Secularization, Technologization and Religion.

How religious groups continue to defy the secularization theory and remain relevant in Singapore.

Abstract

Secularization theory suggests that as a society develops and continues to modernize, religion will not be as salient as it once was. It was seen that scientific progress was on oppugnant terms with religious beliefs. This was thought to be the sequela of a society's development. Despite Singapore's rapid urbanization since her independence, contrary to the secularization theory, religion has continued to have a prominent role in Singapore, with some religious denominations such as Christianity and Buddhism seeing a growth in its subscribers. The increase in religiosity is all the more surprising as being an officially secular state, Singapore has kept religion out of its politics. The diversity of religions co-existing in Singapore meant the move to keep religion out of politics was essential in ensuring peace, progress and prosperity. Additionally, the rapid developments in Singapore have brought about further challenges as religious groups will have to continue upgrading, embracing and adapting technology to stay relevant. The need to stay relevant is further exacerbated as Singapore seeks to undergo a digital revolution, transforming into a Smart Nation and Singapore's desire to innovate and adapt technology has intensified over the tumultuous coronavirus period in 2020. Restrictions on public gathering and congregations have made it even more vital to develop innovative technologies and utilize them in a more meaningful manner. Religious groups then face an uphill task to adopt such technologies in their practices in a short span of time. This paper seeks to shed light on how the various religious groups have faced challenges in adopting technology, and how they seek to stay relevant in a new Singaporean epoch.

1. Introduction

With the coronavirus pandemic in 2020, and most interactions being shifted online, there is a need to find ways in which we can further enrich organic connections through online media. It is especially important in the case of religious practices as many religions rely on the physical intimacy, connections and emotions (Watts, 2007). However, enriching religious connections in Singapore is not straightforward, as the avowedly secular state takes on an active role in managing religion (Tong, 2007), evidenced by the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act[1]. Additionally, the Infocomm Media Development Authority (IMDA) regulates religious content

[1] The act establishes a Presidential Council for Religious Harmony and for related matters to ensure the maintenance of religious harmony.

and requires all public broadcasts to be kept secular (Media Development Authority). This was seen as requests for customary practices such as *takbir*[2], *khutbah*[3] to be broadcasted on free-to-air television were denied (Ministry of Communications and Information, 2020). The above-mentioned requests came in the aftermath of the coronavirus pandemic, when *Hari Raya Aidilfitri* occurred during the *circuit-breaker* (lockdown) in Singapore.

Despite restrictions in adapting platforms such as the above-mentioned television broadcasts, direct and indirect promotion of religion by the government, coupled with religious rationalization, has allowed religion to be deeply etched in Singapore's society (Pereira, 2005). An example of a direct promotion of religion would be the '*Religious Knowledge*' program[4]. Although discontinued, it was a two-year program (Tamney, 1992) and the subjects[5] were examinable.

On the other hand, indirect promotion of religion was done through a '*cultural preservation*' policy (Pereira, 2005). While ethnicity is not a definite indicator of religious roots, the state presupposes ethnicity as such, negating unique differences between the two. The state had an overly-simplified model in preserving and promoting cultural heritage, by focusing on 'religious rituals' (Pereira, 2005). The assumption was made as many citizens have religious affiliations along ethnic lines[6] (Tong, 2007). This over-simplification and subsequent promotion of culture had indirectly promoted religion in Singapore. Consequently, the direct and indirect promotion of religion has left most Singaporeans still considering religion as an important part of their lives, despite Singapore's rapid modernization.

Being closely watched by the state necessitates religious groups to have the forethought of what and how they preach or share to prevent causing friction between the various religious groups. Singapore's delicate social fabric has been tested previously as evidenced by the 1964 and 1969

[2] The Takbir is the Arabic phrase 'Allahu Akbar'.

[3] A sermon preached by an imam in a mosque.

[4] Commenced in 1984, it was mandatory for secondary school students to take one, from a range of religious subjects under the programme.

[5] Subjects taught were Bible Knowledge (either Protestant or Roman Catholic), Buddhist Studies, Confucian Ethics, Hindu Studies, Islamic Religious Knowledge, or Sikhism (Tamney, 1992).

[6] To illustrate, the majority of Malays in Singapore are Muslim and almost all believers of Hinduism are Indians (Tong, 2007).

race riots leading the state to be more cautious and take on a more active role in managing religion. Religion can then be seen to be intertwined with public life. The state also maintains impartiality and shows no form of favoritism to any particular religion (Kluver & Cheong, 2007). This means that Singapore has a unique proposition on secularization as she does not completely separate religion and the state. Religious groups then have the added challenge of adopting technologies and using them in a sensitive manner to upkeep the harmony.

Technological advancements are characteristic of any society undergoing modernization. While technology and religion may seem incongruous, they share similarities (Mitcham, 2009). Both religion and technology involve some extent of practice and experience (Roy, 2002). As such, it is not entirely unwise to study the confluence of the two (Mitcham, 2009). Accompanying Singapore's modernization process, the Smart Nation[7] initiative was announced in 2014 (Smart Nation and Digital Government Office, 2018), and the desire to innovate and adapt technology has only intensified due to the coronavirus situation. Religious groups adapting digital tools to stay relevant (Rivers, 2006) may face challenges as they must balance being faithful to their traditions, while incorporating technology in their practices and teachings (Kluver & Cheong, 2007). Additionally, they face an uphill task to adopt such technologies in their practices in a short span of time due to the coronavirus pandemic. This paper investigates the challenges faced by religious groups in their efforts to adopt technology and the direction they seek to take amidst a changing digital landscape.

[7] Singapore has three main pillars supporting her initiative – Digital Economy, Digital Government and Digital Society. Transformations will occur in key sectors such as health, transport, urban solutions, finance and education. Singapore seeks to harness and develop technology to gain a comparative advantage and continue a prosperous path.

2. Literature Review

There have been a few prior works that classify technology as a religion (Roy, 2002 and Rivers, 2006), and do not consider religion and technology to be in conflict. However, to understand the challenges religious groups face, the two fields will be treated as separate entities. While there have been influential works in the field of religion and technology, and computer mediated communications (CMC) in Singapore, there has been very limited coverage regarding the intersection of these fields. This is largely due to it being a relatively new branch of study as the internet rose to prominence only in the mid-1990s (McClure, 2017). Researchers also face methodology challenges as the internet is dynamic (McClure, 2017). Furthermore, existing studies do not account for Singapore's Smart Nation and digitalization direction.

Broadly speaking, we can categorize the impact of technology into the positive and the negative roles it has on religion. Understanding the roles technology plays will be pivotal in studying both the challenges religious groups may face in adopting technology, and the future directions in which they decide to utilize it. In summary, none of the prior works touched on the importance of adopting technology nor the challenges that accompany such a process in Singapore due to the regulations. There was also a gap in understanding how religion remains relevant in the fast-adapting and developing society.

2.1 Boon of Technology in Religion

Prior works from Lily Kong (2003) investigated the "religion-technology nexus" (Kong, 2003). She emphasizes the poetics[8] of religious communities as technology increasingly influences social interactions and the necessity to explore the new role of religion. Advancements in communication tools, and its propagation have made it possible for the various religions to harness and utilize the available technology (Kong, 2003).

[8] Poetics of a place are what sets them apart from any other ordinary space while social engagement and activities contributes to the poetics of a community (Kong, 2003).

CMC provides a platform to encourage religious practices, boost interactions through the use of interactive media viz. social media and chat rooms, and even to stay connected with other members from the same religion (Kong, 2003). As most of the CMC occurs in English, this makes religious information digestible for the more educated and English-speaking younger population of Singapore, allowing the various religious institutions to reach a wider audience than they previously could. This could then aid youths to reaffirm their beliefs. While Kong does analyze the interactions among adherents aided by CMC, her study does not explore the challenges faced by religious groups in Singapore when adapting such technological platforms.

The ways religious leaders in Singapore perceived and utilized technology in religious practice and education were examined by Randolph Kluver and Pauline Cheong (2007). They posited that religious leaders in Singapore have adopted technology in innovative ways that enable the modernization of religious practices. They argued that the internet is an important medium for religious leaders in relaying information, mobilizing interest and participation, and for outreach. Stating that religious leaders have been adapting technology in a way that suits their religious beliefs and customs, they claim that it leads to greater expectations of the integration of technology in religious practices. While Kluver and Cheong (2007), have raised some challenges in adopting technology and established that religious leaders are willing to utilize the internet, the extent to which they have and plan to adapt technology have not been addressed.

2.2 Challenges Technology Poses on Religion

With the rise in educational levels, an increasing number of people possess greater scientific and technological understanding. In line with the secularization theory, it is then assumed that the increasingly educated population has greater skepticism towards religious beliefs (Bainbridge, 2017). With the state gaining more control over public life, and due to the overall decrease in religiosity, religious leaders will lose the influence they once had (Kluver & Cheong, 2007). However, to come to this conclusion, an assumption that scientific development and technological advancements are in discordance with religion has to be made.

This assumption seemed to follow as the more religious Americans were, the less likely they were to utilize the internet as it represented a more secular view which did not align with the values and beliefs of the religious individual (Armfield & Holbert, 2003). This sentiment was echoed by Kong (2003), when she claimed that if technology ran counter to religious views, then religious leaders would regard technology as a threat and look to curtail its usage in a religious context. However, as the study by Armfield and Holbert was done in America, the findings cannot be generalized to Singapore's diverse population.

Further studies on this topic must be conducted while accounting for Singapore's unique landscape of being the most religiously diverse country (Pew Research Center, 2014). As of 2015, almost 80% of the population utilize the internet (Infocomm Media Development Authority, 2019) in Singapore while slightly over 80% of the population claim to have religious affiliation (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2015). The statistics further proves that scientific advancements and religiosity do not necessarily have to be treated as being incongruent. The high internet penetration rates and religious affiliation contradict the argument posited by Armfield and Holbert.

It could also be argued that practicing religion online could potentially cause adherents to become disconnected with things traditionally associated with the practice of a religion – the community, the "shared time and cultural memory" (Dawson, 2005). This is another challenge for religious groups in Singapore as they will have to constantly ensure that religious faith does not waver while restructuring how they practice religion in a post-coronavirus world. In this new era, it is likely that the demand for adoption and usage of technology will surge. For instance, as Islamic adherents in Singapore have been increasingly vocal and demanding, there is a necessity for the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS) to adopt technology and provide services in order to remain relevant and ensure some form of connection is retained among adherents (Tan, 2001). Since 1996, MUIS spent around $1.16 million dollars just on computerization, further illustrating the need for religious groups to continue adapting technologies.

In addition, the digital information era has led to an apocryphal equivalence of information and knowledge (Sajjadi, 2008). Advancements in technology have "encouraged the cosharing of innovation, production, and distribution by expanding forms of communication" (Poon, Huang, & Cheong, 2012). This leads to a rise in the concerns about the safety, fidelity and consequences of sharing information as information gets reproduced and exchanged. Quoting Gerald Graff, Sajjadi claims that information technology allows for "conflict and contradiction" to be taught (Sajjadi, 2008). The pace and ease of spreading misinformation or falsehoods, exacerbated by the fact that internet allows for anonymity, can give rise to new fault lines in a society's social fabric (Kong, 2003). As the Singapore government was generally in favour of Confucianism (Tamney, 1992), the internet would have been cause for concern for the state. The internet promoted individualism, freedom of expression among other values which are in direct conflict with Confucian values. It could be argued that the anglophone subset of the internet promotes American values and is not a completely neutral platform (Bockover, 2003). This is potentially an issue for Singapore where conflicts can easily arise due to the diversity of religions, making her a very fragile society.

3. Methodology

The data was collected by conducting semi-structured interviews online[9], with four religious leaders and educators. Two were Christians (Pastors), and the other two, Muslims (an Ustaz, and a religious teacher). The questions asked varied between interviewees, depending on their religious beliefs and technical expertise. Due to the nature of semi-structured interviews, results cannot be generalized beyond the sample group, but they provide for a more in-depth understanding of participants' aims, emotions and perspectives. To protect the participants identity, pseudonyms have been used.

[9] Interviews were conducted online, on Zoom (a video conferencing platform), due to the coronavirus pandemic and were filmed with consent.

4. Findings & Analysis

The responses from the interviewees can be classified into the following categories: (1) how they work with the secular government; (2) challenges they faced in adopting technologies; (3) how they plan on moving forward with technology.

4.1 Working with A Secular Government

The respondents had generally felt that the limitations were not significant in restricting their abilities to practice their religions. They had also noted that such restrictions were vital to upkeep the peace and harmony in Singapore and were keen to work alongside the government. Quoting Ustaz Abdullah:

> *"No real restriction because [new] technology is available. Restriction is on traditional mass broadcast. Even without it, we have our own social broadcasts that we can use. [The limitations are] not much of an issue, can overcome [them]. Singapore['s] restriction is more for the nation's benefit."*

It has been noted that religious groups are not limited in using social media and other form of digital tools such as websites in their engagement or preaching. Pastor Simon states:

> *"Even before [the coronavirus pandemic], we have been using some form of recordings on YouTube… For communication we use our website, WhatsApp[10], email, and even call."*

As the limitations imposed by the government on the religious groups are solely on traditional mass media, the advancements and availability of the internet have enabled religious groups to continue their practices with little to no hinderance.

Additionally, it was noted by the respondents that religious groups are not overly concerned about false information being spread, due to the government's efforts to curb misinformation through The Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act[11] (POFMA). As stated by

[10] An online messaging platform.

[11] Quoting from the Singapore Statutes Online, POFMA is "an Act to prevent the electronic communication in Singapore of false statements of fact, to suppress support for and counteract the effects of such communication, to safeguard against the use of online accounts for such communication and for information manipulation" (Singapore Statutes Online, 2020).

Kong (2003), the spread of misinformation can potentially give rise to social tension. As such, the state's willingness to ensure accurate representation of information is even more vital in a diverse society like Singapore. Considering religious groups trust the government based on the responses and do not take extra precautions to prevent misinformation being spread, it can be inferred that religious groups benefit from having POFMA in place.

4.2 Challenges Faced in Adopting Technologies

All of the respondents had stated that they have experienced challenges in adopting technologies. According to Ustaz Abdullah, who runs an online Islamic education platform, the technology that can be used is also dependent on the audience. He adds that the audience may not be ready for the platform, and pilot testing is essential especially if the platform is too advanced for the congregation. His sentiments were echoed by the other respondents as well. For instance, Pastor Fiona claims:

> *"Younger people have no issues worshipping online. But for older people, the phone is small, and their eyesight may not be so good. But to cast to screen is tough, like using Chromecast[12]… We had a handful of people who didn't know how to use technology."*

Pastor Simon adds:

> *"Some people may not have access to the technology, so even if YouTube is a great tool, they may not have the familiarity."*

While noting that these issues are more prominent amongst the older demographic, religious groups have been attempting to overcome such issues, to make the transition in adopting technology easier. Pastor Fiona pointed out that there were a few adherents without access to digital tools, and with the help of donors they were able to get mobile phones and SIM cards so they could remain contacted. Pastor Simon added that volunteers would go over to the elderlies' place to set up the systems and teach them how to use it. The provision of such social services as mentioned by the Pastors, and their willingness to co-operate with the state's restrictions (as highlighted in the previous sub-section), has allowed the government to utilize the services of

[12] Chromecast allows for content to be streamed from a device to a larger screen.

religious groups to provide for the society. Consequently, religious groups' relevance in Singapore has increased. Such assistance provided by religious groups was a reason why the state was keen to promote religion (Mathews, 2009). However, analyzing such solutions, these are merely stop-gap measures. To ensure sustainability, a long-term plan may be required.

These challenges are not restricted solely to adherents, as they can be extended to religious leaders as well, whom generally felt that learning the technology comes with a steep learning curve. Additionally, they may not have resources to implement digital tools. Pastor Fiona states:

> *"Setting up the place for live stream was a challenge and helpers are all volunteers. So usually people are learning [the technology] and volunteering their time. Video cameras and all that was a steep learning curve… We pastors knock on our head trying to figure it out and get help from people... We try to learn how to use social media/webpages etc."*

The learning curve that accompanies learning technologies has been echoed by an Islamic educator, highlighting the need for religious leaders to understand how to use digital tools before utilizing them for religious teachings. Ms. Farah says:

> *"We don't have a specific team; it is just the four of us [Islamic educators]. We just explore [technologies]. We don't know much knowledge about the technology."*

All interviewees seemed to echo the sentiments of Ms Farah, claiming that neither do they have personnel to assist them in adopting technologies, nor do they outsource professionals. As such, most of the help comes from within the congregation, with Pastor Simon claiming:

> *"We do not have full time communications staff. We have an IT contractor who is one of our members, who is one who makes all [the technologies] run. We are not a big church… other [bigger] churches have full time contractors. Suggestions [to adopt a particular technology] comes from the various leaders… We just need to find someone who can do it well… We also have 2 engineer volunteers who help with sound/equipment to help."*

As religious groups rely on the technical ability of the group to implement technological tools, a potential barrier can immediately be seen if the congregation come from an older demographic[13] or if they are not as *tech-savvy*. Additionally, it can be seen from the above quote, that larger

[13] In Singapore, the older population tend not to be neither as technologically literate nor as educated as the younger generations.

religious organizations may possess the resources needed to have a dedicated team working on maintaining and enhancing their technological capabilities.

Finally, religious leaders also face challenges in using telecommunication devices to deliver religious content. Not only do they have to deliver religious content, but they must also attend to other concerns such as potential technical difficulties. Ustaz Abdullah voiced his concerns:

> *"When we do them in person, I mean it is live so can see people's reactions, see if they understand but via zoom people can disconnect. Don't know what they are doing at the back if they remove the video. Sometimes it is limited time because of trouble shooting and technical difficulties surfaced. So, need to attend to that instead of teachings itself."*

His sentiments have been echoed by the other religious leaders as well. While acknowledging that quantity of communications has increased, the consensus was the quality of interaction has not. Pastor Simon goes a step further and elaborates that in some sense the physical congregation is necessary and why technology has some limitations.

> *"I run an addiction support group, and if we are not physically meeting, we are not meeting at all. Because for sensitive issues, we cannot be sure if it is recording [or if people are] listening in. Phone is deemed to be safer but still not as safe or ideal with two people in the room... Looking at the person and seeing how they respond reassures you… You don't know how the person is reacting [when sessions are conducted virtually]… Being in person they can change their face, adjust body, face and touch shoulders. For a more in-depth convo, silence is important. But silence on the phone is like 'what are you doing?' It is okay for factual information communication – but deeper level with tone, reaction, feelings, it loses a lot."*

Essentially, current technology cannot replace the intimacy and personal connection that accompanies religion. Some religious leaders noted they had training in recognizing body postures and reacting accordingly during counselling sessions and are unable to put them to practice virtually. Religious leaders also raised their concerns regarding privacy as well as can be seen from the comments made by Pastor Simon. If technology were to truly assist religious practices, some form of a safe and secure connection has to be established virtually.

4.3 Religious Groups and Moving Forward with Technology

Despite the challenges, there are many avenues in which technology can be useful, and religious groups are giving consideration to such platforms. These opportunities range from using digital tools for the passing of religious knowledge to administrative purposes. For example, religious leaders conduct YouTube broadcasts for sermons, newsletters for sending announcements or messages, and worship services (personalized bible studies/prayers) done online over Zoom or other video conferencing platforms. On the other hand, administratively, Ms. Farah states that registration is done 100% online, and payment is encouraged to be done cashless (bank transfer/*PayNow*[14]). Those who were not knowledgeable in utilizing online transaction services, were taught how to make use of such services.

This depicts that religious leaders are able to improve technological-literacy and cultivate tech-savviness in the general public. This serves as a platform for them to expand further and engage in digital mediums for worship, moving at a measured pace, so as to ensure the public can keep up with the digitization process. It is then in the interest of the government to promote religion in Singapore as religious groups can assist in improving the *tech-savviness* of the public.

Generally, all respondents echoed the same positive sentiment when it came to adopting new technologies, as it can aid in assisting with public engagement. However, they did not have a dedicated team working on adopting or educating their congregations about the new digital tools. Moving forward, in line with Singapore's digitalization, they are hoping to improve their technological usages.

[14] PayNow is an electronic fund transfer service offered by participating banks that lets you send and receive Singapore Dollar funds from one bank to another using a mobile number.

5. Conclusion

From both the literature reviewed and data obtained, it is clear there is a tremendous potential for the use of technology in religion, but practical difficulties impede its adoption. The changing technological landscape presents three key challenges. Firstly, when adopting technology, religious leaders face issues in utilizing technologies. Secondly, adherents too face challenges when adopting technologies. The above two points could be due to a lack of technical know-how, or a lack of resources albeit mainly amongst the older demographic. Finally, religious leaders also face challenges in imparting knowledge, and practicing religion over technology.

With the government being keen on promoting religion for a host of issues such as to offer social services (Mathews, 2009) or to encourage better citizenry (Tamney, 1992), the willingness of religious groups to take cues and comply with the state's regulation has enabled religion to remain relevant in modern Singapore. Despite this, there is no centralized agency that regulates the type of digital tools and how they can be utilized by the various religious groups in Singapore. The efficacy of such an agency to standardize technological tools, and potentially provide training and resources is one plausible area which further studies can focus on.

The efficacy of the study was limited to a small sample group, and with no participants from other religious groups such as Hinduism and Buddhism. Thus, there is room for a more comprehensive study to better ascertain how we may conglomerate technology and religion. Alternatively, future studies could focus on devising possible directions, to enable religious groups in Singapore to efficiently and impactfully, adopt and implement technology.

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