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Theorising ‘Talk’ about ‘Religious Pluralism’ and ‘Religious Harmony’ in Singapore

VINEETA SINHA

ABSTRACT This article aims to make sense of the discourse on ‘religious pluralism’ and ‘religious harmony’ in Singapore. My choice of the ‘Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act’, passed in 1990, to launch this inquiry is by no means accidental or random. I argue that in addition to an empirical domain, it is a central analytical tool that has provided an occasion for the articulation of a range of taken-for-granted statements about ‘religion’, ‘religious pluralism’, and ‘religious harmony’ in Singapore. I map out how the religious scene is discussed by various parties. The inevitability of Singapore’s multi-religiosity, the fragility of religious harmony, and the need for constant vigilance are dominant strands. The article addresses these related areas: a brief historical contextualisation of religion in secular Singapore is followed by a condensed narrative of the conditions and deliberations leading to the Act. Further, the discourse on religious harmony from the early 1990s is juxtaposed to present concerns about religion and religious encounters in Singapore. The intention for this is two-fold: to see if there have been any major shifts in such ‘talk, and to use the empirical material to call for the re-conceptualisation of categories/notions, such as ‘religious pluralism’ and ‘religious harmony’.

Locating Religion in Singapore Society

In the last half century, the religious domain in Singapore has been shaped by domestic and global historical events. Yet, continuity defines the official, state discourse on the function of religion in Singapore. The vast scholarship (Benjamin; Clammer; Kong; Hill; Tamney, Sinha “Constituting and Re-constituting”; Tong, Trends; Wee) on this subject has produced a coherent and valuable discourse. From the earliest days, the leadership has highlighted Singapore’s ethnic and religious pluralism, a fact that was cause for both celebration and caution. The view that such diversity must be judiciously managed and could not be left to ‘natural’ forces has remained. The idea that without guidance, racial and religious differences would produce tensions and strife has been a central feature of governance. Religious freedom and practice are, however, constitutionally guaranteed, provided citizens do not engage in any “… act contrary to any general law relating to public order, public health or mortality” (Article 15(4), Constitution of the Republic of Singapore).

Despite the state’s secular stance, religion is seen as an important vehicle and repository of traditional values—evident in the deliberations about the need for religious education (Tamney). The state demarcates what constitutes ‘religion’ and defines what appropriate religious activity is. The deliberate delimitation of
the religious domain and the insistence that this is different from the realm of formal politics are important. Given such a construction, a great deal of work has to be invested in managing and guarding the defined boundaries and the content of the religious domain. This is done through argument and persuasion and through institutional means, including legislation, such as the Maintenance of Religious Harmony (MRH) Act of 1990, an important milestone and a clear instance of a rationalised, institutionalised mechanism for managing religious diversity.

Today, religion continues to be central in the life of Singaporeans and inspires intense and complex discussions. This article documents one aspect of this ‘talk’ about religion, the starting point being the events and rationale leading to the formulation of the MRH Act. I begin with a condensed narrative of the circumstances and deliberations leading to the passing of the Act, mapping out the various participants in the emerging discourse. This discourse is then juxtaposed to present concerns about religion and religious encounters in Singapore. Such a focus provides both a rich empirical field and serves as a central analytical tool in revealing a range of otherwise unarticulated statements and perceptions about religious diversity and harmony in Singapore.

A caveat regarding the term ‘theorising’ in the title—it denotes a process of ‘sociological sense-making’, which allows me to demonstrate the rationale and thinking behind utterances, decisions, and practices, which reveal the complexities of the phenomena and produce sociological insights about the local multi-religious domain.

Maintenance of the Religious Harmony Act: A Legislative Solution?

The 9th November 1990 is significant in the legislative history of Singapore. After more than five years of planning, debating, and deliberation, a Bill to maintain religious harmony was passed by the Singapore Parliament, bringing into effect the MRH Act.1 Singapore thus scored yet another ‘first’, becoming the only country in the world to have a law of this nature.2 Expectedly, this legislation generated discussions locally and critical sociological commentary from students of Singapore society (Clammer; Hill; Tamney), highlighting among other things, that this Act was devised to keep the realms of ‘religion’ and ‘politics’ separate, realms already pre-defined by the state in specific ways. Tamney (36–7) further states that “Clearly the target of the new law was leftist Christianity (and, to a lesser extent, Islamic fundamentalism). Both the ‘Marxist conspiracy’3 and Christian evangelism awakened the leaders to the political threat of Christianity.” The Act was indeed called for and passed close on the heels of the ‘Marxist conspiracy’ in 19874 and the controversy relating to the compulsory Religious Knowledge Program and its dissolution in 1989. In looking at this legislation, I build on existing theorising on the subject, but propose that the same material allows a different glimpse into the local religious scene.

How the Act Came into Being

Although the Act came into existence in 1990, different kinds of evidence, including a report prepared by the Internal Security Department (ISD) of Singapore in 1986, set into motion the chain of events that culminated in this
unique piece of legislation. Among other details of religious life, the report noted the prevalence of inter-religious tensions in Singapore, coupled with a large-scale incidence of aggressive proselytisation and the exploitation of “religion for political and subversive purposes” (White Paper 13). The Ministry of Community Development (MCD) then commissioned more detailed studies to investigate religious trends in Singapore. These reports, too, ‘confirmed’ some of the central findings of the ISD report.

In the face of such evidence the government felt that action was imperative to ensure religious harmony. Two options were envisaged: firstly, to adopt non-legislative, non-enforceable guidelines, rules, and principles about the ‘dos and don’ts’ in inter-religious relations and secondly, to formulate a legislative, enforceable means, a law to restrain ‘trouble-makers’ and deter them from disrupting harmonious co-existence of religious communities. In 1987, the Attorney General of Singapore submitted two drafts to the government for consideration: a declaration and a legally binding code. The first was deemed inappropriate; that the state inclined more towards legislation is clear from albeit cautionary statements by various members of the government. At the opening of Parliament on 9th January 1989, Wee Kim Wee, then President, reiterated the need for religious tolerance and moderation as a matter of political expediency and ‘explained’ the need for clear ground rules for harmonious interaction of religious communities. Things moved rapidly thereafter. On 30th April 1989, during the opening of the ‘Parliament of Religions’ organised by the Ramakrishna Mission, BG Lee Hsien Loong, then Trade and Industry Minister, announced that the government took recent religious trends seriously (e.g. increasing religious fervour and aggressive evangelising) and considered legislation to prevent religious strife. On 6th October 1989, the Minister for Home Affairs announced in Parliament that “…the government has decided to introduce legislation to give effect to these ground rules (vis-à-vis religious harmony). I expect the Bill to be ready for introduction at the next sitting of Parliament” (White Paper 1). On 29th December 1989, the White Paper, which included a preview of the proposed laws and a rationale, was presented to Parliament and made available to lay Singaporeans. 31 MPs debated it for two days. The ministerial exchanges were widely reported in the local media and discussed by religious leaders and lay people. It was decided that a Parliamentary Select Committee on the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Bill be set up. Members of the public were invited to send their views ‘on how to make the Bill more effective’. Although introduced in January 1990, the Bill lapsed when Parliament prorogued in April. By June/July 1990, the Select Committee had received 70 written representations from the public, some of which were heard in September 1990. Nine individuals and groups were heard in non-public sessions, including the Singapore Council of Christian Churches (SCCC), Islamic Religious Council (MUIS), Graduates’ Christian Fellowship (GCF), Hindu Advisory Board (HAB), Hindu Endowments Board (HEB), Singapore Democratic Party (SDP), and National University of Singapore Political Association.

After the presentation of the Select Committee’s White Paper and almost two months of debate, the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Bill was passed on 9th November 1990, with 20 amendments proposed by the Select Committee on the basis of its findings. Under this law, action can be taken against any religious leader, official or member of any religious group or institution, who causes ill-feelings between different religious groups or promotes a political cause or carries
out subversive activities under the guise of propagating or practising any religious belief. The ‘offender’ is first issued with a restraining order, with notice, by the Minister of Home Affairs and has the right to make written representations to the Minister and the Presidential Council for Religious Harmony. The latter deliberates on both the order and the written representations of the concerned person and makes recommendations (confirming, cancelling or varying the restraining order) to the President. The President is the final arbiter. He may “... cancel or confirm the order and in confirming may make such variations as he thinks fit” (Section 11). A breach of the restraining order makes the person liable for conviction, which may lead to a fine or imprisonment or both.\(^{10}\)

**The State’s Rationale for Legislation: Singapore Must be Multi-Religious**

In the Singapore State’s discourse, religious tolerance is regarded as absolutely necessary for the prevention of religious polarisation and sectarian strife. Excessive religious fervour, missionary zeal, and religious assertiveness are considered undesirable. A situation of religious harmony is a matter of ‘national pride’, not to mention a good selling point in presenting Singapore as a haven of harmony in the midst of a region characterised by communal differences. The tie between political stability and religious tolerance and moderation is emphasised. The state has an obvious and pragmatic interest in ensuring that religious differences do not lead to conflict, which would be counter-productive to the socio-economic and political security of the nation.

Soon after its separation from Malaya, Singapore’s ruling élite inherited a multi-religious republic and the responsibility of managing this pluralism. Given the close proximity of different religious communities, religion has been viewed as a sensitive subject and a source of potential social conflict, but nonetheless ‘legitimate’ and a necessary social feature. Yet, although seen to be potentially problematic, religious differences have not prompted the state to wish for a religiously uniform Singapore. In fact, government ministers consider the idea of a ‘religiously homogeneous’ Singapore society impossible and absurd. That Singapore is, and must continue to, be defined by diversity and plurality, in its ethnic, linguistic, and religious make-up, is entrenched in all public discussions of social life on the island. Yet, there is a stream of thinking that these irreconcilable differences must be negotiated. With regard to religion, this is clear. According to BG Lee Hsein Loong, “We have to find some way to compromise practically what is impossible to reconcile theologically” (*Straits Times* 31 Jan. 1990, emphasis added).

In utterances like these, one notes a fairly serious and problematic admission: religious diversity cannot by itself ensure religious harmony. If anything, it is the reverse. The government’s position is that religious diversity and religious differences have the potential to generate misunderstandings among religious communities, but this possibility must be prevented at all cost, through a rational, practical, common-sensical, tolerant approach. According to the Prime Minister, Goh Chok Tong,

I consider the racial and religious harmony as the most important bedrock of our society. If there is no harmony, there will be no peaceful, prosperous Singapore—as simple as that. (*Straits Times* 24 Feb. 1990)
The liberating aspect of the discourse on the MRH Act is that specific statements could be made about inter-religious relations, which were otherwise ‘taboo’. The deliberations relating to the Act enable ‘talk’ of religious disharmony in a context where the overwhelming emphasis is on harmony, whereas inter-religious tensions are experientially real—and not entirely surprising. The Act also supplies a language that enables talk about religious conflict in a discursive context that celebrates religious pluralism, to the almost total denial of tensions. Further interesting is the idea that the tensions are ‘new’, ‘recent’, and somewhat anomalous in the otherwise peaceful trajectory of religious co-existence in Singapore since independence. The following statement by Goh Chok Tong captures the essence of a specific reading of Singapore’s religious scene in 1990:

In a sense, this Bill is recognition of a retrogression, a potential deterioration in religious harmony. The government takes no joy in introducing it. I take no joy in speaking on this subject. It is not something which we are proud of. We introduce it more with sorrow or more in sorrow than with joy. It is to prevent us from sliding backward. It is an act aimed at preserving common sense and harmony. (Straits Times 24 Feb. 1990)

The premise of this statement is an interesting assumption—that Singapore has a recent past of harmonious communal co-existence and no overt, public displays of religious intolerance. One notes a certain political romanticising (and imagining) of the ‘good old days’, the glorious, amicable, past of a multi-religious era, and fear that events like the Maria Hertogh riots of 1950 and the Hock Lee riots of 1964/1969 are not repeated. A critical exchange in Parliament between Opposition MP, Chiam See Tong, and the ruling party’s MP, Yatiman Yusof, showed that for the latter, both historical events were ‘religious’ in nature, while for the former, they were not. An interesting disagreement about the ‘real’ nature of the incidents ensued: Chiam argued that “Religious harmony had been a way of life here for a long time. There had been no instance of blood being shed here solely over religious grounds” (Straits Times 24 Feb. 1990), while Yatiman Yusof (and others) countered that the two events in Singapore’s history signalled disruptions in the harmonious balance between the religious communities.

The government’s rationale for introducing additional legislation to deal with possible religious disharmony was founded on the following reasons. Firstly, conditions internal to Singapore were cited. The government noted a shift in religious sentiment from ‘tolerant co-existence’ to ‘fervently held beliefs’, visible in greater evangelical activity and religious revivalism among Christians, Muslims, and Buddhists. Further, specific instances were noted in which religion had been used as a front for carrying out political activities. The government also argued that the two historical incidents mentioned above pointed to a need for legislation to curb religious tensions. Secondly, government leaders referred to examples of ‘other’ societies that had been plagued by communal violence. India, Sri Lanka, Fiji, Lebanon, Northern Ireland, the Philippines, Iran, Iraq, Armenia, and Azerbaijan were cited as examples of how communal clashes occurred as a result of religious insensitivity and mixing religion with politics. Finally, the language of the Act alluded to the dangers, negative potentialities, and anticipation of an ‘imagined’ or ‘anticipated’ religiously disharmonious situation.
According to this logic, Singapore in 1990 continued to be multi-religious, but strewn with seeds of religious tension and disharmony.

Another strand of the discourse argued that while religious harmony existed in Singapore, it could not be taken for granted: conscious effort was required to achieve and maintain it. Prof. S. Jayakumar states in no uncertain terms that religious harmony needs “careful handling and it is a folly to assume it will always be there” (Straits Times 23 Feb. 1990) and despite the veneer of religious harmony, there is evidence of inter-religious and intra-religious tension. It is further argued that religious harmony in Singapore is ‘a delicate and fragile balance’ because of the ‘ethnic and religious coincidence’. Often, talk about religious harmony overlaps with statements about ‘racial harmony’. Again, the state’s rationale for restraining and policing contentious elements that may ‘mix’ religion and politics or exploit religion for political ends is grounded in a pragmatic stance about the stability of the nation.

Although there was no consensus in these discussions, there was agreement that specific changes in the religious scene indicated a need for action before more severe damage was done. Politicians argued that shifts in religious trends carry long-term social and political implications. Two such trends were highlighted: firstly, ‘disproportionately’ large numbers of converts to Christianity could potentially ‘unsettle’ the religious harmony of the nation, as it indicated a parallel decrease in the size of ‘other’ religious communities, such as Buddhism, Taoism, and Islam. The logic is that the ‘imbalance of numbers’ regarding religious communities could lead to a shift in traditionally accepted religious boundaries. That this could be a source of inter-religious tension was clearly articulated by government and religious leaders. The message seemed to be that the premise of social stability is a numerical, formulaic configuration of religious communities. Prof. S. Jayakumar argued:

Can we assume that everyone will act with prudence, moderation and sensitivity? Because if that is so, then I think we can conclude there is no need to legislate... It is a problem of minority, a number of mischievous, irresponsible people... To contemplate legislation after the damage is done will be too late. Violence would have occurred. People killed. Deep feelings of resentment and wounded feelings would divide our society. (Straits Times 23 Feb. 1990)

Secondly, the MCD and ISD reports noted a shift from ‘tolerant co-existence to fervently held religious beliefs’, not just among Christians and Muslims, but also among revivalist and resurgent tendencies among Buddhist, Taoist, and Hindu communities.

From its inception, the proposed law involved discussions among various interested parties: government representatives, religious leaders, opposition politicians, academics, and lay people. Not unexpectedly, lively, divided, and cautious responses were elicited from all concerned. The next section maps out the complex and mixed rejoinders to the proposed legislation.

Feedback: Opening a Pandora’s Box?

In the Singapore State’s dealing with religious communities, ‘religion’ is generally reified and accorded an abstract generalised singularity, devoid of any particular
content. Despite religious diversity, a certain sameness and homogeneity has often been conferred on all religions. While many religious and community leaders welcomed greater discussion of the subject, there was clearly no consensus about the exact formulation and interpretation of the proposed laws. 14 According to public statements, Roman Catholic, Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist, Taoist, and Sikh religious leaders agreed that action was necessary to foster inter-religious harmony; most supported the principles grounding the Bill. However, these communities had interesting and varied responses.

One question was whether the proposed Act would infringe the constitutional guarantee of religious freedom. In this discussion, the rights of the individual citizen and these of the collective citizenry confronted each other. While the Constitution guarantees individuals the liberty to practise and propagate religious teachings, including the right to proselytise, the sentiment was also expressed that ‘absolute religious freedom’ was neither possible nor desirable. Some members of the public called upon the government not only to ‘check the activities of people and groups who proselytise in public’, but also to ban public propagation of religious beliefs, because religion was a personal affair and should be practised in private.

However, it was clear that in evaluating the merits and limitations of the proposed law, religious communities had different concerns. The strongest support for the Bill came from the Hindus and Buddhists. Some sections of the Muslim and Christian communities were wary and wanted both more clarification and safeguards. At a forum organised by the Evangelical Fellowship of Singapore, Protestants raised several issues: why was new legislation needed, if existing laws already addressed religious strife? Would the Bill not accentuate religious sensitivities? Did the Bill grant absolute powers to the Home Affairs Minister? Was there no ambiguity in interpreting specific phrases and clauses in the Bill? As an example of the latter, parts of Section 8 were cited: ‘causing feelings of enmity, hatred, ill will or hostility’. The GCF (Graduates ‘Christian Fellowship’) representative argued that this was open to subjective reading and requested that ‘deliberately’ be added to indicate ‘intention’ of the wrongdoer. The President of the Singapore Council of Churches suggested that the term ‘feelings’ be changed or dropped, because it was ‘highly subjective’. The President of the GCF pointed out that the Bill would ‘curb and hamper some of the discussions going on in our seminars’ and generate the fear that they might be reported to the authorities by ‘over-sensitive’ people. BG Lee, a member of the Select Committee, asked if the GCF was concerned that the Bill might ‘curb missionary work’. Indeed, both Christians and Muslims were concerned about the line between legitimate and genuine ‘evangelising’ and ‘harassment’ and about who would decide when the line had been crossed.

The Mufti, the religious leader of the Muslim community, 15 welcomed the law in that it “might help to avoid clashes between Christians and Muslims over the issue of conversions” (Straits Times 11 Jan. 1990). Other Muslim organisations sought clarification about how the proposed laws would be enforced. For example, the Secretary of the Islamic Fellowship Association asked “how far a group’s missionary activity can go under the law... We are not sure whether activities such as distributing leaflets door-to-door is allowed” (Straits Times 18 Jan. 1990), reiterating some of the Christian community’s concern about the question of what constituted legitimate missionary activity. Several spokespersons, such as the respective presidents of the Adults Religious Students Association and Muhammadiyah Association, wondered whether the legislation might prohibit Muslims groups
from spreading the ‘correct’ Islamic message to counter ‘deviant teachings’ within the community. The leader of the latter group considered this scenario:

We may get into trouble if we try to act on a group of people who claim to be Muslims but hold different religious beliefs. We can be accused of denigrating their religious beliefs and spreading bad blood between them and the Muslims. (Straits Times 18 Jan. 1980)

Would the new laws allow the various religious authorities to continue to decide what constituted legitimate and acceptable professions and practices regarding Islam or could their authority and legitimacy be challenged? This raised questions about the authority to declare particular interpretations of Islam, Hinduism, Christianity, and Buddhism ‘legitimate’ or unacceptable.

A diametrically opposed reaction typified the Hindu camp which seemed to welcome the legislation. This response was duly noted by Select Committee members: BG Lee pointed out to the President of GCF that the Hindus had expressed an ‘opposite joy’ at the possibility of legislation to restrain over-zealous proselytisation, as Hinduism was a ‘minority’ faith. The Hindu religious leaders and community representatives were categorical in their support of legislative intervention. They saw the Bill as a tool to protect their small community from ‘aggressive conversion tactics of the other religions’. The HAB (Hindu Advisory Board) and the (Hindu Endowment Board) HEB representatives argued that, compared with the ‘bigger, better organised and more aggressive religious groups’, Hinduism was a passive religion, lacking in the ‘dogmatic religious militancy’ and resources. The past President of the HAB therefore declared to the Select Committee that

As a minority community and as one whose underlying religious beliefs are liberal and broad-based, we are of the view that the dangers of strong proselytisation are real. The actual conversion of Hindus to other religions is of concern to us. The process and manner in which they have attempted to do so is of greater concern. (Straits Times 21 Sep. 1990)

This mosaic of responses from the Protestant, Muslim, and Hindu communities challenges a neat and somewhat simplistic official understanding of religions. For the sake of administrative convenience, the State treats religious traditions as singular, monolithic, and homogeneous wholes. Yet internal divisions and diverse interpretations of the ‘same’ religious tradition exist locally. Some versions are considered legitimate by the relevant religious authorities, others are labelled ‘deviant’. With the new Act, do all religious communities, as citizens of the state, have equal right to propagate and practise their interpretation of a given religion? Could individuals or groups (labelled deviant and unorthodox by religious authorities) invoke the Act, allege harassment, and thereby seek legal protection? Leaders of concerned religious communities were astute enough to anticipate possible practical effects and future ramifications of the law.

Perceptions about different religions also surfaced. Comparative references were constantly made to ‘other’ religions, which, although not named, were ‘known’ and recognisable to all concerned. Given its ability to attract followers, ‘Christianity’ was typified by aggressive proselytising and perceived as ‘dominant’, successful, resourceful, and organised. Interestingly, Buddhism, Taoism, and Hinduism defined themselves as ‘minority’ religions, numerically weak, and unable to withstand the onslaught of evangelical forces. It seems rather
ironic that discussions which were inspired by a law intended to foster greater inter-religious interaction culminated in a discourse which highlighted religious differences. The mixed reactions produced an array of voices and positions, particularly in terms of the practical implications of enforcing the law. It was impossible for the government to treat all these religions as if they were the same.

While there was general agreement that some action was needed, there was less certainty about who should take a lead: the individual citizen, leaders of religious communities, or the state. Although the state has quite self-consciously defined itself as ‘secular’, it is neither ‘atheistic’ nor ‘anti-religious’. It is a secular government that sees itself as responsible for curbing potential religious conflict and as the final arbiter of religious disputes. Two statements by key politicians, BG Lee and PM Goh, underscore this point:

The government cannot avoid the responsibility to act or not to act against leaders or members of religious groups whose actions might threaten the peace, after taking advice from the Presidential Council. *(Straits Times* 31 Jan. 1990)*

Singapore is a multi-religious society and it would be foolish of any group to think that it can harass and unseat the government without expecting the government to strike back using the counter-religious force if necessary. *(Straits Times* 24 Feb. 1990)*

Those who favoured self-regulation argued that there was no point in involving the government in an issue which could be easily handled by people being more tolerant and sensitive. Others felt that government intervention was critical. Prof. S. Jayakumar argued that one could not rely on individuals to act with conscience *(Straits Times* 23 Feb. 1990), hence the crucial role of the state. Some worried that state regulation would be construed as government interference, a point duly noted by MP Aline Wong. She observed that the Bill caused anxiety among some religious groups who saw it as ‘yet another layer of control by the government’. Opposition members engaged with the debate by using the latter as a starting point. The non-constituency MP Lee Siew Choh argued that the proposed legislation was ‘trying to check opposition’. He was particularly concerned about the absolute power vested in the Minister for Home Affairs. The SDP (Singapore Democratic Party) also opposed the proposed law, because it represented ‘an invasion of politics into religion’ and could be applied arbitrarily by the government. Opposition politician Mr. Chiam felt that the provision “covered too wide a ground” and appeared to “be an instrument of repression” *(Straits Times* 24 Feb. 1990). The People’s Action Party MPs also participated in the discussion: MP Lau Ping Sum asserted that the line between religion and politics was “very general” and “ambiguous”, thus “subject to diverse and multiple interpretations” *(Straits Times* 23 Feb. 1990). Religious leaders, too, called upon the government to clarify
this demarcation. For example, both the Mufti and the head of the Roman Catholic Church needed more unambiguous definitions, before they could give their unequivocal support. Some Muslim organisations had a related practical concern: how much could a religious leader or member of a group speak up before his/her actions would be seen as “mixing religion with politics” (Straits Times 18 Jan. 1990)? Section 8 of the proposed legislation differentiated between ‘appropriate religious behaviour’ and ‘harmful conduct’. Again, questions were raised about who would decide what constituted these and according to what criteria. Responding to the complex debate, PM Goh finally agreed that

It is not really possible to separate the two halves and I concede that.

I think I agree with that point of view that it is not easy and perhaps not possible, to separate our spiritual life from our political day-to-day life because politics and religion represent one total way of life. But we must try in the context of a multi-racial and multi-religious Singapore, and for the common good of all Singaporeans. (Straits Times 24 Feb. 1990)

With the passing of the MRH Act one sees a further circumscription of the ‘religious’ domain through formal legislative means, albeit with an arbitrary separation of ‘religious’ and ‘political’ spheres.

The responses suggest that the Select Committee hearings opened a Pandora’s box and generated debate which was—possibly—neither otherwise permissible nor anticipated. The discussions raised more questions, many of which remained unanswered and unresolved, while suggestions were taken into account. The Act was passed with 20 amendments. That most religious leaders ‘supported’ the Act in the end hides the messy disagreements which preceded the ultimate ‘aye’. One central aim of this article has been to make this ‘muddle’ visible, together with the diversity of voices, positions, and sentiments.

Managing Multi-Religiosity

What has been the effect of this legislation in terms of the stated objectives for its need? Some post-Act statements on religious harmony are illustrative: in January 1993, PM Goh still reiterated the fragility of religious harmony and the folly of complacency; in July 1993, MP Wong Kan Seng stated the obvious: “law alone cannot ensure religious harmony. It is also up to the people to be practical and tolerant towards other religions” (Straits Times 12 July 1993). In 1996, BG Lee admitted that “although the main of religious harmony Act had not been invoked, its existence reminded Singaporeans of the fragility of religious harmony as seen in countries like Bosnia, Sri Lanka, Northern Ireland” (Straits Times 20 May 1996). Clearly, it was recognised that religious harmony cannot be secured simply because of the Act. Inter- (and intra-)religious tensions did not suddenly disappear. At most, it could be said that the Act served as a wake-up call and deterrent.

The Act was passed almost ten years ago. To my knowledge, no convictions under the Act have been reported to date. Was the Act truly successful in discouraging any public expressions of harmful and offensive statements about other religious communities? Or have no cases been identified as suitable for invocation of this law? Was the Act nothing more than a showpiece? How does one gauge it to be a successful deterrent? Does the management of multi-religiosity through legislation seem an easy way out for the state?
Religious pluralism and religious harmony are evidently not two sides of the same coin, a fact acknowledged by the state. Multi-religiosity (understood simply as the co-presence of ‘different’ religious communities) does not, by any means, automatically lead to religious harmony (understood as genuine, non-judgmental acceptance of other religions, despite incompatible theological differences). If anything, discussions about the Act reveal that, despite the diversity of the local religious domain, fears of inter-religious tensions continue, ironically because of pluralism.

Singapore’s multi-religiosity is not unique, although the absence of overt religious disharmony is. Ethnographic evidence suggests that most multi-religious societies have explicitly and consciously had to manage and negotiate their religiously plural contexts. Given the present scenario, the secular state in Singapore wants to, or signals that it has to, shoulder much of this responsibility, with support from citizens. What strategies and mechanisms are needed to manage such a context successfully continues to be asked. The Singapore state’s adoption of secularism is a partial answer, yet its pragmatic orientation sees it heavily involved in charting a religiously peaceful scene.

Focus on this law has allowed me to make sociologically nuanced sense of religious diversity and harmony in Singapore. Its religious scene is three-dimensional and complex, moving away from bland, stereotypical characterisations of the island community as populated with passive, non-responsive citizens. I have argued that events and ‘talk’ surrounding this law have provided a context for making inter-religious and intra-religious differences and disagreements visible and admissible.

The Present

After 11th September 2001, the Bali blasts, and the Jemiah Islamiah (JI) arrests in Singapore, the trope of religious harmony, its fragility, and the need to safeguard it has again emerged as a central feature in the Singapore government’s discourse on religion. These elements have not been resolved, but recent global and domestic events have again placed them on the state’s agenda as matters of renewed urgency. In a post-9/11 climate, governments the world over, especially those with multi-religious citizenry, have adopted a highly cautious stance towards religious extremism. Government leaders in Singapore, too, have articulated this fear and called for greater tolerance and understanding among members of different religious communities. The state has been exemplary in taking a lead by saying openly that religious communities or individuals should not be targeted or blamed for ‘terrorist’ acts and that stereotyping would be detrimental to the community’s long-term multi-culturalism.

Not surprisingly, current government statements about racial harmony have a familiar ring to them. There are clear continuities with the earlier discourse outlined above. The same elements recur: the need to maintain and ensure religious harmony for the economic and political stability of the nation, the vulnerability and precariousness of race relations, a harmonious relationship among religious communities is not the natural state of affairs, tremendous work is required to achieve such harmony and thus manage racial and religious pluralism. In quintessential Singapore style of governance, defined by
bureaucratic pragmatism (Chua), the government has taken the lead in initiating this work to prevent religious strife, as it feels compelled to act decisively.

Since 9/11, there has been a tremendous amount of government, institutional and organisational initiatives\textsuperscript{18} to ward off the threat of terrorism and to ensure harmonious communal relations. Although many of these proposals have been state led, the leadership of the various ethnic and religious communities has responded by translating them into practice while initiating novel strategies independently.

While the present talk about religious harmony overlaps with previous discussions, there are some noteworthy differences. Despite the fairly long and impressive list of government-led strategies for promoting racial and religious harmony, the present discourse slants towards individual action and community involvement. This view is even reflected in earlier deliberations, in the admission that religious and racial harmony cannot be ensured by legislation alone. The focus now is explicitly on the ‘everyday life’ of Singaporeans as a space where true interaction and understanding needs to be achieved. The emphasis is now on more and better interaction, learning about the customs, traditions, and religions of the ‘other’. That this message is state led, coming right from the top, is not without significance. PM Goh himself articulated on several occasions the need for more personal and intimate ties between members of different communities. The prevailing sentiment is that it is individuals, through confidence, trust building, and friendships, will act rationally and calmly rather than emotionally in the face of tensions. The new buzz words are: more mixing and interaction, building links and relationships across communal groups. According to PM Goh,

\begin{quote}
We should begin to lay a framework to build up confidence, friendship and trust among Singaporeans of different races and religions. We should go out and mix with our neighbours, colleagues and classmates of other races and religions. We should not just make friends with our own kind. (\textit{Straits Times} 30 Jan. 2002)
\end{quote}

Mr. Wong Kan Seng, Minister for Home Affairs, echoes this view:

\begin{quote}
The government will do its best to maintain the harmonious relations among our different races. But the best deterrence is from the community itself. If we understand respect and build confidence in each other, we will be able to deal with any stress to our social fabric... We must make greater effort in inter-racial interaction. The more we mix and integrate, the more we know one another and have friends belonging to different races. In this way we are less likely to misunderstand the actions of one another or to form any wrong image of our fellow citizens through stereotyping. Every one of us therefore has a part to play in preserving our unity and strengthening our cohesion. (speech at the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry Lunar New Year gathering, 12 Feb. 2002)
\end{quote}

Here is another candid statement from the PM Goh:

\begin{quote}
Some Singaporeans have argued that racial and religious harmony cannot be forced, and hence, these artificial mechanisms will not work. But some things need prodding. In the absence of external stimulus,
the natural tendency is to congregate among our own kind. Over the years our race and religious relations have been smooth, Singaporeans have drifted toward this more natural pattern of human behaviour. It is time to give Singaporeans a jolt, to remind them they are living in a multi-racial, multi-religious society. (Straits Times 2 Feb. 2002; emphasis added)

Other government leaders share and publicly articulate these views. They assume further sociological significance in carrying the tacit admission that the desired interaction and genuine understanding has so far been lacking in Singapore’s multi-culturalism. There is implicit recognition that religious communities in Singapore have thus far co-existed as separate and parallel streams, hence the call for building bridges and linkages through personal ties of friendship and camaraderie. However, inherent and incompatible racial and religious differences are still asserted, but it is argued that more interaction and familiarity will ensure that these differences are not viewed as alien or threatening.

The second difference relates to the response of the Singaporean citizenry to the state’s approach. The reaction of the government to the terrorist threat has been viewed as swift and necessary. This was evident to the citizenry and the international community in its firm and non-negotiable handling of instances of religious extremism, as seen in the JI arrests. This mode of action is not new for Singapore, but marks the way the government has routinely handled religious trouble-makers on the island. This time, Singapore’s steadfast and uncompromising handling of ‘terrorists’ and ‘divisive’ religious elements—‘religious extremists’—has been received with approval and clearly won it admiration from the international community and many Singaporeans. This is interesting, as this same governance style often led to criticism in the past. In this instance, firmness is lauded and seen to be crucial for preventing religious discord.

Closing Remarks

Religion has recently appeared as a vital variable in discussions about global terrorism. Secular governments have prioritised the need for inter-faith dialogue, civilisational understanding, religious co-operation, and avoidance of scapegoating and stereotyping specific religious communities. In this regard, the recent evidence from Singapore is overwhelming. However, as my discussion of the religious scene in Singapore has demonstrated, these are by no means new issues, neither for the state nor for the religious communities on the island. The concerns about the successful management of a religiously and ethnically plural citizenry have engaged the leadership in Singapore since its inception as a modern nation state. At various moments in its history, the state has contemplated and devised various strategies for managing relations across communities, opting often in favour of institutional and legislative measures. Overall, these safeguards have ensured that communal tensions have not been allowed free and irresponsible expression, even if they might be present. The measures, many of which are punitive (warnings, fines, imprisonment) have indeed served as deterrents, as the island is marked by the absence of explicit racial and religious strife. Yet recent events have raised the question (even at government level) if such an approach is sufficient. I argue that the shifting emphasis from institutional mechanisms...
(which still continue to be present) towards everyday actions, forging interpersonal ties and more interaction among members of different religions, is indeed critical. It also underlines that multi-religiosity is not merely about listing and counting different religious communities (separately) which exist in and occupy the same space, but about other elements, such as mutual respect and non-judgmental understanding. Conceptually, this demands re-thinking the notion of ‘multi-religiosity’.

My analysis further signals that after some 35 years of building a multi-cultural nation, the formula for managing the inevitable pluralism on the island is still being worked out. Thus far, the Singapore state has been strongly involved in managing the local religious scene. As easy and quick fixes are not the answer, the question is whether this task will continue to occupy the energies of the political leadership and remain a constant feature in future years. The state may find itself in the (unenviable?) position of having to take the lead continuously in guarding against potential racial and religious tensions, but now with input from lay citizenry. In the words of Mr. Wong Kan Seng, Home Affairs Minister:

Strengthening our social cohesion and religious harmony is a fundamental and on-going enterprise in our nation-building which preceded the terrorist threat and which will continue after this is over.

(Straits Times 23 Jan. 2003; emphasis added)

What implications this recognition carries for both the future governance styles in Singapore and the mode of negotiating relations between state and religious communities will no doubt engage students of Singapore society in the years to come.

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NOTES

1. The Bill was passed almost unanimously, with the exception of the opposition MP, Mr. Chiam See Tong, and one nominated MP, Lee Siew Choh.

2. Singapore’s leaders noted this exception, with a comparative reference to Turkey’s constitution as the only other context where similar legislation exists. It is noteworthy that in 1998, the Malaysian government was similarly concerned about religious harmony being ‘under threat’ (Straits Times 19 Jun. 1998). In a separate development in Malaysia, Dr. Abdul Hamid Othman, Minister in the Prime Minister’s Department, announced that the government was planning to table an ‘apostasy bill’ in Parliament in 1999, saying that “the law would also clarify provisions in the Federal Constitution which state that other religions cannot be preached to Muslims in this country” (Straits Times 24 May 1998). In the present, other instances of legislation are notable for attending to the ‘religious’ domain. An example is the controversial French ‘anti-cult’ bill of 2001, directed at sectarian religious groups, while Article 13.1 of the Constitution of Greece, prohibits proselytism.

3. In 1987, a group of individuals were arrested under the Internal Security Act (ISA) on grounds of mixing religion with politics. The description ‘Marxist conspiracy’ is associated with Vincent Cheng who was one of those arrested and charged with using various Catholic-related
organisations and publications as a guise for propagating Marxist and leftist ideas among lay Catholics and priests.

4. The occasion for the introduction of the legislation was a combination of alleged ‘Marxist conspiracy’, a perceived growth in Islamic fundamentalism, and concern that evangelical Christians were likely to destabilise the ethnic situation with aggressive conversion attempts.

5. Interestingly, the MCD commissioned several studies by academics (sociologists and political scientists) on religion in Singapore. Some prominent examples include Quah; Kuo and Quah; Tong, Trends, and Tong, Religious Conversion.

6. Two and a half years before the White Paper was made available for public debate, it had undergone many revisions, with the views of the Government Parliamentary Committees, community leaders, and the leaders of the major religious groups in Singapore having been sought and incorporated.

7. According to a report in the Straits Times (3 Jan. 1990: 1), “the White Paper on the Maintenance of Religious Harmony has proven to be an instant best-seller, with 2000 copies snapped up in just four days”. It cost S$2. The Singapore National Printers decided to print an additional 3,000 copies to cater for the popular demand. Given the public’s lukewarm response to previous White Papers, it is clear that the subject of religion is of immense interest and concern to many Singaporeans.

8. In August 1992, Wee Kim Wee, then President, appointed the first Presidential Council for Religious Harmony. It was headed by the former Chief Justice Wee Chong Jin and included six representatives of major religions (Buddhism, Islam, Roman Catholicism, Protestantism, Hinduism, Sikhism) and two distinguished lay Singaporeans.

9. The order is not to exceed a maximum of two years and is subject to review by the Minister at intervals of not more than 12 months.

10. For a first offence, the punishment is a fine not exceeding S$10,000 or imprisonment for a term not exceeding two years; for a second and subsequent offence, the fine is a maximum of S$20,000 and a prison term of not more than three years.

11. This must be positioned against another vision of the past, which reveals a chaotic, disorderly picture—often invoked in political discourses as a basis for continued social vigilance and control.

12. Several pieces of legislation that can be invoked to handle instances of religious discord exist: Internal Security Act, Sedition Act, Societies Act, and the Penal Code. However, proponents of new legislation argued that these were disproportionate and too severe, hence the need for a more appropriate law to deal more effectively with those who incite feelings of religious animosity.

13. The White Paper on Maintenance of Religious Harmony Bill cited instances of religion being ‘mixed’ with politics and religion being exploited for subversive purposes. Two groups cited were Vincent Cheng and his ‘Marxist group’ (in the mid-1980s) and the Ikhwan (Muslim Brotherhood, in the mid-1970s).

14. The Government’s Feedback Unit held a discussion with 20 representatives of the major religious clan and cultural organisations on 17th May 1989. Participants agreed that religious harmony had to be preserved and inter-religious interaction regulated, but there were doubts whether the proposed legislation could ensure this. (Straits Times 18 May 1989).

15. The proposed Bill elicited responses not from just within Singapore, but also across the Causeway, from her Malaysian neighbour. An article in The Straits Times, Singapore, reported the reactions of opposition Parti Islam (PAS). PAS had “expressed reservations over the proposed set of laws” and urged “the government to enforce the proposed laws with cautions that religious freedom and legitimate missionary work would not be affected” (Straits Times 9 Jan. 1990: 3).

16. This has been recognised in the Religious Harmony Code of June 2003 and certainly raises questions about the role of legislation in managing multi-religiosity.

17. Yet, I further argue that religious strife is not the order of the day. It would in fact be ‘easier’ to write on religious harmony in Singapore. Space does not permit to list pervasive evidence. Sinha (‘Merging ‘Different’ Sacred Spaces’) provides some examples.

18. It is not possible to list the impressive list of measures, both state led and community initiatives, that have been devised in the post-9/11 context. I note only some government proposals: (1) Inter Racial Confidence Circles (IRCCs) were proposed by PM Goh to be set up in each of the 84 constituencies in January 2002. These a network of community groups and, through a range of activities, are meant to develop rapport and cement inter-racial ties. He has also encouraged schools, workplaces, and other social organisations to establish what he has called Harmony Circles (HCs), “to help spread the movement of inter-racial confidence building more extensively at the ground level” (PM Goh’s opening remarks at Dialogue with Young Malay/Muslim
Professionals, 2 Feb. 2002). (2) PM Goh also suggested a ‘Code on Religious Harmony’, which is essentially a pledge, not a law, and meant to reflect moral values and norms that should guide the practice of religions and has to be cognisant of both Singapore’s multi-religious and secular context. This proposal was met with some reservation. According to Jurong MP Halimah Yacob, “The objective and purpose of this code must be made explicit and clear, as there is a possibility that it could be misconstrued, if people feel that the government is now telling them how to practice their religion” (Straits Times 26 Sep. 2002). (3) The Ministry of Community Development established a ‘Community Harmony Grants Scheme’ in December 2002, which provides funds for up to S$50,000 per project that promotes inter-faith interaction. Some examples include: writing comic books, devising board games with the theme of multi-religiosity, and developing inter-faith resource guides. Community efforts and religious institutions have been devising projects to foster inter-religious appreciation. These include visits to places of worship, talks on various religions (Straits Times 5 Feb. 2002), and co-operative ventures between different religious communities, such as Hindus and Buddhists organising joint Vesak Day Celebrations and Catholics and Muslims celebrating Christmas and Hari Raya together (Straits Times 28 Dec. 2001).

REFERENCES


