

Singapore Government

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IRO COMMEMORATIVE POSTAGE STAMP LAUNCH

15 JAN 1999, 3.00 PM

(REVISED) SPEECH BY DR YAACOB IBRAHIM

Mr Kwa Chong Guan, Chairman of the Singapore Philatelic Museum,

Chairman of the IRO's Commemorative Stamp Committee, Mr Jamshed Fozdar,

Your Excellencies, Fellow Members of Parliament, President, Past Presidents and
Council Members of the IRO, Ladies and Gentlemen.

1 Religion is as old as humanity. It has faced countless challenges. Yet it has survived and continues to flourish. The 21st century will perhaps bring new challenges but I am confident that religion will continue to play an important role well into the next century. It will continue to be relevant as it provides a sanctuary and place of solace for the spiritual yearnings of mankind.

2 The real challenge that religion faces does not lie in proving the need for it. Rather it lies in insuring co-existence among the various religions and denominations. In this decade alone we have seen multiple wars and conflicts fought in the name of religion. I do not believe that religious doctrine advocates war and violence. People, religious followers choose war and violence. How can we, as followers of different religious persuasions and inclinations exist side by side in harmony? Ironically, the key to tolerance lies in the emphasis that religions place on patience and understanding.

3 I recall the many encounters I had as a Muslim with Jews, Christians and believers of other religions when I was working at Cornell University as a research fellow. At the university, all religious groups were given office space in a building called Anabel Taylor Hall. There was a church located inside this building. All groups however had to share the common spaces with other groups. For example, we used the basement of the church to run our Friday prayers. We had to co-ordinate the use of the common auditorium. We literally had to co-exist. We were mindful of the needs of the various groups and planned our activities accordingly. During Ramadhan, we used the kitchen to cook and break our fast. Some of the non-Muslims would join us during the breaking of fast. There was a co-ordinating committee headed by the Pastor of the church. The whole set up was like a mini-IRO.

4 The opportunities provided by the need to share common spaces gave me a better understanding of Judaism and Christianity. I made friends with individuals from the different faiths. In Singapore we also have such opportunities. We do have our own private spaces, i.e., our mosques, churches, temples and synagogues, yet we have to share common spaces and we share similar experiences. We go to the same schools, sports halls, community clubs and various other places. Our men share a common experience in National Service. These I see as opportunities to foster a better understanding among the followers of different religions in Singapore.

5 An opportunity can either be used or misused. What is needed to seize these opportunities for the benefit of everyone is an enlightened leadership among the various religious groups. Let me give you a down to earth example. Every Friday, we see many cars, motorcycles and trucks double parking at various mosques throughout Singapore. This I am sure can cause some members of the public to feel irritated. However, the mosque leadership can work with the local authorities, private condominium management committees and other relevant bodies to deal with this weekly phenomenon. In this way, we can create a better understanding of the obligatory prayers Muslims have on Friday. I understand this is already being done and hence we have not heard of any major complaints. I am sure Christian groups would have a similar experience on Sunday mornings. In other words, we have to be pro-active in promoting understanding.

6 The IRO's aim has been to represent and harness the strengths of each of our religions for the greater good of all our peoples. Its motto "Unity in Diversity" now depicted on this historic Commemorative Stamp to mark its golden anniversary is also symbolic of our Singapore, and it is clearly the wave of the future for all human relationships in a swiftly evolving global village we call our planet home. It is through such sustained effort by religious leaders and their followers as well as the government towards strengthening the unity of our diverse races and religions that has enabled Singapore to become a model for religious understanding and harmony in our region.

7 It is most heartening therefore to be present at the launch of this historic Commemorative Postage Stamp of Singapore's only over-arching inter-faith organisation which was established a half century ago, and is one of the oldest organisations in Singapore. This Commemorative Stamp is the first religious stamp issued by Singapore and it depicts the nine world religions in chronological order: Hindu, Jewish, Zoroastrian, Buddhist, Taoist, Christian, Muslim, Sikh, Baha'i, whose members constitute the body of the IRO. This historic stamp also demonstrates our government's commitment to foster the various religions of our peoples while at the same time its firm resolve to accord equal treatment for all Faiths. Our government and the IRO are and have continued to be partners over many decades in the vital task of ensuring both religious harmony and social bonding through ever greater

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understanding of each others sacred beliefs. Given the tragedies and conflicts which we have witnessed this century, we in Singapore should be justly proud for having sustained religious harmony for over a quarter century.

8 I am confident that through the active participation of the IRO and the close partnership between it and the government inter-religious understanding and amity will grow from strength. Hence, I offer my heartiest congratulations to the IRO on this its Golden Anniversary and my Best Wishes for an even more fruitful and brilliant record of achievement for its next half century.

Thank You.

National Archives of Singapore