

The Religious Factor in Singapore: Conscription and Containment

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The Singapore state has a secular constitution and a population of mixed ethnicity and religion. Ethnically, Singapore society has for the past three decades contained a relatively stable population mix of some 75 percent Chinese, 15 percent Malay and 7 percent Indian. Religious adherence only partly coincides with ethnic group membership: thus while a large majority of Muslims are of Malay origin, there is a significant minority of Indians among them; Hinduism entirely comprises Indians, while Buddhism and Taoism are almost exclusively Chinese. Christianity, both Catholic and Protestant, is predominantly Chinese in membership, with a significant Indian minority.

In the 1950s and 60s a combination of religious and ethnic cleavages, sometimes fuelled by anti-colonial sentiment, resulted in episodes of public disorder and fatal confrontation. Two of the more notable incidents were the Maria Hertogh riots of 1950 after a Eurasian girl who had been raised as a Muslim was returned to her Roman Catholic Dutch father by a court order; and communal clashes in 1964 between Malays and Chinese during a religious procession on the anniversary of the prophet Mohammed. Such incidents are regularly highlighted by government and media to demonstrate the inherent fragility of Singapore's ethnic and religious pluralism.

Singapore achieved self-rule in 1959, independence as part of a federal Malaysia in 1963, and sole independence after an abrupt split with Malaysia in 1965: this was followed early in 1968 by the British decision to withdraw its troops. Since the political leadership of Singapore did not believe the country could survive on its own (Lee Kuan Yew, for instance, believed that 'island nations are political jokes') this experience was traumatic and, once again, has become part of the republic's myth of origin. The key phrases of the early period of independence were the 'politics of survival', building a 'rugged society', and adopting an 'ideology of pragmatism'.

To use the analogy of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, until the mid 1970s the overwhelming imperative was to secure an economic base through rapid industrialisation and to provide an infrastructure, especially of housing and education, which would attract overseas capital and enhance the government's legitimacy. Nothing was heard of 'Asian values' or Confucianism as a source of social discipline, and when commenting on the existence of putative 'core values' in 1972 a leading member of the government, Goh Keng Swee, said: 'If we are honest with ourselves, I think we can detect in contemporary Singapore a strange but striking similarity of intellectual climate with Victorian England, together with much of the hypocrisies

and cruelties of that age'. Any articulation of cultural values took the form of a negative critique of Western decadence, epitomised in the figure of the "hippie".

Two influential developments pushed the issue of social values, and with them the question of the religious factor, to the fore. First, Western depictions of the impact which religious ideology could have on development in East and Southeast Asia - which really began with Bellah's work in the 1950s and 1960s on religion in Japan and more generally in Asia - were taken up in local academic discussions of identity and 'Asian values' from 1973 onwards: these were usually framed in terms of national cultural identity. But even as late as 1977, at a seminar on Asian Values and Modernisation, another leading government minister, Rajaratnam, expressed scepticism: 'I have very serious doubts as to whether such a thing as 'Asian values' really exists - or for that matter 'Asian' anything...' He preferred to characterise the prevailing Singaporean value as that of 'moneytheism'.

The second influence is very much in line with the Maslow analogy. By the late 1970s most of the basic needs of the population had been fulfilled, but there was growing concern about a range of perceived social problems. These included a greater visibility of crime, delinquency and drug-use, together with what were seen to be rising levels of divorce and abortion; and although in comparative terms these rates may have been relatively low, they provoked concern about the moral dimension of nation-building. The potential of rapid development to bring about a deculturalisation of Singapore citizens was a closely related theme, leading to a call for more 'cultural ballast' to prevent this. Commencing in 1979 these non-material, cultural aspects of society were addressed, and it is at this point that the project to conscript religion into the inculcation of civic virtue emerged.

In 1979 two reports on education were produced. The first, under the chairmanship of Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Education Goh Keng Swee (whose earlier sceptical remarks on core values have been noted) was principally concerned with bilingualism. Coupled with its recommendations on language streaming, however, were clear indicators of a broader concern to avert deculturalisation by teaching Asian history and moral values in the language of the three main cultures - Chinese, Malay, and Indian. In his comment on the Report, Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew emphasised the characteristics of the good citizen - patriotism, filial respect, responsibility, tolerance, and punctuality - and went on to show how these could be inculcated through religion:

The best of the East and West must be blended to advantage in the Singaporean. Confucianist ethics, Malay traditions, and the Hindu ethos must be combined with sceptical Western methods of scientific inquiry, the open discursive methods in the search for truth. We have to discard obscurantist and superstitious beliefs of the East, as we have to reject the passing fads of the West.

The second report (the Ong Report) was more specifically on moral education and addressed the perceived deficiencies of the existing Civics program. It also

pointed out that many of the teachers in mission schools - some of the highest quality private schools in Singapore - had strong religious backgrounds, which aided their teaching of Civics. It recommended the introduction of a 'Moral Education' program, the object of which should be to produce 'good, useful and loyal citizens through inculcation of the desired moral values and social attitudes'. To prevent deculturalisation, emphasis 'should be placed on inculcating the desired Eastern and Asian moral concepts, values and attitudes so as to help in the preservation and strengthening of our cultural heritage'. Responding to this report, Goh advocated a holistic approach and, noting that there was nobody in the Ministry of Education with sufficient grasp of such issues, he recommended the outside help of a prominent local Jesuit. Thus was religion initially conscripted into the moral education program, but the comment of a prominent educationalist at the time highlights the essentially instrumental nature of the project:

There would be a broad agreement in Singapore with the Durkheimian view that the schools are the guardians of national character, to be used for the inculcation of common moral sentiments on the basis of a secular rather than a religious inspired morality.

Work rapidly began on the development of a moral education syllabus - a major policy change for a previously secular government - and early in 1982 it was announced that five religious subjects would be offered - Bible knowledge, Buddhist studies, Hindu studies, Islamic religious knowledge, and World religions. They would be taught cognitively as classroom subjects, 'like studying Shakespeare'. Goh had not originally envisaged the inclusion of Confucianism, which he saw as a secular ethical system, but on the urging of the Prime Minister and after 'several sleepless nights' he announced the inclusion of Confucian Ethics in the syllabus. Very soon this part of the project attracted a disproportionate share of the resources devoted to the overall program; but it is worth noting as a background to the development that it was in the decade of the 1980s that a succession of Western social scientists and political commentators pointed to Confucianism as a major contributor to the rapid development of East Asian societies. What eventuated, in effect, was a form of reverse Orientalism: instead of the static, tradition-bound 'magic gardens' found in Weber's portrayal of Eastern religions, there was substituted the vigorous, socially disciplined ethos of neoConfucianism which could now challenge Western values.

There are strong components of Weber in the approach to religion adopted in developing the various curricula. Tong Chee Kiong has noted the 'rationalisation of religion' that has occurred in Singapore, by which he means the filtering out of folk beliefs and the domestication or 'tidying up' of less manageable elements - a movement from more ritually based to more canonical forms of religion. In the case of Confucianism this entailed the importing of Confucian scholars from the United States and Taiwan to consult on the syllabus: as commentators have noted, Confucianism was hardly discussed in Singapore until the late 1970s. Buddhism

proved somewhat more difficult to codify because formal religious instruction was unfamiliar to local Buddhist monks: after the Singapore Buddhist Foundation commissioned a prominent Sinhalese scholar-monk to write a textbook, the latter was judged unsuitable because it lacked practical orientation. The task was entrusted to the Curriculum Development Institute of Singapore, which established its own team to write the material and only consulted the Buddhist Federation when there were queries over scriptural interpretation. The resulting textbook treated the ritual aspects of Buddhism in a negative manner and concentrated on Buddhist teachings as translated into such values as self-reliance, tolerance, loving-kindness, and compassion.

It will be clear from the above narrative that the conscription of the religious factor in the pursuit of a moral education program was inseparable from a process of containment. In order to be accommodated within the school syllabus, religion had to take a form that was acceptable to the state; and a process of homogenisation occurred whereby interreligious differences were permissible so long as they complemented one another. The syllabus was introduced in 1984 and in less than two years a series of events which demonstrated the unintended consequences of religion had been set in motion which indirectly led to the eventual discarding of the syllabus in 1989.

The problematic nature of religion was first accented in late 1986 and early 1987 in relation to Malay Singaporeans and their Islamic identity. In 1986 the Singapore President invited the President of Israel to visit the country, an act that was widely interpreted among Singapore's Islamic neighbours as evidence of the republic's hubris. The modernising elites in both Malaysia and Indonesia have fought a constant rearguard action against resurgent Islam and in Malaysia Prime Minister Mahathir had adopted an anti-Zionist, even an anti-Jewish stance. What was seen as a personal slight to Mahathir, coupled with a more general resentment in Malaysia of Singapore's economic success, led to a deeply hostile response in the Malaysian media, including suggestions that Singapore's fresh water supplies piped across the Johore causeway should be cut off; and that the air services agreement between the two countries should be revoked. The Singapore government ensured that the local media reported these reactions as a means of jolting the complacency of younger citizens who might be less persuaded of the potential precariousness of the island state. Eventually the furore was restrained, but almost immediately it was revived in a speech by Minister Lee Hsien Loong who explained why there were no Malay pilots in the Singapore Armed Forces:

If there is a conflict, if the SAF is called upon to defend the homeland, we don't want to put any of our soldiers in a difficult position where his emotions for the nation may come into conflict with his emotions for his religion, because these are two very strong fundamentals, and if they are not compatible, then they will be two very strong destructive forces in opposite directions.

This again attracted much adverse comment in Malaysia, with imputations of chauvinism among the government leadership. A third incident in June 1987, when four Malays with Islamic links were arrested for allegedly spreading rumours of impending racial clashes, further underlined the potentially divisive fusion of ethnicity and religion. This was amplified by the *Straits Times* into a reminder of previous incidents of ethnic-religious violence, including the Maria Hertogh riots of 1950.

In July 1987 religion was once again implicated in potential subversion when sixteen Roman Catholic social activists were arrested and interned by the Internal Security Department in what came to be officially labelled a 'Marxist Conspiracy'. The mastermind of this conspiracy was claimed to be Tan Wah Piow, a former student activist who had fled Singapore in 1976 after being convicted and sentenced to one year's jail for unlawful assembly and rioting. An icon of Tan appeared at the head of the newspaper account, and was to reappear in subsequent newspaper reporting of proceedings. The Home Affairs Ministry report of the investigation contained a diagram showing an alleged network of conspirators (reminiscent of those used during the 1950s struggle with the Communist Party of Malaysia). Organisations implicated in the report included the Student Christian Movement of Singapore, the Young Christian Workers' Movement, the National University of Singapore Catholic Students' Society, Singapore Polytechnic Catholic Students' Society, the Justice and Peace Commission of the Catholic Church, and a Catholic Welfare Centre whose main activity was to run a refuge for Filipino maids. The report also placed considerable emphasis on the fact that the majority of those arrested were graduates and professionals. The moral panic thus created was expanded into a major exposition of the alleged threat from subversive communism¹. It was followed by a robust critique of 'liberation theology' by Rajaratnam, who described its proponents as 'Leninists wearing white collars the wrong way round'.

The 'Marxist Conspiracy' and its aftermath rumbled on through the latter part of 1987, once again highlighting the unpredictable dimension of religion, but as the controversy subsided a more diffuse concern about the influence of religion, and specifically about the impact of the religious education syllabus, began to be articulated. From the initial introduction of the Religious Knowledge program there had been explicit recognition of the potential problem of conversion inside and outside the classroom, and this became a major preoccupation of government in the late 1980s. This had been a recurring motif as far back as 1950 with the Maria Hertogh case, and it had resurfaced in 1965 when Muslims complained about proselytising by Christians, leading to the latter publicly denying any such intention. In 1987-88, the problem appeared to be a dramatic shift among young, English-educated Chinese towards the rapidly growing Christian charismatic churches, with the possibly destabilising effect of inter-ethnic conversions which this might encourage. Although the figures subsequently turned out to have been somewhat inflated, they were sufficiently dramatic to attract government attention: at this point we can observe a series of initiatives leading to the formal containment of religion by means of

legislation.

The government commissioned a series of reports by sociologists at the National University of Singapore into the current religious situation, and especially into patterns of conversion. One of the concerns behind the commissioning of the reports - articulated by Lee Kuan Yew in his 1987 National Day speech after reading Kornhauser on Mass Society - was that the pace of social change in Singapore had outstripped the capacity of many people to make sense of their new surroundings; and the perceived problem was operationalised around Durkheim's concept of anomie. The Reports' findings confirmed that there had been growth among Christian charismatic churches in Singapore, that conversion was disproportionately concentrated among those who were young (14-19 being the key age group), of higher status, and English-educated; but anomie was not found to be an important factor in conversion to Christianity. The reports were covered in considerable detail in the media and their implications were widely canvassed.

In 1989 the Religious Knowledge program was scrapped for several reasons. First, there was concern that as a result of a curriculum which emphasised the uniqueness of each religious tradition rather than one emphasising comparative world religions there had been the unintended consequence of increasing students' religious fervour. Second, the combination of a course in Confucian Ethics and a simultaneous campaign to 'speak Mandarin' was thought to have the unintended consequence of increasing insecurity among the non-Chinese population and inflating the sense of uniqueness of Chinese Singaporeans *vis-a-vis* other ethnic groups. It should be recalled that the 1980s saw a steady traffic of Western social scientists through the East and Southeast Asian region preaching the merits of the Confucian ethic, and these received considerable local publicity. However, there is a certain irony in these concerns: as a Religious Knowledge option, Confucianism had in fact been losing out to Buddhist Studies and Bible Knowledge because in a keenly competitive education system Confucianism was thought by students to be more difficult to learn and therefore a distraction from more 'serious' subjects: in 1989 the percentage of Secondary Three students who enrolled in Buddhist Studies was 44 percent, while the Confucian Ethics option attracted only 18 percent. Buddhism - in its rationalised form - could also be seen as an attractive option to those wanting to be both Chinese and modern, and support for this view is provided by the success of canonical forms of Buddhism such as Soka Gakkai in the wider population. Furthermore, the conversion of significant numbers of English-speaking Chinese to Christianity takes place in young adolescence so that Bible Knowledge would be seen as more relevant by them. Thus behind the official reasons for curtailing the program, there are additional factors which explain its demise.

At the same time, policies were being formulated which would secure the further containment of religion. Beginning in mid 1989 the government intimated that in view of the disruptive potential of religion - both ethnically and politically - which had been revealed since the mid-1980s, formal initiatives might be required

to control religious activities. In April 1989 Minister Lee Hsien Loong mooted the possibility of legislation to preserve religious harmony and shortly afterwards it was reported that several religious leaders were in favour of laws to protect such harmony: one important function of the Singapore media is to report consensus in relation to major policy issues.

The sequence of events leading to the passing of what became the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act can be summarised briefly. In late December, 1989, a White Paper on Religious Harmony was released. The Internal Security Department had compiled a report - which was annexed to the White Paper - illustrating the problems caused by over-zealousness in religion. In response to the White Paper's stated intention to demarcate between religious and political activity, the Catholic Archbishop and the Mufti called for a clearer definition of 'politics', though there was also evidence provided in the media of broad acceptance by religious leaders of the need for legislation.

The Maintenance of Religious Harmony Bill was first introduced on January 16, 1990, and it later became clear that Christian groups would express their reservations to the Select Committee. During the debate on the Second Reading of the Bill Prime Minister Goh explained that its origins lay in a 1986 report from the Internal Security Department about aggressive proselytism by some religious groups, and there followed a substantial debate on the perceived twin problems of conversion and subversion. During Select Committee hearings in September 1990, two points were constantly reiterated: the first was the need for legislation to prevent the kind of riots and public disturbances which had occurred in the past (again, the Maria Hertogh case was especially emphasised); but second, it was stressed that the Bill incorporated less severe penalties than the use of criminal law, since it contained the provision that the first response to an alleged infringement was cautionary rather than punitive. The Bill was finally passed into law as the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act in November, 1990, and the legal containment of religion was accomplished.

It is clear that by 1988 the Singapore government had been sufficiently persuaded of the potentially destabilising effects of religious revivalism and activism; and the likely divisive impact of religion and ethnicity in combination had resurfaced.

Thus in an overlapping chronology of policy development from 1988 onwards, there was a search for an alternative 'civil religion' - one more in line with Rousseau's minimalist prescription - in the form of a national ideology with a more secular articulation. At its core was an identical concern to that of the Confucian project - to instill social virtues in the face of their erosion by Western values, or as Minister Goh had put it in 1988, 'If individualism results in creativity, that is good, but if it translates into a 'me first' attitude, that is bad for social cohesion and for the country'. The precedents of neighbouring countries, Indonesia with its *Pancasila* and Malaysia with its *Rukunegara*, were an explicit feature of what came to be identified as the 'Shared Values' project from the outset. Once again a National University team,

based at the Institute for Policy Studies, was convened to provide background research and the findings were presented in 1990. After some debate over the precise number of values and the wording of the text the government in 1991 presented its White Paper on Shared Values, containing five principles: 1) Nation before community and society above self; 2) Family as the basic unit of society; 3) Regard and community support for the individual; 4) Consensus instead of contention; and 5) Racial and religious harmony. While various interpretation have been made of the intentions behind the ruling party's support for this project, it is notable that it was initiated at a time of ideological contention and immediately before a change in political leadership.

As the 1990s have seen a period of greater consolidation in the government's leadership combined with some selective opening up of social space, there has been less urgency in the search for such ideological formulations, and the White Paper has been allowed to lie quietly on the table. In its place in 1994 was introduced a set of Family Values which are more finely focused and which, after some debate, were promoted as: love, care and concern; mutual respect; commitment; filial responsibility (in the original draft 'piety'); and communication. Though there are echoes of the Confucian project, the epithet 'piety' was rejected precisely because it had religious connotations. In fact the values correspond closely with public policy towards care for the aged (seen as a primary responsibility of children) and can be seen as an attempt by the state to enlist the family as a central mediator of moral values. Whether this will be more successful than previous attempts to inculcate civic virtue is questionable.

It is useful to introduce Weber once again by way of conclusion. Reviewed in this article are some of the policy initiatives towards religion which have been deployed by a state which has been characterised by a high level of technical rationality. Within the parameters of certain key principles - multiracialism, multilingualism, and meritocracy - there is a fundamental pragmatism in decision-making which facilitates apparent policy reversals or major realignments when these are found to contain unintended consequences of a negative kind. Elsewhere I and my co-author have labelled this a 'Return to Sender' process, as the state responds to unintended consequences and missed cues on the part of its citizenry², and the policy shift from conscription to containment of religion provides an excellent example of the process in Singapore. Underlying such pragmatism there lies a firm consistency, and this is the principle that Weber attached to all systems of technical rationality, namely the existence of 'spheres of competence' - the strictly demarcated and specialised functions which each component preserves within the whole. It is a principle which has been unwaveringly maintained in Singapore, especially in the area of public life where conflicts of interest may prove highly corrosive. In Singapore it has been clearly asserted in disputes over academic freedom, and the containment of religion is simply one further application of the principle. (It is also one reason why a number of religious organisations in Singapore have become detached from international or

regional associations - but that is another theme). Indeed, the logic on which the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act is based had already been propounded by Lee Kuan Yew in the early 1970s:

We can maintain this spirit of tolerance provided religious and secular leaders do not commit the tragic error of dragging religion into the political arena or using it as a cloak for political ambitions.

Notes

1. A useful account of these events can be found in Lee Lai To (1988) 'Singapore in 1987: Setting a New Agenda' *Asian Survey* 28, 2: 242-253.
2. Some of the material in the article can be found in Michael Hill and Lian Kwen Fee, *The Politics of Nation Building and Citizenship in Singapore*, London, Routledge, 1995.