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# RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY IN SINGAPORE

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## RELIGION IN SINGAPORE

Religious and ethno-religious issues are inherent in multi-ethnic and multi-religious societies, and Singapore is no exception. It has long been a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-religious society, being historically and contemporarily at the crossroads of some of the world's major and minor civilizations, cultures, religions, and traditions. Today, every major religious tradition in Singapore probably has within it a full religious spectrum, from orthodox, traditional orientations to reform movements and independent spiritual clusters, while other minor religions and movements have created or renewed spaces, membership, and expressions in the rapidly evolving city landscape. Most have regional and global links and influences. Religious affiliation is high and religious identification is strong among the population. These have also occurred against a background of growing religiosity and religious change since the 1970s. Global, regional and local events and developments since September 11 have further put the spotlight on religion, and raised issues concerning religious identity, politics, and inter-religious relations, and their impact on social cohesion.

Despite the diverse and dynamic religious landscape, however, there is a lack of in-depth knowledge, nuanced understanding, and regular dialogue about various religions and the meanings of living in Singapore's multi-religious world. Indeed, claims of ignorance, lack of inter-religious understanding, dialogue, and interaction, negative stereotyping and other inter-religious encounters among individuals and groups present potential points of misunderstanding and tension. Some

overlaps between ethnicity and religion further lend a heightened dimension and significance to ethno-religious identities and issues. While much is happening on the ground, recent studies and published literature are few or limited in scope and research has generally fallen behind realities and developments. Literature on various religions, while abundant, tends to be focused on their respective religious concerns and congregations. There is a lack of systematic studies or surveys and little on religion in national census coverage.

This chapter provides an overview of religious diversity in Singapore. In a broad examination of the larger religious landscape, it highlights some general developments and trends among the multi-religious population, in relations between the secular state and the multi-religious society, and within specific religions. The complex religious landscape is then illustrated and explored through relevant or significant aspects, issues and examples in some specific domains and among particular populations: schools/education and the young, media and social services. Finally, it discusses some "inter-religious" dimensions of diversity, and the implications and challenges of religious diversity on social cohesion.

## THE LANDSCAPE OF RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY

The religious landscape in Singapore is highly diverse, complex and fluid, involving both macro forces, particular religions and inter-religious relations which give meanings to its specific contexts, expressions and nuances.

### Multi-religious Society, Secular State

Tham points out that the long journey travelled by religion in general from about the fifteenth century to the present has impacted on Singapore through various impulses and influences, particularly on state-religion relations on the one hand, and between religion and society on the other.[1] He notes that along religion's journey, the religion-based meaning system or "sacred canopy" of the past has undergone change and differentiation consequent on several inter-related processes of secularization, globalization, modern capitalism, democratic liberalism and pluralism. The religious impulse remains, but now has to take into account the dominance of the state where the "laws of man" supersede the "laws of God" in the management of contemporary problems and needs. The religious response itself to pluralism and secularism is manifested in different forms, from accommodation to rejection and opposition. How these developments impact on Singapore has to bear in mind its particular feature as a multi-religious society and secular state, in which the society's multi-religious character is derived from various streams of immigrants originating from various parts of the world

and from a variety of religious backgrounds and movements throughout Singapore's history, while the state's secularism is a direct inheritance from the British colonial system.

The high degree of multireligiosity in which the vast majority of the population professes to have a religion (87 per cent in 1980 and 85.2 per cent in 2000) is further marked by significant changes. In different periods, religions have waxed and waned, with significant changes occurring in the last twenty-odd years. Census data show that Christianity has been highly successful in recruiting members (from 10 per cent in 1980 to 14.6 per cent in 2000) and so has Buddhism (from 27 per cent in 1980 to 42.5 per cent in 2000), while Taoism has seen its membership decline sharply from 30 per cent in 1980 to 8.5 per cent for the same years.[2] Census data also shows that there is a correlation between religious affiliation and several socio-demographic variables, including age, education, occupation and socio-economic status. Christians and Reformist Buddhists in Singapore tend to be younger, more educated and have a higher socio-economic status, whereas Taoists and Chinese Shenists tend to be older, less educated and come from lower socio-economic groups. Another key variable is ethnicity. Religious affiliation is culturally or ethnically structured to some extent, with most Malays being Muslim, the majority of Indians being Hindu, and the Chinese, to a lesser degree, adopt Chinese religions and Buddhism although it is the most heterogeneous religion-wise.

Another outstanding feature of religious change is the growing separation of culture and religion, with the privatization of religion taking place rapidly and with individuals claiming personal religious faith as opposed to kinship-based or community-based religious faith. Alongside the disillusionment with "traditional" religious beliefs and practices that underlies this change is the understanding of individual choice and freedom of worship and faith. As such, over the past two decades, large numbers of young people are switching religions, in which non-Christians are turning to Christianity and Reformist Buddhism while Christians are switching to Reformist Buddhism or other Christian denominations. It is also significant that nearly 15 per cent of the Singapore population has declared itself without religion in 2000.

At the level of the secular state, its management of religion and religious diversity stands out as a dominant feature of Singapore's religious landscape. It is a particular feature of the Singapore state that while it is secular, it envisages religion to have a role in nation-building. Its institutional and legal framework for secularism and the management of religion in Singapore within the governing ethos of multiculturalism involve a plethora of institutions overseeing various faiths, such as the Constitution, which guarantees freedom of religion, the

Presidential Council for Minority Rights and the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act (1991). It ought to be pointed out that the 1991 Act has often been interpreted as being passed by the state to exercise control over the political mobilization of religion in the face of the 1987 arrests of alleged "Marxists", a few of them Catholics with alleged liberation theology leanings, and the majority of others of a left or critical-of-government bent, for involvement in a conspiracy to overthrow the state some time in the future. This interpretation overlooks the fact that the arrests took place during the same time period as aggressive religious proselytization after many complaints and several serious incidents involving proselytization and conversion. Unlike the alleged Marxist conspiracy that was covered extensively by the local media, religious controversies arising from proselytization and conversion were kept under wraps and unreported.[3]

At the same time, these legal institutions nestle within a coercive, pre-emptive legislative regime in forestalling any religious extremism and interfaith conflicts. As pointed out by Tan, the fear of vulnerability in the post-September 11 "war on terror" and of political religion in general has meant that scrutiny, surveillance, and security are hallmarks of the state's tightrope walk between secularism on the one hand, and wielding control and influence over religion and its expression for the purposes of state- and nation-building, on the other.[4] In the latter, the state co-opts religion to reinforce the teaching of moral values, to sustain economic vitality, to share the responsibility of social welfare, and to urge the practice of one's religion in keeping with the secular and multiracial mores of Singapore society.

Concretely, relations between Singapore's secular state and multi-religious society have been tested regularly through several contentious issues involving religion, such as abortion (since the 1960s), human organ transplants (since the 1980s), religious proselytization (since the 1980s), stem cell research (since 2002), the building of integrated resorts which include casinos (which in turn raise issues of gambling addiction and prostitution) (2004), and gay rights (2003 and 2007). State-society relations can be expected to continue being affected by these issues, some of which have yet to be resolved or continue to develop, and as society's religious and multi-religious features continue to evolve dynamically, possibly raising other testy issues in future.

## Some Trends and Changes in "Old" and "New" Religions

Against the above broad trends and macro contexts, it is now useful to provide specific examples of religions which make up and add to the dynamic local religious landscape, each through its own particular developments, features, and

expressions. These include both "old" and "new" religions, such as Islam that arrived in the Southeast Asian region five centuries ago; Christianity which came alongside colonialism and is now returning via global evangelical circuits; Hinduism and India-derived religions; Buddhism; the Baha'i Faith and Sikhism.

**Islam**

Given that Islam is the religion of the majority of the population in the larger Southeast Asian region, its discourses, particularly in Malaysia and Indonesia, have an impact on the Singapore Muslim public. Azhar Ibrahim identifies the following as the main subjects and issues in the dominant discourses on Islam in Singapore: Islamizing trends in Muslim intellectual and cultural life; the denunciation of secularism and humanism; the advocation of plurality, diversity and moderation; and the debate on reformism versus traditionalism in which both competitively claim authenticity.[5] However, reformism tends to be absent in public discourse, while traditionalism continues to be favoured.

As religious belief, traditionalism is distinguished by a deep sense of cherishment for religious traditions which are deemed complete, infallible and unquestionable. As practice, traditionalism is characterized, among others, by the unquestioning acceptance of authority and opposition or reluctance to change. This traditionalism is strong among the local dominant Muslim religious elites or *ulama*,[6] and is expressed, among various ways, in their writings found in the Malay media and in other sources, such as their sermons. Their traditionalism can also be found in their responses to some recent significant issues and events affecting the Malay Muslim community, such as organ donation and transplant, stem cell research, secular knowledge (versus religious knowledge), reason (versus traditionalism), the wearing of headscarves in schools, the arrests of local Jemaah Islamiyah members, and *madrasah* education, as well as to larger societal issues such as government and politics, the economy, globalization, poverty and development. This religious elite seeks to be recognized and legitimated as the sole experts and authority on Islam and on knowledge and modern issues affecting the Muslim community. As such, one broad concern among Muslims is the impact and ramifications of traditionalism on the general development of the Malay community, particularly in the relative absence of a strong stream of reformism in public discourse.

**Christianity**

The other impactful religion in Singapore's religious landscape is Christianity. While the main Christian churches and denominations such as Catholicism,

Methodism, and Presbyterianism have long established themselves in Singapore since early colonial days, it is contemporary evangelical Christianity that accounts for the trend of conversion from other religions to Christianity and the leap in the Christian population between 1980 and 2000. Within the diverse forms of evangelical Christianity in Singapore are several common forms of evangelical practice and proactive ways in which Christians interpret the call to be evangelical. These are supported and enhanced by global Christian networks whose leaders often propose innovative Christian practices using mass media and contemporary technologies, although these are sometimes construed by non-Christians as aggressive proselytization and detrimental to peaceful inter-religious relations.

**New "India-derived" Religious Movements**

While Hinduism remains the main religion associated with local Indians, new religiously inspired "India-derived" movements and groups have added much diversity to Singapore's religious landscape since their importation in the mid-1960s and which now attract a substantial number of followers, including from outside the Indian-Hindu community. Sinha points out that many of these groups, including the Ramakrishna Mission, Radha Soami Satsang, Brahma Kumari Raja Yoga Centre, Satya Sai Baba Movement and Sri Aurobindo Society, do not perceive themselves to be "religious" or "Hindu", even if some have developed within the framework of Hinduism, and show a considerable variety of beliefs, practices and organizational structures.[7] At the same time they share some generic or common features such as the founder guru; claims to universal appeal and membership by individual choice and a personal quest; "difference" from mainstream, institutionalized religions, especially in promoting a de-ritualized stance; a claim to a logical, rational, and modernist approach to life and spirituality while also asserting a connection with ancient wisdom and tradition; and a focus on the individual and his/her self-development while at the same time subscribing to the notion of *seva* (community service) as essential practice. The functioning of some of these groups is also conditioned by local multi-ethnicity and multireligiosity while being connected with centres in India and elsewhere, and this offers some explanation for their appeal to English-speaking, literate, middle-class and upper-class professionals and members of different ethnic groups and religious sensibilities. One outstanding example is the Satya Sai Baba movement.

**Buddhism**

The "traditional" Buddhism (Theravada, Mahayana, syncretic) commonly associated with many local Chinese and the larger Buddhist landscape has

not escaped reformism and change in recent decades, and the varied groups now include Shenist-Taoist-Mahayana Buddhists, Mahayana Buddhists, Therevada Buddhists, Reformist Buddhists, Nichiren Shoshu Buddhists and Soka Gakkai Buddhists. Also, since the 1990s, Reformist Buddhists have become a formidable group within the Buddhist community, and include the non-sectarian Buddhayana Reformist Buddhists, the Mahayana Reformist Buddhists and Theravada Reformist Buddhists.

Kuah-Pearce notes that the processes of religious modernization and rationalization within the Singapore Buddhist landscape since the early 1980s have resulted in the movement towards Reformist Buddhism and a unifying religious ideology, this development generally appealing to modern needs.[8] This can be broadly attributed to the younger, better-educated and middle-class Chinese population being dissatisfied with the syncretic Chinese religious belief system for consisting of only ritual practices (and hence theologically inadequate to meet spiritual needs) as well as being focused on funerary rites instead of on the living. At the same time, Reformist Buddhists reject a God-created world, which they argue features notions of superior versus inferior, and authority versus subordination, and instead favour the egalitarian approach of Buddhism. They also believe in personal effort in religious spiritualism and the attainment of enlightenment. Other Buddhist reformists' primary focus is not the attainment of enlightenment, but with this-worldly needs. However, unlike Engaged Buddhism elsewhere, Reformist Buddhism in Singapore takes on the welfare and charity role without encouraging political consciousness and activism. In general, Reformist Buddhism adopts relevant and selected scriptural tenets from the different Buddhist traditions that best suit the needs of adherents and answer their contemporary spiritual and social needs.

In the case of the Nichiren Shoshu, it is an imported sect which, since the late 1970s, has become entrenched on the Singapore Buddhist scene. It gained substantial members through its ability to attract disenchanted Shenists who want a change in their religious affiliation, as well as through its aggressive proselytization, simple ritual practice, exclusive membership, and well-organized social activities. Similarly, the Soka Gakkai Association, formed as a break-away group from the Nichiren Shoshu in the early 1990s, is now firmly part of the Singapore Buddhist landscape, with older members drawn from disenchanted Shenists and younger members who seek spiritual meaning in life. Like the Nichiren Shoshu, it is well known for its simple ritual practice and high level of organization of activities which it mostly labels as "social" and "cultural". Indeed, its members attribute its ability to be highly organized in such activities for its inclusion in the annual National Day Parade.

### Bahá'í Faith

A less known and "new" religion in Singapore that arrived in the 1950s, but saw a growth of membership only in the 1980s and 1990s largely through conversion is the Bahá'í Faith. Foo's and Thomas' study show Bahá'í converts and adherents to be mainly young, English-speaking, middle-class with tertiary education, and Chinese, many of whom were formerly Taoists or Christians but were dissatisfied with their former religions.[9] Many had also converted when they were overseas students in North America or were Malaysian in origin, while a significant percentage of adherents are from "other" ethnic backgrounds. The decision among converts to embrace the faith is also attributed to the attractiveness of its spiritual principles — Progressive Revelation, the Oneness of God, and the Unity of Mankind — and its social teachings, located in the independent investigation of truth, the need for harmony between religion and science, and the principle of equal opportunities for men and women.

### Sikhism

Another religion that is not as well known as the main faiths is Sikhism, which is exclusive to the small Sikh community in Singapore. Although the Sikhs are a visible and ostensibly homogenous community owing to their unique physical appearance and established places of Sikh worship (*gurdwaras*), a different reality prevails. Arunajeet points out that, over time since immigration in the early 1900s, Sikhs in Singapore have evolved away from the Sikh religious ideals propagated by the religious authorities in the original homeland of Punjab, with only one third of local Sikhs maintaining their unique appearance and a further select minority within this third understanding and practising the religion as institutionalized by the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbhandak Committee (SGPC) in Amritsar, Punjab.[10] The reality is at once a story of immigration and settlement and of inter-generational adaptations and changes, with the latter reflected most visibly in the physical differences among the Amrit Dharis, Sahaj Dharis and "cropped", and intricately in the identity and community issues involving the Khalsa/Amrit Dhari identity, the *gurdwaras*' leadership, language, and competing lifestyles for families, genders and youth.

Finally, it ought to be mentioned briefly that the diversity of Singapore's religious landscape is expressed not only through the many religious sites that dot the city-state and are visited regularly by their respective religionists, but also through the many annual events and processions some of which appear to be revived through greater participation and embellishment of paraphernalia and rituals. Both Thaipusam and the Nine Emperor Gods' Festival, for example, are among

the most colourful, organized, and long-lasting religious processions in Singapore, and by their very visibility speak of their sacred meanings and sacred experiences for their participants while contributing to a construction of identity and community amongst them.

## RELIGION IN SCHOOLS AND AMONG THE YOUNG

Education and the school being the major site and agent of state and institutional policies, as well as of personal development and group dynamics, its religious orientations and influences are important aspects of early religious socialization, experiences, and inter-religious encounters among the young. These aspects, as well as religious orientations and shifts among the young themselves, reveal much about religious diversity and change in Singapore.

### Religious Education

The teaching of religion in schools has undergone various experimentation and change. The government's initial attempts to teach religious beliefs and practices in Singapore schools for the purposes of inculcating moral values and promoting citizenship education, through the compulsory Religious Knowledge (RK) subject introduced to all secondary schools in 1987, was quickly abandoned in 1989. This was due to allegations that the study of individual religions led to emphasis on religious differences and to religious proselytization. RK was replaced by a new Civics and Moral Education (CME) programme in 1992, and to a lesser extent by National Education (NE) launched in 1997. Charlene Tan argues that the government's approach of introducing various religions to students in a historical, objective and detached manner makes it difficult for students to imbibe the moral teachings propounded by religions, or be committed to promoting religious harmony.[11] Given the intrinsic problems and challenges associated with the teaching of religions among the young and in a multi-religious society, the secular state has stayed away from it despite calls for the teaching of world religions in the aftermath of September 11, preferring to leave religious institutions, individual religion-affiliated schools and parents themselves to attend to religious education. Instead, it focuses on moral education and National Education as a means to foster social cohesion and citizenship.

### *Madrasah* and Christian Mission Schools

In religious education, two distinct types of schools — the Muslim *madrasah* and the Christian mission schools — both long-time institutions in the educational and religious landscape of Singapore, warrant some brief discussion.

In the case of the *madrasah*, religious education is expected to offer a curriculum that focuses on religious subjects in keeping with its role as an institution to produce Muslim religious elites. Sa'eda Buang points out that historically, the national and economic development and demands of the state, particularly during the post-World War II period, necessitated the *madrasah* to revisit its long-held position as classical curriculum practitioner time and again.[12] An earlier resurgence of Islamic fundamentalism in the early twentieth century also sought to effect *madrasah* curriculum reform which was indeed swiftly put in place but was short-lived. In recent years, the curriculum purpose of the six remaining full-time *madrasah* has again come under scrutiny and reformulation, to make them be more responsive to larger economic and socio-political transformations and which includes the employability of *madrasah* graduates beyond traditional religious sectors. In particular, the government, through the Islamic Council of Singapore (MUIS), is pushing for English, Maths and Science subjects to be given more emphasis, as well as for higher standards of academic achievement among *madrasah* graduates to match those of Muslim students in state schools. However, this has encountered resistance from some quarters of the *madrasah* education elite, Muslim religious elite and the Muslim public, who variously perceived the state's motive to be that of closing down *madrasah* schools altogether and thus of removing what has become a symbolic marker of Muslim identity.[13] Sa'eda Buang argues that both the socio-historical aspects of *madrasah* education and main curriculum issues, such as syllabuses, subjects and texts with their underlying philosophical considerations, make reform in *madrasah* education multifaceted and formidable. Power assertions between elite groups and the Muslim public within the Muslim community itself have also directly stunted the growth and progress of early *madrasah* education, and the curriculum itself has been in subsequent dire need of reform.

In the case of Christian mission schools which came alongside colonialism and the spread of Christianity, the role of religion as providing moral and spiritual "benefits" has contributed to their reputation for excellence, even after independence and the creation of a national school system. Goh points out that though mission schools have had to negotiate their distinctive character in the light of national educational imperatives and currents, the quality of a distinctive school "spirit" and its "moral" benefits, which have been built up largely through non-curricular or structural means, have persisted throughout their history.[14] The result is a distinctive character of Christian mission schools which has been broadly acknowledged to play a significant part in the Singapore educational landscape not only or primarily in academic terms, but also in

terms of the "moral" training for which these schools are held in high regard by both Christians and non-Christians. He argues that the superior efficacy of moral influence (which arises from the inherently Christian culture of the mission schools) over a Religious Knowledge curricular approach (in which a multi-religious, pluralistic curriculum is inculcated through abstract classroom dictates) arises from and enhances the structural leeway given to mission schools to carry out their project of Christian moral influence. At the same time, a number of safeguards have been set in place to protect the religious sensibilities of non-Christian students and to avoid Christian evangelization.

### Religious Switching and Knowledge among School Adolescents

In the "religious" landscape of schools that is shaped by school adolescents, their religious conversion and switching and knowledge stand out as important features. The study by Chew reveals a notable permeation of religious influence in adolescent life, with 82 per cent of adolescents identifying themselves as having a religion, primarily the Buddhist, Christian, and Muslim faiths.[15] The most common period for adolescent religious switching to occur is between the ages of fifteen and sixteen, with switchers mainly from the Buddhist/Taoists, Christian and Hindu faiths, and often facing parental opposition initially. On the whole, adolescents switch not because of a personal quest for truth but because of peer group influences and the need to "solve a problem".

The popular choice for a switch is from Taoism to Christianity, and/or from Buddhism to free-thinker status. When the switch is to Christianity, it is also to a church that is youth-focused and that preaches a this-worldly gospel of care, cheer and prosperity. The switch away from the Taoist/Buddhist faiths is because of adolescents' disenchantment with the practice of their rites/rituals and their inability to operate in the adolescents' preferred language choice of English or Mandarin. The study also reveals adolescents' knowledge of religions to be poor, drawn mainly from the internet and chat room sites and peer groups. At the same time, most are aware of the need to be tolerant of religions in multi-religious Singapore and not to be offensive.

## RELIGION IN THE MEDIA

One of the most public spaces for information and exchange of views — the media — provides the ground for religious diversity in Singapore to be expressed and discoursed. Two important religion-related issues — internet use for religious purposes and media discourse on homosexuality — exemplify and illustrate this phenomenon. They also surface two main issues pertaining to religious

diversity: the potential for religious harm and harmony through cyberspace, and the secular-religious distinction in the public sphere.

## Religion and the Internet

The internet is becoming a popular medium for gaining access to religious information, teachings, communities, and experiences, and is an abundant source of both useful and false and sometimes inflammatory information about religious faiths. The study by Kluver et al. pays attention to the way the internet might increase or decrease religious understanding and harmony among diverse faith communities.[16] The study found that the internet has become an important source for religious information and activity in Singapore, in line with global trends, and that Singaporeans use the internet more for matters related to their own religion than to learn about other religions. Singaporeans are also more likely to use local sites for religious purposes than foreign sites. While most religious leaders see the internet as a helpful medium for users to learn both about their own and other religions, some religious leaders believe that the internet provides an easy context for religious conflict through the posting of harmful materials, and are concerned over the authenticity of religious information online. Interestingly, most survey respondents believed that the internet can be a potential threat to religious harmony, and firm support is expressed by Singaporeans and religious leaders for government regulation of the internet on religious matters.

It is clear that the widespread dissemination of information and communication technologies presents new challenges and opportunities for religious communities, in terms of outreach and mobilization of believers. But it is also true that it provides greater potential for offence as the internet allows individuals and groups to post material online that might insult or offend others.[17] In 2006, three bloggers who posted negative material about Muslims were arrested and charged under the Sedition Act for their actions, indicating that the government is watchful about the internet becoming a site for religious conflict. As new technologies are integrated into societies, religious organizations, modes of practice, systems of authority, and modes of interaction are all likely to be challenged. Kluver et al. argue that a proactive stance which seeks to understand how the technology can be utilized for positive purposes is likely to be more meaningful than one that seeks solely to limit potential harm.

## Media Discourse on Homosexuality

In 2003, the national print media managed a public debate over the question of non-discriminatory hiring policies in the Singapore civil service with respect

to homosexuals. Kenneth Paul Tan examines this debate through a close reading of mostly "pro-gay" and "anti-gay" arguments voiced, in particular, the religiously inflected arguments of authorities from the Muslim, Buddhist, Roman Catholic, and Protestant Christian communities.[18] He locates obstacles to an open, free, empirically supported, normatively justified, and sincere discussion that should ideally characterize a mature public sphere, and suggests that it is two approaches — the artificial distinction between the religious and the secular, and the insistence on formal secularism that excludes all religious reasons from the public sphere — that have been responsible for a public sphere that is defensive, dogmatic, and disengaged, and that distorts the capacity for more open public dialogue motivated by a collective pursuit of higher-order knowledge of what is good. Strict and formal secularism can also have the effect of demonizing religious reasons and transforming them into a defensive discourse, with complexity, subtlety, variety, and engagement being distorted into simple "us" versus "them" modes of reasoning. He points out that the discourse clearly shows that religious people and even the authorities can have a range of views ranging from the conservative to the most liberal, but a siege mentality reduces discussion into a battlefield of rigid notions of good and evil and right and wrong, all marked by suspicion and hostility between the forces of religion and secularism.

This case is an important one. It points to the need to develop a culture of public debate and discussion that can produce and admit more nuanced arguments that destabilize simple "pro" and "anti" modes of discussion. Here, a start can be made by removing the religious/secular and "us" versus "them" distinctions in the public sphere so as to free up discussion, remove suspicion, and increase good faith in one another.

## RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS IN SOCIAL SERVICES

The social services is a domain in which many religious organizations — Muslim, Buddhist, Christian and others — have traditionally and long participated strongly and even initiated. Indeed, the religious and social motivations, roles, and activities of each major religion and its affiliated organizations in the development of the social services sector can be traced and detailed historically. Broadly, their involvement all similarly arises from their respective religious and social teachings of charity, compassion, and love of humanity, and one common and outstanding feature is that they cater to all, irrespective of religion or ethnicity. They have continued to remain active in the field through a continuous reinvention of themselves, and flexible adjustments to the larger multi-religious environment

and secular state, including collaboration with state bodies and other selected intra-, inter-religious and secular organizations.

Muslim agencies and mosques both play major roles as social service providers.[19] For Muslim agencies, they have evolved historically from providing help to Muslim immigrants and the needy, such as orphans, to their present role as providers of a large range of services catering to the poor and needy. While the majority of their clients are Muslims, they also service a sizeable percentage of non-Muslims. They have also established external relationships and collaborations with state agencies and other non-Muslim organizations, both faith-based and secular. Working with non-Muslim organizations seems to be part and parcel of their experiences and a practical necessity, Muslims being a minority. However, they ensure that the collaboration effort is consistent with Muslim beliefs and practices.

In the case of mosques, besides being primarily places for prayers, they have become important institutions which address social issues in the community. They offer a huge range of social services to meet different needs of various segments of the Muslim population, although they are varied in their resources, collaboration, and leadership and orientations/values. Although the mosques' social services programmes cater mostly to Muslims, there are spaces in which interaction between Muslims and people of other religious groups takes place, including those for fostering inter-religious understanding and correcting misperceptions about Islam — this feature having developed mainly since September 11.

Another major player in the delivery of welfare services is Buddhist institutions. The Buddhist temple, through its Buddhist Sangha and the Buddhist notion of compassion, has always been simultaneously a sacred and a welfare space as it evolved over time, first as home for the destitute and tea house for the needy, and then to benevolence hall, free medical clinic and provider of shelter and services. Today, the intersection of state ideology of "many helping hands", including those of religious organizations, and Buddhist ideology, produces a philanthropic and compassionate Buddhist culture that encourages Buddhist organizations and individuals to become actively involved in charity work and social and welfare services.[20]

Christian churches of various denominations have historically been long involved in social service provision, especially among those strongly rooted in "social gospel" theology which emphasizes good works for the betterment of humanity. The Catholic Welfare Services, the Methodist Welfare Services, and the Presbyterian Welfare Services are examples. The Catholic Church and

some of its individual members further provide services where others may hesitate to undertake, such as with AIDS sufferers and immigrants.

The case of evangelical Protestant churches, which began to enter the social services in the 1980s, is interesting. According to Mathews, to a large extent they are theologically conservative and traditionally have been more concerned with "soul saving" than "bread giving" but, together with church-affiliated social service organizations, they now form the largest bloc in Singapore's social service landscape.[21] The main types of services they offer include help for families and youth; half-way houses, care facilities, including hospitals and institutional homes; and facilities for the disabled. Their motivations for involvement lie in integrating faith and works and obtaining legitimacy *vis-à-vis* the state and community, and they are adept at mobilizing ideological, spiritual, and material resources. Overall, Protestant churches and their organizations have been successful in adapting to the secular state and a multi-religious society and have become strongly entrenched in the social service landscape, even as the common perception exists that their social service provision is a front for proselytization.

The role of Hinduism and Hindu temples in social services is the exception compared with the other religious organizations, and is relatively recent. Historically, the temple evolved from being a focal centre for worship, interaction, and safe haven for early Hindu immigrant workers in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, to their position as largely places of ritualistic worship by the 1970s. However, temples have been increasingly subject to pressures for change towards greater performance of the mandatory *seva* (community service) since the 1980s, such pressures coming from more informed and educated devotees and neo-spiritual movements, loss of youth members unable to identify with rituals, and examples set by organizations of other religions.[22] As noted earlier, some new India-derived religious movements, such as the Satya Sai Baba, are now active in the social service landscape through the concept of *seva* as essential practice.

## INTER-RELIGIOUS ISSUES AND INTERACTION

Inter-religious issues and interaction probably constitute the most difficult and challenging dimensions of religious diversity in Singapore. Given their inevitability and their potential for both peace and conflict, it is necessary to understand their specific contexts, forms and expressions, and the principles and values by which they are approached by individuals and groups, leaders and laities, and society as a whole.

According to Ten, the existence of genuine but sometimes incompatible or even conflicting beliefs about religious matters should be acknowledged as a starting point, in order to face a central political issue: the basis on which people with such differences are to live together harmoniously and in cooperation with one another.[23] In his view, the first step is to establish good grounds for religious toleration: having a proper understanding and application of religious beliefs, showing respect for sincere believers of all kinds by letting them lead their lives in accordance with their fundamental values so long as they do not harm others, and rejecting a theocratic state in favour of a secular one. At the same time, he sees mere toleration as being insufficient as it is compatible with mutually tolerant religious groups living compartmentalized lives without any dialogue or interaction. He observes that in Singapore, several other social ingredients have been added in order to avoid this, including housing and educational policies and a meritocratic approach. He argues in particular for a meritocratic society, which, properly tempered, not only provides opportunities for social mobility but also encourages the emergence of multiple and criss-crossing social identities whereby religious divisions need not coincide with, and be amplified by, other social divisions.

Two examples illustrate the complexities and challenges of interfaith dialogue and interaction in reality. How Christian clergymen negotiate their religion with other religions is one particularly significant example, given that the steady growth of Christianity in Singapore, especially the more conservative segment of it, is a cause for concern in terms of inter-religious harmony as this category is allegedly more resistant in entering into dialogue and partnerships with other religious groups and opposed to making concessions and compromises to their exclusivist faith and practice. In Mathews' study of Christian clergymen's negotiations with other religions in four areas — inter-religious dialogue, inter-religious relations, evangelistic practices, and participation in non-Christian ritual — he demonstrates the difficulties and complexities in negotiating the tensions between their evangelistic mission and their need to coexist peacefully with other religions within a secular nation-state setting.[24] While clergymen provide theological and social rationalizations while being always mindful not to dilute their exclusivist stance in their negotiations, the processes and outcomes are far from being easy or resolved.

An "older" example of interfaith dialogue and interaction is that of the only inter-religious body in Singapore: the Inter-Religious Organisation (IRO), set up in 1949. In tracing the IRO's historical development and major activities, Lai points to some of the inherently difficult issues raised and problems

encountered in inter-religious relations and collaboration, even as such an organization aspires to spread inter-religious goodwill and understanding and members share similar values drawn from their respective religious traditions.[25] Some of these problems and issues include organizational issues of structure, leadership, qualification for membership and representation within the body; theological differences and their negotiation; religious proselytization; the public portrayal, representation, and referencing of religions and "others"; the content and the nature of dialogue and interaction; public representation of an inter-religious organization; and its relations with the secular state.

In general, the more ritualistic and symbolic aspects of interfaith representation and interaction have been developed and agreed upon over time, even though these remain open to question by religious others from outside the organization. It is the complex issues of representation, and of the theological and social justifications for interfaith dialogue and interaction that are deeply contested. However, in assessing the IRO's contributions to interfaith awareness, peace and understanding, Lai argues that an inter-religious institution such as the IRO is a necessary one in a multi-religious society.

A new dimension of interfaith dialogue among youth leaders appears to have been emphasized after September 11 and other terrorist attacks involving young adults. However, the nascent youth interfaith dialogue is limited and hampered by several conditions, including the social taboo of religion as being sensitive that has contributed to the abstinence from and lack of interest in youth interfaith work, and the inter-generational gaps between religious leaders and youth.

Interfaith relations and dialogue in multi-religious Singapore after the occurrence of September 11 and terrorist attacks elsewhere as well as the arrests of Jemaah Islamiah terrorists in Singapore warrant mention here.[26] In brief, the state was quick to organize events and set up new structures since 2001 which have brought religious and community leaders to the table and on common platforms in the interests of religious harmony and social cohesion.[27] However, it was Muslim individuals and Muslim organizations such as Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura (MUIS, The Islamic Council of Singapore) and the Association of Muslim Professionals (AMP), under the glare of suspicion and negative reporting on Islam and Muslims particularly in Western media, which initiated several events and activities for the public. These included lectures, dialogues, conferences on religion and peace, and joint celebrations, many in collaboration with secular and religious organizations such as the Catholic Church, Buddhist organizations and the IRO (which also organized similar events and activities). In the response

of the Catholic Church and its members to such activities and expressions of inter-religious solidarity, it may be said that they were guided by their church's document *Nostra Aetate*, which recognizes the good present in all the major religions of the world and acknowledges the Catholic Church's own recognition of the world's major religions, as well as by the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious and Ecumenical Dialogue.

## CONCLUSION

The dimensions and meanings of religious diversity are wide-ranging and multilayered. In Singapore it spans an entire spectrum within a dynamic and fast-evolving landscape: society as a whole, global and regional impulses and impacts, the state's management of religion, the secular and the sacred, public and private religion, individuals and their religions, individual religions and intra-religious aspects, and inter-religious dimensions. This chapter does not offer a comprehensive picture nor does it offer strong and firm conclusions about Singapore's religious diversity in view of this vast scope and the huge gaps of knowledge.[28] Broadly, religious diversity in Singapore speaks of the strength of religiosity and religion's many positive contributions to society and the lives of individuals and groups. At the same time, there are some complex and difficult issues and challenges posed by religious diversity, especially for state-society and interfaith relations: growing binary world views and artificial and antagonistic distinctions made between secularism and religiosity, religious proselytization and conversion, external religious influences and their impact on local communities and their orientations, political mobilization by religion and its management by the state, and inter-religious issues.

Arising from these difficult issues and challenges is the consequent need to clarify and balance diversity and unity. It is generally accepted that diversity is such that all, religionists and non-religionists alike, should be able to practise their beliefs, maintain their attachments and identities to their religious/other communities, as well as participate effectively in the shared multi-religious and multicultural nation-state, including in the definition and attainment of social goals affecting all. At the same time, unity is to be held uppermost by all, failing which fracturing and divisions along religious as well as other lines threaten the nation-state and society itself. Religious and other identities would have to sit comfortably with the larger interests of social cohesion, national unity, and the common good of society.

The balance between diversity and unity needs to be sensitively managed within an "always under construction and in dialogue" approach. The scope

and meanings of "diversity" and "unity" will need to be regularly reviewed, clarified, and nuanced. Here, who holds dialogues, manages, and constructs with whom and by what mechanisms and processes are important. In the Singapore experience, some major challenges and tensions have been managed through a range of mechanisms and processes, such as using state power, experiential learning, and dialogue, debate and negotiation.

The role of the state in particular, since it is the key player, needs to be carefully considered and managed in seeking the diversity-unity balance. In academic and intellectual discourse on Singapore's cultural diversity, much focus has been placed on the hegemonic role of the state in social control and management. This is understandable as the state has historically set the larger institutional and legal frameworks for social-cultural policies and practices and been strongly interventionist in its political approach to issues. On religion, it maintains a clear stand on Singapore being a secular state and a distinction between political and social religion. It also claims the maintenance of religious harmony as one of its primary roles, and will no doubt respond strong and hard to any perceived organized threats to security and social stability and to this role.

Religions and religious communities, however, have their own worlds and realities which offer motivations, fulfilments, meanings and lives into which the state cannot or would hesitate to enter without being perceived as being hegemonic or anti-religion. Religion appeals to people in ways that no amount of state power exercised can have complete control over or deliverables offered can substitute for. In the delicate balance between unity and diversity, the state's part has to be sensitively managed. Too much intervention by the state and its emphasis on unity and the result can be hegemony and religious repression.

On the other hand, too much diversity without sufficient unity can result in society being fractured and divided. Dealing with diversity can be especially difficult when there is a history of serious inter-religious conflict or when religions come into play in aggressively competitive, exclusivist and/or literalist forms, or are interpreted without sufficient contextualization and sensitivity into local multi-religious conditions. In Singapore, diversity is viewed broadly and lived by people as a condition to be tolerated and even appreciated ritually and culturally for its enriching qualities, but feared socially and politically for its divisive potentialities. Singapore's history and record thus far are not strewn with frequent occurrences of open and violent conflict, but there exist some potential areas of inter-religious tensions that reiterate the need for sensitive management.

Finally, interfaith education, dialogue, and collaboration, despite their inherent difficulties, are likely to become an important mechanism and process in the ongoing construction of religious harmony and in seeking the unity-diversity balance. Aside from the recent top-down state moves at promoting religious harmony and interfaith dialogue, much is left to religious organizations, groups and individuals themselves to initiate and participate in interfaith dialogue and collaboration. It should be remembered that it is possible to have a multi-religious society but not much inter-religious interaction, and that interfaith dialogue and collaboration may be considered desirable by some but are avoided by others for fear of inter-religious tension or faith pollution and dilution. Indeed, the conditions for dialogue or resistance to it can be as difficult to manage as the scope and content of dialogue itself, and both ought to be carefully assessed. How sustained, extensive, and deep interfaith dialogue and collaboration will go, beyond elite and top leadership involvement, remains a guess. While not an engagement that all will want to participate in or can be forced into, those with belief, interest, and passion can tap into dialogue and collaboration and take the lead to set the example on how to make peace and achieve harmonious living without resorting to harmful means to settle conflicts.

The religious landscape in Singapore and, indeed, the world can only get more diverse. We will need higher-order social knowledge and insights into this unprecedented diversity, towards better understanding and management of religion for the common good of all living in a multi-religious and at the same time shared environment and nation-state.

## NOTES

Parts of this chapter appear as earlier versions in the Introduction and Conclusion sections of the book *Religious Diversity in Singapore*, edited by Lai Ah Eng (Singapore: Institute of Policy Studies and Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008). This book is based on recent research conducted under the Religious Diversity and Harmony in Singapore Project (2005–06) undertaken by the Institute of Policy Studies. The project had the following objectives: to understand the background and current state of religious diversity and complexity in Singapore; to identify key trends and issues; to offer insights and suggestions for policy and practice, and to contribute to inter-religious dialogue, understanding and harmony, in the interests of social cohesion and the common good in Singapore. The project involved the collective effort of thirty academics, researchers, graduate students, and practitioners. The author has drawn

material from some chapters in the book, and wishes to thank their respective contributors. She is solely responsible for all views expressed in this chapter.

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2. *Census of Population 2000* (Singapore: Singapore Department of Statistics, 2000).
3. This has perhaps led some scholars such as political scientists, who relied largely on reports and government speeches rather than difficult fieldwork on religious proselytization which required local knowledge and access, towards the first interpretation which has become accepted "truth".
4. Eugene Tan, "Keeping God in Place: The Management of Religion in Singapore", in *Religious Diversity in Singapore*, edited by Lai Ah Eng (Singapore: Institute of Policy Studies and Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008).
5. Azhar Ibrahim, "Discourses on Islam in Southeast Asia and Their Impact on the Singapore Muslim Public", in *Religious Diversity in Singapore*, edited by Lai Ah Eng (Singapore: Institute of Policy Studies and Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008).
6. Noor Aisha Abdul Rahman, "The Muslim Religious Elite of Singapore", in *Religious Diversity in Singapore*, edited by Lai Ah Eng (Singapore: Institute of Policy Studies and Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008).
7. Vineeta Sinha, " 'Religiously-inspired', 'India-derived' Movements in Singapore", in *Religious Diversity in Singapore*, edited by Lai Ah Eng (Singapore: Institute of Policy Studies and Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008).
8. Khun Eng Kuah-Pearce, "Diversities and Unities: Towards a Reformist Buddhism in Singapore", in *Religious Diversity in Singapore*, edited by Lai Ah Eng (Singapore: Institute of Policy Studies and Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008).
9. Foo Check Woo and Lynette Thomas, "Baha'is in Singapore: Patterns of Conversion", in *Religious Diversity in Singapore*, edited by Lai Ah Eng (Singapore: Institute of Policy Studies and Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008).
10. Arunajeet Kaur, "The Evolution of the Sikh Identity in Singapore", in *Religious Diversity in Singapore*, edited by Lai Ah Eng (Singapore: Institute of Policy Studies and Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008).
11. Charlene Tan, "From Moral Values to Citizenship Education: The Teaching of Religion in Singapore Schools", in *Religious Diversity in Singapore*, edited by Lai Ah Eng (Singapore: Institute of Policy Studies and Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008).
12. Sa'eda Buang, "Religious Education as Locus of Curriculum: A Brief Inquiry into Madrasah Education in Singapore", in *Religious Diversity in Singapore*, edited by Lai Ah Eng (Singapore: Institute of Policy Studies and Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008).

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14. Robbie Goh, "Mission Schools in Singapore: The 'Religious Harmony' State, The Construction of Social Identities, and the Negotiation of Evangelical Cultures", in *Religious Diversity in Singapore*, edited by Lai Ah Eng (Singapore: Institute of Policy Studies and Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008).
15. Phyllis Chew, "Religious Switching and Knowledge among Adolescents in Singapore", in *Religious Diversity in Singapore*, edited by Lai Ah Eng (Singapore: Institute of Policy Studies and Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008).
16. Randolph Kluver, Pauline Hope Cheong, Benjamin Detenber, Lee Wai Peng, Shahiraa Binti Sahul Hameed, and Chen Yanli, "The Internet and Religious Harmony in Singapore", in *Religious Diversity in Singapore*, edited by Lai Ah Eng (Singapore: Institute of Policy Studies and Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008).
17. See Cherian George's "Control-shift: The Internet and Political Change in Singapore" in this volume for a discussion on the internet, local politics, and the state's management of cyberspace.
18. Kenneth Paul Tan, "Religious Reasons in a Secular Public Sphere: Debates in the Media About Homosexuality", in *Religious Diversity in Singapore*, edited by Lai Ah Eng (Singapore: Institute of Policy Studies and Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008).
19. Enon Mansor and Nur Amali Ibrahim, "Muslim Agencies and Mosques as Social Service Providers", in *Religious Diversity in Singapore*, edited by Lai Ah Eng (Singapore: Institute of Policy Studies and Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008).
20. Khun Eng Kuah-Pearce, "Delivering Welfare Services: A Strategic Partnership between Buddhism and the State in Singapore", in *Religious Diversity in Singapore*, edited by Lai Ah Eng (Singapore: Institute of Policy Studies and Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008).
21. Mathew Mathews, "Saving The City Through Good Works: Christian Involvement in Social Services", in *Religious Diversity in Singapore*, edited by Lai Ah Eng (Singapore: Institute of Policy Studies and Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008).
22. Sinniah Vivakananda and Nagah Devi Ramasamy, "Hindu Temples in Charities and Social Services", in *Religious Diversity in Singapore*, edited by Lai Ah Eng (Singapore: Institute of Policy Studies and Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008).

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24. Mathew Mathews, "Negotiating Christianity with Other Religions: The Views of Christian Clergymen in Singapore", in *Religious Diversity in Singapore*, edited by Lai Ah Eng (Singapore: Institute of Policy Studies and Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008).
25. Lai Ah Eng, "The Inter-religious Organisation of Singapore", in *Religious Diversity in Singapore*, edited by Lai Ah Eng (Singapore: Institute of Policy Studies and Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008).
26. See Yolanda Chin's "Community Confidence and Security" in this volume for a discussion on community efforts towards religious harmony.
27. These include the Inter-racial and Inter-religious Confidence Circles (IRCCs) and the IRCC National Steering Committee (2002); the Inter-Religious Harmony Circle (IRHC 2003), and the Community Education Programme (CEP 2006).
28. These gaps include:
    1) The impact of globalization, development, and modernity on religion and religious life in Singapore, including global and regional impulses and influences, and secular-religious distinctions and issues;
    2) Various religions, movements, communities and groups, examples of which are Jainism, Chinese folk religions, "New Age" religions and new spiritual movements, "free thinkers", non-religionists and secularists, immigrants' religious organizations and orientations, and histories of religious communities and their religious lives;
    3) Religious trends, processes, and issues, including proselytization, conversion and religious switching; religious syncretism and hybridization; everyday life religiosity; religious socialization in families, among youths and in schools and religious institutions; and religious representation in public and private spheres;
    4) Gender and religion issues;
    5) State and religion, such as issues pertaining to the secular state-religious society relationship and collaborations and collisions between state and religious organizations;
    6) Interfaith issues and interactions in various domains, such as within families, schools, workplaces, neighbourhood localities, and public spaces; by various agencies and actors such as organizations, leaders, colleagues, parents, and students; local histories of inter-religious issues and interactions; and interfaith dialogue initiatives and challenges; and
    7) Religious responses to specific political, economic, social, scientific, and environmental issues.