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INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON COHESIVE SOCIETIES CONFIDENT IDENTITIES, CONNECTED COMMUNITIES

Event Report

6–8 September 2022

RSiS

S. RAJARATNAM
SCHOOL OF
INTERNATIONAL
STUDIES

Nanyang Technological University, Singapore



**NANYANG
TECHNOLOGICAL
UNIVERSITY**
SINGAPORE

Event Report



6–8 September 2022
Raffles City Convention Centre, Singapore

Report on the Conference organised by
S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS)
Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

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Singapore

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OPENING ADDRESS



HER EXCELLENCY MADAM HALIMAH YACOB PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF SINGAPORE

Mr Teo Chee Hean, Senior Minister and Coordinating Minister for National Security;

Ministers;

Ambassador Ong Keng Yong, Executive Deputy Chairman of RSIS;

Distinguished guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good morning.

Welcome to the International Conference on Cohesive Societies (ICCS). To our friends from overseas, a warm welcome to sunny Singapore!

I am delighted to host such a diverse gathering of great minds and influential voices for this second edition of the ICCS. When we held the inaugural ICCS three years ago, it was a vastly different time. Participants from all around the world came together to discuss faith, identity and cohesion. Since then, COVID-19 has changed our world. This year, we continue to focus on the same three pillars, but with a different lens informed by lessons from the pandemic.

The pandemic was a public health crisis with serious social implications. People were confined to their homes, constraining the basic human need for social interaction. Religious communities also faced difficult decisions as houses of worship worldwide had to limit or suspend their activities in order to comply with public health measures. Perhaps the most heartrending accounts were of those who could not bid a proper farewell to the loved ones they lost to the pandemic.

In a period of heightened social anxiety, tensions rose and in certain cases triggered hate, bigotry and xenophobia. This descended into violence in some places, with reports of hate crimes against persons of Asian ethnicity who were blamed for the spread of the virus. Even public health measures like vaccinations became points of contention.

Singapore too was not immune to such challenges. The pandemic deepened fault lines in societies across the world, when what was urgently needed to recover from the pandemic was collective action and cooperation. This reminds us that social cohesion is a necessary condition for our collective security. Societies cannot survive, let alone thrive, without the social glue that bonds people together. National resilience and stability are the result of people working together towards a common cause, united in the face of challenges and threats facing a country. Cohesive societies do not exist spontaneously. They are borne of choice and conviction. The pandemic has reinforced this.

To address these challenges, we need to understand factors that contribute towards social cohesion. A regional study by the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), the organiser of this Conference, found that 69% of those surveyed in Southeast Asia believed that their country is socially cohesive. According to the study, the level of trust and acceptance between each other and the social networks that people build over time are elements that help strengthen social cohesion. Harnessing these aspects can provide a useful springboard towards action. Such insights presented in the Southeast Asian Social Cohesion Radar study can help inform our discussions to develop meaningful approaches towards building cohesive societies. Indeed, the study recommended that the engagement of community and religious leaders and other relevant stakeholders are critical to this effort. RSIS will share more about these findings this afternoon.

In view of these findings, initiatives like the Commitment to Safeguard Religious Harmony have become even more pertinent. Launched at the last ICCS, religious leaders pledged to be united in promoting the common good, and to stand against division and discord. They undertook to build strong bonds across religious communities through interactions such as attending each other's festivals. More than 750 of Singapore's religious organisations have affirmed this Commitment. It is our hope that ICCS too provides a platform for people to learn from one another and be comfortable with differences.

Moving forward, how do we safeguard and promote social cohesion amidst these challenging times? How do we bridge divides and harness our diversity for the common good? These questions remind me of a quote I came across two months ago when Singapore celebrated our annual Racial Harmony Day. I quote, "Racial harmony means we can all be friends because we are all human beings." Unquote. These words were spoken by Gaia Amedi, a four-year-old pre-schooler. It is a moving reminder that despite all our differences and disagreements, we are human beings at the end of the day, equally fragile, yet equally resilient. We may come from different backgrounds, countries, cultures, and religions, but we share the same core values of kindness, compassion and love. We are connected. And yes, Gaia, we can certainly all be friends.

The theme of ICCS 2022, “Confident Identities, Connected Communities”, echoes Gaia’s words. Building on the foundations of ICCS 2019 where we discussed who we are, what we stand for, and how we can find common ground with one another, ICCS 2022 will explore the role of our identities, beliefs, and faiths in shaping social connections and cohesion.

I am glad to welcome over 800 participants from more than 40 countries. You come from different countries and disciplines. There are religious leaders, policymakers, academics, and civil society practitioners in your midst. With such a diverse group of speakers and delegates, I am confident that there will be a rich exchange of views and ideas over the next three days.

Building social cohesion is an experiential endeavour. This is why we have arranged visits to Singapore’s multicultural communities as a way to spend your evenings. I encourage you to sign up for these community explorations if you have not done so. I wish to thank our community and religious leaders for opening up their community spaces and houses of worship to our ICCS participants.

We also need to develop our youth to take the lead in shaping their communities. I am glad that we have gathered 120 youth leaders for the second run of our Young Leaders Programme (YLP). They join the first cohort of YLP participants from 2019, many of whom have gone on to drive social cohesion initiatives in their communities. I cannot emphasise enough the importance of young people being involved in building cohesive communities. An article in The Straits Times today made the point that there are not many young people involved in interfaith activities. In the Harmony Circle for instance, the average age is about 60. Young people need to be involved to ensure that the building of social cohesion continues to the next generation.

Two of these YLP alumni are Basil Kannangara and Nicholas Pang from Singapore. They met through YLP and share a passion for facilitating deep conversations about race, religion, nationality and disability. Basil and Nick believe that it is possible to have fun while generating constructive dialogue. They developed a card game called Diversity by Default, which features diversity-related questions. Such initiatives help to dispel misperceptions, build bonds, and create trust. The pair are among us today as mentors to the new batch of YLP delegates. Basil and Nick – thank you for returning to nurture fellow youth leaders.

This year’s YLP will help our young leaders harness their energy and creativity to discuss common challenges, develop capabilities and form partnerships to advance their ideas. They will have an opportunity to pitch their proposals to a judging panel at the end of the YLP on Thursday. Singapore’s Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth will provide funding to develop the selected projects.

We face common challenges globally as we emerge from the pandemic. We must continue to create and build safe and open platforms to discuss sensitive issues and work together to strengthen unity and resilience in our societies. I hope that the ICCS can be such a platform for you.

I thank RSIS for organising this Conference. The importance of its work cannot be overstated, and it can go further. RSIS can play a role in strengthening the body of research, studies and programmes in the region and globally to promote social cohesion. It can pilot and act as an incubator for innovative ideas for such work and enable useful experiences to be shared broadly, especially through harnessing the drive, talent and creativity of our young. RSIS can continue to groom local researchers to expand on the studies to help us identify the emerging threats and opportunities to promote social cohesion, supporting RSIS' mission of understanding traditional and non-traditional security challenges.

In closing, I encourage everyone to use this opportunity to speak our minds respectfully and without prejudice, and to keep our hearts open to learning from one another. In this way, we can improve the quality of our conversations, relationships and practice in forging social cohesion.

This is a time to come together as a family, to recognise the beauty in our diversity and use that to our advantage in tackling greater challenges to come, so that we can build brighter and more cohesive societies for all.

I wish you a fruitful Conference.

Thank you.

OPENING ADDRESS

WHEN WE HELD OUR FIRST EVER ICCS, 3 YEARS AGO... IT WAS A VASTLY DIFFERENT TIME

BUT THEN, COVID HAPPENED

THERE WAS A RASH OF VIOLENCE & XENOPHOBIA THAT EMERGED FROM THE PANDEMIC.

WHAT WE NEEDED

WHAT ACTUALLY GOT US THRU COVID: COLLECTIVE ACTION & COHESION

69% of ASEANS BELIEVE that their COUNTRIES ARE SOCIALLY COHESIVE

"RACIAL HARMONY MEANS WE CAN ALL BE FRIENDS, BECAUSE WE ARE ALL HUMANS" - GMA, 43.0.

Mdm. HALIMAH YACOB - PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF SINGAPORE

THE QUESTION: HOW DO WE ENSURE RACIAL HARMONY IN THESE DIVISIVE TIMES?

Visualized BY SKETCHPOST.COM

The infographic features a central theme of 'COHESION' represented by a handshaking icon. It uses various shapes like banners, speech bubbles, and a question box to present the text. A portrait of Mdm. Halimah Yacob is included, and a quote from GMA is presented in a speech bubble. The overall style is hand-drawn and colorful.

SPECIAL PRESENTATION

PERSPECTIVES ON SOCIAL COHESION



Panellists

Professor Lily Kong

President, Singapore Management University

Professor Katherine Marshall

Senior Fellow, Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs

Professor of the Practice of Development, Conflict, and Religion

Walsh School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University

Moderator

Professor Farish Ahmad-Noor

Associate Professor, RSIS

PERSPECTIVES ON SOCIAL COHESION

The Special Presentation discusses how the multiple identities we have as peoples and communities, together with variances in culture, beliefs, and value systems, effect social cohesiveness and set the context for the ICCS 2022 plenaries and breakout sessions. The conversation features viewpoints from Southeast Asia and throughout the world.

Today's world is characterised by growing diversity among peoples and greater interaction between communities. This marks a departure from a culturally homogeneous past in which shared values and beliefs functioned as a bond for unity. However, this does not always imply that there should be more division and conflict today, because diversity, like eco-systems, may be advantageous. What matters most is that various groups remain well-managed.

If opinions combine differences in money and opportunity with differences in sect, religion, race, and other factors, societal splits may readily develop. With fewer resources, it is simpler to believe that members of other groups are gaining an advantage over one's own, even when there is no actual racial imbalance in wealth and opportunity. This makes managing such discrepancies more difficult, especially during the pandemic when people had to rely on technology for communication. While disinformation may abound and cause rifts in society, technology has been largely useful in enabling virtual congregations and reaching out to individuals at home while communities remained in lockdown.

Professor Lily Kong

Professor Kong began by outlining the limits of the idea of social cohesiveness. Social cohesiveness is a multi-faceted notion that involves, among other things, a strong feeling of community, shared loyalties, and a sense of solidarity. The Bertelsmann Stiftung, according to Professor Kong, provides a framework for social cohesiveness, which was employed in the development of the Social Cohesion Radar. This includes social relations (social networks, trust in people, and acceptance of diversity), connectedness (identification, trust in institutions, and perception of fairness), and a focus on the common good (solidarity and helpfulness, respect for social rules, and civic participation).

On why social cohesiveness has become more necessary, Professor Kong observed that the world is experiencing globalisation, increasing mobility and migration, as well as forces for deglobalisation. Modern society has become more varied, with distinct cleavages becoming more visible. These elements have combined to exacerbate increasingly complex global and local issues, culminating in what has been dubbed the “Crisis of a Generation”.

Case Study of Singapore

Professor Kong used a case study to emphasise the significance of resilience in dealing with today’s numerous challenges. The following are the major fault lines in Singapore’s social cohesion: (i) race and religion, which are inextricably linked to other factors; (ii) migration and multiculturalism (for example, language); (iii) inequality and inequity; (iv) virtuality and physicality; and (v) intergenerational dynamics and inclusivity. Despite these fault lines, Singapore’s societal cohesiveness serves as a model for creating and regulating social cohesion.

Professor Kong stated that in addition to community-led initiatives, both organic and organised, the state has a significant role to play, particularly through legal, policy regulatory, and public persuasion mechanisms. Singapore is a secular state with a multi-racial and multi-religious society. As a result of the new super diversities, “old categories” are now perceived as being challenged or contestable, including new racial and religious pluralisms.

Professor Kong highlighted the interracial policies in Singapore that receive a lot of attention, including (i) legal measures like the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act and the Broadcast Act; (ii) policy measures like the Ethnic Housing Policy; and (iii) public persuasion measures like seeing religion as agents of religious progress and as a proponent of communal values.

The conventional interracial classifications (Chinese, Malay, Indian, and Others, or “CMIO”) and religious categories in Singapore have given rise to new challenges that exacerbate the differences between races and religions. She emphasised the necessity to pay equal attention to distinctions within races and faiths as well as the differences between them.

Complexity of Intra-racial and Intra-religious Relationships

Intra-racial and intra-religious relationships are more nuanced and complex. According to Professor Kong, the current interracial and interreligious frameworks and norms must be modified to incorporate intra-racial and intra-religious diversity. Such policies are pertinent to maintaining cohesion in the face of increased migration and multiculturalism, as migrants now account for one-third of Singapore’s total population, and one in every three marriages in Singapore is inter-ethnic. Further threats to social cohesion include xenophobia, NIMBYism, an “Us vs. Them” mentality, as well as the emergence of trait-based enclaves or groupings.

To prevent future societal splits along these fault lines, it is critical that no group perceives another to be “taking away their rice bowls”. Singapore’s policies encompass considerations for interracial and equitable opportunities in infrastructure planning, as well as in promoting a robust economy with good employment rates. Future difficulties that must be addressed in the long term include reducing income and wealth disparity, allowing for greater social mobility, and reducing class stratification. The pandemic had compounded such issues. Failure to deliver on these outcomes may contribute to the deterioration of the social compact.

Additionally, it would be vital to bridge the digital divide between the elderly and the poor, often referred to as “digital left-behinds”. The strategy is to reduce the “digital tribes” that act as “echo chambers” for divisive sentiment, and dismantle “comfort zones” that limit common spaces. Today’s opportunities lie in the high rate of digital adoption (50% of Singaporeans use social media to grow their social networks), and in the creation of inclusive online communities centred on shared concerns.

Keeping Intergenerational Differences at Bay

Professor Kong concluded by emphasising the significance of keeping possible intergenerational differences in Singapore in mind. Singapore is now dealing with an ageing population, a growing proportion of single-elder families, and an increase in working adults abroad. There is also a rise in intergenerational segregation and ageism. In addressing these issues, possibilities exist in boosting intergenerational connections and establishing an age-integrated society. Initiatives could include the Maintenance of Parents Act and policies promoting “ageing in place”, as well as encouraging tri-generational living and providing co-location facilities.

Professor Katherine Marshall

Professor Marshall believes that the post-pandemic world is experiencing a “poly-crisis” encompassing varied crises affecting all facets of society. With COVID-19 having acted as a “gateway from one world to the next”, the present should be considered as an era of opportunity, with events like the G20 summit in Indonesia, World Bank meetings, and UN conferences on education providing the advantage to see the world from different perspectives.

Managing Diversity in Modernity

While homogeneity is commonly seen as a path to peace, Professor Marshall recognised that variation and diversity remain the basic features of modernity. Instead of reminiscing about a romanticised and mostly mythical past of homogenous societies, she advocated learning from past difficulties and conflicts. She suggested that religious factors contributed to heterogeneity when characteristics like religion and ethnicity are paired with causes like income disparity and conflict. As a result, some conflicts appear to be religious despite being also political and economic in character. These problems underscore the crucial role of youth and community leaders in curbing the proliferation, spread, and incubation of such beliefs.

Professor Marshall added that racial and religious diversity benefits society in the same way that biodiversity enriches ecosystems. She cited the United States as an example of a melting pot offering an ideal for cohesiveness amid diversity. Yet, the United States is an increasingly divided society, particularly on issues of diversity. Having to deal with religious minorities that are under-represented in certain societies but over-represented in others has added to the complication. There is also inadequate research on the rise of minority persecution. Furthermore, the role of women in religion must be examined.

Challenges in Managing Diversity

Professor Marshall acknowledged the challenges of managing diversity and the need for ongoing work to establish shared paths. During the COVID-19 period, the problems in managing diversity became evident with the rise of religious nationalism and bigotry. In this respect, Singapore stands out as a remarkable state, given its success in the ongoing management of domains encompassing education, housing, and sports, and the provision of adequate opportunity for all. The arts and music may also have helped to foster unity by bridging divides.

Professor Marshall further argued that in an increasingly diverse society, greater mutual respect and understanding were necessary. While the immediate impact of such attributes may be significantly more complex and beneficial to human diversity, they may take time to manifest. Moving forward, the focus should be on innovative and modern solutions that capitalise on diversity.

Discussion and Reflections

In the robust discussions that followed, the panellists were asked how they would envision reintroducing the concept that being part of a wider community is something “good”. The panellists agreed that for a society to be creative, the “we” must be present. However, cultivating each individual would be just as vital as cultivating the “we”. At the end of the day, humans need to feel that they are a part of something bigger than themselves.

In answer to a query on “othering”, a larger paradox concerning the idea of the “we” was posed. People are somewhat dependent on one another. Societies with a long history of diversity are now viewed as having a problem with it. One of the presenters rationalised that this was due to the increased exposure to inequality. Despite a vastly different situation at present, there is still a constant element of fear that fuels the conflict we see today. The panel acknowledged that the media may be a double-edged sword, exposing corruption and evil deeds on one hand, while disseminating misinformation and outright lies on the other. Consider the anti-vaccine sentiments fuelled by claims that vaccinations were “microchipped”.

Given that certain cultures have become incredibly fragile and vulnerable, it is crucial to minimise digital differences. Even in the context of hate campaigns, not everyone has equal access to the resources that may be utilised against them. The panel emphasised the importance of considering both the risks to one’s requirements and how well those needs are being met. The panel also observed that hate speech is amplified in the digital realm (e.g. on social media), as these platforms may function as a digital echo chamber for such attitudes.

Nonetheless, even if people had the same tools or access, not everyone engages in the same manner. The voices and perspectives being reinforced often belong to an over-represented group, such as the youth. Thus, the digital gap overlaps with racial and social disparities, intensifying interracial tensions.

A question was raised on instances of misinterpretation that may result from a small group of people who are empowered by technology to share information. While the media plays a significant role, what should be done from the standpoint of social cohesion? One of the presenters remarked that radio and television were the first virtual spaces. Singapore's management style may be perceived as authoritarian. Yet, in other settings, this is considered a key factor to Singapore's success. The country has precise standards of conduct concerning the activities permissible in the media. This is institutionalised through censorship, review panels, as well as appeal committees.

The social policy infrastructure has evolved over the years in an effort to balance between freedom of expression and societal order. Questions were also raised about the plans to interact or engage with young people, whose social interests take precedence over their social or religious identities. One of the presenters noted that this is a challenge for many individuals with multiple identities. Given how diverse society has become, we can no longer categorise individuals into different baskets, and social mapping can be difficult today.

The final point concerns the availability of space for dissent in a diverse yet cohesive community. One of the speakers remarked that there is, and must always be, room for disagreement and the expression of differences. The setting up of galleries to enable representation is one such example. However, the circumstances where voices disagree with the concept of tolerating differences present greater difficulty. This is especially challenging in a city state like Singapore because, unlike states made up of multiple cities/regions, Singaporeans cannot express their dissent by relocating to another city.

Professor Farish Noor concluded the discussion by noting that we are now living in a time of upheaval, where cohesiveness would be vital to sustainable societies. As human beings, we live within a shared human civilisation. There is a need to be conscious of the centrifugal forces that threaten societal unity, as well as transcend from traditional interreligious and interracial methods into more nuanced intra-religious and intra-racial approaches. While some claim that there has been a decline in social values, this is primarily a conflict of ideals between generations or groups. External variables have always been part of societal and communal life. Perhaps the most significant difference today is how we manage new technology (particularly the infrastructure for media and communication),

which acts as filters to determining whether society can remain cohesive despite our differences.

**SPECIAL PRESENTATION:
PERSPECTIVES ON SOCIAL COHESION**

WHAT IS SOCIAL COHESION?

- ENDURING SENSE OF TRUST
- STRONG SENSE OF COMMUNITY
- SHARED LOYALTIES
- SENSE OF SOLIDARITY



RELIGION

84% of the WORLD'S POPULATION HAS AN AFFILIATION WITH RELIGION

DIVERSITY

- ↳ SHORT-TERM EFFECTS CAN BE VERY COMPLEX
- ↳ DEEPLY POLARIZED & DIVIDED
- ↳ NEEDS CONSTANT **EFFORT**
- ↳ ACKNOWLEDGE & ACCEPT DIFFERENCE



Q&A:

CULTIVATE 'ME' AND 'WE'

COVID CRISIS: LOOK AT EVERYONE'S EXPERIENCES

MISINFORMATION: SPEED & SPREAD CAN HAVE HUGE IMPACT.

MULTIPLE IDENTITIES: NO ONE IS IN ONE BOX!

LOOK CREATIVELY & THOUGHTFULLY for A FUTURE WE WANT

EDUCATION & the ARTS IS KEY



THERE'S A CRITICAL NEED for BUILD RESILIENCE

COVID-19 ECONOMIC CRISIS



SOCIAL COHESION IN SINGAPORE

KEY FAULTLINES:

- RACE & RELIGION**
 - ↳ INCREASING SUPERDIVERSITY
- MIGRATION & MULTICULTURALISM**
 - ↳ 1/3 of POPULATION CHALLENGES: US vs THEM
- INEQUALITY & INEQUITY**
 - ↳ INCOME/WEALTH
 - ↳ CLASS STRATIFICATION
- VIRTUAL & PHYSICAL**
 - ↳ DIGITAL DIVIDE
 - ↳ HIGH DIGITAL PENETRATION RATE
- INTERGENERATIONS & INCLUSIVENESS**
 - ↳ PROMOTE INTERGENERATIONAL INTERACTIONS



PROFESSOR LILY KONG

PROFESSOR KATHERINE MARSHALL

MODERATOR: DR. FARISH AHMAD-NOOR



Visualized by SKETCHPOST.COM

PLENARY 1

HOW FAITH CAN BRIDGE DIVIDES



Panellists

Dr Sadhvi Bhagawati Saraswati

Secretary-General, Global Interfaith Clean Water, Sanitation & Hygiene (WASH) Alliance

President, Divine Shakti Foundation

Co-President, Religions for Peace

Lord John Alderdice

First Speaker of the Northern Ireland Assembly

Imam Uzair Akbar

Imam, Holland Park Mosque

President, Council of Imams Queensland (CIQ)

Head, Shariah Advisory Board with Amanah Islamic Finance Australia (AIFA)

Director, Centre of Excellence (Australian Youth Welfare Trust)

Director, ISHP Youth Club

Member of the Australian National Imams Council (ANIC)

Venerable Shi You Guang

Abbot and President, Samantabhadra Vihara

Secretary-General, Singapore Buddhist Federation

Moderator

Professor Kumar Ramakrishna

Professor of National Security Studies,

Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

HOW FAITH CAN BRIDGE DIVIDES

This plenary discusses why ideological or religious beliefs contribute to social fragmentation's growth and permanence. The panellists highlighted specific takeaways from several faith traditions. Faith fulfils a deep human need. However, in contemporary times, societal stress and anxieties are projected onto religion, causing the circle of "us" to shrink. In times of heightened anxieties and stress, rather than bridging divides, religion has been used by some to exacerbate fault lines. The panel discussed the role of faith in social cohesion, and how faith can work at individual, interpersonal, and societal levels to counter polarisation.

Dr Sadhvi Bhagawati Saraswati

Dr Saraswati began by emphasising that many religious traditions have stories of notable persons (such as saints, prophets, and mystics) spending time in the forest, connecting with the divine. She cited the Redwood Forest in California as an example, noting that each tree is hundreds of feet tall and is one of the oldest trees on the planet. The Redwood Forest has survived and expanded in the face of earthquakes and fires. One would expect that the roots of the trees to be extremely deep as a result. The secret of the Redwood Forest, however, is that the roots are interconnected, rather than being individually deep. Dr Saraswati explained that the connectivity fed and fostered the trees' strength. She added that religion is what is intended to connect people to their sense of a transcendent reality. Furthermore, the concept of the genuine self is not distinct from the divine, which connects people to larger groups and to a system/order of knowledge (e.g. our morals and values).

Growing Chasm Between Us and Them

Dr Saraswati also emphasised the contrast between the ideal and the actual. In reality, rather than leading to a connection with one another, this has led to separation and othering. Dr Saraswati stated that human psychology teaches us that when we are stressed, afraid, or threatened, we contract. The chasm between us and them becomes wider. The circle of what constitutes the notion of "us" has shrunk. Fear of disease and death, as seen during the COVID-19 period, has led to finger pointing, scapegoating, and debates about who is or is not following protocols.

The lack of resources (such as water and food) is another source of apprehension. These considerations prompted the formation of the Global Interfaith Wash Alliance (GIWA) to bring about water security, sanitation, and hygiene in order to avert violent conflict caused by shortages. GIWA aims to supply potable water

to hundreds of millions of refugees by 2040, in addition to making significant progress on other water-related challenges. Many people have perished in India as a consequence of open defecation and water shortage. She added that GIWA's efforts sparked the mobilisation of hundreds of millions of people in India.

An expanded understanding of peace is built upon these initiatives, which involve UNICEF, and the governments of the United States and the Netherlands. Dr Saraswati pointed out that peace must entail the prevention of factors that cause misery, conflict, and struggle. As a result, efforts have been broadened to address additional issues such as gender equality, eradication of violence, cessation of child marriages, and increased awareness about menstruation, among others.

Leverage the Power of Faith

Faith has the ability to influence the attitudes and behaviours of communities towards healthier and more sustainable societies for all. This power of friendship surpasses the attainment of clean water/sanitation — it breaks down the barriers between us and them, putting an end to vilification while bringing people together. For example, amid the COVID lockdowns, GIWA managed to provide access to water due to the friendships, connections, and foundations it had established over the years.

Dr Saraswati cautioned that we cannot wait for the occurrence of violence before intervening. Instead, as a community, we must sow the seeds of interdependence now. These seeds of interconnectedness will enable us to unite against common adversaries (such as gender-based violence, water scarcity, and climate change) in order to prevent polarisation and violence. Dr Saraswati acknowledged the significance of working with young people. She noted that bringing madrasa students and Hindu students together to spend time and discover their fundamental similarities was a tremendous triumph. These lessons have established the basis for peace in their minds and, consequently, their actions. Religion should instil the fortitude to stand against what must be opposed and to reject polarisation, demonisation, and othering. It should also empower us to work together before crises occur, extinguish the flames of violence, and successfully safeguard communities.

Lord John Alderdice

According to Lord Alderdice, bridging divisions should come naturally. We are born with the urge to interact with the larger world of beings. As infants and young children, we instinctively interact with and relate to our immediate environment. We investigate and interact to build a sense of relatedness that takes us outside of our own limitations.

He elaborated that imitation is a component of all human relationships, and that conflicts arise when we emulate another person's desires. Conflict develops more explicitly over shared resources or wants. As a result, limits are established around such behaviours, ensuring that social skills continue to have intrinsic worth alongside meeting one's physical and mental demands.

Safeguarding from Harm

When considering the broader question, "Why does this contestation result in conflict?" Lord Alderdice emphasised that asking "why" is a fundamental aspect of the human experience. As we seek to comprehend how we relate to one another, how to meet our most fundamental needs, how to safeguard ourselves from harm, and where we fit into the world, the question arises with greater frequency and annoyance. However, as we age, our faculties start to deteriorate, and we lose interest in keeping the knowledge we have already acquired. Nevertheless, this propensity for comprehension and kinship remains a fundamental aspect of humans.

Lord Alderdice observed that since the Enlightenment, we have come to believe that our primary means of involvement is our intellect. Religion, however, is not merely a cognitive association; it is an experience in all the ways that humanity can interact in relationships, the realisation of ambitions and values, bound up with the most fundamental aspects of what it means to be human. When it comes to objects outside of our social circle, we have always felt a connection to them that transcends simple logical comprehension. Additionally, faith encourages us to look beyond ourselves since it is more of a way of being in the world and an answer to the innocent inquiry of "why" than it is a theology.

Nevertheless, Lord Alderdice emphasised that what begins as inquisitiveness results in joy and elation when we discover new ways of understanding that can gradually transform into doctrine, law, and ritual. We struggle with this because we often mistake rationality for comprehension and appreciation — which is why our liberal colleagues place such a strong emphasis on the law, voting, and elections. However, as time goes on, it is becoming increasingly clear that the conflicts and disagreements we see are not simply discussions about disagreements in political or economic ideology, or even in matters of law and order. Rather, they have their roots in past conflicts and wars.

Approaching Difficulties with Childlike Naiveté

Instead of solving the issue solely by reason, Lord Alderdice suggested listening to the people who disagree with us, concentrating on shared values rather than differences, and considering both their right and wrong opinions. We must put more effort into fostering connections between leadership groups capable of rallying their cohorts, rather than focusing on connections between individuals. Instead of being a prerequisite, trust is the outcome of our collective efforts. There will never be unanimity on what is “good”, which necessitates pluralisation in our society and structures, as the failure to collaborate would lead to self-destruction. As Lord Alderdice pointed out, we should approach these difficulties with the naiveté of a child because, in the grand scheme of things, we are still infants. The mystery of faith, not the certainty of our beliefs, is what will enable us to overcome our differences and open a doorway of hope for us to enter together.

Imam Uzair Akbar

Imam Uzair Akbar began with the remark that, despite how we have been divided since day one, God Almighty has provided a platform that can accommodate everyone. It is up to us to determine how to administer this platform. Imam Uzair Akbar used the analogy of a crowded vehicle that appears to be at capacity but can actually accommodate more passengers with a few tweaks. Similarly, humanity will be challenged, but if we are reasonable and compassionate, we will find a way to adapt.

Sacrifice is Necessary for Social Cohesion

When it comes to social cohesion, Imam Uzair Akbar believes that sacrifice is necessary in order for relationships to flourish and develop. Therefore, we must determine how much we are willing to sacrifice in order to admit individuals onto the platform. When the fabric of humanity is disrupted, it is due to avarice and the failure of individuals to master their inner demons. Our body is a two-edged sword, capable of giving joy on the one hand and grief on the other. Faith teaches us how to make the most of our body. Islam responds to this by emphasising internal purity and advising us to master our demons.

While people frequently discuss what should be done at the governmental or media levels, Imam Uzair Akbar noted that interpersonal ties are crucial. He added that a smile can open doors to dialogues that foster stronger social cohesiveness. The only thing we can ever truly know about another person is what is on their face because it is the first thing, we notice about them. Thus, it must possess a radiant smile, for if our body language does not inspire confidence, we will fail.

Imam Uzair Akbar concluded that all of creation is the divine family. If we are striving to please God in our own capacity but are not pleasing God's family, we are not pleasing God.

Venerable Shi You Guang

In his presentation, the Venerable Shi You Guang discussed his involvement in interreligious dialogue initiatives. He started with the premise that it is difficult to perceive one's reflection in moving streams; only in still water can we see more clearly. The purpose of dialogue is to listen to others and understand their points of view, not merely to argue one's own. As a result, we must identify chances for growth and learning in dialogue.

Compassion and Broadening Perspectives

Venerable Guang pointed out that a minority group status is determined by the parameters we set, but we should not let these designations limit our ability to be perceptive. As a result, whether or not we are minority, we should respect and uphold the human rights of everyone, regardless of race or religion.

In order to accomplish this, Venerable Guang emphasised that compassion is necessary in order to broaden our perspective beyond stereotypes and to highlight positive traits. More communication channels can help to encourage the formation of shared ideals. And instead of debating, we should try to listen in order to comprehend. It is also critical that we are able to "sense the ground", to recognise what is vital and then act on it.

Avoid Imposing Religious Ideology

The role of faith, according to Venerable Guang, is to first create clarity. This should be done without imposing one's religious ideas or ideology on others, as doing so could produce minor difficulties in our society. We must respect the personal space of others and offer perspectives that do not intrude.

Venerable Guang recognised the significance of spiritual support during all stages of life. In light of this, when providing spiritual support for palliative care, one should concentrate on elevating support and universal principles. To provide adequate support, one must first understand what faith means to others and how they practise it. Palliative care providers should avoid attempting to convert patients at the bedside. Rather, they should converse with patients about the faith they have practised throughout their lives or connect them with their respective religious leaders.

Discussion and Reflections

During the robust question-and-answer session that followed, panellists were asked if the commonly held belief that religion should be private rather than public was accurate.

Faith in the Public and Private Sphere

The panellists noted that people are much less inclined to injure others or act out in anger when they are at peace inside and have connected with the divine. Because their minds are open, Dr Saraswati added, people are subsequently more willing to join groups that promote togetherness. If one wants to bring about peace, love, and unity, they can only do so if they are at peace within themselves. Through internal transformation, our identity in the world changes, and we can start spreading what is inside to other individuals and cultures. Discussions focused on how faith contributes to the development of understanding and often transcends ideas and dogmas. In essence, faith is really about embracing uncertainty rather than announcing certainties.

Religion is about taking care of yourself and the people around you. This is the first building block of a society that works well together. In order to avoid becoming judgemental, we work on ourselves and try to manage our inner selves. Clarity is made possible by faith, which enables us to perceive the good in the world and to hang onto it when we are challenged in life. According to Venerable Guang, we need to comprehend the concept of faith, which goes beyond religion. Everyone is spiritual inherently, and religion is merely a framework for understanding that spirituality. Although rituals are used to direct spiritual prosperity, they are not spiritual beings. By building bridges, we can discuss religion openly and utilise the opportunity to express our own opinions. Good friendships enable us to interact in a mature manner, uphold religious principles, and have open, honest conversations with one another.

Religious Fanaticism

Addressing the query about identifying instances of religious fanaticism and rigid beliefs, Dr Saraswati reiterated the significance of acknowledging that we are souls inhabiting human bodies. She said that when one views another's religion through their own lens, the contrasts become insurmountable. In doing so, we discount all facets of the person's identity other than religion. Intractable religious conflicts frequently have less to do with the actual practise of the religion and more to do with how power, money, and resources are distributed. Targeting these areas is crucial to preventing religion from being used to justify violence.

Lord Alderdice cited instances of non-religious persons who have turned into extremists. He observed that the community's perception of an existential threat appeared to be a commonality. He predicted that, as a result of these events, fundamentalism would manifestly increase. People are finding the world to be more and more terrifying. And when people are afraid, they seek assurance in areas where there is none. Fundamentalism aims to transform the present into a certain and secure past that never actually existed, rather than merely returning to the past. Thus, it is critical to pay attention to what people are saying and consider their fears, since a seemingly ridiculous fear may not be unjustified.

Imam Uzair Akbar added that fundamentalist perceptions have had an impact on social cohesiveness as well. Widespread Islamophobia in the post-9/11 society has led to two outcomes: people who have drifted away from their faith and people who have gone further into their faith. The issues lies not in the religious doctrine itself, but in how people interpret their faith. He remarked that when the mind has turned evil and spiteful, people can find negativity in any topic. People who believe they are marginalised or rejected by society are easier to manipulate and persuade to adopt fundamentalist beliefs. We must refute that narrative as we combat fanaticism. Instead of dividing ourselves based on our religious beliefs, we must work together to address those who undermine the social fabric. Venerable Guang argued that a person's words and actions determine whether or not they are regarded as trustworthy. Fundamentally, one's credibility will grow exponentially if they have good intentions, and this holds true for religion.

Challenge in Building Cohesiveness

The panellists were asked a final question about the possible challenges to building social cohesiveness in multi-religious society, given that some groups have evangelism and proselytisation as their main or only goal.

According to the Venerable Guang, if someone claims to have a certain faith, we should accept their belief and wish them well. We should also hope that they pursue their chosen path diligently and successfully. We should not have to worry about being pressured into conversion when engaging in discussion. Instead, we should learn to blend religious values, extract from useful dialogue, and most crucially, respect all religions.

Islam, on the other hand, makes it very plain that there is no compulsion in believing. If there are religious differences, Imam Uzair Akbar highlighted the need to treat everyone with respect, compassion, empathy, and care. Problems arise when people rely on the superiority of their belief. He stated that social cohesion will be attained if our community returns to its core value of humility.

While it is alluring to think that one can develop a set of guidelines or norms that can be used in every civilisation at every stage, Lord Alderdice believed that many societies are in different phases, locations, and faced with diverse challenges. The actions taken to survive in those circumstances are considerably different from those of someone confronting similar obstacles in a different setting. It also depends on who is proselytising and how they go about doing it when it comes to a specific subject of proselytising. He recommended mutual respect (with an emphasis on reciprocity), even if others continued to be impolite and insistent.

Dr Saraswati concluded that it is vital to observe what the proselytising is accomplishing. She said that it is alright to share one's love for one's faith, so long as this is not linked to a matter that is crucial to the health, safety, or peace of others. For instance, when faith is linked to having access to resources like healthcare, education, and the freedom to live in safety, we are no longer discussing love but rather oppression and violence. This line must be drawn so that one person's passionate love does not interfere with another person's ability to lead a free, secure, and healthy life. There is no place in a peaceful and cohesive society for such behaviour.

ICCS THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON COHESIVE SOCIETIES
6th - 8th SEPTEMBER 2022 | SINGAPORE

Plenary 1
HOW FAITH CAN BRIDGE DIVIDES

THE REDWOOD TREE IS STRONG NOT BECAUSE THEIR ROOTS ARE DEEP BUT BECAUSE THEIR ROOTS ARE INTERCONNECTED.

WHY? THE HUMAN NEED TO UNDERSTAND IS THE FOUNDATION OF SOCIAL TOLERANCE & COHESION.

THE LAW IS A GOOD SERVANT, BUT A BAD MASTER!

SMILE! IF THERE IS ONE THING TO TAKE AWAY FROM THIS, IT'S TO PLEASE THE FAMILY IN GOD, THIS WE CAN ALL DO.

DO GOOD IN WHATEVER YOU DO

LISTEN TO OPERATIONS

MY OLD SCHOOL MOTO:

IF GOD HAS GIVEN ME A PLATFORM THAT CAN ACCOMMODATE EVERYONE.

IF I AM HAVING PLEASE THE FAMILY IN GOD, THIS WE CAN ALL DO.

WHEN WATER IS STILL, CAN WE SEE OUR REFLECTIONS CLEARLY?

DR. SADHVI
LORD ALDERDICE
IMAM UZAIR
SHI YOU GANG

PANEL DISCUSSION

THE INDIVIDUAL IS THE BEGINNING TO SOCIAL UNDERSTANDING. FAITH HELPS ENRICH OUR INNER SELVES, AND THAT WILL RADIATE OUTWARDS.

FAITH IS ABOUT TAKING CARE OF YOURSELF FIRST BEFORE YOU CAN TAKE CARE OF OTHERS.

FAITH LETS US UNCERTAIN THE UNCERTAIN

JUST LIKE THE PART OF IDENTITIES WE'RE LIVING ON, WE'RE LIVING ON.

DIALOGUES AREN'T ABOUT GETTING YOUR POINT ACROSS. IT'S ABOUT OPENING YOUR HEART.

IF YOU ARE USING YOUR FAITH TO SPREAD LOVE, THAT'S BEAUTIFUL. IF YOU ARE USING YOUR FAITH TO EXCLUDE, THAT'S OPPRESSION.

DR. SADHVI BHAGAWATI SAKRABUPPI
LAYA JOHN ALDERDICE
IMAM UZAIR AKBAR
MODERATOR: DR. KUMAR RAMAKRISHNA

VERACIBLE SHI YOU GANG

Visualized by SKETCHPOST

SPECIAL ADDRESS



CARDINAL PIETRO PAROLIN **SECRETARY OF STATE, HOLY SEE**

I cordially greet all the speakers and delegates participating in the International Conference on Cohesive Societies; I greet and thank the Singaporean Authorities, especially Madam President Halimah Yacob and the Minister of Culture, Community and Youth, Mr Edwin Tong, for organizing this conference.

It gives me great pleasure to speak to you today, since the global context in which we find ourselves necessitates even greater introspection and action on our part if we are to foster harmonious communities. In light of this, I believe that the International Conference on Cohesive Communities 2022 is a sign and a signal to not lose hope and to continue with a strong sense of responsibility to establish communities based on fraternity and justice.

Introduction

From the dignity, unity and equality of all persons derives first of all the principle of the common good, to which every aspect of social life must be related if it is to attain its fullest meaning. According to its primary and broadly accepted sense, the common good indicates “the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to achieve their fulfilment more fully and more easily.” (Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, 164).

I would like to carry out my contribution on this definition of the common good according to the Social Doctrine of the Catholic Church, highlighting the relationship between society, the individual person, and the pursuit of the common good. So, what do we mean by “cohesive societies”?

Undoubtedly, many partial or complete answers may be offered, but education for the common good and a sense of “humanity” are the first steps toward constructing cohesive societies. We do, in fact, belong to humanity, and the duty to develop and progress toward the total fulfilment of what is truly “human” rests with everyone, both the individual and society.

This awareness cannot be achieved solely through ideas, discourses, or the theoretical presentation of horizons; rather, it is necessary to promote a specific human willingness to enter into relationships with others through social behaviour, that is, intentionally tending to do good to others in everyday life, personally and

responsibly committing oneself without expecting anything in return, with the goal of realizing the full dignity of each person created in the image of God.

Societies consist of the networks of relationships that people are able to build with one another, but such encounters are not based on algebra and mathematics, but rather on cooperation, since if individual goods are put together, it is logical that a total good will be produced, but a common good will never be acquired in this manner. The objective of cohesive societies, on the other hand, is the formation of individuals capable of relationships, of inhabiting societies, and of transcending the individualism of “I” to embrace the diversity of “us”. Indeed, it is the connection with the other, particularly the relationship of love, that enables us to grasp our dignity. But, as Martin Buber said, relationships are not produced; they “happen” and come to us. When we are loved, our genuine worth is revealed; when we get a gift, our highest dignity is shown; and when we are forgiven, we become fully conscious of our value. When we obtain what we are entitled to, we become aware of the other, but not of our inherent dignity. This is something we learn when we are appreciated, when we get a free gift that benefits us. To put it another way, modern man has lost sight of the value of human life because he ascribes it to his own efforts rather than acknowledging that he is a mere recipient of it.

Within this context, the idea of social cohesion has been central to the study of sociology and other social sciences from the very beginning and refers to the set of constituent factors of the relationship between the individual and society, and in particular to the dimensions of belonging, trust, and cooperation between individuals, social groups, and institutions.

Opening up the area of social cohesiveness through interventions that recognize the benefits of enlarged cohesion seems to be a worthwhile objective. Another of the tasks that should not be forgotten in order to construct cohesive societies is working on the connection between the efficiency and efficacy of social programs, the engagement of people in the administration of public affairs, and the inclusion of peripheral realities, again in both geographic and social dimensions.

This introductory reflection confronts us with a problem: our contemporary society is characterized by new forms of individual insecurity and community fragmentation as a result of social, cultural, demographic, and economic transformations; a problem that has intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic. How can we restore cohesion?

To address this subject, I will make an effort to provide some directional guidance from a Christian viewpoint that I believe may aid in the planning and establishment of cohesive societies.

Individualism – Relationship – Fraternity

In 1936, de Lubac, a French Jesuit, theologian, and Cardinal whose works were significant in the formulation of the doctrine of the Second Vatican Council, took a stance against the individualistic and, by extension, self-centred inclinations of his own day by stating: “Catholicism is essentially social in the most profound meaning of the term: not merely because of its applications in the realm of natural institutions, but first and foremost in itself, at the very core of its essence.” (H. De Lubac, *Cattolicoismo Aspetti sociali del dogma*, trad. It. a cura di Elio Guerriero, Jaca Book, 1978, p. XXIII).

From this perspective, the believer is never alone; to begin to believe is to emerge from isolation and into the community of God’s children. In fact, the deepest foundation of this Christian “we” is the fact that God is also a “we”. The God professed by the Christian Creed is not a solitary, self-contained being, but a relationship, just as Pope Francis reminds us, “every day we are offered a new opportunity, a new stage. We should not expect everything from those who govern us; that would be childish. We enjoy a space of co-responsibility capable of initiating and generating new processes and transformations. We must be active participants in the rehabilitation and support of wounded societies. Today, we are faced with the great opportunity to express our being brothers, to be other good Samaritans who take upon themselves the pain of failures, instead of fomenting hatred and resentment [...]. The word “neighbour” in the culture of Jesus’ time usually indicated those who were closest, neighbours. It was understood that help should be directed first of all to those who belong to one’s own group, one’s own race. Jesus completely reverses this approach: he does not call us to wonder who are those who are close to us, but rather to make us neighbours, nearer.” (Fratelli tutti, nos. 77,80).

Today, we are confronted with a situation in which fraternity and solidarity are widely acknowledged as values, but there is a major crisis of solidarity in our societies: never before has solidarity been more topical, and never before has it been so in actual, in other words, penalized in real experience. Our society is paying less and less attention to the dynamics of solidarity: we are seeing an ever-expanding growth of dependency, which even aspires to become universal, but which is characterized, particularly at the cultural level, by inclinations toward closure.

The subject’s withdrawal within itself corresponds to a withdrawal into daily existence as an eternal present: contemporary man feels less and less of the interaction with the past, interpreted as creative memory, and less and less of the prospect of future openness. The quickening of time makes yesterday’s events

appear so remote that they have little bearing on what we feel today. The future is feared rather than expected; as a result, there is a retreat into the present, which is the source of our society's and the youth's reluctance to set ambitious goals.

In a post-globalization society, the objective is to begin addressing the challenge of coexistence among many cultures while being proud of each culture's achievements and without expecting everyone to become like ourselves. Philosopher and theologian Ramon Panikkar distinguished between dialectical discourse and dialogical discourse in his thinking. The first type is that of talk shows, in which participants fight passionately and attempt to convince one another in a dialogue that radicalizes perspectives. Dialogical discourse, on the other hand, is a trip in which both parties are confident of their own ideas but seek a third point that is not in the centre but entails a road of change in both parties.

In light of this, what does it mean to construct and create a cohesive community in the present day? In the Christian viewpoint, which is the biblical one, we must state that solidarity, prior to becoming an ethical example, is a theological value: the Christian is invited to practice solidarity in the first place because he encounters a God who has revealed himself to him as a God of solidarity. As Pope Francis has taught us from his first Encyclical: "Today, when the networks and means of human communication have made unprecedented advances, we sense the challenge of finding and sharing a 'mystique' of living together, of mingling and encounter, of embracing and supporting one another, of stepping into this flood tide which, while chaotic, can become a genuine experience of fraternity, a caravan of solidarity, a sacred pilgrimage. Greater possibilities for communication thus turn into greater possibilities for encounter and solidarity for everyone. If we were able to take this route, it would be so good, so soothing, so liberating and hope-filled! To go out of ourselves and to join others is healthy for us. To be self-enclosed is to taste the bitter poison of immanence, and humanity will be worse for every selfish choice we make." (*Evangelii Istitia*, n.87).

Defending such an essential good as social cohesion, as was evident during the pandemic, where many played a secondary role of civil protection and supplemented state intervention in supporting people who were not left alone, made us realize that a different arrangement of welfare and social cohesion systems is possible and can therefore evolve into a welfare community in which the state, other structures, and individual contributions can coexist in a subsidiarity relationship.

What other alternative do we have to the pervasive individualism that seems to exist in every society of today? For the sake of simplicity, we call this the third method, which is a vision in which the person is central; the person is understood in the round, thus in terms of discernment, relationships, and motivations, and with all the repercussions this has for how society and everyday life are conceived. I will now attempt to construct this third approach through four paths:

1. Discernment as a compass
2. Together as agents of hope.
3. For a welcoming city and world
4. The value of friendship

Discernment as a compass

In realizing one's existence, man is not called to rely on vague generic prescriptions, to dive headfirst into ideologies, or to graze on hypothetical visions of the future in which there is much heart and little intelligence; rather, man is called to patiently seek his way in today, enlightened by the great truths, which do not absolve him from the responsible, strenuous, and sometimes difficult search.

In this view, discernment is first and foremost an attitude of vigilance, assuming a critical posture, and refining one's vision in order to separate good components from those that are just seemingly such or not at all, recognizing clearly and precisely the real issues and potential remedies. This entails, among other things, emancipating oneself from relativist examples, which tend to minimize distinctions and see all alternatives, proposals, and values as technically similar.

This task of differentiation contributes to the reconstruction of the horizon within which one is obligated to decide and act, since only a comprehensive perspective enables one to identify the spaces accessible for responsible initiative and to assess the actual opportunities for practical engagement, while also safeguarding unrealized potential. The effective completion of such a process, particularly when it involves a broad reality, cannot be left to the activity of a person or a group, but requires the conscientious and proactive participation of all interested parties.

It is not enough, then, to make a choice; one must also decide, that is, be conscious that the authenticity of a decision implies a dramatic placing of oneself on the line, shifting from the position of a neutral and external observer to that of a person who involves himself and commits himself in first person alongside others.

Together as agents of hope

A strong focus on decision-making projects us into the future and calls attention to the obligation of all those involved in discernment to act intentionally for the common good. In essence, discernment enables us to look around and uncover, in the experiences and occurrences of the human community, those seeds, energies, and reconciling forces that are already clearly at work on many societal levels. This occurs even at those levels and in those realities, such as megacities, where so many negative and disintegrating forces seem to act.

Even though we are living in a confusing historical moment owing to the uncertain transition that is happening throughout the world, the objective is to capture the inherent potential of society and activate its positive energies so that they may be put to work in the service of a better city, in which the dignity of each individual is respected and protected.

Our period seems to be characterized by a gradual rise in frustration and despair. Consequently, it is society's duty to give people hope, and not only for the future but also for the present.

Even we, men of the third millennium, are challenged by the biblical imperative: Remember! do not forget man, your brother, just as God never forgets you; and Hear! listen to his cry of pain. In the biblical perspective, the children of memory and of listening will be the generous fathers of a future of peace and concord.

The tragic sights of war reminded us once again of how precarious man's path in history is and of how much horror we may be responsible for or complicit in. As a result, the ethical dilemma of evil has been re-posed with renewed urgency to the consciences of individuals and nations.

But in the common responsibility to build a cohesive society, man is not alone, just as the Prophet Isaiah describes in perhaps the most intimate text in the entire Bible, "Zion said, 'The Lord has forsaken me, the Lord has forgotten me.' Does a woman forget her child so that she is not moved by the child of her bowels? Though these women forget, yet I will never forget thee." (Isaiah 49:14-15); or as witnessed by the beautiful page in Luke's Gospel about the Merciful Father, who waits for his own son to return, and when the Father, who is the image of God, arrives, he runs to meet him moved: everything in this parable is surprising and never had God been depicted to men with these features, showing God's tenderness for every man.

Let me recall the universal witness of the peace prayer convened by Pope John Paul II in Assisi in 1986, when voices were raised in deep accord with Isaiah

and the Gospel. The Buddhist sage Shantideva (8th century) prayed thus, “May all who are exhausted by cold find warmth, and all who are oppressed by heat find refreshment [...]. May all animals be free of the fear of being devoured by one another; may the hungry spirits be content; may the blind see and the deaf hear [...]. May the naked find clothing, the hungry find food, [...]. May all who are frightened no longer be afraid, and those who are chained find freedom [...] and may all men show friendship among themselves.”

Not different were the accents of Hindu prayer, taken from the Upanishads, the ancient meditations on the Vedas: “We confirm our commitment to the building of justice and peace through the efforts of all world religions [...]. May Almighty God, the friend of all, be conducive to our peace. May the Divine Judge be the Giver of peace for us.”

We are also well-versed in the rich theological and human connotations of the term “peace”, as expressed in the Muslim (salam) and Jewish (shalom) traditions, which equate peace with the presence of God’s kingdom and the obedience of faith (Islam), and use the desire for peace as a standard form of greeting among believers. These accents of faith and profound humanity, prevalent throughout the sacred texts of the world’s faiths, might remind us of the “book of the peoples” mentioned in the Bible (cf. Psalm 87:6): a celestial book in which God himself writes, but whose pages also appear in the sacred texts of the world’s peoples.

From this brief introduction to the many religious traditions, we may derive an additional lesson for the topic we will be discussing today: to develop a cohesive community, we must labour in the world without losing sight of the hope that only heaven can provide.

For a welcoming city and world

In the 4th century, Saint Ambrose wrote: “The guest does not want wealth, but rather a gracious welcome. Not a lavish banquet, but ordinary food. It is better to provide friendship and generosity with beans than to slaughter calves in the stable with hostility.” (AMBROGIO, *Opere morali*, Tutte le rist di Ambrogio, vol. XIII, p. 303).

I decided to quote this passage from the early periods of the Catholic Church’s existence because it concretely demonstrates the conviviality of disparities at the table of society, where new guests unanticipated by our calculations or plans always appear and swarm in.

Even today, building community with the “different” is not an easy process. On the contrary, it is a sort of misery that is always before our eyes. It is challenging

to bring together “diverse” individuals from different ethnicities, beliefs, and backgrounds. Living together, coexisting, and building communities that share everything from labour to welfare, from basic amenities to security, demands a heavy burden that, if accepted, provides the advantage of paving the way for civilization.

It requires fortitude to see beyond one’s own self-interest ghetto or one’s own culture and religion, which, if not open to acceptance, would become an absurd Berlin “walls” blocking all kinds of human growth, of every man who now, more than ever, considers the whole planet to be his home.

For this reason, establishing a cohesive society also requires a moral commitment that must be maintained by the concerted efforts of several people acting at different levels. Starting at the educational level, efforts should be made to instil values of openness, diversity, autonomy, morality, and finally, respect for differences, fraternity, and solidarity, which may subsequently be reflected in public discourse and cultural life. We must begin in a practical manner with brief relationships, regulating our emotions of distrust and rejection of the unfamiliar. We must watch over future generations so that they learn to be welcoming and eliminate the seeds of xenophobia that history and tradition have planted in their hearts.

In addressing the topic of hospitality, we must first approach the situation with a prophetic mindset, ready to see in the daily journey a providential opportunity, a call for a more fraternal and supporting society, and evidence of God’s presence among mankind. We have to make the transition from a homogeneous to a multicultural society, with all its attendant challenges and opportunities. This means that politics should evolve into a platform for the collective human advancement, a terrain for growth in which all individuals provide their different inherent contributions. Saint Paul VI remarked in Octogesima adveniens (no. 48) that it is not enough to recall principles, affirm aspirations, point out glaring injustices, and utter prophetic denunciations; these words will have no real weight unless they are followed by a heightened sense of responsibility and practical action on the part of each individual.

The value of friendship

We are aware that a city is the product of several historical, economic, commercial, political, and even competing circumstances. In the end, however, it is always the outcome of an act of harmony and cooperation: a collection of individuals who choose to live and work together for shared aims and advantages. The fundamental value upon which a city stands is not primarily the goodwill of its citizens, despite the fact that the book of Proverbs correctly states, “By the blessing of righteous men a city is raised” (Ps. 11:11); nor is it the fundamental value of good governance, despite Sirach’s admonition that “a city prospers through the wisdom of its leaders” (Sir. 10:3). In actuality, the classical world attributes the term “friendship” to a considerably more meaningful value. Already, Plato created an equivalency between friendship and harmony that contributes to the prosperity of the community.

Furthermore, Aristotle dares to say that “the highest point of justice seems to belong to the nature of friendship” (Ethics to Nicomachus, VIII) by describing friendship as that good without which no one would choose to live, even if he possessed all other goods; he gives this good a political significance by stating that all communities are manifestly parts of that politics, and the particular species of friendship correspond to the particular species of community.

Initial expressions of friendship are directed toward the city as a whole, which is compared to a living person. In a 1954 speech in Geneva, the saintly mayor of Florence, Giorgio La Pira, said, “Cities [...] have their own face, they have, so to speak, their own soul and their own destiny: they are not random piles of stone; they are mysterious dwellings of men and, in a certain sense, mysterious dwellings of God: *Gloria Domini in te videbitur*.” (Giorgio La Pira Sindaco, vol. I, p. 383). La Pira grasps the relationship between person and city with such clarity that he asserts that the crisis of our time may be described as the detachment of the individual from the organic setting of the city: “Is it not true that the human being is rooted in the city as a tree is rooted in the soil?” That it is anchored in the key parts of the city, namely the temple for its connection with God and prayer life, the home for its family life, the workshop for its work life, the school for its intellectual life, and the hospital for its physical life? Moreover, he emphasizes that “just because of this vital and permanent relationship between the city and man, the city is, in a sense, the appropriate instrument for overcoming all the possible crises to which human history and civilization have been subjected throughout the centuries.” (Address to the Conference of Mayors of Capital Cities, Oct. 5, 1955, vol. II, p. 108).

The commitment to build connections between individuals and groups beyond each person's natural affinities is a second aspect of friendship that helps us better grasp the mission of a cohesive society. Too often, the city looks like a collection of distinct bodies, a succession of layers that do not connect with one another. These layers are comprised of social categories, classes, professions, labour interests, political interests, and diverse ethnic and subethnic groups. Occasionally, one has the sensation that the city is too large to feel like a community. In order to bridge these gaps, friendships must be formed between people of diverse backgrounds, cultures, and languages.

There is a need to forge the kinds of connections that crystallize into warm embraces and friendships and which, if genuine and profound, may extend to individuals of other backgrounds. In this framework, it is the responsibility of the Church and all religious groups, in particular, to forge friendships that transcend natural affinities, thus contributing to the civic and moral sense of a community. A broader dedication then follows: the dedication to opening lines of connection between workplaces and academic institutions; places of suffering and places of leisure, cultural institutions and everyday citizens; the socially excluded and the socially connected. Only a strong communication effort can provide a foundation for the many public and private projects that are designed to give the city a new look—the face of a unified society.

The third quality of friendship is the will to foster not just the circumstances for living well, in the sense of being comfortable, but also the conditions for working for good, in the sense of fostering the social and civic conditions essential to the growth of virtue.

In his essay titled “The City of Man”, Giuseppe Lazzati explains why he prefers the phrase “creating the city of man” as a metaphor for politics. By doing so, he hoped to restore politics to its rightful place as the pinnacle of human activity within the natural order, in which each individual being—in his or her particular set of social and religious relations—functions as a subject-artifact and end that composes itself harmoniously for the common good. (*La città dell'uomo. Costruire, da ristiani, la città dell'uomo a misura d'uomo*, Roma, AVE, 1984, pp. 11-17).

This harmonious ideal may be traced back to Plato and Aristotle through Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, specifically the Beatitudes, from which he extracts the characteristics of a cohesive community:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. Blessed

are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5:3-10).

For this reason, Saint Paul VI wrote in Octogesima adveniens (no. 8): To build the city as the place of existence of men and their enlarged communities, to create new forms of contact and relations, to glimpse an original application of social justice, and to assume responsibility for this difficult future is a task in which Christians must engage. Even today, the Church desires to contribute as a friend of the city by becoming nothing less than the voice of the Gospel in it and for it.

Conclusion

As I conclude my presentation, I think that a cohesive society necessitates rewriting the “grammar” of leadership and care for others, taking into account the life, history, and circumstances of each person. In this context, Pope Francis reminds us that “Upholding the dignity of the person means instead acknowledging the value of human life, which is freely given to us and hence cannot be an object of trade or commerce. We are all called to a great mission which may at times seem an impossible one: to tend to the needs, the needs of individuals and peoples. To tend to those in need takes strength and tenderness, effort and generosity in the midst of a functionalistic and privatized mindset, which inexorably leads to a “throwaway culture”. To care for individuals and peoples in need means protecting memory and hope; it means taking responsibility for the present, with its situations of utter marginalization and anguish, and being capable of bestowing dignity upon it.” (Pope Francis, Address to the European Parliament and the Council of Europe, 25 November 2014).

Pope Francis identifies compassion as the most effective way to address a sick person. Because an observer without compassion is unaffected by what he observes and moves on; whereas a compassionate heart is touched and engaged, stops, and cares. This is the legacy entrusted to us by Mother Teresa of Calcutta, who lived a life of proximity and sharing, recognizing and respecting human dignity till the very end and making death more dignified. Mother Teresa often reminded her sisters that their lives were not in vain if they had kindled even one candle in someone’s darkest hour. (Address to participants at the CDF Plenary Assembly, 30 January 2020).

Before concluding and thanking the Singaporean Authorities and the ICCS organizations once again, I would like to highlight six points that I think will help make the concept of a cohesive society more concrete.

1. Everyone, without exception, is a promoter of solidarity.

To construct a fair and cohesive society, the commitment of all parties is necessary (Pope Francis, Angelus of 1 January 2014).

2. Building solidarity with youth leadership.

To construct a better society based on justice, fraternity, and solidarity, the leadership of young people is crucial: they must help solve issues with bravery, optimism, and unity. The world needs young people who are daring and fearless, who come to the streets and refuse to remain inactive. The young people of today and tomorrow are entitled to a peaceful global order based on the unity of the human family, respect, collaboration, solidarity, and compassion (Pope Francis, Message at the Conference on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons, 7 December 2014).

3. Solidarity is a commitment to creating inviting cities.

The cities in which we reside will have an attractive appearance if they are rich in humanity; hospitable; inviting; if we are all attentive and kind to those in need; and if we are able to engage constructively and cooperatively for the benefit of everyone.

4. Solidarity is assuming responsibility for the other person's problems.

Solidarity is the disposition that enables individuals to approach one another and to base their relationships on a sense of brotherhood that transcends differences and limits and compels them to pursue the common good together. Solidarity means assuming responsibility for each other's problems. The mandate of love is to be carried out not from thoughts or notions but from true meeting with the other, from recognizing oneself day after day in the face of the other with his sufferings and heroism. One does not love abstractions or ideas, but rather people in the flesh: men and women, children, and the elderly; faces and names that fill the heart and move us to the gut (Pope Francis, Address to Participants in the Second World Meeting of People's Movements, 9 July 2015).

5. Solidarity is defined by closeness and generosity.

Not only does solidarity include contributing to those in need, but it also involves taking care of one another. When we see in one another the face of a brother or sister, there can be no more division or exclusion (Pope Francis, Address at the Meeting with Civil Society, Quito-Ecuador, 7 July 2015).

6. Solidarity is a way to create history.

Solidarity entails overcoming the damaging consequences of selfishness in order to make way for the bravery of listening gestures. In this sense, solidarity is thus a means of creating history (Pope Francis, address to participants at the World Meeting of Popular Movements, 28 October 2014).

All of this illustrates that the great religious traditions of mankind are capable of motivating the quest for and creation of peace and coherence among people even now, and it seems to me that the persistent and far-sighted dedication of the present Conference fits well within this dynamic.

An appropriate description of this dedication is found in John Paul II's closing remarks at the 1986 historic prayer for peace in Assisi: "We attempt to find in it a foreshadowing of what God would want the historical evolution of mankind to be: a brotherly journey in which we accompany one another toward the ultimate goal he creates for us."

Thank you.

SPECIAL ADDRESS

THE COMMON GOOD:
FULFILMENT LIES ON EVERYONE'S EFFORTS

MEET the **NEEDS** of OTHERS WITHOUT EXPECTING ANYTHING IN **RETURN**



TRANSCEND **US** to **EMBRACING US**



EDUCATION IS the FIRST STEP to A COHESIVE SOCIETY



WE NEED to WORK ON EFFICIENCY & EFFICACY

EMBRACE LIVING WITH OTHER FAITHS & CULTURES IN the WORLD



DISCERNMENT AS A COMPASS



TOGETHER, AGENTS of HOPE



RENEW your MIND

LOOK BEYOND RELIGION & YOURSELF

STANDING IN **SOLIDARITY** WITH OTHERS IS A HOLY PILGRIMAGE

EVERYONE CAN DO THIS!



- CARDINAL PIETRO PAROLIN - SECRETARY of STATE, HOLY SEE

THE DEEPEST CONVICTION of the CHRISTIAN FAITH IS **LOVING OTHERS**



BUILD FRIENDSHIPS that TRANSCENDS **ALL** RELATIONAL AFFINITIES



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PLENARY 2

HOW DIVERSITY CAN BE HARNESSSED FOR THE COMMON GOOD



Panellists

Mr André Azoulay

Adviser to H.M. King Mohammed VI of Morocco
President of the Executive Committee,
Foundation for the 3 Cultures and 3 Religions (Sevilla)
Founding President of the Essaouira-Mogador Foundation
President of the Moroccan National Foundation for Sciences Engineering

Professor Yoshiko Ashiwa

Professor of Anthropology and Global Studies
Founding Director of Institute for the Study of Peace and Reconciliation
Hitotsubashi University

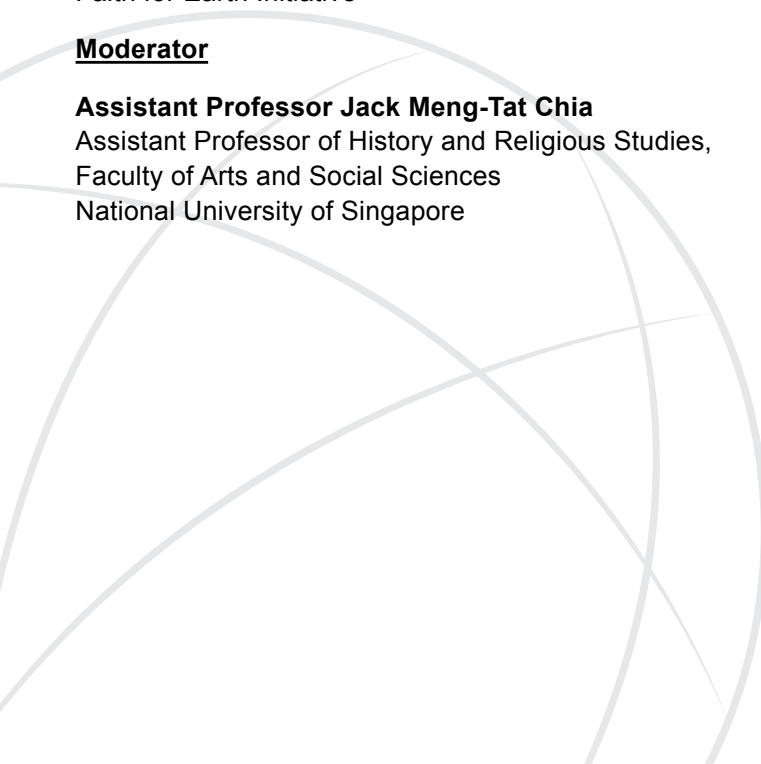
Dr Iyad Abumoghli

Founder and Director of the United Nations Environment Programme's (UNEP)
Faith for Earth Initiative

Moderator

Assistant Professor Jack Meng-Tat Chia

Assistant Professor of History and Religious Studies,
Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences
National University of Singapore



HOW DIVERSITY CAN BE HARNESSSED FOR THE COMMON GOOD

This plenary examines the tools and concepts needed to comprehend a world characterised by super-diversity, i.e. the existence of extremely complex and varied civilisations. It explores how our sense of belonging and identification intersects across topics like gender, class, colour, nationality, religion, and worldview, both as individuals and as communities. Each panellist spoke from their respective area of expertise on how they approached and harnessed diversity in society. Mr Azoulay began by emphasising the importance of speaking the truth about, and profoundly changing, education on the intricacies of diversity. Next, Professor Yoshiko stressed the need for religious leaders to internalise anthropology and field experiences, so that they and the general public can be at ease with the uncertainties that diversity brings. Finally, Dr Abumoghli underlined how climate change might create a neutral forum for communication not just between religious organisations but also between the religious and secular sectors.

Mr André Azoulay

Mr Azoulay identified as Jewish, partially Arab, and partially European. These characteristics define his Moroccan identity. He remarked that Singapore's commitment to diversity is not merely rhetoric; it is ingrained in Singapore's culture, which is so quiet, composed, and compelling. He added that when he returns to Morocco, he will share this intriguing experience.

He stated that when people think of Morocco, they do not realise that Jews settled there nearly a thousand years before Islam. The mainstream media may inform those who are neither Moroccan nor from the Middle East about the violence and conflict in the region. As a result, they may not believe his assertion that reality is more complex than these depictions. Mr Azoulay explained that his heritage spans over three thousand years. Its historical works comprises not only beautiful pages but also black ones. In terms of diversity, interactions between Islam and Judaism have endured adversity but have ultimately prevailed. Knowing that he is not a minority gives him peace of mind. His Jewish identity is not his only one. Becoming a citizen is also a component of his identity. Therefore, he lives as a full-fledged Moroccan for the sake of maintaining harmony. This reality is very distinct from what the media portrays.

Diverse History

The Moroccan constitution states that Morocco was founded by the Berber civilisation, before it was succeeded by the Jewish and Arab civilisations. To his knowledge, no other constitution has had a history as culturally diverse as Morocco's.

In the Muslim world, non-Muslim minorities often lack their own predominantly-populated homeland or city. Nevertheless, such a city still exists in his birthplace in southern Morocco. This city had approximately 20,000 inhabitants, with approximately 16,000 Jews. This implies that Mr Azoulay's birthplace has been predominantly Jewish for close to a century. Mr Azoulay believes that his unique DNA has been shaped by both Judaism and Islam. He argued that there are various ways to resolving the conflicts in the Middle East, and cautions against the region's complexity.

Being Treated with Respect

Mr Azoulay has been taught by his rabbis and Jewish instructors that to be a decent Jew, one must treat others with equal respect. The moment you acknowledge that they may not have the same opportunities as you, you cease to be Jewish. Mr Azoulay revealed that the perspective of being a "Moroccan Jew" has influenced his activism to the extent that "political correctness" is not a priority. Despite being Jewish, he conveys concern for Palestinians and their struggle with dignity. He also advocates for peace for Israel, its citizens, and its future generations.

Mr Azoulay concluded by relating a personal incident that occurred in his birthplace two years ago: The King visited one of the synagogues and entered the holiest section of the sanctuary, where the Torah scrolls were kept. The King reverently placed his hands on the Torah and offered his prayers. Remarkably, this is the same King who descended directly from the Prophet Muhammad. Significantly, this event occurred in an Arab nation within a Muslim region. Mr Azoulay wished for more of such interactions to occur globally.

Professor Yoshiko Ashiwa

The challenge of diverse societies, according to Professor Ashiwa, is to confront complexity and overcome differences. Even in super-diverse societies, indifference exists. As humans, we tend to disregard those who are unlike us. We use indifference as an excuse to avoid complexity and subscribe to simplistic us-versus-them dichotomies.

Challenge of Complexity

Professor Ashiwa explained that the innate nature of humans is to simplify complexity through polarisation, as this provides a sense of security. People often categorise themselves as “good” and label ambiguity as “bad”. Such indifference consumes life’s vitality. She considered ambiguity to be a fertile launching pad for the emergence of new concepts and realities. Religion should foster a greater understanding of humanity, not divide it.

Professor Ashiwa suggested methods for engaging with the enigmatic “other”. Firstly, religious leaders must understand anthropology and acquire field experience in diverse subsets of society. One’s experiences with others could serve to improve one’s comprehension of otherness. Embracing the unsettling nature of complexity could enable us to find common ground and strengthen religious leaders’ ability to exert such an influence on their followers.

Issues that Hinder Social Cohesion

However, the challenges that hinder social cohesion remain, and Professor Ashiwa suggested that social and structural inequalities could be the root causes of most communal violence. The middle class is polarising into the wealthy and the impoverished. The “99%” struggle with destitution in capitalism can be exemplified using David Graeber’s work. Although social mobility and social stability appear to be contradictory, it would be crucial to find balance and resolution to this issue. She concluded that it would be impossible to remain in predetermined groups in a super-diverse society. Instead, we should actively attempt to leave our social bubbles in order to discover and develop new systems and ideas, as well as to seek change and common ground.

Dr Iyad Abumoghli

Dr Abumoghli emphasised the significance of collaboration between religious organisations, world governments, and civil societies. Such collaborations are key to promoting global peace and stability, while religion serves two crucial roles in promoting environmental sustainability.

Necessity to Collaborate

Dr Abumoghli noted that over 84% of the world’s population believes in a religion or subscribes to some form of spiritual belief. Numerous religions prescribe what people consume and drink, as well as their behaviour. Consequently, religious values can influence individuals’ and institutions’ attitudes towards nature and natural resources, thereby affecting production and consumption patterns. He

also noted that religious institutions constituted the fourth largest economy on earth and own approximately 8% of habitable land. This gives them access to the financial resources required to address environmental issues.

Climate Change and Social Justice

Dr Abumoghli stated that climate change impacted people on all continents, suggesting that climate change is a social justice issue spanning human rights, gender, equality, peacebuilding, and climate action. Faith leaders are essential actors in humanitarian responses, protection, and social cohesion, and they can collaborate with other actors across the nexus of climate change, fragility, and peacebuilding to promote trust, social justice, and equal participation in decision-making processes.

Furthermore, Dr Abumoghli acknowledged that religious cooperation may lead to significant prospects, given that environmental degradation and climate change were growing threats to peace and human security. The Faith for Earth Initiative of the UNEP builds on the role of faith-based organisations in promoting environmental stewardship and facilitates interreligious dialogue to accomplish the shared goals of environmental protection and sustainable development. Initiated in 2017, the Faith for Earth Initiative aims to promote interreligious and intercultural dialogue, understanding, and cooperation for peace between humans and the natural world.

The initiative has three primary objectives: (i) to provide faith-based organisations and their leaders with a neutral forum for policy dialogue with decision-makers; (ii) to utilise the resources of faith-based organisations to support the achievement of sustainable development goals; and (iii) to equip faith communities with the knowledge necessary to comprehend the relationship between religions and science and to communicate effectively with decision-makers and the general public. During the United Nations Environment Assembly, the world's highest-level decision-making body on the environment, the Faith for Earth Initiative hosted an interfaith dialogue with 680 participants from 94 religions and more than 180 presenters across 25 sessions. The dialogue produced a strong position on environmental governance, which was submitted to the President of the Assembly. Representatives of all faiths concurred on a shared human, spiritual, and moral obligation to the planet. All religious traditions, including Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam, possess robust environmental ethics.

Social and Spiritual Support Structures

Dr Abumoghli added that religious actors could offer social and spiritual support to increase resilience in communities impacted by both climate change and

conflict. They can assist these communities in adapting to climate change and promoting climate-sensitive lifestyles. He also emphasised investing in young faith leaders to foster intergenerational dialogue and cooperation. He cited that the Faith for Earth Initiative has a youth council that represents 12 denominations. A great deal of work would be necessary to enhance religious literacy on the relationship between religions and the environment, as well as to educate the public on how environmental issues are reflected in their own religious values. Dr Abumoghli concluded by advocating for greater interreligious cooperation and a strengthening of our moral obligation to the world.

Discussion and Reflections

The panel discussion was focused on the strategies for dealing with super-diversity. In 2007, Steven Vertovec had coined the term “super-diversity” to refer to a level of societal complexity that exceeds anything previously encountered. The concept of super-diversity is employed to examine diverse societies characterised by a high level of diversity. The panel also examined methods to encourage and facilitate interreligious interactions in order to advance the common good and foster social cohesion.

Advancing the Common Good

A participant observed that, as a result of globalisation, societies are becoming even more diverse and inquired how societies can strive to advance the common good. Dr Abumoghli responded that all religions uphold lofty moral standards bound by beliefs such as “either we sink together or float together into port”. He said that the United Nations Environment Assembly is a place where people can talk about issues and pass decisions. But what was missing from policy talks about the environment was a moral voice. So, in 2019 and 2022, the Faith for Earth Initiative invited religious leaders to join policy dialogues with decision-makers to bring moral opinions into the policy-making arena. Professor Ashiwa suggested the use of non-violent communication for effective expression. She explained how two individuals in Sri Lanka who do not share a language would not be able to converse, and that only the elites use English as a lingua franca. While this demonstrates the importance of language education, the teaching process requires time, and violence can erupt suddenly in a society. She highlighted the use arts as a means of non-violent communication for promoting group unity. Mr Azoulay stated that we must comprehend the misuse of religions and the importance of comprehending why archaic religious interpretations continue to persist.

Interactions Among Diverse Groups

Another participant inquired how various religious groups could be persuaded to abandon their comfort zones and interact with those of other faiths. Dr Abumoghli proposed closer collaboration between religious and non-religious actors. According to him, *Laudato Si*, issued by Pope Francis, is an excellent example of drawing from both scientific and biblical principles. Professor Ashiwa suggested seeking common ground on issues while avoiding dogmatism and differences. She added that interactions with other religious groups would be essential, citing how a Jesuit monastery in Tokyo had visited Buddhist temples and practised meditation on their own. Mr Azoulay stated that education is the primary remedy, along with regular meetings between religious authorities. He cited how Moroccan youngsters were previously taught that their national history had stemmed from the Muslim civilisation. The government has since corrected this historical inaccuracy in the school curriculum a few years ago.

Fostering An Inclusive Society

A participant inquired about fostering an inclusive society for minorities, including the LGBTQ community. Professor Ashiwa believed that the dual identities of individuals as citizens and religious individuals should be permitted. Religious groups and civil society must engage in dialogue, and it is hoped that religious groups can “find a discourse” to defend civil rights. Dr Abumoghli cautioned the need to be “human and an upstanding citizen” and to “let the divine judge”. He argued that one’s sexual orientation should not be the major concern. For Mr Azoulay, education and the avoidance of divisiveness and polarising debates were what mattered. The use of art, poetry, literature, and the study of religious traditions with care, could also present numerous opportunities and initiatives for bridging cultures with divergent worldviews.

Legislation and Public Policies

A participant asked about ways to facilitate interaction and dialogue between the religious and secular sectors on significant issues, given that legislation and public policies must be secular in most societies. Can thought leaders persuade policymakers to exercise discretion so that society can become more cohesive and the common good can be realised? Dr Abumoghli emphasised that religions should not be politicised. Religion persists as a collection of moral principles and behaviours. Political systems establish the administration of the population. The key is to identify common ground and complementarity between religions and political systems — the value system and the system of governance. Mr Azoulay agreed that religion should not be used for political ends, although it is somewhat too late. He added that those who perverted religious values wielded excessive

power, and the main issue would be to reclaim religion from these divisive forces and place it in its proper context.

Harnessing the Common Good

Dr Abumoghli believes that the common good involves considering how our lifestyle and consumption affect others. Professor Ashiwa stated that the common ground exists within each individual. Her advice was to locate the otherness within yourself. Mr Azoulay suggested investing in education to facilitate profound and fundamental mindset changes.

ICCS / THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON COHESIVE SOCIETIES
6th - 8th SEPTEMBER 2022 | SINGAPORE

Plenary 2: HOW DIVERSITY CAN BE HARNESSSED FOR THE COMMON GOOD

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A JUSTICE ISSUE
THE FAITHFUL EARTH INITIATIVE
PROVIDE A NEUTRAL PLATFORM
INVESTMENTS OF FAITH ORGS IN LINE WITH SDGs
PROVIDE KNOWLEDGE OF SCIENCE TO FAITH COMMUNITIES

II MR. AZOULAY
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WHEN IT COMES TO TRUE DIVERSITY, YOU NEED TO GIVE VOICE TO EVERY VOICE.
EVEN IF IT IS SOMETIMES UNCOMFORTABLE
THAT TEARS ME TO SPEAK FOR THE PALESTINANS!
DUSTY DREAM TO BECOME A GOOD FISH IN THE MEDITERRANEAN

I PROF. YOSHIKO
COMPLEXITY
WHEN PRESENTED WITH COMPLEXITY, PEOPLE TEND TO WANT TO DICHOTOMISE
LEADERS NEED ANTHROPOLOGIST-LIKE EXPERIENCES TO UNDERSTAND COMPLEXITY
COMMUNALITY
SHARING OF ENERGY

IV PANEL DISCUSSION
CLOSE YOUR EYES
& LOOK INSIDE
YOU WOULD BELIEVE IN ANY RELIGION
THEY ALL PREACH THE SAME CORE VALUES!
THERE ARE HYPER-DIVERSE SOCIETIES THAT ARE DIVIDED BY A LACK OF A COMMON LANGUAGE
THAT'S THE IMPORTANCE OF NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION
RELIGIOUS LEADERS SHOULD BE ENCOURAGED TO BE CURIOUS ABOUT OTHER RELIGIONS
ON SEXUAL & GENDER IDENTITIES
WE ARE NOT THE JUDGES OF OTHERS, THAT IS GOD'S ROLE.
OUR SYSTEMS DEFINE WHO IS & WHO ISN'T TRAPPEL
WHAT WE SHOULD ONLY CARE ABOUT IS IF SHE IS A GOOD HUMAN BEING & A GOOD GLOBAL CITIZEN!
MAYBE RELIGION & POLITICS SHOULD NOT MIX, BUT IT'S PROBABLY TOO LATE FOR THAT...
HOW CAN WE ADVOCATE FOR THE COMMON GOOD?
MODERATOR: Assoc. Prof. JACK MIENG-TAT CHIA
Dr. YIAD ABUMOGHLI
Prof. ASHIWA YOSHIKO
Mr. ANDRÉ AZOULAY

IN MODERN GLOBALISED SOCIETY, ANY GOOD YOU DO IS FOR THE COMMON GOOD

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PLENARY 3

HOW TECHNOLOGY CAN BE LEVERAGED TO FOSTER MUTUAL TRUST



Panellists

Mr Jasvir Singh

Founding Chair of City Sikhs, United Kingdom

Associate Professor Patrice Brodeur

Associate Professor, Institute of Religious Studies,
University of Montreal (Canada)

Dr Shashi Jayakumar

Head of the Centre of Excellence for National Security (CENS)
S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS),
Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

Moderator

Dr Terri-Anne Teo

Lecturer in the Politics of Race and Ethnicity
Newcastle University, United Kingdom

HOW TECHNOLOGY CAN BE LEVERAGED TO FOSTER MUTUAL TRUST

Social capital can and should be cultivated through diversity, as cooperation offers humanity the greatest chance of survival and resiliency. In modern times, technology has grown the public commons, making it easier for people to participate, talk, get knowledge, and use resources. However, epistemic bubbles and echo chambers have impacted intergroup interaction, such that in-groups may be less exposed to out-groups.

In the midst of the expanding opportunities of the Internet and the heightened dangers of an increasingly digital age, it is crucial to recognise that social media is not a neutral force and that it can be a potent instrument for bringing people together. Drawing from their research and personal experience, the panellists discussed the opportunities presented for social cohesion and identity formation in the digital age. The panel also highlighted the persistence of the digital divide and the need to provide resources and education to the economically and digitally disadvantaged, as well as the need to cultivate an inclusive population and online spaces that are resistant to divisive online discourse.

Dr Teo emphasised how social media and technology may disrupt social cohesiveness in various ways, including the rapid dissemination of falsehoods, thanks to technology's delivery of knowledge on demand. She argued that social media and technology have been called both a wonderful equaliser and a promoter of inequality. Technology offers a space that can exacerbate tensions and divisions, but it can also offer a space for interaction between groups that builds social capital via diversity.

Mr Jasvir Singh

Mr Jasvir Singh cited the South Asian Heritage Month (SAHM) 2022 to illustrate how social media and other forms of technology can be used to foster community building. SAHM was founded in 2020 and has grown exponentially through social media over the past three years. Social media had a positive effect in the background by making it possible for SAHM, a group that was originally focused on identity problems, to talk about religion in a safe way.

Using Technology in Community Building

SAHM is a “month of awareness” created by the South Asian Heritage Trust (SAHT), a UK-based charity group run by volunteers. The initiative serves to: (i) honour the experiences of South Asians living in the United Kingdom and their shared history; (ii) be a resource where these communities can discover

information and support; and (iii) highlight opportunities for a more inclusive society.

Mr Singh defined South Asia as consisting of the following eight countries: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, all of which have a long-standing relationship with the United Kingdom. SAHM is held annually from 18 July to 17 August to coincide with two important historical dates for India and Pakistan: the Indian Independence Act, which received royal assent on 18 July 1947; and the Radcliffe Line redrawing the borders of India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, which was published on 17 August 1947. The two dates constitute a practical calendar month for the SAHM event.

Bridging Divides

Mr Singh explained that the prevalence of South Asians in the United Kingdom is significant because of their intertwined history and demographics. South Asians constitute over 40% of the non-White population in the United Kingdom. As a result, the history of South Asians, their identity, and their heritage are intrinsic to the society and identity of the United Kingdom. To illustrate the need for SAHM, Mr Singh cited the award-winning war film “1917”, which actor and activist Lawrence Fox deemed to be a form of “institutional racism” due to the fact that it featured only one South Asian combatant. In 1917, Indians constituted one-sixth of the British Army, and their numbers were greater on the front lines.

To counteract these unfair views of Indians in British society, SAHM tells important British South Asian stories, such as those of Noor Inayat Khan, who was part of the Prosper resistance network in Paris during World War 2; the Ayah’s House, depicting ayahs (or nannies) who were hired by British families to look after their children and families on their sea voyages home; and Nadiya Hussein, who won the Great British Bake Off and became the first Muslim winner. SAHM also provides fascinating information about British cultural symbols of South Asian origin, including Queen frontman Freddie Mercury, horseback polo, and paisley fabric, which is a Scottish imitation of Kashmiri designs.

Using Technology to Broaden Outreach

Through the use of social media, SAHM was able to tap into the zeitgeist of British society, reaching more than 31 million British citizens in its first year and generating 87.2 million impressions on social media platforms.

SAHM also reached British citizens of varying ages. Its YouTube channel, the primary platform for disseminating South Asian tales and facts, received 134,000 impressions in 2022, with 40% of viewers aged 25–34 and 37% of viewers aged 55–64.

Notably, a number of UK institutions, including the England and Wales Cricket Team, Cambridge University, EY Careers UK, Tottenham Hotspur Football Club, the Law Society, and Sky Sports, took up SAHM and carried it onto Twitter on their own accord. Major corporations and institutions in the United Kingdom, including Historic England, the Royal British Legion, the National Archives, HSBC UK, Sutton Heritage, and Muslim Mind Collaborative, have incorporated faith-based tweets of South Asian stories and facts into the SAHM online discourse without prompting. Facebook and Instagram exhibited the same trend. This was a significant development for SAHM because, despite being a secular movement, faith communities felt included.

Mr Singh concluded his lecture by emphasising that, while there are several practical ways for SAHMs and other good groups throughout the world to promote their message, social media was critical in capturing the public zeitgeist. Additionally, faith-based and interfaith activity and initiatives need not be outwardly faith-centric, since social media and secular organisations like SAHM may still produce faith-related outcomes because these platforms reflect how secular communities and civil societies interact.

Associate Professor Patrice Brodeur

Professor Brodeur centred his presentation on the use of technology to cultivate mutual trust. Despite the breadth of technology's diffusion and the multitude of opportunities it offers, the technological divide persists, albeit at a decreasing rate.

Building Mutual Trust Using Online Tools

Professor Brodeur contends that it is critical to include neuroscience knowledge when designing online tools to bring people together and develop mutual trust. Because of the way our brains are formed, we begin to construct the "I" as babies, but as we grow, develop, and occupy various identities, this occurs in the context of relationships and communities. As a result, the balance between the conceptions of "I" and "we" becomes critical.

In light of this, Professor Brodeur noted that there are initiatives (in and around the online and technological domains) that aim to bridge this divide. Sofiya, a post-9/11 American non-profit organisation, for instance, seeks to reduce tensions and misperceptions between the Arab world and the United States and is at the forefront of efforts to embrace opposing viewpoints in order to connect people. The group formed a collaboration with the United Nations as well as the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT)'s Cognitive Neuroscience Lab

to investigate the feasibility of leveraging online spaces to assist human change. A research study comparing groups of students who participated in virtual exchange activities to those who did not indicated that the programme has been transformational in key ways.

Using Social Media For Dialogue

Professor Brodeur also discussed the KAICIID Dialogue Centre's investigation of social media as a forum for dialogue. Recognising the urgent need to address issues surrounding online dialogue, the centre trained 446 participants from 11 Arab countries to have conversations online. The training equipped them to intervene purposefully and strategically in instances involving false information and representation, as well as fundamentalist narratives. The KAICIID Knowledge Hub is a platform not only for hosting webinars and e-learning resources, it also contains an international database of individuals and organisations engaged in interreligious dialogue.

Professor Brodeur noted a FAS research study that sought to highlight the networks of interreligious initiatives by identifying how an organisation networks with others in the field. This is essential because interreligious initiatives cannot be conducted in isolation, and it would be necessary to determine how to situate one's efforts within a national, regional, or international framework.

In the digital era, there is a need to support and encourage discourse in a systematic manner, and one way to do so is through online platforms. This is the foundation of Strengthening EU, a transnational digital initiative designed to strengthen European democracy by supporting Citizens' Dialogues conducted in accordance with the principles of inclusiveness, deliberation, and efficacy.

Professor Brodeur concluded with two analyses on initiatives surrounding online dialogue (whether intercultural, interreligious, inter-spiritual, or inter-worldview). The first is the significance of incorporating both empirical and anecdotal evidence. The data collected from studies such as those discussed above demonstrate that interreligious dialogue organisations are becoming increasingly interconnected (e.g. FAS research) and that profound transformations of individual online experiences are possible (e.g. Sofiya). In addition, sustaining online and in-person experiences in conjunction with explicitly identified learning objectives is likely to boost positive transformation, long-term social networking and active national/global citizenship engagements. All of these are necessary and fundamental for inclusive and sustainable social cohesion.

Promoting Inclusive and Sustainable Social Cohesion

Professor Brodeur concluded that complex human challenges necessitate exponential growth in platforms adapted to promote inclusive and sustainable social cohesion. In the face of climate-related challenges, information technologies facilitate global interaction. However, mutual trust can only be established if online platforms employ both automated hate speech moderation and dialogical facilitation. Scaling up conversation capacity development and educating individuals in effective facilitation (e.g. the WOSM-KAICIID conversation for Peace initiative) is critical, as is developing new modules for such training. It is also essential to strengthen partnerships between formal, informal, and non-formal education in order to develop policies that meet the educational and learning requirements of young people and enhance multi-sectoral collaboration.

Dr Shashi Jayakumar

Dr Jayakumar began his presentation titled “Polarisation, (In)Tolerance, Cohesion, and Social Media” by acknowledging that distinct worldviews exist today along identity lines, eroding the middle ground and space for discourse. In Europe, for instance, there is a rise in economic insecurity and discontent, as well as a rise in disillusionment with political systems. Since the late 1970s, polarisation between political party supporters in the United States has increased significantly. Singapore follows a comparable pattern. According to a study conducted by Channel News Asia in 2021, 64% of respondents have witnessed an increase in online polarisation over the past five years. This loss of a space for dialogue and a middle ground for civil discourse fosters polarisation and extremism. In this regard, social media played a significant role in polarisation, as certain movements were permitted to use these platforms for mobilisation.

Dr Jayakumar reiterated that social media should not be considered a force of neutrality. During periods of political crisis or societal stress, such as during the pandemic, social media accelerated conspiracies and misinformation, such as vaccine hesitancy and narratives alleging that COVID-19 was an elaborate hoax. Dr Jayakumar cautioned that social media corporations were unable to address these issues, and that fact checkers could not keep up with the rate of misinformation. Extremism, polarisation, and intolerance are forces that would imperil diverse multicultural societies if left unfettered.

The concepts of reciprocal radicalisation and cumulative extremism suggest that extremist groups grew more extreme by imitating one another’s actions. Islamic State (IS) propaganda, for instance, frequently conveyed demonisation, victimisation, and blame on corrupt political establishments clothed in Hollywood

slickness. This approach has made their redemptive narratives that call for a radical change highly persuasive. Christian far-right extremists have replicated IS' social media strategy verbatim.

Some studies, including one conducted in Singapore, of various social media content, such as Facebook discussions, indicate that the quality of online discussions is generally low, with a bias towards alternative media over mainstream media. Such discourses create fragmented echo chambers that limit perspective and dilute discourse.

Another societal force to be aware of is cancel culture, which began as a noble cause challenging powerful people who have committed wrongdoing. But this has regrettably taken a turn that has led some to justify doxing and online humiliation.

Dr Jayakumar concluded that, despite the dangers posed by social media to society, it can be a force for good, with opportunities to document and showcase positive work that promotes unity and cohesion online.

In the face of these obstacles, it is essential to maintain a civil ground for dialogue. As exemplified in Singapore, the international community should intervene early and proactively. Moreover, society must recognise the peril of taking normalcy for granted. There is a need to consciously preserve such normalcy, and grassroots actors should come together in a genuine and organic manner to address polarisation and disinformation and devise strategies to combat radicalism and extremism. Dr Jayakumar added assertively that we cannot always rely on the government.

Discussion and Reflections

During the rigorous question-and-answer session that followed, topics such as digitisation and the digital divide, negative aspects of social media, partnership with social media companies, and the security of online spaces, were examined in greater depth.

Digitisation and the Digital Divide

The panellists were asked if increased digitisation created a digital divide that poses additional dangers to those who are left behind or vulnerable. Mr Singh pointed out one issue with an online endeavour like SAHM is that certain individuals, particularly those from older generations, are unable to fully engage or have a presence in the digital arena. However, the older generation appears to be more engaged in SAHM via YouTube, which is not necessarily a social media tool. These disparities are less of a concern among the younger generation. He

added that the challenge of exposure can be overcome through social media, so long as we find ways to escape from echo chambers. Professor Brodeur observed that the pandemic has contributed to a widening disparity. He added that the majority of grassroots support for violent extremist groups comes from economically deprived communities. In addition to providing education opportunities for the impoverished, he advocated for greater access to electricity and Internet connectivity. The key is to address the underlying causes of poverty and lack of education, including digital literacy and education.

In the face of digital divides and communities at risk of being left behind, Dr Jayakumar emphasised the role of government facilitation. However, with greater access to online platforms in developing nations comes higher exposure to misinformation. Rapid digitalisation has left the populace ill-equipped to handle online threats. Dr Jayakumar recognised that the targeting of radical echo chambers is a time- and labour-intensive effort, and that promising initiatives do not necessarily depend on social media. He noted the regrettable loss of valuable heritage skills, such as the ability to discern between the lines, as technologically advanced nations rush to embrace the digital age. Against polarisation and extremism, it is essential to develop resilience and, indeed, critical thought.

Communities and the Negative Effect of Social Media

The panellists were asked how communities can mitigate the negative effects of social media, ensuring that mistrust does not overshadow the trust they are attempting to establish. Mr Singh emphasised the need for constructive discussions on social media that steer clear of polarisation. He acknowledged the need to strike a balance between the negatives and positives for community building. He also urged that awareness and cohesion initiatives be tailored specifically to community members, as the impact can be exponential if the right individuals are reached. However, algorithms remain a concern, and without proper legislation, the issue cannot be effectively addressed. Professor Brodeur noted the social obligation that comes with access, including intervening with alternate viewpoints when encountering lies, disinformation, or extremist narratives online. He acknowledged that such intervention requires training, without which further debate and extremist reaction could be fuelled. Consequently, such programmes are essential, and their scope should be linked to broader digital literacy training. This should be implemented throughout all educational systems, including informal education. Non-formal learning approaches (e.g. hands-on practical trainings) should be incorporated into formal education, and peer-to-peer initiatives (often the most effective for altering abuse dynamics) should be adapted for online environments.

Dr Jayakumar also elaborated on the role of the government and regulation, highlighting that Singapore's regulations alone would not solve the problem. Communal issues such as ethnicity and religion are more frequently discussed and debated, both online and offline, as a result of an evolving Singapore society where the significance of "out-of-bounds" markers has diminished. Stating that not all difficult conversations necessarily result in polarisation or extremism, Dr Jayakumar emphasised the need for civil discourse and the pursuit of a middle ground, as its erosion cannot be allowed.

Partnership with Social Media Companies

Addressing the utility and dangers of public-private partnerships and social media companies, Mr Singh remarked that social media corporations tremendous responsibility, but they do not always live up to them. Many social media companies will not intervene in hate crimes and false news, unless being pressured to do so by law enforcement. He also stated that the initiatives to address animosity within communities are insufficient. What is deemed as animosity in intra-community contexts may not be perceived the same way in intercommunity spaces (for example, the police might categorise it as an intra-community matter that they cannot intervene in). But if people do not feel secure enough to engage in robust discussions with compassion, hatred will prevail. To overcome this, Mr Singh posited that all social media companies have a moral duty to educate their employees on understanding intra-community conversations, as well as intra-community animosity and dissent. While digital laws have been passed in many countries and significant work is ongoing, the question of moral responsibility still lingers.

Professor Brodeur emphasised that there is some reassurance when one considers the UN strategies for combating hate speech. These strategies prioritise working with a variety of stakeholders (including governments) to develop links and dialogues with social media platforms. The aim is to hold the platforms accountable from a transnational perspective, rather than solely in relation to national governments.

Dr Jayakumar reiterated the significance of both online and offline interventions. The issue of algorithmic transparency persists despite significant efforts by social media companies. As Singapore is a smart nation, the government will need to address this issue. In China, there were attempts at an early stage by regulators to compel major platforms to disclose specific algorithmic details. Offline interactions, such as town halls that are highly effective for airing grievances, are equally crucial. He noted the success of such an approach, as seen during the Singapore Conversation when it was implemented on a large scale. Participants did not fully concur, but there were instances of mutual acknowledgment.

Safety of Online Spaces

The subject of online safety was brought up, as well as individuals' experiences and concerns with regards to using such platforms.

Citing from personal experience, Mr Singh emphasised the need for colleagues from marginalised populations (e.g. LGBTQ+ individuals) to generate ideas that promote inclusion within the community. He said that in order to develop cohesive societies and discover the shared humanity among us, people from diverse backgrounds must be given the opportunity to discuss intersectional identities and authentic lived experiences. Establishing such communities will enable them to share these experiences and receive support, he added.

ICCS THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE OF COHESIVE SOCIETIES
6th - 8th SEPTEMBER 2022 | SINGAPORE

Plenary 3: HOW TECHNOLOGY CAN BE LEVERAGED TO FOSTER MUTUAL TRUST

MR SINGH
SOUTH ASIAN HERITAGE MONTH STARTED IN 2020
A CELEBRATION OF STORIES IN BRITAIN
VOLUNTEER-RUN
2022: TWITTER PRESENCE WAS MASSIVE
INCORPORATE FAITH TO BRING THE SECULAR & RELIGIOUS TOGETHER IN ONE MOVEMENT

PROF. BRODEUR
A LOT OF PEOPLE TODAY STILL DON'T HAVE ACCESS TO THE INTERNET
WHEN DEVELOPING ONLINE TOOLS WE ARE ALWAYS HOW DO WE USE ONLINE TO BUILD RESILIENCY WITH EACH OTHER?
SOCIAL MEDIA AS A DIALOGUE
NETWORK & COLLABORATE!
INCLUSIVE & EFFECTIVE CITIZEN PARTICIPATION

DR JAYAKUMAR
RISE OF IDENTITY POLITICS
SOCIAL MEDIA IS A KEY FOR MOBILISATION
NOT A NEUTRAL FORCE!
POLARISATION IS EVISCERATING THE MIDDLE GROUND
SOCIAL MEDIA'S ROLE IN POLARISATION
CHALLENGES OF GOVERNANCE

RECIProCAL RADICALISATION
EXTREMISTS ARE PUSHED TOWARDS FURTHER RADICALISATION WHEN EXPOSED TO OTHER EXTREMIST GROUPS
ECHO CHAMBERS
RADICALISATION
CHALLENGES OF GOVERNANCE

IV PANEL DISCUSSION
CHALLENGE: PEOPLE WHO ARE EXCLUDED FROM DIGITAL EVENTS - THE OLDER GENERATION
MITIGATE THE HARMS OF SOCIAL MEDIA
CREATE SPACE TO HAVE POSITIVE DISCUSSIONS
GRASS-ROOT APPROACH IS EFFECTIVE...
IF YOU RELATE IT TO THINGS THAT MATTER TO YOUR AUDIENCE
SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY FOR INTERJECT IS VITAL BUT NEEDS TO BE TRAINED FOR AS FALLING INTO DEBATE DRIVES FURTHER EXTREMISM

MR JASVIR SINGH
YOU CAN REGULATE YOURSELF, BUT YOU CAN'T REGULATE YOURSELF OUT OF A PROBLEM

PROFESSOR PATRICE BRODEUR

DR SHASHI JAYAKUMAR

MODERATOR: DR TERRI-ANNE TEO

DIGITAL DIVIDES
WHEN RURAL COMMUNITIES SUDDENLY HAVE MODERN TECH THRUST UPON THEM...
IT CAN BE DANGEROUS: AS THEY DON'T KNOW HOW TO HANDLE THE FLOW OF INFORMATION & MISINFORMATION

Visualised by SHERPHOST

BREAKOUT SESSION 1

FAITH 1: RELIGION, RESILIENCE AND COHESION (INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE)



Panellists

Venerable Chi Kwang Sunim

Abbess of The Seon (Zen) Centre

Swami Samachittananda

President, Ramakrishna Mission

Master Tan Zhixia

Taoist Mission (Singapore)

Moderator

Dr Mohamed bin Ali

Assistant Professor,

Studies in Inter-Religious Relations in Plural Societies (SRP) Programme

S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies,

Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

RELIGION, RESILIENCE AND COHESION (INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE)

This breakout session examines various faith-based strategies for identifying and protecting vulnerable individuals or communities from radicalisation, as well as building resilience against divisive and even extremist religious narratives.

Venerable Chi Kwang Sunim

Venerable Chi Kwang Sunim remarked that ICCS is an opportunity to consider what we do in our communities and how we serve to improve interfaith networks through collaboration with religious and multicultural communities and their organisations. Such engagement would result in more favourable outcomes on social and political issues involving faith, social cohesion, and resilience for the common benefit of all.

Interfaith Networks

She discussed her work with Buddhist organisations in Australia, having helped found the Australian Sangha Association (ASA) and the Federation of Australian Buddhist Councils. Both of these organisations emerged in response to the Buddhist monastic community's increasing need for multiculturalism and religious diversity. Venerable Sunim acknowledged that the Buddhist monastic community in Australia is a very diverse, predominately ethnic group confronting numerous issues that have been addressed not only by Buddhist organisations but also by other organisations with which she collaborates. Venerable Sunim described the work performed by the Victorian Interfaith Networks and the Australian Partnership of Religious Organisations, which operate on the basis of cohesion and religious harmony, such as peacekeeping. Others, such as the Interfaith Centre of Melbourne, have developed a meaningful relationship between Buddhist leaders in order to facilitate discussions about the inevitable similarities and differences within a cohesive society.

Venerable Sunim was invited to join the Multifaith Advisory Group, which promotes cooperation and mutual understanding among all faiths and collaborates with Victoria's faith leaders to resolve issues that impact the entire community. The Multifaith Advisory Group facilitates in addressing cultural concerns regarding how to influence government policy on social issues pertinent to ethnic communities. She emphasised the need for multi-faith chaplains to be represented in various sectors of society, including: (i) the military, where a Buddhist nun from the ASA joined the Australian Defence Force Religious Advisory Committee; (ii) the Criminal Justice system, where the Buddhist Council of Victoria (BCV) has had

years of engagement with the prison and police chaplaincy; and (iii) the Health Care Chaplaincy, where both the ASA and BCV are involved.

Voice to the Marginalised

Venerable Sunim also noted that all the faith leaders have formally endorsed the Uluru Statement from the Heart, which advocates for a “voice” and seeks to present the indigenous voice to parliament. She also mentioned the work done in preparation for the submission of the religious freedom bills, which seek to draw attention to the concerns of the larger community and ensure that all human rights are accorded equal status under international law.

Other prominent topics in Australia addressed by the BCV during the last three years include family violence and organ donation. It can be challenging to decide whether or not to donate, and it can be unclear how this choice interacts with religious convictions. Venerable Sunim also noted that, while faith organisations in Victoria have welcomed legislation prohibiting the public display of the Nazi symbol (Hakenkreuz), the swastika is a symbol of good fortune for the Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain communities. As a result, Buddhist leaders met with Hindu and Jewish leaders to find a way forward, emphasising that education is required to safeguard the swastika.

Swami Samachittananda

Swami Samachittananda noted from a Hindu and monastic perspective, that resilience and cohesion in society can only be achieved through endeavour. There must be a concerted effort from the government and Singapore’s strong political.

He elaborated on the Ramakrishna Order by explaining that Ramakrishna was a saint born in 1836. Despite being uneducated, Ramakrishna had a passion for knowledge that drove him to practise not only Hindu faiths but also Christianity, Islam, Sikhism, Buddhism, and other religions. At the conclusion of his spiritual practices, Ramakrishna proclaimed, “As many religions, so many paths.” Religion is nothing more than a path to the realisation that God is the same, despite the fact that we call him by different names.

Common Foundation of Religions

Swami Samachittananda opined that all religions share a common foundation. Until we reach this common ground, we may not realise the desired truth. Swami Vivekananda, the great philosopher, underlined that religion does not reside in the paraphernalia or the practice and rituals, which are only secondary aspects

of religion. The primary aspect is the divinity within us that must be realised. Religion has always been a source of calm. Different religions originated in various locations, and while we cannot expect them to be identical, the ultimate objective of realising the divine remains unchanged. We cannot advance towards genuine harmony until we recognise that God is one and that we are all his offspring.

Swami Samachittananda emphasised that contemporary social problems and divisions can be attributed to religion. He argued that religion was never at fault, but rather, that the fault rests with the adherent, who may misunderstand and misrepresent the scriptures' knowledge. No faith promotes fundamentalism. When a devotee of a religion does not sincerely comprehend his or her own religion, radicalisation occurs. To prevent fundamentalism, members of one's own faith must inform their respective religious communities that those who fight in the name of their faith are not its representatives.

Sincerity in Religious Pursuits

Swami Samachittananda emphasised that we must comprehend the eternal truth in our hearts; otherwise, religion becomes a socio-cultural activity. We must follow our hearts, peruse the sacred texts of our respective faiths, and be sincere in our pursuit. Only then can we have compassion for those of different faiths. To achieve social cohesion, less emphasis should be placed on religion and more on spirituality.

Master Tan Zhixia

Master Tan spoke about the unity of the Yin and Yang from a Taoist perspective. As long as we are in the universe, the Tao governs us. She emphasised that religion and faith are no longer a personal matter. It has become universally accessible. In Taoist teachings, contributing significantly to societal and global awareness of the other is vital.

Master Tan also highlighted the significance of fostering resilience and cohesion through partnerships with diverse faith-based organisations and communities. Additionally, the emphasis should be placed on being active, contributory, constructive, and collaborative in both diversity and similarity.

Resilience and Cohesion

Master Tan noted that resilience and cohesion can be achieved in the following ways: (i) through inter-religious dialogue, which enables us to understand one another's sensibilities; (ii) through education, which comes with peacemakers and peacebuilders; (iii) by believing in unity in harmony; (iv) by encouraging unity

in action/collaboration; and (v) by being a guardian of the mother earth through disaster relief and sustainable development projects.

Master Tan reiterated the efforts to advance unity in action/collaboration by highlighting the work of the local humanitarian relief organisation, Humanity Matters, which has collaborated with various faith-based organisations. She remarked that ICCS functions as a platform for communities to come together, share ideas, and learn from one another in order to live in peace. In turn, we can apply the lessons within our communities.

Discussion and Reflections

In the moderated question-and-answer session that followed, panellists were asked if youth and religious leaders should be at the forefront of bringing harmony to their communities and humanity.

Role of Future Leaders in Fostering Cohesion

The panellists were asked to elucidate on how youth, as the future leaders of communities, can play a greater role in fostering cohesion. In response, the panellists stated that many religious parents do not instruct their children in their respective religions. Instead, education reached the children through their school peers and social media. By the time their offspring are young adults, the parents' ability to influence them is minimal. However, adults should not quickly disregard what children are learning as insignificant. Youth are acutely aware of the prevalent problems in society. It is therefore a matter of having faith in their ability to follow a religious path of some description because religion provides structure and the capability to contribute to global change.

Challenges with Social Media

When discussing how to deal with social media difficulties, it was stated that hate ideology, exclusivism, extremism, racism, and anti-religious emotions are frequently promoted on the Internet. If we do not address these ideologies, we will continue to see acts of violence and terrorism. The panellists were then asked about how to combat hate ideology on the Internet. They responded that social media is a sword that can harm, assist, or defend us. We can help to spread positivity on social media by refusing to forward bad remarks. Social media is a repository of both good and evil. We must ensure that we do not spread anything that is detrimental to society. Furthermore, parents should be accountable for monitoring their young child's access to the world of social media, as the intense negativity of social media poses a risk to mental health.

Trust and Resiliency

Regarding the role of religious leadership in Singapore and beyond in terms of fostering trust and resiliency in connecting communities, the panellists discussed the need for religious leaders to comprehend their teachings and uphold them through their actions. The subsequent generation of religious leaders must comprehend why these teachings must be inculcated. We are, of course, influenced by social media as we grow older. It is essential to receive a solid family upbringing. If moral values and ethics are not instilled and the family disregards the teachings of the faith, the individual may be lost. The panellists also underlined the importance of distinguishing between misinformation and disinformation. Religiously speaking, adults should be able to determine what should and should not be transmitted. An extensive process would be required to comprehend the role of religion in guiding that individual.

Engaging the Youth to Build Social Cohesion

One participant observed that religion, resilience, and community cohesion are valued less among young people. He asked the panellists if they had any experience interacting with youth and what effective messaging and programming they might use to engage youth in the discourse around peacekeeping. The panellists remarked that it would be important to identify the areas that would appeal to youth participation, such as music, sports, heritage, or culture, etc. From there, we can implement engagement programmes and expand the extent of their participation. Moreover, as one panellist noted, engaging the youth should begin with the most basic and straightforward steps. It is not advisable to initially impose excessive demands on them.

FAITH 1: RELIGION, RESILIENCE & COHESION (INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE)

OPEN UP A SPACE WHERE WE CAN INTERRELATE

MULTIFAITH CHAPLAINCY

- MILITARY: ASA'S BUDDHIST NUN JOINS THE AUSTRALIAN DEFENCE FORCE
- RAC
- CRIMINAL JUSTICE
- HEALTHCARE CHAPLAINCY

BUDDHIST COUNCIL OF VICTORIA

- HELPS SUPPORT HEALTHY FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

RELIGION IS NOTHING BUT A PATH

WE ARE ALL CHILDREN OF THE SAME GOD

GOD HAS MANY NAMES

LESS ON RELIGION, MORE ON SPIRITUALITY

PRIMARY: DIVINITY WITHIN YOU HAS TO BE REALIZED!

RELIGION IS SHARED WITH EVERYONE

BUILD RESILIENCE & COHESION through PARTNERSHIPS & DIFFERENT FAITH-BASED ORGANISATIONS & COMMUNITIES

INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

PERFORMERS & PEACEBUILDERS EDUCATION

UNITY IN HARMONY

UNITY IN ACTION

PROTECTOR OF MOTHER EARTH

I VENERABLE CHI KWANG SUNIM

II SWAMI SAMACHTTANANDA

III MASTER TAN ZHI XIA

IV PANEL DISCUSSION

RELIGION PROVIDES STRUCTURE



HARMONY OF RELIGION: UNDERSTAND YOUR RELIGION BEST...

THEN SEE HOW OTHER RELIGIONS ARE SIMILAR

KIDS NEED SPACE TO SPEAK

LOOK AT AREAS ON ENGAGING THE YOUTH

START WITH THE MINIMUM

SOCIAL MEDIA IS A SWORD:

NO

THE STRENGTH OF YOUR CAPACITY IS WHEN YOU CAN SAY NO

VENERABLE CHI KWANG SUNIM

SWAMI SAMACHTTANANDA

MASTER TAN ZHI XIA

MODERATOR: DR. MOHAMMED BIN ALI

FLOOD SOCIAL MEDIA with POSITIVITY

IT CAN HURT YOU
IT CAN HELP YOU

DON'T LET YOUR GADGETS USE YOU



Visualized by SKETCHPOST

BREAKOUT SESSION 1

IDENTITY 1: LANGUAGES, IDENTITY AND BELONGING



Panellists

Professor Ghil'ad Zuckermann

Professor of Linguistics & Endangered Languages, University of Adelaide

Reverend Terry Kee

President of Inter-Religious Organisation

Moderator

Associate Professor Catherine Gomes

Associate Professor of Culture and Communication,
School of Media and Communication, RMIT University, Australia

LANGUAGES, IDENTITY AND BELONGING

This breakout session investigates how language shapes our impressions of self and others, as well as our knowledge of our identities. Developing a sense of belonging is heavily dependent on identity and language, particularly for minority groups. The session also examines how language restrictions, vocabulary evolution, and the use of colloquialism influence the way we perceive ourselves, develop a sense of belonging, and differentiate ourselves from others.

Professor Ghil'ad Zuckermann

Professor Zuckermann draws on his experiences as an expert on indigenous languages to analyse language, identity, and sense of belonging.

Language and Purpose

He highlighted the need to prioritise the study of revivalists and the languages of ancestors, and elaborated on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. He said it was rare to meet someone who has achieved *ikigai* the Japanese term for "reason for being".

Professor Zuckermann believes that the current tautological revolution will have the same effect as the industrial revolution, which transferred people's focus from obtaining food to acquiring material goods. He noted that 90% of our ancestors were farmers, whereas only 4% of people today are farmers.

According to Professor Zuckermann, there have been four language revolutions that have affected social harmony and altered the course of history. He reiterated that the ability to communicate has enabled *homo sapiens* to deceive and offend. The economy contributed to a revolution in writing. The preponderance of world languages lacks writing systems. The Guttenberg press allowed for the mass production and conversion of books.

Language Revival

Professor Zuckermann acknowledged that it requires time, money, and perseverance to revive a language. As a consequence of technological advances, indigenous languages vanished from both the Old and New Worlds.

For ethical, aesthetic, and pragmatic reasons, Professor Zuckermann advocated for the revival of extinct languages. The revitalisation of language results in an increase in well-being, which promotes social harmony and cohesion. Unlike other scholars in the field, Professor Zuckermann does not advocate for the universal adoption of a single language. The premise is that there will be no conflicts if everyone speaks the same language. Genocides in Rwanda in 1994 and Syria

in 2019 demonstrate that a world in which everyone speaks the same language cannot be tranquil.

Professor Zuckermann argued that everyone should know four mother tongues: their own heritage language, a national language, an international language, and a language related to their ikigai.

Dangers Surrounding the Loss of Language

Elaborating that a world-wide renaissance of languages is occurring, Professor Zuckermann quoted Nelson Mandela, who once said, “If you speak to a man in a language he understands, you speak to his intellect; if you speak to him in his language, you speak to his heart.” According to Professor Zuckermann, the loss of language is a greater calamity than the loss of territory. Language is more important than national origin. The loss of a language represents the loss of cultural autonomy, intellectual sovereignty, spirituality, well-being, and personality.

Despite the time and resources required, the revitalisation of a language benefits the physical, mental, and spiritual health of individuals. It imparts a sense of identity and purpose. A research study indicating a correlation between adolescent suicide and lack of conversational native-language proficiency demonstrates the associated between language acquisition and enhanced mental health and well-being.

Reverend Terry Kee

Reverend Kee struggled with a new language that he did not comprehend on multiple occasions. These experiences had instilled in him the need to be considerate while ensuring that those around him felt included and valued.

Reverend Kee emphasised the impact that language has on a person’s sense of belonging. Language and identity are integral to establishing a sense of belonging within a community and the larger world.

Reverend Kee recognised that language may help establish connectedness to oneself, others, and one’s country. He also acknowledged that when one acquires a language, one absorbs the culture and all its facets. The majority of people today have an identity that is defined by their nationality, ethnicity, religion, and gender, in addition to their family, position, or title.

Language and Belonging

Reverend Kee added that the quest for belonging entails looking for commonalities as a means to discover a sense of connection and, perhaps, a broader sense of belonging.

While attempting to be inclusive, it is essential to note that the same language can have various colloquialisms and collocations in different countries. Nurturing a spirit of inquiry while forgiving others for not seeing these tiny nuances would be crucial as we evolve as a community.

This is evident in Singapore's efforts to foster a sense of identity and belonging. In the past, Singapore desired a common language for communication to unite the diverse races. Singapore has since progressed and now allows for the dialect group of citizens to be written on the National Identity Card.

Reverend Kee cautioned that it is critical to promote a sense of inclusiveness and respect.

Discussion and Reflections

The panellists agreed that accents play an important role in language and communication. Professor Zuckermann concurred that the need for communication drove the evolution of language. However, language is far more than a mode of communication, as it incorporates an emotional component that instils a sense of belonging.

Reverend Kee spoke about a case from his counselling experience, where language barrier had hindered a couple's ability to communicate. The comprehension of a common language is crucial to the depth of the communication.

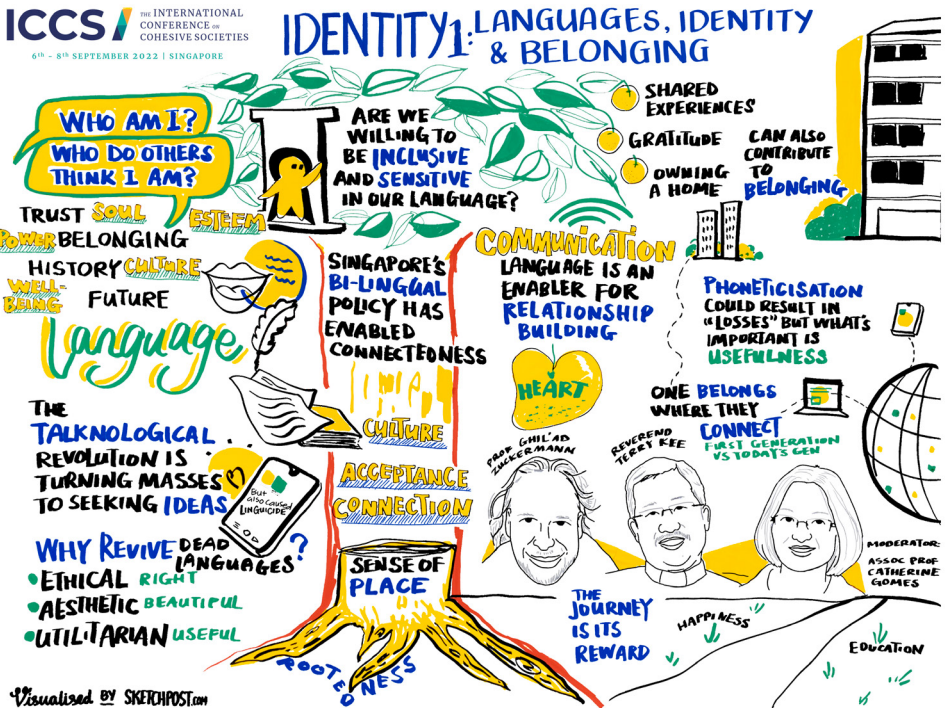
Developing a Sense of Identity Despite Lack of a Common Language

A question was raised about the relationship between language and the Singapore identity. Despite the lack of a common language, older Singaporeans (i.e. the first or second generation Singaporeans) retain a strong Singaporean identity. Reverend Kee pointed out that common language is only one factor that contributes to identity. Professor Zuckermann added that the Singaporean identity has little to do with a lack of English proficiency.

Decolonialisation and Phonetics in Language Acquisition

Professor Zuckermann observed that more Māori dialects are being revived despite the Māori language being on the verge of extinction in New Zealand, where there is continuous debate about language decolonisation. He cautioned that, as a community, we should avoid representations that are merely superficial, as is sometimes the case in Australia. He added that the journey is the reward.

Associate Professor Gomes concluded the breakout session by aptly summarising the visual, aural, and symbolic significance of language in society today.



BREAKOUT SESSION 1

COHESION 1: HATE AND CONSPIRACY ONLINE



Panellists

Father Philip Larrey

Chair of Logic and Epistemology,
Pontifical Lateran University, The Vatican

Mr Fritjof Knier

Project Manager, Integreat

Moderator

Dr Gulizar Hacıyakupoglu

Research Fellow, Centre of Excellence for National Security
S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies,
Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

HATE AND CONSPIRACY ONLINE

This breakout session elaborates on the topics covered in Plenary 3, focusing in particular on hate speech and online conspiracies. As the reach and promulgation of conspiracies, disinformation, and hateful online content expanded with the advent of the Internet, recent crises such as COVID-19 have provided an even more fertile environment for the propagation of such content. Popular conspiracy theories effectively exploit societal fault lines, which require time to heal. Nonetheless, there are numerous opportunities to assist individuals who have been drawn in by conspiracy theories. These opportunities include promising countermeasures, which increasingly utilise technology to strengthen religious institutions, bridge cultural gaps, and combat inter- and intra-religious hatred and violence.

The two panellists, Reverend Larrey and Mr Knier, discussed a variety of cases, concerns, and countermeasures pertaining to pernicious online content, citing primarily American and German examples.

Reverend Philip Larrey

Reverend Larrey defined conspiracy theories as the explanation of specific facts that are not based on empirical evidence, but on a notion or idea that cannot be proved or disproved. He refers to this as the “beauty” of a conspiracy theory. Noting that some of the most successful conspiracy theories in recent times have involved the Vatican (citing the portrayal of Mary Magdalene in *The Da Vinci Code*, the Illuminati, and theories about the death of Pope John Paul I, as examples), Reverend Larrey acknowledged that the Vatican is not immune to conspiracies that can neither be proved nor disproved, especially given the way it operates and the curiosity it creates.

Reverend Larrey cited Alex Jones’ Infowars as a prominent example of a website with a notorious reputation for publishing malevolent stories and conspiracies online. He identified Infowars’ coverage of the 2012 Sandy Hook massacre (which included claims that the massacre was a fabrication perpetrated by the US government to implement gun control laws) as a turning point in the website’s history. Although Jones was later bankrupted by a defamation lawsuit filed by the parents of a child slain in the attack, the site experienced a significant increase in traffic, providing Jones with a source of income.

Reverend Larrey also cited Christopher Blair’s satirical *America’s Last Line of Defence*, a website modelled after *The Onion* that publishes hoax articles and designed to deceive conservative readers. Despite the fact that many of Blair’s

stories appear to be entirely absurd, the website has amassed up to 300,000 Facebook followers who share millions of articles daily. Given the sheer number of individuals who are unable to distinguish between truth and falsehood, this demonstrates how difficult it is to solve the problem of misinformation.

Reverend Larrey observed that a number of Italian journalists have begun to insist that there are in reality “no facts, only a matter of interpretation”. Even for people who live in Ukraine, it was difficult to interpret and discern information about the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian War. As the news cycle becomes increasingly ridiculous and absurd, some individuals have become even more vigilant against fake news, to the extent of being sceptical of everything they hear. Reverend Larrey recounted a time when he initially dismissed a news story about Donald Trump’s plan to purchase Greenland as false, only to later discover that it was accurate. As the line between truth and falsehood has substantially muddied, Reverend Larrey reiterates the importance of Internet users taking the time to discern or fact-check information in order to determine what is true or false, which will help to advance society.

Mr Fritjof Knier

Mr Knier’s Integreat initiative is a non-profit, digital information portal designed to provide support services and essential information to refugees and migrants who find themselves in an unfamiliar country.

Mr Knier describes how he came up with the idea for the Integreat app following the arrival of a million refugees from Syria and the Middle East in Germany in 2016. He had observed that many local and non-governmental organisations were unable to communicate with these refugees due to language barriers, even though many of their questions were very similar, such as those related to schools, housing, and essential services. Therefore, the app is intended to provide answers to refugees’ and migrants’ frequently asked questions. While the app required its creators to “think big” in addressing a large, nationwide issue, Mr Knier and his team recognised the power of “thinking small” in order to create a simple, sustainable tool. The team achieved this by introducing the app separately in individual towns to ensure its scalability. While the app shares the same software across all municipalities, its contents were developed on-site by local experts and offered in multiple languages. This has helped to establish a bridge between migrants and local municipalities, while enabling civil society organisations and NGOs to implement the app according to their specific needs.

Eventually, the Integreat app was extended to address the concerns of foreign workers arriving from other EU countries. The app has also evolved in recent years

to provide up-to-date health information on pandemics. Noting that information campaigns played the most significant role in lowering infection rates in Germany, Mr Knier emphasised Integreat's contribution to such campaigns. However, he also acknowledged the app's occasional failure to combat critical misinformation. For instance, many refugees had mistakenly believed that they could not be deported from Germany if they remained unvaccinated against COVID-19. This led to a large number of refugees opting not to receive the vaccine.

Although refugees are able to verify the facts against many sources, their difficult circumstances made it challenging to process the wealth of information. Additionally, the refugees in EU countries are particularly vulnerable to misinformation because European authorities tend to only communicate with residents in their own administrative languages. This is evidenced by the German government's information campaigns having little effect on refugees and foreign migrants. Integreat had responded in March and April 2022 by running advertisements on Google and Facebook to broaden its reach. This led to dramatic improvements in Integreat's access statistics, with the majority of new traffic coming from refugees.

Importantly, while the Integreat app aims to provide communication channels for migrants and cater to their requirements, it also intends to educate European society about migrants and refugees. As Putin seeks to exploit the influx of Ukrainian refugees to destabilise Europe, Mr Knier argues that it is crucial to humanise the migrants and refugees. He cites how some European families have demonstrated this by providing shelter to the new arrivals from Ukraine, adding that it would be just as critical to assist them in establishing genuine ties in their new communities and adoptive homes.

Discussion and Reflections

In the subsequent discussion, Reverend Larrey remarked that in an era where conspiracy theories are so prevalent, it is increasingly difficult to distinguish between truth and falsehood, but the only way for users to do so is to acquire the ability to think critically. Although some conspiracy theories (e.g. those devised by Brown) may be entertaining to read, those who believe them must ultimately rely on other sources of information for confirmation. The only way for people to determine the truth is to read and analyse the available material and evidence before forming their own opinions about what is most convincing and true.

On a question about the process required to reduce the amount of hatred directed towards the peaceful Muslim majority and bring about better cohesion, Mr Knier noted that in Germany (and Europe), education is seen as an important tool to help native citizens understand that any tension created in their societies following the

2015–2016 refugee crisis was due to refugees fleeing IS, meaning that citizens had a lot in common with the refugees themselves. There is a need for members of society to learn about “others” and each other’s true beliefs. Ultimately, all refugees desire peace and security; while most Europeans, particularly those born after the Cold War, want and value the same. It is essential to discuss similarities between various groups and to emphasise that everyone is a human being at the end of the day. Moreover, while plans to revamp education systems may help to foster cohesion among younger generations, it is equally essential to educate older citizens. However, there is no consensus on how this should be accomplished.

The greatest conspiracy theories, according to Reverend Larrey, make extensive use of data, which gives them credibility and fuel. Nonetheless, even if some data may indicate the authenticity of certain conspiracies, they often omit a large number of contexts. Therefore, it is necessary for individuals to educate themselves on the contexts and read as much as possible. Regarding Islamic radicalisation, Reverend Larrey remarked that this was also a problem within Muslim communities, where fabricated information circulates. Therefore, external pressure from non-Muslim communities is unlikely to assist and may actually exacerbate the problem. Islamic radicalisation is arguably a challenge that Muslim communities must address on their own.

On the importance of fact-checking, Reverend Larrey pointed out that fact-checkers and fact-checking institutions can be hacked, which could be dangerous. This lack of transparency raises the question of who users may be paying for information. Recently, Amazon had denied reports that drivers were forced to urinate in plastic bottles. However, Jeff Bezos issued a public apology when video footage subsequently confirmed the allegations. Although Bezos’s statement made the preceding claim credible, Amazon’s immediate response was to cover it up, giving rise to concerns about organisational trust and conspiracy. While fact-checking collectives can be valuable, the issue of trust remains paramount.

Mr Knier, on the other hand, observed that society tends to be compartmentalised. Academics are not representative of society as a whole, and therefore, it is crucial for alternative ways to make fact-checking accessible to a broader population (including the working class) so that they can verify information. The working class is the backbone of society. Thus, the solutions must be simple and accessible, given that even educated members of society are susceptible to misinformation. Consideration must be given to how these initiatives are funded, as the likelihood that funding from certain controversial figures will be viewed as problematic.

Reverend Larrey added that certain assertions, such as Donald Trump's claim that he had won the 2020 presidential election, are especially compelling and captivating. However, Trump had omitted a substantial amount of context from his claim (e.g. information regarding election laws and police presence), which many people would not be able to comprehend on their own. This highlights the need for members of society to conduct their own research, especially when it comes to important or compelling issues. There may be hints, such as the fact that many of the judges who dismissed Trump's case were Republicans (who independently reviewed the veracity of his claims before making a judgement), strongly suggesting that his claims were invalid.

The panellists were asked about the possibility for striking a balance between granting states legal responsibility and preventing them from abusing their privilege (particularly in non-democracies). Reverend Larrey stated that hate crimes are punishable by penalties and/or imprisonment in the United States. Whether justified or not, the fact that Alex Jones lost his aforementioned legal case established a precedent that his First Amendment rights were subordinate to the emotions of the parents who sued him. While it is vital to be wary of state-controlled censorship in countries like the United States, such techniques may be appropriate elsewhere. Given that certain conspiracies (e.g. anti-vaxxers claiming that COVID-19 vaccines contained material that rendered the CRISPR drug ineffective) will remain extremely compelling to many, there is no simple solution to the problem. The only course of action would be to persist in searching for the solutions.

Mr Knier explained how the Integreat initiative has brought together specialists from various sectors of society, as its creators recognise that society cannot rely solely on state legislators for information and clarification. To develop research-based policies, researchers will have to play a larger role and politicians will have to form stronger alliances with the research community. This would entail designating members of civil society to consult with politicians, who tend to be disconnected from society and its numerous problems. In addition, as new scientific discoveries are made over time, new recommendations and information will need to be communicated to society (such as the eventual discovery that COVID-19 is an airborne disease). However, while policymakers may make the initial errors, it is essential that they recognise and rectify these errors in a transparent manner. Ultimately, political alliances with various parties or spheres are indispensable.

To conclude, Mr Knier emphasised the significance of a whole-of-society approach, in contrast to Reverend Larrey's emphasis on the responsibility of the individual to be educated and informed about conspiracies. This would entail strengthening

the relationship between society, experts, and governments, and uniting all members of society, regardless of demographic, to combat misinformation. Reverend Larrey remarked that ultimately, falsehoods may be more alluring than the truth. Conspiracies may provide a way to explain reality in a manner that is more consistent with perceived truths or reality. There is something about the human condition that is conducive to the development of bizarre concepts, such as fantasy, escapism, and alternative and more intriguing interpretations of reality. Mr Knier stated that conspiracies frequently provide the answers to exceedingly complex situations (e.g. the tension between the United States and China). Pointing the finger at a specific organisation or group of people provides a very simple, plain, and digestible answer. As humans, we dislike admitting that we do not know or comprehend everything; therefore, conspiracies are a useful coping mechanism.

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COHESION 1 : HATE & CONSPIRACY ONLINE

I FATHER PHILIP LARREY

THE "BEAUTY" of a CONSPIRACY THEORY is THAT IT CAN NEITHER BE PROVEN NOR DISPROVEN

ALEX JONES
EVEN AS HE LOST THE SANDY HOOK CIVIL CASE, HIS WEB-BRANDING

AS the NEWS CYCLE GETS MORE RIDICULOUS, IT BECOMES even MORE VIGILANT against FAKE NEWS!

II Mr. KNIER

THINK SMALL
SMALL IS FLEXIBLE.
SMALL IS MANAGEABLE.
SMALL IS DOABLE

INTEGRATE ^{Small} SOCIAL MEDIA ADS TO GET REFUGEES & MIGRANTS to the PLATFORM THEY NEED!

INTEGRATE ^{Small} SOCIAL MEDIA JUST EXPANDED & EVENTUALLY MIGRANT WORKERS

REFUGEES (MIGRANTS)
SOCIAL MEDIA
NGOs
GOVERNMENTS

III PANEL DISCUSSION

TRUST IS ABSOLUTELY CRUCIAL

SLOW BUT SUSTAINABLE
IT'S VITAL to CONNECT REFUGEES & MIGRANTS to the GOVERNMENT at the MUNICIPAL level!
ONCE TRUST IS LOST THE MEDIA LOSES ITS AUDIENCE
IF IT'S SOMETHING IMPORTANT TO KNOW

EDUCATION
REFORMING EDUCATIONAL SYSTEMS OR NURTURE our YOUTH
HOW DO we EDUCATE our SENIORS?


FATHER PHILIP LARREY
Mr. FRITJOEF KNIER
MODERATOR: Dr. GULIZAR HACIYAKUPOGLU

THE ONLY WAY TO TELL WHO TO TRUST IS TO RESEARCH

FACT CHECKERS
BEG THE QUESTION: WHO PAID THEM TO SAY THIS?
IT'S REALLY IMPORTANT JOB, BUT ONLY AT ITS BEST, IT HAPPENS AFTER THE FACT.

BREAKOUT SESSION 2

FAITH 2: RELIGION, RESILIENCE AND COHESION (REGIONAL PERSPECTIVE)



Panellists

Master Benjamin Tan Xianda

Singapore Taoist Federation

Mr Dicky Sofjan

Indonesian Consortium for Religious Studies (ICRS)
Graduate School of Universitas Gadjah Mada (UGM), Indonesia

Moderator

Dr Tan See Seng

President and CEO of International Students Inc.
Research Advisor at S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS)
and Senior Associate at Centre for Liberal Arts and Sciences,
Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

RELIGION, RESILIENCE AND COHESION (REGIONAL PERSPECTIVE)

Dr Tan initiated the session by describing the disconcerting condition of society in the United States, where he resides, as having become fragmented and discordant. In recent years, US society has been defined and driven by extremist conversations, narratives, and religious and political behaviour. Southeast Asia has faced its own unique difficulties in developing resilient and cohesive societies. Preliminary considerations on the triumphs and failures of what has been done and what could be further achieved within the context of faith traditions and interfaith dialogue were then discussed.

Dr Dicky Sofjan

Dr Sofjan shared his thoughts on religion and religious communities based on his study and practise in religious studies while presenting on the activities of the Indonesian Consortium for Religious Studies (ICRS) at Universitas Gadjah Mada (UGM).

Religious Diversity Index

Dr Sofjan argued that religion is the most long-lasting and resilient institution in the history of humanity. Approximately 84% of individuals have a religious affiliation, according to large-scale data collected over the past eight decades. In a comparable Gallup survey (conducted since the 1970s), more than 86% of respondents continue to believe in God or a universal spirit. Asia emerged to be the most religiously diverse region globally, with a score of 9.2 on the Religious Diversity Index.

He observed that while Islam is typically associated with the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) regions, the majority of Muslims, however, live in Asia Pacific. Asia Pacific has three times the population of Muslims as MENA. In terms of religious growth, Islam is predicted to be the fastest growing religion. According to Pew Research, Muslims would outnumber Christians due to greater birth rates, immigration, and conversion, all of which contribute to the growth of Islam. First among the challenges of an increasingly “religious” world was the tendency of religious individuals to believe they have a monopoly on immutable truth. It was difficult to communicate with those who had such beliefs or believed that there was no chance of truth in other religions. Dr Sofjan stated that such believers were reticent to acknowledge that their Truth was a truth or that other Truths existed.

Broadening Understanding

Dr Sofjan continued by stating that religious individuals and communities have a tendency to believe that it is sufficient to rely solely on their religious or faith tradition and that there is no need to learn from others. He viewed this as tragic. While it is understandable for individuals to hold such beliefs as members of a religion or faith, their communities may benefit from an openness to the greater diversity of Truths/truths. The Quran, for example, asserts that if God had so desired, he could have limited humanity to a single race, ethnicity or religion. In Islamic theology, diversity – religious or otherwise – was therefore divinely ordained and willed so that humanity may learn or benefit from one another. There was a split in religious authority in Indonesia. The rise of social media resulted in polarisation, possibly as a result of an increase in the number of celebrity clergy who lacked the necessary skills and experience to manage religious communities. This form of communication is referred to as *Dakwah*-tainment, or “*tuntutan* (religious prescriptions) *dan tontonan* (entertainment)”. The Arabic term for proselytisation is *Da’wah* or *Dakwah* (in Indonesian and Malay transliteration).

Dr Sofjan emphasised that difficulties exist at all levels of religious education in Indonesia, regardless of religion. For example, religious education among Muslims was centred on *ibadah* or rituals, but lacked in-depth discussions on history and social justice. Even if there had been some form of history education, controversial topics such as the extent of corruption in Islamic empires would be whitewashed. Due to the uncritical approach to religious education, people lacked the critical thinking knowledge and skills required for life in a plural society.

To address these problems, ICRS trained over 115,000 religious officers from the Ministry of Religious Affairs in religious literacy in order to promote religious harmony and social justice values. These religious officers of various faiths were tasked with teaching the “real” (or most informed) version of their respective religions. In Indonesia, anti-intellectualism and religious conservatism have resulted from the continued need for educational reform. This reform should include a movement on religious teachings that prioritise human dignity, as well as the dignity of other forms of life and the environment (i.e. multi-species dignity).

Dr Sofjan shared about a programme that examined the concept of “eco-*pesantren*” (*pesantren* are traditional Islamic boarding institutions). The programme examined the conservation efforts, ecological instruction, and curricula of 15 *pesantren* in Java and Sumatra.

Social Media Content Regulation

Dr Sofjan recommended that Indonesia regulate the information domain of social media. While free speech, free thought, and the right to criticise faiths are all vital, it was necessary to ensure that social media promoted social cohesion. He concluded by urging Indonesia to exert greater effort in the area of Freedom of Religious Belief (FoRB).

Master Benjamin Tan

Master Benjamin Tan discussed resilience and cohesion from a Taoist perspective and in the context of Singapore. He remarked that Singaporeans were fortunate to reside in such a multicultural and tranquil community. Given that Singapore's sole natural resource is its people, tensions between the many communities living together cannot be tolerated.

Religious Harmony in Singapore

Despite long-standing efforts to maintain religious harmony and Singapore's positive international reputation, Singapore's plural society faces obstacles. There were Singaporeans who joined the Jemaah Islamiyah terrorist group, supported the so-called Islamic State, and plotted to attack mosques and a synagogue. Master Tan argued that the digital era had both advantages and disadvantages for society. While technology has made it possible for people to connect online, there were also some who were "learning the wrong things".

To mitigate the difficulties of living in a plural society, especially in the digital era, Singaporeans collaborated with the government to foster greater unity among people, particularly the youths. Efforts included incorporating an interfaith element into the religious activities of Singapore's diverse religious communities. Master Tan praised the Catholic200SG event for fostering interreligious friendships. In a separate dinner event organised by the Singapore Taoist Federation, 200 out of 1,000 tables were reserved for individuals of various religions. During the COVID-19 pandemic, religious leaders from 10 distinct traditions held regular Zoom meetings. Roses of Peace, Hash.peace, and the Inter-Religious Organisation Youth Wing were among the many youth-led organisations involved in interfaith dialogue.

Master Tan explained that Taoism is a Chinese religion and philosophical tradition that has always adapted to new circumstances. During a time when religious controversies were readily ignited, the Taoist community in Singapore and elsewhere attempted to adapt their beliefs to profound societal changes.

There are several Taoist notions relevant to social resilience and cohesion. The first fundamental principle is that relationships are continually in flux and that objects are always viewed in relation with each other — light and dark, night and day, hot and cold. This instructs the Taoist about the importance of self-knowledge and relationships with others. The second principle is compassion, which is the capacity and propensity to empathise with others. Taoists should assist those in need regardless of their faith. Thirdly, the Tao Te Ching states in Chapter 49 that humans are “all made of the same substance”, and so, our sense of identity should broaden to embrace others. However, Master Tan cautioned against being dogmatic or narrow-minded. The fourth principle emphasises the importance of having humility when assisting others. Help does not always have to be mediatic or “from the front”, and there should be no rivalry for this job. Contributions made behind-the-scenes are just as essential, if not more so, than those in the spotlight.

Discussion and Reflections

During the question-and-answer session, differences in the government’s administration of religious affairs in Malaysia and Indonesia were discussed in response to a clarification. An audience member wanted to know the number of religious officers employed by the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs and what religions they were responsible for educating.

Dr Sofjan clarified that the ICRS trains 115,000 religious extension officers who are responsible for teaching both Islam and other religions. The 115,000 religious extension officers are employed by the Ministry of Religious Affairs in Indonesia. Of these, 5,000 officers are civil servants and the remainder are honorary state employees with a meagre pay. Despite the large budget allocated to religious affairs in Indonesia, only six major religions received government support, while the rest are left to expand and grow independently. Therefore, the religious officers only represent mainstream religious groups such as Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), Muhammadiyah, Nadhlatul Wathan, and their Christian, Hindu, and Buddhist counterparts.

Malaysia’s religious department operates under the Prime Minister’s Office and is known as the Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia (JAKIM) or the Department of Islamic Development of Malaysia. This department was allocated a significant portion of the federal budget (approximately RM 1.5 billion in 2023), which covers the management of approximately 70,000 mosques, including the employment of *imams* (religious preachers/congregation leaders) and *bilals* (who are tasked with the *azan* or call to prayer).

Dr Sofjan remarked that Malaysians and Indonesians view the function of religion in state and society very differently. Malaysia views itself as an Islamic state, as numerous Prime Ministers have stated over the years. However, Indonesia is founded on Pancasila. Thus, other religions are acknowledged, although one could argue that it favours monotheistic religions. However, the distinction in meaning between the terms *Tuhan* (God) and *Ketuhanan* (Lordship), an ambiguous term used in Pancasila that does not refer to the godhead, allowed for debate and interpretation.

In addition to the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) and Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS), Dr Sofjan noted that JAKIM played an important role in the Islamisation of Malaysian society. In Indonesia, interreligious affairs are largely determined by the leadership. For example, Indonesian President Joko Widodo had a background in NU and a preference for traditionalist forms of Islam and NU. In Malaysia, Muslims tend to exclude themselves from religious harmony activities, because Islam is “*primus inter pares*” (Latin for first among equals) and it is well known that leaders are subject to pressure from their own constituencies. In August 2022, the mayor of Bandung inaugurated a new building for an anti-Shi’a national organisation. Ministers of Indonesia vehemently objected to his appointment and urged the mayor to oppose intolerance.

Dr Sofjan added that Islam is, however, more inclined towards secularism and pluralism, as evidenced by the Medina Charter, which was Prophet Muhammad’s inclusive constitution for the young prophetic city of Madinah. Prophet Muhammad did not establish the Islamic state we have come to dread, but rather a multicultural society that celebrates the diversity of identity and faith. Other relevant documents include Quranic verses emphasising diversity as both a fact of life and a divinely ordained phenomenon.

In response to a query about religious identity as a brand rather than a social institution that bridges gaps, Dr Sofjan stated succinctly, “Religion sells.” He provided examples of refrigerators in Indonesia that are certified halal by the Majelis Ulama Indonesia, despite the fact that refrigerators are not intended to be consumed. This absurd commercialisation of religion includes *Dakwah*-tainment. It is common knowledge that famous preachers often promote products to their followers. Examples include Dedeh Rosidah (or Mamah Dedeh) who endorses the *Kaki Tiga* medicinal drink. The health and prosperity gospel is a prevalent part of televangelism in both the United States and the Philippines.

Summarising the discussion, Dr Sofjan reinforced the distinction between religious knowledge and religious literacy. The latter is crucial for resilience and cohesion in multi-religious societies like Indonesia. Religious literacy is the understanding of

religion and its influence in society, politics, economics, and other areas. Exposure to different sources of information or truths, such as science and the humanities, helps individuals better navigate interreligious relations by fostering a broader and more open mind to others. Master Tan reiterated the Taoist perspective on essential values for social cohesion, citing lessons from his interfaith work. He advocated for an authentic knowledge of religion, which parallels Dr Sofjan's perspective on the ultimate goals of religion. This would be a prerequisite for effective religious leadership in initiatives to unite communities, he said.

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FAITH 2 : RELIGION, RESILIENCE & COHESION

RELIGION IS PERHAPS, THE MOST SUSTAINABLE & RESILIENT INSTITUTION IN THE HISTORY OF MANKIND

ASIA PACIFIC IS THE MOST DIVERSE RELIGIOUS REGION IN THE WORLD.

OBSERVATIONS

- MONOPOLY OF ABSOLUTE TRUTH
- FRAGMENTATION OF RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY & COMMUNITY
- DICTATORSHIP OF AUTHENTICITY
- LACK OF RESPECT FOR RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY

POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

- PROMOTION OF RELIGIOUS LITERACY
- REFORM & REFINEMENT HOW RELIGION IS TAUGHT
- FREEDOM OF BELIEF
- CONSIDER DIGNITY FOR OTHERS

WE NEED TO LOOK AT RELIGIOUS CONVERSION FROM CONTEXTUAL CIRCUMSTANCES

YOUTHS NOWADAYS WANT TO BE MORE VOCAL. DON'T WANT TO SNEAK THINGS UNDER THE RUG

3 TREASURES OF TAOISM

- COMPASSION
- HUMILITY
- FRUGALITY

WHAT MIGHT CONVERGENCE LOOK LIKE?

THERE SHOULD BE NO COMPULSION OR PRESSURE TO CONVERT

RETHINK & REFINEMENT

WHAT RELIGION IS & ISN'T

FORCED CONVERSION ISN'T ANYTHING GOOD

MASTER BENJAMIN TAN XIANDA

MR. DICKY SOFJAN

MODERATOR: PROFESSOR TAN SEE SENG

EVERYTHING HAS ITS COMPLEMENTARY OPPOSITE

Visualized BY SKETCHPOST.COM

BREAKOUT SESSION 2

IDENTITY 2: DIVERSITY AND INTERSECTIONS (PUBLIC POLICY AND COMMON SPACE)



Panellists

Mr Krish Raval OBE

Founder Director, Faith in Leadership

Mr Tim Dixon

Co-Founder, More in Common

Moderator

Mr Shane Pereira

Research Associate, IPS Social Lab, Institute of Policy Studies
National University of Singapore



DIVERSITY AND INTERSECTIONS (PUBLIC POLICY AND COMMON SPACE)

This breakout session discusses global public policies that have helped identify and protect vulnerable individuals and communities from radicalisation, as well as how common spaces have been identified to develop community resilience against divisive, extremist, and religious narratives.

The plight of vulnerable and disenfranchised groups was highlighted as a source of discontent due to the lack of solidarity shown towards them. The challenges and approaches to fostering social cohesion were also discussed.

The first speaker, Mr Tim Dixon, presented data from his group's field of work, pinpointing sources of conflict in modern communities that undermine society's unity. The second speaker, Mr Krish Raval, described his interfaith organisation's work in preparing religious leaders to lead their respective religious communities amid increasing diversity and polarisation.

Mr Timothy Dixon

Mr Dixon began his presentation with an anecdote about a specific challenge relating to group cohesion. He outlined how his organisation helped to address pressures that drove several villages apart in an Eastern German town. Historically, the municipality has not been as prosperous, and since 2015, when the immigration influx began, more divisions and fractures emerged. Consequently, the problem was dealing with escalating hatred. Neo-Nazis, for example, made death threats against various organisations in the town. These sentiments have intensified over time.

Sense of Civic Pride

Many groups in this town did not consider themselves to be members of a diverse coalition, which exacerbated the issue. Mr Dixon's organisation was brought in to aid local organisations in implementing this coalition. Mr Dixon explained that, according to social and behavioural studies, the "Us vs. Them" mentality cannot be mitigated by elevating the "Other". Rather, the goal is to expand the concept of "We". Consequently, assistance from his organisation enabled the groups to develop a broader sense of civic pride and identity — something not seen in the previous century. Efforts included the creation of a community calendar featuring portraits of city residents from all walks of life, including migrants. It was like telling a story that encompassed both "Them" and "Us". This led one of the group leaders, who had been hesitant about the initiative, to express his realisation that

diversity involves both “Them” and “Us”. Thereafter, many groups opted to be part of this initiative in order to share personal experiences.

Evidence-Based Strategies

Mr Dixon also spoke about evidence-based approaches to supporting collaborators and strengthening their strategies, such as identifying those who are at risk. This can be accomplished by categorising society into those who are eager to engage versus those who are unwilling. Various metrics, such as trust levels, political leanings, and cultural and ethnic identities, are used for this purpose. This allows individuals to better comprehend the reality on the ground, providing a fresh perspective for those dealing with societal differences and conflicts.

Bridging the perception gaps was suggested next. Perception gaps illustrate how one group tends to overestimate the extremeness of another. Unsurprisingly, groups at opposite ends of the political spectrum had the greatest perceptual differences. However, recognising these perception gaps yielded unanticipated outcomes. For instance, PhD holders exhibited the largest perception disparities, whereas uneducated ethnic minorities demonstrated the smallest. This contradicts prevailing assumptions regarding the sources of social tensions, suggesting that misinformation and disinformation from both social and mainstream media contributed to these perception discrepancies.

Mr Dixon also highlighted how everyday human stories could encourage cohesion. He described StoryCorps, a programme which documents the conversations of ordinary Americans from diverse backgrounds. The sincerity exhibited by and between ordinary people made this approach extremely effective, showcasing that individuals with divergent views can find common ground. As a result, Americans who watched these programmes reported increased confidence in the nation’s cohesiveness.

Lastly, Mr Dixon assessed the sense of belonging among individuals. Since substantial discourse on social cohesion revolves around the concept of belonging, it would be beneficial to devise methods for measuring a broader sense of belonging.

He concluded his presentation by reiterating the significance of social cohesion for democratic nations. He praised Singapore for treating social cohesion seriously, and for inspiring other nations to do the same.

Mr Krish Raval

Mr Raval spoke about the transformation of variety into cohesiveness, noting that these were two extremely distinct concepts. He acknowledged that diversity is not inherently positive and can lead to silos and mistrust. As such, his organisation works with lay and clergy leaders to support them in running their faith groups, particularly in a diverse society.

Role of Leadership

He then played a video depicting his organisation's work. The video featured several religious leaders discussing how leadership is critical in assisting communities to coexist, and how Faith in Leadership enables them to achieve this shared objective. Following the video, Mr Raval discussed how his organisation assists diverse religious leaders in creating safe environments for dialogues and living. The leaders can then impart these ethics and manners to their followers. Mr Raval cited one outcome of this effort, where an imam had gathered other imams to stand in solidarity with victims of a terrorist attack on Westminster Bridge. This imam also issued a fatwa stating that no Muslim body would officiate the memorial of any Muslim convicted of terrorism. Such actions by religious leaders would set a positive example their followers.

His organisation also encourages the religious leaders to engage with the media by providing them with the skills and the opportunities for public speaking via podcasts and radio telecasts.

Discussion and Reflections

The panel took questions on a wide range of important and contentious issues, with topics extending from the role of governments, to assimilation versus integration, education, inequality, proselytisation, and identity politics, among others.

Mr Dixon highlighted two obstacles in his organisation's work in terms of resolving conflict between leaders and ordinary individuals. The first challenge is that the religious individuals who attend his organisation's sessions frequently hold beliefs that are not widely held. In Germany, for instance, cosmopolitans would concur that Muslims are similar to themselves, whereas the rest of society might have a different perception. The second difficulty involves finding common ground. In the United States, "progressive" culture can inadvertently exacerbate inequality. While it would be beneficial to identify commonalities, the US progressives would be extremely uneasy due to past injustices committed in the name of progressivism. In this regard, it would be difficult, but necessary, to initiate a conversation on common ground.

Mr Raval observed that dealing with the cosmopolitan typology is the easiest part. For those who do not share this vision or are disenfranchised, the possibility of recruiting them into the programme could be challenged. Mr Raval also challenged the presumption that “more is better” because having more people can often lead to animosity.

Regarding the extent to which the government should provide assistance, Mr Dixon opined that it was dependent on the political climate of the country. Countries with greater levels of trust in the government, such as Singapore and Germany, are fundamentally distinct from the United States. The centrifugal forces that hold individuals together have weakened, whereas those that drive them apart have grown. Given this reality, we must consider how education, the economy, and other factors may help to reverse the tendencies. Similar to climate change, it is acceptable that solutions vary. However, Mr Dixon acknowledges these issues may be politicised in a manner that is debilitating. Based on his experience as a member of the Australian government, he realised that many in the public sector often lack the necessary skills to deal with religious constituencies. Government officials would prefer to engage in a highly procedural manner, rather than consider the broader implications of various policies. As such, it is a question about how you implement solutions.

Mr Raval, on the other hand, emphasised that the response varies depending on who is asked. There have been instances where he disagreed with government policies and the selection of policy advisers. He noted that the level of education of those whom the government consults on specific issues can be astounding. At times, the government has excluded the faith sector entirely in order to prevent controversy with the other stakeholders. The faith sector, like any other sector, has its own grievances and aspirations. He also wishes the United Kingdom had some of the less punitive aspects of Singapore’s approach to handling inter-community relations, which emphasises understanding rather than punishment for communally incendiary conduct.

Mr Dixon emphasised that politicians, particularly populist figures that have emerged in recent decades, can exploit divisions. This is exacerbated by social media platforms that promote extremist viewpoints. Additionally, political structures such as gerrymandering contribute to the issue. Therefore, we must recruit more individuals who comprehend the factors of division. The role of the social media sphere is also crucial. While politicians and politics cannot be avoided, every effort should be made to slow down division.

Mr Raval acknowledges the dog-whistle nature of British politics, noting that the Conservative Party must confront Islamophobic elements within its ranks,

while the Labour Party must address the antisemitic and Hindu-phobic elements. He believed there is an underlying cause for politicians' divisive behaviour, and that the discovery of significant commonalities, rather than a large number of commonalities, would be more important.

Mr Dixon admitted his bias as an economist in addressing the need for a just and equitable society to foster cohesion. Nonetheless, even inequality is rooted in identity. Dehumanisation in purely market-driven cultures, as well as the associated anxieties and loss of status, are all drivers of a "Us vs. Them" mindset. Instead overthrowing the system, Mr Dixon sees religion as a stronghold in bridging social divides. According to existing data, lower socioeconomic level is connected to weaker affiliations with the larger society, and those with less polarising views tend to be religious. This demonstrates the potential of religious groups in mitigating the effects of economic inequality.

Mr Raval noted the challenge of discussing diversity amid abject destitution, even though economic justice would be necessary. The necessity for government advocacy in this regard would have to depend on circumstances. In the United Kingdom, religious groups have been a voice of conscience for economic justice. In contrast, it would be essential to identify actors within the system that perpetuate inequality. There are religious persons who work as bankers, hedge fund managers, CEOs, among other influential positions. The question was how these individuals can contribute to the reduction of inequality.

IDENTITY 2: DIVERSITY & INTERSECTIONS (PUBLIC POLICY & COMMON SPACE)

IF YOU WANT TO
BREAKDOWN
the "US vs THEM"
YOU DON'T TELL a
STORY about THEM
but a
LARGER
STORY
of **US**

DIVERSITY
* NOT NECESSARILY a HEALTHY THING!
* CAN CREATE SILOS & BREED MISTRUST

START with
COMMONALITY

BRINGING LEADERS TOGETHER

FUNDAMENTAL
• HOSPITALITY
• BUILD BRIDGES
• COMMUNICATE with MEDIA
↳ DISAGREE WELL
↳ UNDERSTAND WELL
↳ LOVE WELL



GOVERNMENTS OFTEN RATHER DEAL with OTHER STAKEHOLDERS but NOT FAITH because OF THE LACK of UNDERSTANDING

THOSE WITH LOW SOCIAL ECONOMIC STATUS but ARE PEOPLE of FAITH STILL FEEL a HIGH SENSE of BELONGING

• HOW TO BETTER LEAD THEIR OWN ORGANISATIONS
• HOW TO DO IT IN a PLACE of
PLURALITY

WE NEED A SENSE of CONFIDENCE to NAVIGATE
CHANGE

- 1 IDENTIFYING those at RISK
- 2 PERCEPTION GAPS
- 3 MAKING DIVERSITY truly INCLUSIVE
- 4 STORYCORPS - ONE SMALL STEP
- 5 BELONGING BAROMETER

ORDINARY, AUTHENTIC VOICES that PEOPLE CAN RELATE TO & FIND COMMON GROUND CAN be POWERFUL

EVERYONE WANTS to BELONG!



Visualized BY SKETCHPOST.COM

BREAKOUT SESSION 2

COHESION 2: CONNECTIVITY AND CONNECTEDNESS



Panellists

Dr Yang Mee Eng

Executive Director, ASEAN Foundation

Ms Teresa Tan

Director of Public Policy, ByteDance, Southeast Asia

Moderator

Ms Teo Yi-Ling

Senior Fellow, Centre of Excellence for National Security
S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies,
Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

CONNECTIVITY AND CONNECTEDNESS

This session discusses the use of social media platforms to reach out to the digitally savvy masses, particularly adolescents, in ASEAN nations. It also encourages the adoption of these platforms by those who are less digitally inclined. However, while the integration of social media platforms into daily lives has expanded outreach, enabled discussion of otherwise sensitive issues, and empowered entrepreneurship, virtual interactions do come with disadvantages. There is a decline in face-to-face interactions and an increase in prejudice and discrimination online. Although the pandemic has increased Internet and social media usage, it is critical to have safeguards against violent extremism and hate content in the ever-expanding virtual universe.

Dr Yang Mee Eng

Dr Yang's organisation is an inter-governmental body that focuses on ASEAN adolescents that are digitally and technologically savvy. Its mission is to build a caring, cohesive, equitable, inclusive, and peaceful ASEAN community by fostering connections between individuals.

Programmes and Collaborations

The organisation now has 14 ongoing programmes (mainly digital in nature, such as artificial intelligence) aimed at: improving hard and soft skills; igniting the spirit of teamwork and collaboration; growing friendship and network; and building resilience. The organisation's diverse collaborators include prominent industry leaders like SAP and Maybank.

Additionally, the organisation is collaborating with social media platforms like TikTok to reach out to young people. Their most ardent supporters are from Indonesia, the Philippines, and Vietnam, and to a lesser extent, from Singapore. Followers on their social media accounts have increased dramatically since the COVID-19 outbreak, as have the social media numbers for content relating to their online events. In addition, the pandemic has resulted in the use of social media to reach a larger population of grassroots activists and an increase in collaborative content creation with partners. Conversely, previously popular online contents have lost their appeal as a result of disruption caused by new digital trends. Health-related content fatigue has increased, while the transition towards virtual activities has diminished face-to-face interactions.

Dr Yang also mentioned the ASEAN Communication Master Plan II, aimed at the general public including women and children. She outlined its strategy to incorporate more interactive stories, live streaming, content collaboration with

partners, and social media reposting, highlighting the need to improve the look and feel of the social media posts in order to reach out to the younger generation.

Ms Teresa Tan

Ms Tan describes TikTok as a platform designed to inspire user creativity and provide enjoyment. However, social media has amplified prejudice and discrimination (such as issues related to religion), while providing a forum for addressing these problems. She emphasised the significance of promptly resolving such concerns in order to maintain the platform's security. She cited how @todayonline utilises TikTok livestreams to foster dialogue on topics such as racial and ethnic stereotypes.

Voice Against Misconceptions

Ms Tan noted how contemporary creators have also used TikTok to challenge common misconceptions, confront racial and religious prejudices, examine racial and religious impact on individuals, instil stronger trust in one's faith, and promote cultural awareness.

In Singapore, a training course was conducted to help local race and religion organisations leverage TikTok for reaching larger audiences. TikTok has a Trust and Safety team to counter violent extremism and hateful content on its platform. Youths have been impressed with religious organisations' use of TikTok for communication.

Ms Tan concluded that TikTok can be used to promote "positive efforts" and create online support communities. She noted how the creator economy flourished during the pandemic, with small businesses utilising TikTok for advertising. Furthermore, the platform's use in promoting mental and cyber health among Singapore's youth has been successful. She cited TikTok's attempts to infuse wellness into its platform by incorporating a screentime dashboard to limit usage and encourage compassion.

Discussion and Reflections

In terms of bridging the digital divide, Dr Yang observed that while digital hardware has evolved, the content has remained consistent. People continue to be interested in topics such as love, family, relationships, and societal issues. The key distinction lies in how we communicate. The pandemic has introduced roughly 60 million new Internet users, and countries like China have adopted 5G connections to enable higher transmission speeds. Additionally, algorithms driven by artificial intelligence (algorithms) have fuelled the pace of content dissemination. At the

same time, it would be critical to establish training programmes that educate individuals to use the Internet safely.

Ms Tan agreed that the pandemic has resulted in a silver lining, with home-based enterprises and hawkers using TikTok to market their businesses. Another related phenomenon would be the expanded Internet access in rural Southeast Asian regions. Similarly, there has been a significant shift in how the youths have used TikTok to create their own community of followers and digital presence during the pandemic.

Dr Yang acknowledged that the quest for a single message that all religious leaders could convey to their communities would be a delicate issue. Faith has historically divided the world, but all faiths ultimately share the same ideals, such as kindness and compassion. Comprehending other religions, regardless of one's background, would be important because their fundamentals are identical. The central message is that the value of faith is universal and not exclusive to any one religion. Issues arise when one religion asserts exclusive ownership of a universal value. Consequently, it is the responsibility of organisations like hers, along with religious leaders and parents, to impart the correct perspective to adolescents.

Internet Penetration in ASEAN

The conversation shifted to Internet penetration in ASEAN nations, comparing usage in the rural and urban areas and examining how to reconcile online and offline interconnectedness. Ms Tan explained that TikTok has approximately 24 million users in Southeast Asia, and that it conducts online and offline outreach to establish interconnectedness. Dr Yang outlined the ASEAN Digital Master Plan 2025, where the programmes and research have been conducted at the local level. ASEAN leaders are acutely aware of the digital literacy and illiteracy divide, which was worsened by this pandemic. While there are long-term and short-term goals for promoting digital literacy among the elderly and the disabled, she noted that it will take time for people to acclimatise to rapidly advancing technologies.

Need for Technology and Human Moderation Strategies

Concerning the provision of a guideline on how and what social media platforms can communicate (with regards to sensitive topics like systemic racism), Ms Tan referred to existing practices such as empowering users to control and manage their online experiences via the platforms. Additionally, a combination of technology and human moderation can be used to eliminate toxicity and keep detrimental conversations under control. Although there is no playbook for managing sensitive dialogues, religious leaders can use comments to clarify ideas. Given the many communication restrictions of an organisation like ASEAN, which is founded on consensus and is non-interventionist, Dr Yang believed that leaders must be trained on how to avoid fuelling tensions.

ICCS / THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE OF COHESIVE SOCIETIES
6th - 8th SEPTEMBER 2022 | SINGAPORE

COHESION 2 : CONNECTIVITY & CONNECTEDNESS

SPREADING WORDS ABOUT WHAT MAKES ASEAN GREAT!

ASEAN FOUNDATION

BRIDGING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

CONNECTING ASIA OF ASEAN

OUR SOCIAL MEDIA & 55% WOMEN!

DR. YANG

AT FIRST, HE HAD A LOT OF ENGAGEMENT WITH HEALTHY CONTENT BUT NOW THEY'RE SICK OF IT!

PUBLIC PRIVATE PARTNERSHIPS

TIKTOK aims to LET YOU SHOW your AUTHENTIC SELF!

CONNECTING & PEOPLE THROUGH THE USE OF CONTENT

RACE & REGION

HOW DO WE CELEBRATE OUR DIVERSITY AND CULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN A SAFE SPACE?

SPREADING OUR ADDRESSING HARMFUL CULTURAL HARMFUL STEREOTYPES

WHY ARE WE NOT ADDRESSING THEM?

TECHNOLOGY IS WARNING ON USERS TO KEEP USERS SAFE (SCREEN TIME ALERTS) & (HATE SPEECH WARNING)

MS. TERESA TAN

OUR YOUTH ARE PASSIONATE & IN NEED OF PLATFORMS

DR. YANG MEE ENG

MS. TERESA TAN

MODERATOR - MS. TED-YI-LING

THE SILVER LINING: THE PANDEMIC ONBOARDED MANY PEOPLE WHO HAD NOT BEEN ON THE INTERNET PREVIOUSLY!

FAITH IS EFFECTIVE IN COMMUNICATING MATTERS OF SOCIETAL GOOD.

EMPOWERS USERS TO BE SAFE ON THE PLATFORM WHILE ALSO HAVING IMPORTANT CONVERSATIONS

TRAINING THE ONLINE GRASSROOT-ACTIVIST FOR THE OFFLINE

WHILE SPEAKING OUT CAN BE COURAGEOUS...

AS AN ORGANISATION IT'S IMPORTANT TO NOT ADD FUEL TO A FIRE

Visualised by SKETCHPOST.COM

SPEECH



MR LAWRENCE WONG, DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER AND MINISTER FOR FINANCE, REPUBLIC OF SINGAPORE

Minister for Culture, Community and Youth, Mr Edwin Tong
Chairman, Council of Presidential Advisers, Mr Eddie Teo Parliamentary
Colleagues

Distinguished Guests and Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen

I'm very happy to join you here today for your last day of the conference and to see such a large crowd here. To all our overseas guest, a warm welcome! I hope you have had a very fruitful event so far, interacting with one another and learning new insights about how we can build more cohesive societies. This event could not have come at a better time, because about a week ago we relaxed our COVID measures further – we have said that masks are optional now indoors. Optional means that you can still wear if you want to. It is interesting that, in this room everyone has decided not to. It is okay if you choose to wear a mask for personal reasons, please do not feel uneasy. That is fine. Of course, if you choose not to wear a mask, that is okay too.

It's no mean feat to gather so many of us from all over the world here in one room. I'm sure we all treasure such physical gatherings more than ever, especially after what we have been through these last two and a half years.

We've all had our own experience navigating the last two and a half years of COVID-19. It has been a difficult journey, full of ups and downs. We have our share of setbacks everywhere around the world, but I believe it has taught us some valuable lessons. Beyond a public health crisis, the pandemic was also a test of social cohesion. It demanded the best of everyone in society. From government to healthcare workers, from essential workers to ordinary citizens, everyone had to come together and do their part. Key to that collective action was trust – trust in the medical authorities and in one's government to manage the crisis; trust in one another to do the right thing. Under the pressing strain of a pandemic, the true texture of society shone through. Whether people would mask up and get themselves vaccinated. Whether they would exercise personal and social responsibility and whether they would rally together to support one another.

All these revealed the strength of trust and social cohesion of our societies, and indeed it turned out to be a key factor why some countries fared better than others in dealing with the pandemic.

An Oxford study, for example, found that high-trust countries had lower COVID death rates. They looked at all the different factors, whether it was a country's healthcare system, or medical advice, but in the end none of these things were the defining factors that resulted in lower death rates. The key factor was the level of trust in a society. So having a strong foundation of trust matters, and it matters greatly. When a crisis hits, if trust is high, half the battle is won.

Across many countries we are fortunately now in a better situation than before where COVID is concerned, but the challenges never end. Supply chain disruptions have led to the rising costs of food, fuel, and electricity, straining social cohesion in many places. Geopolitical tensions have made the world even more dangerous, troubled and volatile. In such a backdrop, peace and stability in Asia can no longer be taken for granted. Each of our societies will be tested, perhaps severely in the coming years. Therefore, the question for all of us is this: How can we deepen the reservoir of trust in our societies, to strengthen social cohesion in our societies as we enter a more volatile world?

Naturally, every society has its own circumstances, its unique cultural and historical context. While we can learn from one another's experiences, it is up to each society to negotiate and balance the competing interests among its people. Let me today share very briefly a few of my own reflections from Singapore's vantage point today. I hope these may resonate with you in your various fields of work.

If I were to distil Singapore's approach, it would be this: That social cohesion does not come about by chance, but it is achieved only through a deliberate and consistent effort to understand one another, to accommodate one another, and to flourish together. Let me touch on these three points briefly.

First, social cohesion begins with all of us working together sincerely to understand one another. Because we naturally gravitate towards those who look or sound like us, and away from those who appear different. That is just human tendency. If we let these instincts take charge and get in the way of mutual understanding, social cohesion will be doomed. So we must actively seek to overcome these basic human tendencies.

This starts with something very fundamental – the idea of contact and interaction between people of different backgrounds. In Singapore, again we do not leave this by chance, we do this very deliberately.

For example, our public housing policy ensures that people of different races live in the same block, in the same neighbourhood, so they have opportunities to interact with each other in their daily lives. Their children will play together in the same playground, and they grow up together, fostering that sense of common identity.

Our national schools as well as National Service in Singapore (or compulsory military service for males) are the common formative experiences for all young Singaporeans, regardless of their backgrounds. Whether it is playing together, eating at the same hawker centres, or going to the same schools, these shared experiences help our people see that they have more in common than they might have first imagined.

At the same time, we put much effort into promoting dialogue amongst community, religious, and Government leaders. One way we do this is through the multi-racial and multi-religious Harmony Circles. This brings together local leaders and their communities. They visit one another's places of worship, they learn about other communities' histories and cultures, and even participate in each other's religious and ethnic celebrations. Through such platforms, Singaporeans of different faiths and different races interact with one another, understand one another's perspectives – and hopefully establish friendship and trust with each other.

But engendering social contact alone is not enough, because in diverse societies, and many of ours are diverse societies, there are bound to be issues where we will not see eye to eye. There may even be deeply held positions stemming from fundamentally different world views. Often, these are strong convictions that we cannot easily set aside. The question then is how do we resolve these fundamental disagreements – how do we strike how do we strike a balance, and not allow different views tear a society apart?

Across the world, we've seen many instances of such disagreements leading to division. In the absence of dialogue and compromise, the issues turn into zero-sum battles – if I win, you lose; there is no other way. Groups start pitting themselves one against another. The texture of society changes, to one of suspicion and antagonism. Under such strain, it becomes difficult to even tackle existential issues where we all have stakes in, like climate change.

Singapore's own history in resolving such differences was instructive because we had experienced violent racial riots in the sixties, and after that lesson, we resolved to go down a different path.

This leads me to my second point, that we have decided to resolve differences through negotiation and compromise – by fostering a culture of accommodation.

How have we done this? Our guiding principle is to preserve maximum space for each community to lead their lives. You do not have to assimilate to any common standard. Every community is given space to lead their lives freely. It does not mean giving each group everything they want, but rather we strive to arrive at a balance of interests that everyone can accept and live with. It also means rejecting calls for maximum entitlements by any single group and avoiding attempts to construe every compromise as an injustice. This is not easy to do, but, over time, it has become ingrained in our collective mindset, and when people see that this is not only possible, but valuable and precious, it spurs them on to engage with one another, build consensus, find ways to compromise different views and deepen social cohesion in the process.

This is of course a never-ending journey. It is always a work in progress because society's norms and views will continue to evolve, and so too must our policies, and the balance we strike in our society. So, we continually review and update our policies not through forceful top-down decisions, but through negotiation and compromise.

Finally, to foster social cohesion and trust, societies must allow everyone to flourish together. At the end of the day, individuals in a society must feel that they are part of the society, where they can: benefit from the nation's progress, forge dignified and fulfilling lives for themselves and their families; and see their children doing better than they did. In short, they must see an arc of progress in their society, and not feel eclipsed by it. That is why it is important that we pursue inclusive growth, where a rising tide does lift all boats, where prosperity is shared widely by all segments of society.

Again, it is easier said than done as we all know. Across many places around the world, we have seen inequality stretch out the gap between the haves and the have-nots. In the developed world, stagnant wages have led the middle class in many places to lose hope for a better life. When people find themselves excluded from the nation's progress, they grow resentful. They feel that the system is not fair, and that the system is stacked against them.

All these unhappiness and frustration become fertile ground for exclusionary and xenophobic politics, which only exacerbates social divides. No society is immune from these forces – certainly not Singapore. That is why we continually review our policies to see how can pursue inclusive growth and continue to narrow our income gaps. And that is why we have embarked recently on an exercise to refresh and strengthen our social compact. To ensure that we can pursue robust and inclusive growth, with opportunities for every citizen, and to provide assurance to our people that they will be supported if they fall on hard times. That they will not be left to fend for themselves in a dangerous and volatile world.

We have called this exercise Forward Singapore because we hope to build consensus on the way forward, and, in so doing, deepen our social cohesion. Crucially, we want everyone in Singapore to have a part to play in shaping this new social compact, because building a better, more inclusive Singapore is not just the Government's responsibility, but also that of every community and every citizen. So for the Singaporeans here, I hope you will actively contribute your ideas and efforts to this exercise, as an extension of the conversations you've been having these past few days, and as we urge society to come together, to hear from one another, and examine what each of us can contribute, and what trade-offs we would be prepared to accept, I am confident that we can strengthen our social compact to arrive at the future we all want as Singaporeans.

Meanwhile, to our international friends, we are sharing what we have done in Singapore; we hope it will be useful for you and will provide food for thought as you go back to your respective countries and think about how you might chart your own way forward to build more cohesive societies.

To conclude. Each of us is involved in the project of social cohesion in different ways, in our respective communities and societies. It is not easy, and it can often seem like an uphill battle. Sometimes it seems like you take three steps forward, only to then take another two steps back. But I hope as a community of practitioners and leaders, we will encourage one another, and we will press on in our shared labours, because the work is never finished, and it must carry on. For if we do, if we deepen, tighten, and strengthen the societies we belong to, we will also do our part to make this world better, and perhaps a little brighter and that is certainly a project well worth our while to pursue.

Thank you very much.

IN CONVERSATION *with* DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER LAWRENCE WONG

THE PANDEMIC TAUGHT US MANY THINGS:

• **TRUST** & SOCIAL COHESION

MOST CHALLENGING ISSUE!



HOW?
CAN WE DEEPEN the RESERVOIR of TRUST in OUR SOCIETY?

SOCIAL COHESION IS ACHIEVED BY **SINCERELY** WORKING TOGETHER



1 **SPEECH**



MAKE EVERY EFFORT TO **BRIDGE** GENERATIONAL DIVIDES

SENIOR FOLK
ENGAGE with the YOUTH. MEET THEM WHERE THEY ARE



YOUTH LISTEN
SO YOU DON'T REPEAT THE SAME MISTAKES



FORWARD SG
- OUR MEASURE to BRING the NATION FORWARD



WE STRIVE to STRIKE a BALANCE of:
TRADITIONAL VALUES + COSMOPOLITAN CITY + SENSE of HOME

TO GIVE OPPORTUNITY to ALL GROUPS
EXCEL



TO STRENGTHEN COMMON GROUND



2 **IN CONVERSATION**

IF IDENTITY BECOMES SO ENTRENCHED, we won't be able to **COMPROMISE**



TO COMPROMISE IDENTITY is to DISHONOR



MR. LAWRENCE WONG, DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER & MINISTER OF FINANCE, REPUBLIC OF SINGAPORE

THE MODERATOR: AMBASSADOR ONG KENG YONG

Visualized by SKEKHOPIST

BREAKOUT SESSION 3

FAITH 3: OVERCOMING COVID-19 PANDEMIC



Panellists

Dr Mohammad Hannan Hassan

Deputy Mufti, Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS)

Reverend Dr Edmund Fong

Lecturer, Trinity Theological College, Singapore

Lecturer in Systematic Theology (Christology and the reception of salvation)

Lecturer in Presbyterianism

Dean of Students

Moderator

Master Chung Kwang Tong

Board Member, Character & Leadership Academy

OVERCOMING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

When COVID-19 pandemic restrictions necessitated the closure of houses of worship, digital technology was used to provide a virtual meeting space for congregants. The prioritisation of substance, content, and principles over forms had enabled religious rites to be shifted online, although this was not an easy decision. Likewise, religions that have survived to the present day are those that are adaptable, nimble, and resilient. In contrast, religions that lose their relevance will perish due to natural causes. This breakout session addresses the criticality of maintaining the spirit and larger communal objectives while continually reinventing traditions.

Dr Mohammad Hannan Hassan

Dr Hannan explained how digital technology was utilised in the administration of the Asatizah Recognition Scheme (ARS) during the pandemic period. As of 2020, *asatizahs* (or religious teachers) who return from overseas Islamic universities are required to enrol in the Postgraduate Certificate in Islam in Contemporary Societies (PCICS) programme before they are permitted to teach Islam. The preparations for this one-year programme, scheduled for mid-April 2020, had been disrupted by COVID-19, and the in-person sessions had to be moved entirely online.

He also spoke about the closure of mosques during this period. Prayers had to be suspended, and worshippers could not stand shoulder to shoulder. For some, this was a major concern. In response to the need for safe distancing, the online SalamSG Movement was established to maintain the community ethos and religious life. This facilitated the creation of virtual religious space in addition to physical ones.

Religions cannot exist without humans; therefore, humanity must be their essence and focal point. The establishment of trust had been vital. In times of peace, it is necessary to invest in an emotional bank account because it will be instrumental in times of crisis.

Unlike many nations, the pandemic strengthened Singapore's unity and brought the country closer together. It underscored the need for leaders to cultivate both the cognitive and non-cognitive skills to work quickly and make difficult decisions. Additionally, continuous interaction and communication are essential. Several long-standing issues, including hijab use and LGBTQ rights, were addressed during and immediately after the COVID-19 outbreak, despite having been unresolved for many years prior.

Reverend Dr Edmund Fong

For the Christian community, the use of digital platforms facilitated the preservation of faith-related content and continuation of church interactions, despite the inability to congregate physically.

Referring to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, Reverend Dr Fong outlined how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted humans at two primary levels: the need for safety, and the need for love and belonging. The government stepped in to meet the safety requirements by providing citizens with health coverage and protection. The government also helped to secure jobs by dipping into previous reserves totalling S\$49 billion to combat the pandemic.

Churches supplemented government aid by providing the Emergency Relief Fund to church members, partnering with the Partners Engaging and Empowering Rough Sleepers (PEERS) Network to assist 1,000 rough sleepers, and the Alliance of Guest Workers Outreach (AGWO) to distribute food, meals, and essential items to migrant workers in 300 dorms.

To meet the need for affection and belonging, churches continued to hold worship services online, beginning with Zoom and then transitioning to recorded services, livestream services, and, most recently, in-person services. Bible study and youth group gatherings, teaching sessions, and podcasts were also held online. Counselling services were made available for church members experiencing loneliness, mental health concerns, or the dissolution of marriages, among other issues.

He noted three significant changes made during the pandemic. The first involved transitioning from on-site to various online channels, reaching a broad audience and helping them to practise their faith, foster interaction, and nurture a sense of belonging. The second adaption involved shifting from impersonal to personal communication. This was evidenced by the transition from generic emails and social media communications, to personalised care and concern phone calls or pastoral letters encouraging unity among the congregation. The third adjustment involved performing fewer tasks but with greater thoroughness. Although in-person activities were curtailed, the content of the engagements forged deeper friendship and stronger spiritual communities.

Having learned from its digital worship and interaction experiences, the church now has several options for conducting services in the future. It may choose to maintain the "status quo" where services are performed exclusively on-site, or it may opt to employ the "classical church" model, where meetings are conducted exclusively on-site. The "hybrid church" model would include both on-site and

online services, while the “innovating church” model would include both on-site services and specialised online vehicles that will establish an entirely new digital worship service. Reverend Dr Fong added that there could also be the “digital frontier church” paradigm, in which the church would exist solely online.

Discussion and Reflections

The panellists were asked to assess the most significant change from pre- to post-pandemic. Observations included how socialisation skills must be relearned, and how returning to communities in-person has been exhilarating, but also exhausting. The key was doing fewer things, but doing them well.

There is also the question of how to safeguard privacy. Private space had been undermined during the COVID-19 pandemic because work-from-home arrangements permitted meetings to take place around the clock. Should something similar occur, there must be a ready solution for protecting private space, especially for youngsters.

The question of how best to foster a relationship of trust between health leaders and religious leaders must also be addressed when devising the COVID-19 health guidelines. Given the prevalence of conspiracy theories on social media, the panel noted that misinformation and disinformation are always a challenge. Religious leaders acknowledged the need to consult with specialists like scientists, physicians, and lab personnel, to formulate and communicate the correct messages to their followers. This requires a close relationship between the government and religious leaders, which was established prior to the pandemic. Consequently, the public health imperative and the government’s guidance, particularly from the Ministry of Culture, Community, and Youth (MCCY), were appreciated.

A query was raised regarding the possibility that the COVID-19 pandemic has enhanced global humanism and spirituality. Reverend Dr Fong agreed that while there are lessons to be learned, the church is unable to determine whether the event had been a benefit or a curse. There is no scriptural support for either claim. But we should pause to reflect the situation, and to assess the good in every circumstance.

The possibility that religious leaders politicised themselves during the COVID-19 pandemic prompted a follow-up inquiry. The panel responded that Singapore is a secular nation where diverse religions can flourish. Separation between the state and religions must be maintained at all times. It is only in such an environment that a relationship of trust between the government and various religious groups can be established and maintained. Sowing the seeds of trust among the *ulamas*

(Muslim scholars), as well as between the *ulamas* and the government, was critical. There is a need to maintain optimism and perseverance.

On the prospect of obtaining an agreement to close houses of worship in relation to teachings that needed in-person attendance, Dr Hannan noted that maintaining the spirit of *jamaah* (community) was key. Initially, it was determined that mosque prayers would be suspended. When conditions improved, worshippers were permitted to return to mosques in limited quantities. The process began with pre-booked Friday prayers attended by no more than 50 devotees who maintained a one-metre distance between them. The more pressing concern is whether practises should be returned to pre-COVID-19 levels, because issues like car parking resolved themselves during the movement restrictions.

From the Christian perspective, Reverend Dr Fong said there are different Holy Communion interpretations among the various Protestant denominations. Some denominations could accept the conduct of Holy Communion online, while others could not. The idea was thus to promote kindness among the various denominations instead of passing judgement based on differing points of view.

ICCS THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON COHESIVE SOCIETIES
6th - 8th SEPTEMBER 2022 | SINGAPORE

FAITH 3: FAITH OVERCOMING COVID-19

FAITH IS WITHIN US. NOT WHAT WE WEAR

MEETING SAFETY NEEDS:

- COVER & PROTECTION
- FUNDING OF SUBSIDISED AID GIVEN BY GOVERNMENT

HOW THE CHURCH CARRIED ON DURING THE PANDEMIC:

- ONLINE ZOOM SERVICES
- CARRIED ON WITH WORSHIP SERVICES (SOCIALLY DISTANCED)
- TEACHING SESSIONS TO PROCESS THE PANDEMIC

DO LESS & GO DEEP

- FRIENDSHIPS
- RELATIONSHIPS

RELIGION SURVIVED TO THIS DAY BECAUSE...

- PRINCIPLE-BASED
- ADAPTIVE
- NIMBLE
- RESILIENT
- RELEVANT

PROTECTING & SAFEGUARDING RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS IS DONE THROUGH:

- SPIRIT & HIGHER PURPOSE

HOW WE KEPT THE SPIRIT DURING THE PANDEMIC:

- OUR MOSQUE SG
- MOSQUE BOOKING SYSTEM (muslim.sg)
- SALAMSG TV
- VIRTUAL TAKBIR VIA #JOMTAKBIRSG
- SALAMSG KORBAN

PANEL DISCUSSION:

SHIFT FROM PRE-PANDEMIC TO POST-PANDEMIC:

- LEARNING TO SOCIALISE
- PROTECTING YOUR PRIVATE SPACE
- WFH

THERE ARE MANY LESSONS WE CAN LEARN FROM COVID-19

- BLESSING?
- PUNISHMENT?

WE MUST BUILD TRUST IN TIMES OF PEACE

PRACTICAL LESSONS:

- ENGAGEMENT & COMMUNICATION
- TRUST BUILDING
- COMPETENCY & LEADERSHIP

OUR PRIORITY IS THE PROTECTION OF HUMAN LIFE

DR. MOHAMMAD HANNAH HASSAN

REVEREND DR. EDMUND FONG

MODERATOR: MASTER CHUNG KWANG TONG

Visualized BY SHEKPOSTER

BREAKOUT SESSION 3

IDENTITY 3: RELIGION AND SOCIAL JUSTICE



Panellists

Mr Somboon Chungprampree

Executive Secretary, International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB)

Sister Julia Walsh

Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration

Moderator

Associate Professor Paul Hedges

Associate Professor,

Studies in Inter-Religious Relations in Plural Societies Programme

S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies,

Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

RELIGION AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

This session examines how social justice can bring about practical changes. Dialogues on social justice are part of many religious traditions. However, religious traditions can also be sources of oppression and run contrary to social justice. The panel discussion touched on the importance of dialogue in the peace-building process. It was agreed that a healthy religious identity at the individual level is important before one can embrace “the other” with care and concern.

Mr Somboon Chungprampree

Mr Somboon noted that religion relates to state power, the private sector and the community. Some religious organisations side with the government and political power, while others side with the private sector. Some religious organisations have become social enterprises and corporatised. He touched on how religious groups can maintain balance with the three parties, advocating that when religious groups side with the people, grassroots and organisations, social justice can prevail. He also suggested communicating with one’s enemies to bring about peace, given that dialogue is crucial to peace, justice, democracy, human rights, and liberation.

Sister Julia Walsh

Sister Walsh believes that diversity can enrich and strengthen societies, noting that “there is room at the table for everyone”. However, when operating from a scarcity mindset, we are more likely to leave people out, which neither promotes nor establishes social justice. She elaborated that fear is a breeding ground for extremist ideology, especially when the other is considered a threat. She also emphasised the importance of knowing one’s identity before one can build meaningful relationships.

She shared the story of how St. Francis and St. Clare of Assisi discovered their mission through their religious identities and relationship with Christ and others. The meaning of life is found in relationship, and the purpose of life is knowing the other. As intimacy is cultivated through ordinary relationships, we tend to see others as less different or “otherised”. The Catechism of the Catholic Church proclaims that social justice can only be obtained by respecting the dignity of all individuals. Pope Francis has taught that true social justice cannot exist if the human person is not the centre of concern. Social justice is built upon equity, inclusivity, and liberation. By creating sacred spaces of belonging and honouring the dignity of all, we are able to build community, which would in turn build justice.

Sister Walsh described how she started an intentional community in Chicago, United States, to unite individuals who are separated. This community shares in the common mission of offering a refuge where people can gather, learn, rejuvenate, and avoid burnout. The strength and vitality of the community is grounded in clear values and organisational structures, and every member of the community needs to have a healthy religious identity.

Sister Walsh further suggested that regardless of how complex social injustice may be, most solutions can be found in the basic act of sharing — be it the sharing of space, materials, ideas or our hearts. The more we share our true selves, the deeper the communion. If someone has a healthy and mature religious identity, he or she is not threatened by difference. Rather, such individuals are enlivened by what sets them apart, nurturing care and concern for those outside their group. On the other hand, if one has an rigid or protective notion of religious identity, he or she may view the other as a threat and would be more inclined to using violence and force.

To conclude, Sister Walsh noted that individuals with a healthy religious identity would reach out to those on the margins and promote social justice. She said that faith and civic leaders can provide effective servant leadership by building a healthy community and supporting marginalised individuals while exemplifying how to speak up and create common spaces.

Discussion and Reflections

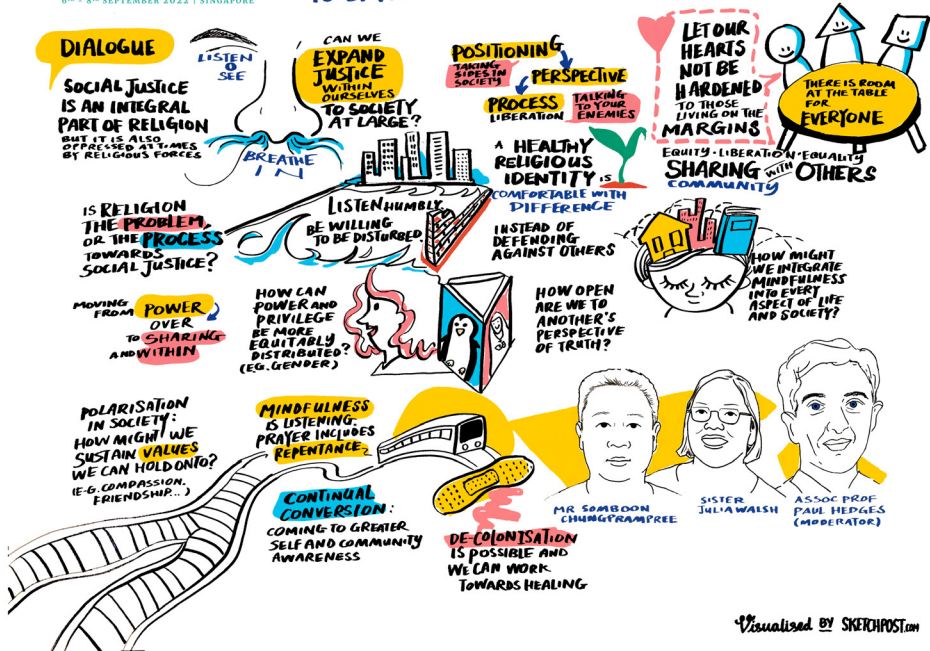
A participant commented that religions are problematic because each faith tradition has the propensity and inherent dynamics to cause injustice. Another participant disagreed with this view, arguing instead that it becomes an issue only when scriptures are not viewed in context.

A question about the equitable distribution of power and privilege was raised. One speaker mentioned how many are trying to improve racial reconciliation, work for peace, and hire consultants. Experts in Diversity, Equality and Inclusivity (DEI) constantly emphasise the importance of cultural humility, the sharing power and privileges, and the need to uncentre whiteness, stressing the need to empower others for change.

Another participant inquired about the long tradition of justice requiring repentance, drawing parallels with the Black Lives Matter movement and the pursuit of justice for victims of sexual abuse. The question was raised about how religious traditions can publicly atone for the injustices they have caused in the world. One participant commented that historically, religion learns from prophetic, ideological/ secular, and free-market justice. Several participants asked about the role of

meditation in facilitating social justice. One speaker emphasised the importance of bringing mindfulness into politics, while another highlighted the strong tradition of repentance in biblical traditions. The speaker also suggested learning from faith communities in South Africa that worked on the truth and reconciliation committees while resisting apartheid. The emphasis was that religious individuals can be the agents of healing and peace in the pursuit of justice.

IDENTITY 3 : RELIGION & SOCIAL JUSTICE



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BREAKOUT SESSION 3

COHESION 3: YOUTH WORK INITIATIVES



Panellists

Ms Arizza Ann Nocum

Founder, KRIS

Ms Farahnaz Ali Ghodsinia

Peace Ambassador to the Office of the Philippine Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process

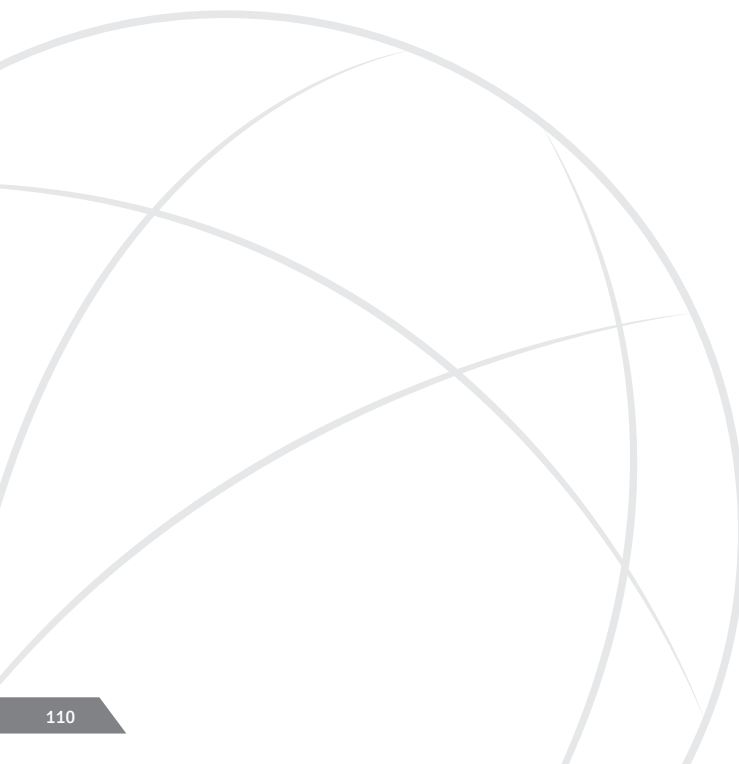
Mr Shukul Raaj Kumar

Chairperson, Inter-Religious Organisation Youth Committee

Moderator

Mr Abbas Ali Mohamed Irshad

Founder, Roses of Peace



YOUTH WORK INITIATIVES

This session looks at the work of youth leaders in fostering social cohesion and religious harmony. The panellists also shared their own efforts to foster peace and reconciliation in their own communities, including encouraging younger members of these communities to develop self-confident identities.

During the question-and-answer session, the moderator identified three distinct points of tension: a digital divide (between online and offline spaces), an intergenerational divide (between older and younger generations), and a divide between conservative and progressive values — all of which create and exacerbate fault lines in society. Ideas on how to reconcile these divisions, as well as ways to surmount the negative stereotypes held by various communities, were then discussed.

Ms Arizza Ann Nocum

Ms Nocum describes the Philippines as “beautiful and vibrant” despite the prevalence of domestic terrorism in her native country. This is particularly true in Mindanao Sulu (in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region) and Zamboanga City, where terrorist organisations such as Abu Sayyaf are active. She said that the Philippines remains among the top 10 countries in the Global Terrorism Index and is consistently ranked #1 among Southeast Asian nations.

Ms Nocum emphasised that domestic terrorism is a significant issue that has angered many in her native country. These conflicts have extremely complex and multi-faceted causes, and are frequently related to religious and cultural distinctions. Religious cleavages (like the Philippines’ majority Christian and minority Muslim populations) are frequently cited as a source of polarisation.

Ms Nocum was raised in an interreligious household. Her mother was Muslim and her father was a Catholic (who had enrolled in a seminary for two years before meeting her mother). She described her parents as being non-stereotypical individuals who frequently rebelled against their own families. Growing up in a family that was both Muslim and Catholic, she and her siblings were exposed to both religions from a young age, encouraged to learn about Islam and Catholicism, and free to choose between the two when they reached adulthood. While her family has always fostered harmony and peace-building, Filipino society was almost the exact opposite. She describes herself as a “hybrid” Filipino straddling the line separating two religions.

Ms Nocum eventually founded a non-profit organisation called KRIS For Peace (where “KRIS” stands for “Christiano-Islam”). One of its first initiatives was the construction of libraries. The strategy reflected the use of youth education and leadership as a pathway to peace, and is aimed at providing young people with more opportunities beyond conflict and terrorism, and broadening their perspectives by teaching empathy and values. KRIS For Peace has since had the opportunity to cultivate relationships with international organisations such as the Kofi Annan Foundation. It also has similar programmes in Uganda, Somalia, and Pakistan, reflecting its objective to reach out to youth of all religions and ethnicities. While her organisation’s mission to invest in young people’s leadership potential and empower them to promote peace is by no means simple, Ms Nocum believes that small actions can result in large changes, including policy modifications. She added that many young participants have approached her for dating guidance over the years, particularly when it comes to interreligious partnerships. Her personal conviction was “to let respect and love win”.

Ms Nocum stated that KRIS For Peace has actively sought to surpass the digital divide. This is reflected in its numerous offline and online initiatives, including in-person seminars and online webinars. She noted the significance of offline venues and efforts when it comes to values education for young people, particularly those who do not have access to online resources. She believes that intergenerational interactions can be very beneficial, as elderly people can empower the youth by sharing wisdom, resources, and networks that complement their vitality and creativity. Ms Nocum acknowledged the shared values among conservative and progressive individuals in society, contending that everyone desires to have their fundamental needs met (e.g. the ability to provide for their families). She emphasised that, regardless of personal ideologies, all individuals share a common ground that serves as a foundation for harmony.

Ms Farahnaz Ali Ghodsinia

Ms Ghodsinia, a native of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao, recounted her contribution to the approval of the 2018 Bangsamoro Organic Law, which helped to establish the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region and its governance structure. She is optimistic that the new Bangsamoro Autonomous Region will be fully established in the Philippines by 2025, once the current transition period concludes. This will empower the people of Muslim Mindanao with the right to self-determination, while granting the Muslim minority greater fiscal autonomy and independence. She emphasised the vital role that young people play in establishing this region and argued that it would be essential that they remain actively involved in the movement.

Importance of Youth Engagement

Ms Ghodsinia remarked that youth engagement is particularly important in the Philippines, where young people constitute a substantial portion of the population and a significant voting bloc. About half of the 65.7 million voters in the most recent election in the Philippines were aged between 18 and 41. The proportion of young voters was even higher in the Bangsamoro region. Given that the Philippines is currently home to its largest generation of young people in its history, youths were the key stakeholders in the country's future. As such, efforts have been made to invite youth leaders in Bangsamoro to learn more about parliamentary processes and sessions, advocacy, and lobbying. This is vital as Bangsamoro adopts a parliamentary system that is distinct from the Philippines' presidential system, potentially serving as a testing ground for future transition. These initiatives have strengthened and empowered Bangsamoro youth to advocate for themselves by providing them with concrete means of self-expression and secure spaces for communication and dialogue.

Difference Divide, Similarities Unite

Ms Ghodsinia argued that exposing young people to such experiences can help to foster greater empathy for one another and agreement on certain issues. She observed that young people are given the option of focusing on the differences that divide them or the similarities that unite them, and added that they can become stronger by choosing to stand by each other and care for each other's well-being and rights. In doing so, they can gradually help to create a better country and world. She cited the United Nations' youth envoy's description of young people as "the missing piece in addressing global challenges", a sentiment echoed by President Halimah Yacob, who had emphasised the need to preserve and prioritise youth mobilisation for the sustainability of political goals. She acknowledged that political struggles may be long and difficult. However, it would be essential for movement members to persevere in sowing the seeds for a future of peace.

Regarding intergenerational divides, Ms Ghodsinia reiterated the significance of establishing long-term and sustainable objectives, emphasising the necessity of involving future generations. She contrasts her own job as a peace envoy supporting the Philippines' government with that of one of her much older relative — a Sultan who had resisted colonisation in Muslim Mindanao many years ago. Acknowledging her continuation of his legacy, she questioned how he might have felt about autonomy as a potential solution as opposed to complete independence. Ms Ghodsinia closed by reiterating the importance of empowering young people in the political discourse to ensure the sustainability of political goals. Regarding

the rift between conservatives and progressives, she emphasised the need for democratic and secure spaces in both intra-faith and interfaith dialogues.

Mr Shukul Raaj Kumar

Mr Kumar observed that there are many perspectives within interfaith advocacy, as well as the necessity to bring these perspectives together in order to forge ahead with solutions.

Inter-Religious Organisation

Mr Kumar argued that essential context is frequently left out of interfaith discussions, such as the fact that the IRO was founded in 1949 by a Muslim man, Abdul Aleem Siddiqui. Since then, the organisation has made great strides in recognising 10 distinct religions in Singapore and empowering multiple perspectives and groups within each religious community. Examples include the establishment of a Women of Faith wing and a Youth wing. Mr Kumar emphasised that interfaith discussions should be constructive multi-perspective in order to contextualise religion for the common person. This will enable them to better understand the tenets of their own faith and, as a result, ensure that these do not become issues that further entrench societal divides.

Mr Kumar observed that by humanising issues, members of different religious communities would be less likely to view one another as adversaries. Aside from the IRO Youth Committee's regular activities, which include monthly meetings and dialogues on hot topics (such as Sharia and violence within Islam), Mr Kumar acknowledged the difficulty of forging solutions to problems without the insights of older generations, including their experiences and knowledge of historical contexts. Notably, not all participants in interfaith dialogues are willing to address the spiritual side of religion, on occasion reducing religion to a divisive ideology despite its importance to culture, values, and common identity. Religion is described as a moral compass that directs how individuals view the world, including the function of public policy and how people regard one another. Mr Kumar argued that the perception of religion as a tool for inner serenity does not capture its true significance, highlighting the requirement for more in-depth interfaith dialogues that investigate the origins of various faiths. In addition, Mr Kumar noted that young people frequently question the necessity and profitability of advocacy. He expressed that, while there is no money involved, lobbying can lead to visible and deep positive improvements, along with emotional and respectful dialogues. This, in his view, would be a reflection of the world becoming a better place, one step at a time.

Overcoming the Digital Divide

Regarding the digital divide, the IRO currently associates with several places of worship and has found that many elderly people (who are not necessarily tech-savvy) view these places as community hubs. As a result, partnerships with these spaces (including community facilities) are essential for reaching out to elderly communities (often through word of mouth). Mr Kumar emphasised the need to understand the interests of various groups. Young people, for example, are interested in social media engagement and problem solving. While food-related events tend to attract greater attention and appeal to people of all ages, Mr Kumar believes that a more specialised approach is required. He also recognises the importance of youth networks in reaching diverse populations through word-of-mouth communication.

Elaborating on the topic of intergenerational divides, Mr Kumar emphasised that the adage “never stop learning” often goes a long way. Although the worldviews of old and young people may differ significantly, it is essential to welcome and embrace these differences, as points of contention provide communities with an opportunity to gain knowledge and connect with one another. In addition, it is essential to grasp the context and nuances of each situation, as well as to identify the best future approaches and solutions.

Finally, on the divide between conservative and progressive values, Mr Kumar underscored the importance of intrafaith dialogues, which help people to understand the origins of certain viewpoints and encourage reflection on the scriptures that shaped them. He observed that a contextualist approach to understanding why certain scriptures advocated particular stances would allow people to comprehend the historical context, the constraints of present day, and the best approaches for the future.

Discussion and Reflections

In the ensuing discussions about how young people felt about interfaith engagement, Mr Kumar qualified that not everyone has had the same level of intra-faith engagement or spiritual knowledge. He noted that young people often share a common quest, such as finding their own identity. This stems from genuine curiosity, rather than a desire to impose their views on issues or create discord. In fact, many young people worry about the things they say being offensive or taken out of context. This is where organisations like IRO seek to offer context, empower and provide representation by establishing meaningful dialogues and giving youths a platform.

In response to another question, Mr Kumar argued that young people do not feel weaponised by older generations; in fact, they are using new technology such as Google, to challenge views they may perceive as outdated. Crucially, today's youth are not confined by religious boundaries. Rather, they would approach religion through a hermeneutic lens, deepening their own understanding in order to seek answers. Thus, older generations have a greater responsibility to understand and interpret their own scriptures, contexts, and perspectives, in order to communicate effectively with young people.

Ms Nocum noted that young people are often viewed either as either too apathetic and pessimistic, or as a generation that cares excessively about certain issues. This can make them vulnerable to manipulation and exploitation by extremist groups. She added that society has to do a better job of understanding what young people really think, especially at a time of societal change. There is an urgent need for intergenerational conversation. Most importantly, there is a need to empower youth — both symbolically and materially. The symbolic “seat at the table” is no longer enough as young people must also be given resources and networks. This serves as a call to action for global organisations to go beyond buzzwords in providing substantial support.

The panel also responded to a question on the sustainability and measurement of systemic impact. Ms Ghodsinia believed it is absolutely vital to work with data. Organisations and movements must be clear about the desired outcomes before ensuring that data aligns with their aims. For example, there are ongoing efforts in Bangsamoro to invest in research and data to enhance policy development. This approach would ensure that data and policies were aligned with reality on the ground, while providing solid evidence to work on our ideals.

The panellists were asked to respond to Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong's comment that it is becoming increasingly commonplace for organisations to establish youth and women's wings. This may imply the fear that young people are being sidelined or marginalised from mainstream work carried out by these organisations.

Mr Irshad remarked that the formation of youth wings is reflective of an effort to ensure sufficient diversity of views at the table, even at the highest administrative levels of Singapore's respective organisations. Ms Ghodsinia warned that these “wings” can be problematic when they become tokenistic, for example, when they are established for the purpose of satisfying diversity quotas. In order for genuine change and collaboration to occur, organisations need to ensure that legislation accurately reflects the needs of people on the ground, and that youth (and women) can provide meaningful input on eventual policies.

COHESION 3: YOUTH WORK INITIATIVES

I LOVE MY COUNTRY!
Culture + Religion
DAD MOM

RANKED TOP 10 COUNTRIES AFFECTED BY TERRORISM

KRIS FOR PEACE

INVEST IN YOUTH PEOPLE TO SPREAD PEACE

CONVINCE YOUTH HOW GOOD A GREAT THEM ARE

BUILD LIBRARIES

EDUCATE THE YOUTH

I SEE MYSELF OPERATING BETWEEN THE LINE OF CHRISTIANITY & ISLAM

THERE ARE MULTIPLE ELEMENTS OF **INTER RELIGIOUS DYNAMICS**

WHAT'S THE BEST WAY FORWARD?

WHEN WE TALK ABOUT **inter faith** IN THE WORLD.

WE HAVE TO DECONSTRUCT IT AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE

WHEN RELIGION IS REDUCED TO IDEOLOGY, IT KEEPS US DIVIDED

But IT HOLDS THE KEY OF OUR SHARED HUMANITY & IS A MORAL COMPASS TO HOW TO PERCEIVE & VIEW THE WORLD

PARAGRAPHS WITH THOSE WITH EXPERIENCES

FILIPINO YOUTH PLAY A CRITICAL ROLE

HOW COULD WE IGNORE OUR YOUTH?

WE GET TO SEE THE YOUTH AT THEIR BEST:

- DEBATING
- DISCUSSING
- DECIDING

WHAT'S TO HAPPEN NEXT.

IN ESTABLISHING THIS NEW autonomous REGION & ITS GOVERNMENT

GIVE THEM CONCRETE PLANS

THE STRUGGLE IS OFTEN A LONG ONE

THE FRUIT OF OUR LABOUR MUST ONLY BE SEEN BY THE NEXT GENERATION

TO STAND BY EACH OTHER WE BECOME STRONGER & BETTER AS PEOPLE

MODERATOR: ABBAS ALI

Q&A

THE INTER-GENERATIONAL DIVIDE... IS COMPLEMENTARY

IF IT WEREN'T FOR THOSE BEFORE US, OUR EFFORTS TODAY WOULDN'T EXIST!

IF IT WEREN'T FOR THOSE BEFORE US, OUR EFFORTS TODAY WOULDN'T EXIST!

THE RIGHT CONTEXT & LENS MUST ALWAYS BE COMMUNICATED!

YOUTHs

- + HAVE THE RESOURCES TO COME TO DEEPER ENGAGEMENTS & ANSWERS
- + NEED RESOURCES TO SUSTAIN their LONG-TERM GOALS

MR. ARIZZA ANN NOCUM

MR. FARHANAZ ALI GHODSINIA

MR. SHUKUL RAJ KUMAR

MR. MOHAMMED IRIHAD

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CLOSING ADDRESS



MR EDWIN TONG, MINISTER FOR CULTURE, COMMUNITY AND YOUTH & SECOND MINISTER FOR LAW, REPUBLIC OF SINGAPORE

Distinguished guests,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Good Afternoon

All too soon, we have now reached the last few hours of the International Conference on Cohesive Societies (ICCS) 2022, 2nd edition.

Lovely to see everyone, but time has just flown by, hasn't it? It seemed only a moment ago that we had President Halimah open ICCS, standing right here.

I must say that not long after the first ICCS which we hosted in 2019, the COVID-19 pandemic unfortunately hit us, and we were not sure whether or when we could host the second one. But we were determined to find a place to hold the second one. And looking back on those days and seeing you all the past couple of days, we are so glad we did. Thank you very much to all of you.

This event has been a tremendous opportunity for us to rekindle old friendships and make many new ones. After all, building cohesive societies start with you and I. All of us, each of us, building strong friendships, fostering a deep sense of camaraderie, lasting ties, amongst all of us. And what we build here, we can bring back to our own countries. And that can grow exponentially.

On this note, my colleagues and I in Singapore are very glad to have all of your support in making ICCS 2022 a very successful one.

We are so honoured to host more than 50 speakers, 800 delegates from about 40 countries, including 120 youth leaders. As I was saying, we have also been joined by 300 online participants over the past three days.

I hope that this has been a fruitful conversation, fruitful Conference, but more importantly, your presence, each of your presences from so many different parts of the world, is a reflection of the strong, deep interest, in the topic and the collective, shared sense of responsibility that we all have. We all see this as our mission to build a culture of cohesion in our own societies.

This also tells us that while we might live in different societies, different parts of the world, in different continents, with our own different nuances, cultures, practices, traditions, each with our own sets of different circumstances and challenges. I think our shared commonality is that we are bound by responsibility to make cohesion happen in our own societies. And we all see value in listening to, and learning from one another.

Overview of ICCS

So let me thank all the speakers that we've had past couple of days for your thoughtful and thought-provoking speeches, and for sharing your experiences so richly and so generously. It left us with a lot to think about.

I also want to thank our moderators for facilitating the discussions, and all our delegates for actively participating and lending a lot of vibrancy and vibe to ICCS 2022.

I hope you all found it to be also a very practical-driven session. We were very careful to try and plan this so that it was not just about the theory, but about exposing you to practices and reality.

Indeed, social cohesion is not just a theory, it must be a culture of practice, of lived experiences, powered by active and engaged citizenry, with open, frank, respect for each other.

To this end, at this year's ICCS, we've had many rich discussions over the course of 3 special addresses, 3 plenary sessions, 9 breakout sessions and 1 community dialogue.

What stood out to me were the 9 community explorations, where many of you had a chance to visit a place of worship, met our multi-racial and multi-religious community leaders, and gained first-hand, our experience of multicultural living in Singapore.

And I am very glad to hear that the Community Experience in particular has allowed many of participants to experience for yourself and also ask questions about a different faith and you've not had a chance to experience before. You got to probe, ask questions, understand, know. Because it is only with understanding and knowing can we foster acceptance and eventually, embracement of each other's beliefs, and different practices.

In addition, I'm also very glad to see that the discussions were grounded on the extensive use of data, including the Southeast Asia Social Cohesion Radar that RSIS just launched. It is important that it gives us a good grounding and good

reality check at what we're doing, continue to cultivate, and to look at the different needles that mark fault lines. And we learn better how to address it.

I am heartened to know, from the many discussions we have had, the experience shared by so many of you thought leaders out there, tells me that we face many common challenges in building cohesive societies.

Some of the difficulties, after we speak about it, are not quite so different. And even though we come from different parts of the world with different contexts, I'm glad to see that this has become a platform for us to exchange ideas that we can bring back to our own countries, our own societies and perhaps with a little bit of nuancing and contextualising, we can use them to good effect.

This is why it is important to continue to have a platform like ICCS. To learn from one another, share insights and experience, and work together to develop solutions to address our common challenges.

As our President said in her opening address, we have to understand the drivers and dimensions of social cohesion more deeply, so that we can bridge divides and harness our diversity for a common good.

All of your enthusiasm enriched the deeply robust interactions we've had, frank exchanges with our moderators and our speakers, reflects our shared purpose and our urgency.

As Professor Katherine Marshall said, we are in a "Kairos" moment in history where we should go beyond talking and towards actively building a better future for all.

Professor Lily Kong also emphasized why building social cohesion and resilience is today more important than ever.

And all of these theories and themes exemplified our conference theme of "Confident Identities, Connected Communities".

So, as we close, I thought I'd share my reflections from this Conference what we've learnt over the past three days.

It is not possible to capture the breadth of wisdom that we've heard in all the sessions, but let me try to encapsulate the key points.

One common thread across our discussions that I've seen in our dialogues and practice sessions about Faith, Identity and Cohesion has been that mutual trust and shared experiences are critical in building cohesive societies. They're a fundamental building block.

Faith can bridge divides. Some of the deepest chasms in society are a result of differing ideological or religious beliefs. And in recent times, perhaps driven by the COVID-19 pandemic, we've become more insular as a people.

Fault lines, often around the lines of identity, have been deepened. What we can do more to foster peace and harmony is to appreciate the commonalities, rather than the differences, across different faiths. Look at what binds us, rather than what divides us.

Dr Sadhvi Bhagawati Saraswati, Lord John Alderdice, Venerable You Shi Guang, and Imam Uzair Akbar all spoke about how our different beliefs could connect us through universal values that bind society together.

It is often in crises and times of insecurity where differing beliefs can widen divides. Therefore, dialogues and occasions like this are all the more important for us to generate greater understanding, and foster a sense of respect among different communities.

And it is in such times, that our respective beliefs can indeed guide us to be the best version of ourselves in engaging with and being open to people from different backgrounds and different faiths, people who are totally different, look different, from each of us.

Our diversity can also increase our resilience in the face of divisive narratives and global challenges. For example, Master Tan Zhixia shared how a Singapore community organisation Humanity Matters brought people of different faiths together to provide local and regional pandemic and disaster relief, working side by side.

Such efforts don't just tell us how compassion can go a long way in bridging our differences, but also that the challenges we face as a society, as humanity, they don't cut across different colours and different creeds. Everyone is affected by the pandemic and how we respond to it as a unified front makes us much stronger.

Second, our diversity can in fact be often harnessed for the common good. And central to harnessing this diversity is mutual trust and respect.

As Mr André Azoulay said, we must treat each other with the same dignity and freedom that we enjoy ourselves. What we want for ourselves, we do to other people. A very simple principle, but perhaps not often used enough.

I was particularly captivated by Professor Ashiwa's suggestion of "finding the otherness in yourself". This was particularly poignant to me. And I believe that if we can do that, we can begin reaching out to those we see as "other" and in

turn, we'll have more authentic shared experiences and foster a deeper sense of mutual trust and respect.

In the same vein, we can also do more to harness the strength of our diversity through dialogue, education, shared goals and action.

For example, Dr Iyad Abumoghli spoke about how faith and non-faith actors can come together, work together on our sustainable development goals, such as food security and climate change. These, as I said, are all universal issues, they cut across boundaries, and they are not particular to any race or religion.

Here in Singapore, we try to find strength in diversity. And most of you know we are one of the most religiously diverse societies in the world.

We ourselves are a small nation that sits in the middle of ASEAN in Southeast Asia (itself the most religiously diverse region in the world with more than a thousand dialects and languages).

But this diversity is fundamental to the fundamental aspect of our respective identities. Each of us as Singaporeans must have their own space and freedom to practice their own customs, traditions, and beliefs so that this uniqueness remains and we value this uniqueness. We find ways to assimilate and not force anyone to conform with another, or even to conform with the majority.

There is space for everyone. We may be of different ethnicities, or different colour, or creed, but we bound by a singular national identity as Singaporeans.

I believe this approach truly makes us stronger than the sum of our parts as Singaporeans.

Third, we spoke a lot about technology and how it can be used to lever and build mutual trust and a stronger sense of respect for one another.

Over the past three years with the COVID-19 pandemic, we have experienced the power of technology. After all, everyone knows what Zoom is, everyone knows what Skype is, though we're a little sick of it now, staring at our screens and at a small little box.

In the context of social cohesion, however, I must say that we've seen the best and possibly also the worst of technology.

Technology can bring people together across vast distances. President Halimah spoke about a project that Basil was involved in, he set up something using virtual reality, allowing people to connect with one another and learn something different sitting in the comfort of your own home without having to travel. A lot of information

can go across in a positive way.

But at the same time, technology can also widen divides, especially through the spread of misinformation and hate speech. We have seen the strife and tension that's been caused by such uncalled for and callous behaviour. Some were accidental but many were not; many of them were deliberate.

The question then is "what can we do?" We can't rewind the advancements that we've made in technology.

But I will say that technology itself is values-neutral: it is neither good nor bad. It is completely neutral in the sense that much depends on the user and how that user marshals the use of technology.

With mutual trust, we can use technology as a truly powerful and positive enabler for social change. And with the right approach, we can transform the digital space into a catalyst for building cohesive societies.

On that score, I agree with Dr Shashi Jayakumar on the potential dangers of social media, but also with Dr Patrice Brodeur and Mr Jasvir Singh that we should collectively tap on the power of digital platforms to strengthen outreach and understanding, thereby foster a greater sense of unity, trust, and foster respect between communities.

And in my view, with the quick advancement of technology, we must urgently take steps to move ahead of the curve, move faster than technology, to mitigate technology's most adverse and hateful effects, and stamp out hate, violent extremism, and misinformation.

Our Young Leaders have discussed how they could use social media to promote the good, to promote positive communities and counter negative portrayals of their respective faiths by bringing depth and authenticity to their social media content and interactions. We need to put this into practice and into motion.

Investing in our Youth

Finally on that note, let me speak about investing in our youths.

On this note, I really agree wholeheartedly with Cardinal Parolin, who spoke on the first day, that youth leadership is crucial in building a better society based on justice, fraternity and solidarity.

And that is why we are investing heavily in our next generation of community leaders through efforts such as the Young Leaders Programme (YLP) here in ICCS.

I hope our young leaders out there (and those young at heart out here), have had an exciting and impactful programme over the last three days. You've all had opportunities to make new friendships from around the world, and I believe that these types of networking and building social relations is every so critical, in this fast-paced world.

And I bet our youth leaders have also picked up new skills through a Faith in Leadership workshop, and were inspired by youth speakers to be fellow changemakers through community projects and social media. And our youth leaders also came together to develop projects.

I am also glad to see some of the YLP alumni from the 2019, three years ago, have become invested in our outcomes here and are now coming back to give back to the programme. Some of them have been part of the design team while others have served as peer facilitators.

Some YLP alumni like Venerable Shi You Guang and Farahnaz Ali Ghodsinia have also "graduated" (though you never fully graduate from this; you're always a part of this programme), but you return as speakers for the main conference. I think all of this, coming back, serving, lending experiences, have been one highlight for me at this ICCS.

Going Beyond ICCS 2022

Finally, before I finish off with this speech, let me do a little bit of a look-ahead.

After we've had three good days of discussion, thought-provoking, deep, sustainable conversations, and building networks and making friends from across the globe, how do we keep this going? How do we build on this?

And I will say that we must leave today with the clear notion that ICCS does not end here. It does not end in ICCS 2022.

We want the conversations that we started here, and the relationships we have forged, to continue to grow and spur collective action, not just in Singapore, but in the region and well beyond.

So let me offer what I think we can do to build on what we've discussed the past few days, to deepen the conversations and indeed, more importantly, like many of our speakers have said, how to put our ideas and suggestions into action.

Research stream – First, this year's regional survey is just a first step. Lots of research went into it, lots of data. The study creates an awareness of the factors that contribute towards social cohesion in Southeast Asia. These insights help us to more deeply understand the challenges faced by our respective communities.

With this knowledge, we are much better equipped to seek meaningful solutions to strengthen cohesion. We should have this study continued and conducted regularly so that we can track how social cohesion trends evolve in the region, and our actions can then be powered by this data.

YLP – Second, let me talk to the YLP and the young leaders here. We will continue to support the young leaders in developing their projects and continue to build a strong community of young social cohesion champions.

The YLP, after this afternoon, will make a pitch of their projects this evening. After that, MCCY will provide funding and support for your respective ideas to be scaled up, implemented, and put into practice and used to foster a stronger sense of social cohesion in our communities.

We will also continue to build up our YLP alumni. The youthful thought leaders of today will become the experienced thought leaders of tomorrow. And we must continue to create a path for the alumni to pay it forward. Just as the 2019 alumni have done.

We will also support YLP projects, through our Harmony Fund, and perhaps also the Youth Action Challenge, to turn proposals, ideas, and aspirations into reality.

Virtual Partners' Showcase – Finally, the virtual Partners' Showcase will remain online as a resource for all of you. I hope that this will help to build our collective knowledge and showcase the work so many of the organisations here are doing to support social cohesion-building. So it becomes a repository of good ideas, of exchange of information, and a place we can all turn to for resources.

Conclusion

As I conclude, on behalf of MCCY and RSIS, I would like to thank all of you, our speakers, our delegates, our youth leaders, everyone for your active participation over the last three days.

My colleagues and I really cherish this time spent with all of you and we hope to be able to keep in touch.

To all our overseas participants, in particular, I hope that you have enjoyed your stay in Singapore, that it was eye-opening, and you had a chance to be exposed to some differences you have not seen in your own countries. And that you will bring back special memories, not just of Singapore, but also of the networks and friendships you've made here in Singapore, and that we can continue to serve, because it starts with each of us here in this room. And if we can go back to our home countries and home societies to multiply that, that would be a great market for ICCS.

To our organizing partners, I thank you for your support. It's not been an easy task to manage such a large conference in these times, but you pulled it off successfully.

I want to thank you for all the work we see and also the work we often don't see, often behind the scenes at very late hours of the evening as well.

I thank you for all this and to all our friends from overseas, I hope we've left you with some good memories to want to come back the next time we hold ICCS again.

Finally, I must say that the friendships we've made at this conference have been the highlights. To be able to see many of you, to chat with many of you, to build relationships have been the true highlights.

So on that note, as I leave, I will leave you with a video that captures the highlights of the last few days, you'll see many of you there, and I hope that this little memento will remind you of ICCS 2022, of the hospitality of Singapore and will remind you that even as you go back to your home countries, that ICCS 2022 does not end here.

Till the next time, thank you very much.

ICCS / the INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE OF COHESIVE SOCIETIES
6th - 8th SEPTEMBER 2022 | SINGAPORE

CLOSING ADDRESS

AS ICCS 2019 ENDED, COVID BEGAN...
...WE WERE NOT SURE **WHEN** WE WOULD HOLD THE 2ND ICCS - BUT WE WERE DETERMINED **HAPPEN!**

YOUR PRESENCE HERE SHOWS YOUR COMMITMENT ISSUE
to this

IT ALWAYS starts WITH...

COHESION IS NOT JUST THEORY
IT HAS TO BE LED BY REAL-WORLD LIVED EXPERIENCES & DRIVEN BY THE DEDICATED **CITIZENRY**

APPRECIATE OUR COMMONALITIES
AND CELEBRATE OUR DIFFERENCES

FINDING THE OTHERNESS in YOURSELF

TECHNOLOGY IS AGNOSTIC.
IT IS UP TO US TO DETERMINE HOW IT IS USED...

Mr. EDWIN TONG

LIVING in DIVERSITY LEADS to LIVING AS THE BEST VERSION OF YOU!

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