WHILE Singapore’s secularism dictates that religion should not be mixed with politics, religion is “not separated from public life and culture”, law academic Thio Li-ann (picture) asserted in Parliament yesterday.

And those who engage in public debate cannot be expected to do so independent of their religious views, the Nominated Member of Parliament stressed.

In his speech last week when he reconvened Parliament, President S R Nathan remarked that the recent Association of Women for Action and Research (Aware) saga demonstrated a new style of politics that does not involve political parties.

Describing such politics involving lobby groups as an “ideological” contest, Prof Thio criticised the “militant secularism” and the biased media coverage — “particularly in one paper” — of the Aware saga which involved her mother, former law dean Thio Su Mien, who had drawn flak for her viewpoints as “feminist mentor” to the group.

With the senior Thio looking on in the public gallery, Prof Thio argued: “Secular fundamentalists are oppressive where they seek to mute religiously-informed convictions in public debate.” They do so “by demonising a view as religious in attempting to make religious faith a cause for embarrassment, or to distract citizens from the merits of an argument by discounting a speaker whose values are shaped by a religious” faith.

Such militant secularism is “a recipe for social disharmony”, she added.

In the aftermath of the saga, Deputy Prime Minister Wong Kan Seng had reiterated the Government’s position that religious individuals “have the same rights as any citizen to express their views on issues in the public space, as guided by their teachings and personal conscience”. But they should also be mindful of sensitivities, he had added.

Yesterday, noting the power of the press “when it comes to moral disagreements and public policy”, Prof Thio said that journalists “are entitled, like all citizens, to have their own opinions; however, they do a disservice if they report contentious issues in a one-sided fashion”.

While the “proper limits of religious activism” was a valid issue that arose, she felt that other issues were “strangely subdued” in the media, including “whether it was really a debate about values, rather than religious overstepping”.

In the aftermath of the saga, 5 million cigarettes, confiscated by Customs officials, were incinerated yesterday. The cigarettes had a potential street value of almost $3 million. Between January and May, 52 million contraband cigarettes have gone up in flames.