Heartland Dialogues 2019: Technology Does Not Conflict with Faith

By: Xinpei Ruan

Social media is a double-edged sword. We live in an era where information is instantly accessible, and where perspectives are easily exchanged. Yet these phenomena have also resulted in ideas, which may have once been unquestioningly accepted, to be confronted and challenged. This has invariably raised several questions: What role does social media and technology then serve in religion today? Is social media a boon or a bane to religion?

These are two of the many questions raised during the Faith X Technology dialogue, jointly organised by OnePeople.sg and the Inter-Religious Organisation Singapore (IRO) Youth Wing, which aimed to serve as a platform for discussion on the role of social media in religion today.

All four speakers engaged in conversation with participants at the Faith X Technology Heartland Dialogue

The dialogue opened with four speakers from various religious groups sharing their insights about information technology in today's world. It was a light-hearted session that brimmed with different salient points, with all speakers agreeing that social media is, in fact, not a threat to religion, and that the two are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

Thoughts on Social Media, Mental Health and Religion: Master Karine Martin

Master Karine Martin, Chairman of the French Daoist Association, was the first speaker in line. She began her speech by commenting on how the increase in social media usage has given rise to an increase in mental health issues such as depression in teenagers. According to Master Karine, mental health issues are often caused by a "lack of meaning in life" which can be restored using religion, which tends to make people "happier and more civilly engaged".

Speaking to the audience: Master Karine Martin

"Science and technology isn't the only answer", she continued before introducing the *3 Treasures of Daoism: Compassion, Frugality, and Humility*, and how one should exercise them when using social media. Her speech ended with a quote from Lao Tzu: "Inner fulfilment can only be reached when your heart is at peace."

Making or Breaking a Community: Mr Parvitar Singh

Following Master Karine's speech, Mr Parvitar Singh, the co-founder of Sikh Youth, took the stage. "We live in the era of instant gratification," the 22-year-old commented. Citing a research statistic that millennials spend an average of 4 hours on social media daily, he observed that "social media has become second nature for us" and that we often turn to social media for emotional support.

Speaking to the audience: Mr Parvitar Singh

Here, Mr Singh cautioned that millennials' heavy reliance on social media could be a cause of concern, owing to the fact that negative elements online could easily dissolve the cohesiveness of a community and breed dissent in its place. In his opinion, youths should be equipped with the ability to "discern right from wrong [and] facts from myths" from a young age, such that social media can unite rather than divide a community.

The Proliferation of Online Falsehoods and Biases: Mr Shivanand Rai

The next speaker, Mr Shivanand Rai, was the founder of SgHindu. He spoke positively about how technology has enabled Internet users to understand Hinduism better. However, he also acknowledged that not everything online was accurate and objective, as everyone has their own take on the same faith. For some, perspectives may be warped by certain personal biases, which may in some cases cause misinformation and falsehood to be circulated online. This was what fuelled him to found SgHindu: he wanted to provide online users with a comprehensive and objective view of Hinduism.

Speaking to the audience: Mr Shivanand Rai

Dead Dogmas and Misinformation: Mr Md Imran Taib

The speakers' sharing session concluded with Mr Md Imran Taib, director of the Centre for Interfaith Understanding (CIFU), who spoke about how the movement of knowledge has been constantly changing throughout the past few centuries, thanks to the advancement of technology. Alluding to Master Karine's earlier speech, he agreed that humility is instrumental in the acquiring of knowledge, simply because "nobody can know everything".

Speaking to the audience: Mr Md Imran Taib

In his speech, Mr Taib drew the participants' attention to how social media can spread falsehoods in the form of rumours and conspiracy theories. When a large enough audience receives and disseminates this misinformation, people will begin to believe in it unquestionably instead of trying to ascertain the truth. Mr Taib coined this phenomenon with the term "A-Lot-Of-People-Are-Saying-ism", and explained how it can be dangerous in a democratic society: when the ill-informed masses are granted with the ability to make powerful decisions, confusion and disorientation might ensue.

"Science and technology isn't a threat to religion," he remarked. "Religion needs to come face to face with the fact that it will be continuously reshaped and reformulated with the changing face of humanity."

Locked in Echo-chambers Engenders Lack of Empathy

Given the social volatility of today's world, ideological divisions and denominations within one faith is commonplace. All speakers opined that when assailed by social media's ability to circulate information almost instantaneously, echo-chambers that amplify a particular idea are created. The constant messaging of ideas through social

media platforms then cements itself within the individual, making them less receptive to other belief systems of the same religion.

Audience listening to the panelists with rapt attention

The speakers also added that a rift in ideas stemming in part from generational gap has become increasingly obvious: often, the older and younger generations are unable to agree on certain doctrines espoused by the same religion. The reason is simple: both parties do "lopsided research" to confirm their own views, as explained by Mr Parvitar Singh.

"We are all locked in the echo-chamber," Mr Singh commented, before proceeding to explain the phenomenon: the older generation might take to social media read up on materials that convey a more traditional and conservative perspective, before conveying these ideas to the younger generation. Conversely, the younger generation, might take to social media to read up on more progressive and liberal viewpoints of the same religion before complaining about the stubbornness of their elders.

Unfortunately, many social media users remain blind to the fact that they are trapped in a social media-fuelled echo-chamber. This is often because they have only access to posts that reflect their own opinions and as a result, they fail to even see—much less understand— any other perspectives on the same issue. This insularity can become a powerful dividing force within a community; it hedges us from knowing how others may think. Consequently, we become less empathetic, or even tolerant, towards those who are different from ourselves.

Q&A Session

The sharing session was followed by a Question-and-Answer (Q&A) session, where participants posed their questions to the speakers. Interestingly, while there was a diverse demographic of participants ranging from teenagers to silver-haired senior citizens, most—if not all—of those who posed questions were older individuals. This came as a pleasant surprise given that the views of older online citizens are often overshadowed by youths who tend to be more active and expressive on social media platforms.

Hearteningly, many fresh and valid ideas were exchanged. Both the speakers and participants spoke about how social media algorithms fuelled the aforementioned echo-chambers: viewing content with a particular bias allows social media platforms to suggest more material with similar content, thus enabling the user to view more of such content, which strengthens their beliefs in the bias. This is a case for concern given how such echo-chambers prevent internet users from accessing and consuming more nuanced and objective viewpoints which would broaden their perspectives.

During the Q&A segment, a member of the IRO Youth Wing brought up statistics from a Facebook poll conducted by their organisation, which revealed that 25% of teenagers are "okay with extremist material online". This sparked concern amongst both the speakers and participants given that 25% is an alarmingly high number. However, the speakers questioned whether these respondents truly understood the definition of "extremism", given that the term in and of itself can be rather vague.

Another participant also enquired if "religion is strong enough to counter the effects of social media" given the pervasiveness of the Internet in the modern world. Master Karine Martin acknowledged the ubiquity of social media, as exemplified by how teenagers now spend an average of 4 hours on social media daily. "I actually remember the time when Facebook didn't exist!" she quipped. However, Master Karine concluded that it would ultimately be up to the individual on how they wish to spend their time and to decide for themselves whether the influence of social media should overshadow that of religion.

Attitudes, Values and Advocacy

Towards the end of the dialogue, many agreed that it is perfectly alright to believe in different faiths and religions, as long as it does not result in malicious behaviour. To quote Master Karine, religion allows us to return to our "most natural form", one that is unadulterated and genuine. It is up to us, however, to "cling onto humanity" in a world full of temptations, to remember that there is always a living person behind every screen, and most importantly, to always be kind.

In terms of what youths can do to manage the cyberspace, one participant, Mr Saiful Md Anuar, commented that youths should take on "the roles of advocates who are able to discern fake news and hate messages". After all, equipping youths with a new set of skills, such that they are able to extend their understanding beyond media literacy, is especially pertinent given their presence online.

Photo taken of Mr Saiful Md Anuar after an engaging Q&A session with the panelists

Another older participant, Ms M. J., shared that "a degeneration of values" is what the older generation is worried about. However, attending the session "gave [her] hope" in the younger generation—some of the speakers were only in their early twenties, but shared perspectives that were rooted in positive moral values.

Ultimately, while our opinions and moral codes may differ, one thing is certain: social media in and of itself is not harmful. As long as users leverage on it to spread goodwill, online platforms can transform into an informative and positive spaces to allow the public to better understand and appreciate religious ideologies and practices. The alternative, however, paints an image of negativity and misinformation, which could even fuel extremism.

This is why it is our responsibility to douse the flames of insularity, instead of helping to fan them.