Non-Religion:
A Growing Reality in Our Religious Landscape

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SYNOPSIS

The number of non-religious individuals in many societies has generally been increasing, further complicating existing forms of religious diversity. How state and society react to the implications, including non-religion's increasing presence and the new secular-religious divide, may very well affect interreligious relations and social cohesion.

COMMENTARY

Easily overlooked, the number of people declaring themselves to be non-religious or to have no religion has been growing over the past few decades. While this trend is particularly pronounced in Western countries, non-Western societies (including Singapore) exhibit similar shifts as well, albeit to different extents.

Given this growing reality, the subject of non-religion warrants the attention of policymakers, scholars, community leaders, and the public alike. Questions abound about its real-life implications: How would the religious react to non-religion's increasing presence? Can secularism maintain neutrality not just between religions, but also between religion and non-religion? What is the role of religious reasoning in laws that affect the non-religious too? As far as plural societies are concerned, a clear understanding of those with "no religion" or the "non-religious" can help to address some of these questions.

What is Non-Religion?

Religious studies scholar, Lois Lee, defines non-religion as a phenomenon that meaningfully contrasts with anything deemed religion. This refers to beliefs, ideas and

identities that constitute an alternative equivalent to the category of religion. Non-religion should not be reduced to meaning only the absence or rejection of religion.

As some other scholars point out, there is also great diversity within non-religion. On one hand, there are deeply held convictions like some forms of atheism and environmentalism. On the other, there are more ambivalent and non-aligned forms like freethinkers. Crucially, it is the shared identity of non-religion in censuses and surveys that ties these different forms of non-religion to a common legal and societal status.

Why the Rising Number of Non-Religion?

Scholars like [Peter Berger](#) attribute non-religion's growth to religious diversity. When many religions become readily available for individuals to choose from, the monopoly some religions might have over religious truth declines. Some may even conclude that there are no such ultimate truths, which then reduces their religious identification. To be clear, religious diversity has not brought about the demise of any religion. But it has led to certain religions losing their monopoly over the discursive space, hence making it easier for people to relinquish their pre-existing religious identities.

Another explanation for non-religion's growth attributes it to increasing accessibility to education and information, leading to what Linda Woodhead describes as the rise of "[liberal spirits](#)". This refers to a critical mode of thinking that idealises independent thought apart from authority, friends or family. As this becomes more commonplace, it is argued that the number of individuals disassociating from established religious traditions would increase.

There are social scientists who challenge such explanations by highlighting non-religious upbringing and socialisation as being particularly crucial in shaping non-religious outlooks. Stephen Bullivant calls this "[nonversion](#)". Unlike conversion into certain religions with their rituals of acceptance, "nonversion" is more gradual and undeliberate. It has a lot to do with an upbringing in which religion gradually becomes irrelevant. Social scientists also link this to the "[stickiness](#)" of non-religion, meaning that children who grew up non-religious tend to remain overwhelmingly non-religious. In many ways, this contributes to non-religion's enduring growth.

Another commonly held reason for non-religion's growth is the declining faith in and relatability to established religious traditions. The former may be attributable to high-profile cases of impropriety and scandals among religious organisations that turn people away. The latter may be due to religious lifestyles and messaging that no longer resonate with people as well as before.

Implications for Social Cohesion in Plural Societies

Non-religion's rising salience should be taken note of as it is likely to have real-life implications for diverse societies. Existing forms of tolerance, inclusiveness, interfaith relations, and social cohesion could potentially be affected. There are three possible implications.

Firstly, as non-religion's numbers continue to increase, one can expect non-religious voices wanting to be heard, such as in areas traditionally claimed by religion, like

public morality, or in having their grievances, like perceived marginalisation, taken seriously. In such areas, non-religion's presence will be increasingly significant. How state and society respond to calls for greater inclusion of non-religious perspectives will be crucial.

Secondly, the growth of non-religion foreshadows the possibility of a widening secular-religious divide. It should be noted that even as non-religion continues to grow, religion is not in decline either. In some places, a religious resurgence is in fact taking place. The Christian Far-Right in the United States, Islamists in the Muslim world, and Hindu nationalists in India come to mind. It remains to be seen how these two seemingly opposing trends are going to interact. As Lai Ah Eng has remarked, this could either "encourage greater tolerance and mutual respect", or "lead to tensions and conflicts".

Lastly, non-religion's increasing significance could bring about new forms of conflict and solidarity across traditional religious boundaries. Although religious and non-religious perspectives can be expected to diverge, this may not be a neat binary. Regardless of religious or non-religious orientations, people do disagree over how, when, or if religious reasoning is appropriate in the public sphere.

Such divergences often come to the fore in "culture wars" revolving around hot-button issues like freedom of expression, abortion, and LGBTQI+ rights. Often, they coalesce around existing conservative-progressive divides. It is not uncommon for progressive and secular people to ally themselves with non-religious movements. Meanwhile, the more conservative segments of society tend to gravitate towards interreligious coalitions to oppose some of these progressive and secular ideas/movements. The Pink Dot SG and its opposing counterpart at one point, the Wear White Campaign, illustrate this in the Singaporean context.

Contests like these are indicative of non-religion's rising salience; not just in terms of its numbers, but also in the non-religious sensibilities, values and forms of reasoning being engendered or rejected.

Conclusion

With the rise of non-religion further complicating existing forms of diversity, the potential for tensions and conflicts to increase grows as well. It is therefore necessary for policymakers, scholars, community leaders, and the public to equip themselves with the concepts, ideas and vocabulary needed to participate in respectful, serious, and informed conversations about non-religion – and the potential implications of its growing significance.

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