Article

Singapore's Secularism and Its Pragmatic Approach to Religion

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Abstract: Singapore embraces a form of secularism that provides the state with the authority to unilaterally decide on where to draw the lines between religion, politics, and state. This paper presents examples that dominate Singapore's approach to religion and governance. Given the centrality of religion in the lives of Singaporeans, this article highlights how the state does not cast aside the social significance of religion but remains engaged with it. The model of secularism in Singapore affords the state the flexibility to easily switch between two broad types of secularism, namely a 'soft secularism', a religion-friendly variety, and a 'hard secularism', which the state employs as a tool for political control and management of society as it wrestles with existential challenges to ensure its continued survival.

Keywords: secularism; Singapore; religion

1. Singapore and Religious Diversity

Situated at the southernmost tip of mainland Asia, Singapore is the twentieth smallest country in the world, with an area of 728 km^2. Singapore is without adequate water catchment, lacks the land area for self-sufficiency and thus imports 90% of its food. Furthermore, it has no hinterland for its economic activities and for these reasons, the country has always seen itself as existentially challenged. Moreover, given its strategic crossroad location as a maritime link between East and West, almost all of the world's major and many minor religions were established early on in Singapore's history, including the full spectrum of conservative, modernist and reform-minded orientations. This gave rise not only to a thriving religious life but also to religious diversity.

The arrival of immigrants from many parts of the world after Singapore gained independence further increased its religious diversity. Today, with a population of 5.7 million people, it is the second most densely populated sovereign state in the world. Its religious makeup is 31.1% Buddhist, 18.9% Christian, 15.6% Muslim, 8.8% Taoist, 5% Hindu, 0.6% other minority religions and 20% unaffiliated with any religion. In short, active religious life continues today, as evidenced (Singapore Department of Statistics 2020) by the high rate of religious affiliation amongst the local population (80% of Singaporeans embrace religion). The remaining 20% of the population practices alternative forms of spiritual practices, which includes those who embrace what may be termed "internal/private" religion, that is a belief in a Supreme God or Creator without professing any specific religious faith or formal ties to a specific religion (Taylor 2007, pp. 5, 8). This population draws on the teachings of the established world religions to provide them with a moral and ethical compass as well as meaning, purpose and direction in life (A. E. Lai 2010, p. 22). In this regard, I consider many of those who are not affiliated with any religion to be 'religious' in the broadest sense of the term. The Pew Research Centre named Singapore the most religiously diverse country in the world (Pew Research Centre 2014). Religious diversity has been part of Singapore's identity throughout its history, and this has posed many significant challenges for governance (Tong 2002, pp. 370–401; Hassan 1981, pp. 154–218).

2. Founding Fathers and Their Fears about Religion

Singapore gained independence in 1965 after being colonised by the British for nearly 140 years (1819–1959) and after a failed merger with Malaysia that lasted a mere two years (1963–1965) due to fundamental differences in race- and religion-based politics. The political elite who brought forth Singapore's nationhood in 1965 manifested aspects of Enlightenment era thinking as a result of their many years spent in Europe. These were realists and they understood how bloodshed, conflict and division had historically rampaged through Europe owing to the fusion of political and religious authority. They therefore deliberately chose a path guided by rationalism and humanism. It was clear in the minds of the nation's founders that religion-based politics and the philosophy of mono-culturalism cannot work in multi-racial and multi-religious Singapore, even if majoritarian politics was an attractive option given that the population consisted of 75% people of Chinese ancestry and culture. This was affirmed by then Law Minister E. W. Barker (Parliament of Singapore 1965) who introduced the Constitutional Reform Commission in Parliament in December 1965 as follows:

> Whilst a multi-racial, secular society is an ideal espoused by many, it is a dire necessity for our survival in the midst of turmoil and the pressures of big power conflict in an area where new [forms of] nationalisms are seeking to assert themselves in the place of the old European empires in Asia. In such a setting a nation based on one race, one language and one religion, when its peoples are multi-racial, is doomed to destruction.

This statement reflects the concerns of founding leaders of Singapore who had lived through and dealt with three traumatic events related to religion in the 1950s and 1960s. The first event was the Maria Hertogh crisis in 1950, which involved a tussle for the custody of Maria Hertogh between her Dutch Catholic biological parents and her Malay-Muslim adoptive mother. This resulted in a series of riots that killed 18 and injured 173 people. This conflict was instigated by local communal factors and was set against a backdrop of anti-colonial politics (Aljunied 2009, pp. 15–24). Religion was at the heart of the issue. The adoptive parent brought up the child as a Muslim but when the High Court ordered the child's return to their biological parents, she was temporarily placed in a convent and there was allegation that she was Christianized. This angered local Muslims who took to the streets, with some resorting to violence. Second were the communal riots in July 1964, during the celebration of the Prophet Muhammad's birthday. Twenty-two people were killed and 454 suffered injuries. Religion was a causal factor, given the nature of the celebrations (Low 2001, pp. 431–55). The celebration traditionally took the form of a street procession. It was during this procession that Chinese youths threw stones at the participants who were Malays and Muslims. This triggered off an ethnic clash between segments of the Chinese and Malay communities which spread to other parts of the country. Malays, who were Muslims, also believed that the incident was an attack on the Prophet and Islam. Third, Singapore's founding leaders in the People's Action Party (PAP), which was the ruling party when it gained independence, had to wrestle with the leaders of Malaysia's dominant race- and religion-based political party, the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO). Singapore's experimental political project of being part of a federation with Malaysia from 1963 to 1965 failed due to a deep split in political beliefs. While the PAP's aim was to govern society based on secularism and multi-racialism, the UMNO sought to govern society based on the dominance of Islam and the Malay ethnicity.

In 1965, Singapore was separated from Malaysia due to the failed merger and became an independent nation. Due to the aforementioned traumatic historical experiences with religion and race in politics, the PAP sought to exclude ethnicity and religion from its platform (National Archives of Singapore 1965). These experiences with the politics of race and religion shaped the two-pillared ideology upon which the new state was established: multiculturalism and secularism (Bedlington 1974, pp. 72–73, 81–84). While multicultur-alism provides space for communities to assert their cultural and religious identities, the secularism practised in Singapore prevents the encroachment of religion into politics and

its involvement in governing the state. Lee Kuan Yew, widely recognised as the founding father of modern Singapore, affirmed his belief in secularism by saying that 'religion cannot be a force for national unity. Indeed, secularism is essential for inter-religious harmony for our multi-religious community' (Amrine and Davis 2013, p. 90). Lee Hsien Loong, the current prime minister of Singapore, reaffirmed the state's position as one aspiring to build a multi-racial and multi-religious society that provides equal opportunities to all ethnic and religious communities to practice their cultural and religious beliefs and to participate in the development of the nation (Mohd Sah 2014).

3. Understanding Singapore's State Secularism

As a contribution to the existing literature on state secularism in Singapore, the author used his lens as an 'insider' (with 33 years of experience in government service) and as an 'outsider' (with concurrently 40 years of activism in civil society), to present a balanced perspective of the subject, rather than an overly and politically critical view. Tapping on his decades of experience in the community–religious sector, the author's contribution lies in his close proximity to the state's employment of a state secularism that is both friendly to religion (non-hostile or 'soft' secularism) and uncongenial to religion ('hard' secularism) in which the state has employed secularism for political control and the management of society to the advantage of the ruling party (People's Action Party) and to the interests of the state.

Another contribution of this article is to fill the gap in discussing Singapore's state secularism within the context of the broad ideas of secularism from major thinkers, such as George Jacob Holyoake, Charles Taylor, Syed Naquib Al-Attas, Rajeev Bhargava, Talal Asad and Rowan Williams, who espoused the traditional, classical, conservative, procedural and political ideas of secularism. The pragmatism of Singapore's state secularism lies in it being understood as an eclectic rather than a specific model as its features are taken from different expressions of secularism mentioned above.

4. Some Key Features of Singapore's Secularism

Due to its unique circumstances, Singapore, since its formative years, has taken a pragmatic rather than a dogmatic approach to governance. This has led Singapore to embrace an understanding of secularism that provides the organising principles and procedures that constitute the three scaffolds of Singapore's nationhood—(i) national unity, (ii) mutual co-existence and (iii) social peace. This pragmatic approach aims to deal with three existential challenges that Singapore encounters: (i) to unify a highly religiously diverse society, (ii) to keep religion at bay so that it is not used for political contestation and (iii) to psychologically prepare citizens to cast aside their religious differences to defend the nation against security threats from religiously majoritarian (i.e., Muslim) neighbouring states (Lee 2020).

Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury, and scholar of religion, divides secularism into pragmatic (procedural) and rigid (programmatic) types. The model of secularism practised by Singapore is akin to Williams' procedural secularism. It is not a rigid or programmatic type of secularism that is hardwired into the Constitution, and as such, it is adaptative and malleable. Procedural secularism is employed by the state in its role as overseer of a religiously diverse society, keeping peace amongst the communities, and it does so by not giving advantage or preference to any religion over others (Williams 2012, pp. 2–3). Religious minorities in Singapore are granted equal access to public goods, for example, in the allocation of land for the construction of places of worship, care and disposal of the dead. Even national leaders officiate at religious functions and become patrons in various religious festivals (A. E. Lai 2010, pp. 309–35).

The Singaporean state takes the view that the power of religion, if properly harnessed, significantly contributes to social cohesion and stability. It recognises that religions help develop social capital and are useful partners in supporting the building of state institutions and in achieving national integration. The state adopts a policy according to which religions,

by and large, instruct their followers to perform good deeds and care for their fellow human beings (Parliament of Singapore 1991). Faith-based NGOs play a prominent role in the provision of welfare and social services to people regardless of their creed or ethnicity (A. E. Lai 2010, pp. 321–23). The state also recognises the benefit of religions in providing values conducive to a productive economy and moral ballast for society to protect itself from the ills of Westernisation. In this sense, the government supports religion in an entirely self-interested way (Tamney 1996, p. 25). Singapore's secularism can be inferred from the speech delivered by Singapore's first president, Yusuf bin Ishak (1965), when he opened the inaugural session of Parliament in 1965, soon after the country gained independence:

> So, we must never allow ourselves the luxury of forgetting that survival depends upon rallying and strengthening the forces in the area who are for a secular, rational and multi-racial approach to the problems of economic backwardness and the legacy of unbalanced development in the colonial era.

Indeed, Singapore did not use religious ideas from sacred texts to resolve the challenges of economic backwardness. Singapore has managed societal affairs through considerations that are purely human and has promoted welfare through material means without referring to religious teachings or principles. There was no need for debate about the truth or falsehood of religion or of philosophical beliefs to develop the country and achieve the greater good of society (Holyoake 1906, Chapter IV). To overcome its existential challenges and effectively manage the complex issues of a highly religiously plural society, Singapore asserts itself as a sovereign state that exercises strong authority in determining where the dividing lines are to be drawn between religion, politics and state.

According to Talal Asad, the modern secular democratic state is 'jealous of its sovereignty; it defines and protects the subjective rights of its citizens (including their right to religious freedom); infuses them with nationalistic fervour; invokes bureaucratic rationality in governing them justly; it is fundamentally exclusive' (Asad 2012, p. 36). Asad also argues that secularism can be easily thought of as requiring the separation of religious from secular institutions in government. But Asad qualified that secularism is not all about separation between religious and socio-political institutions because there are new concepts of religion, ethics and politics that have emerged in the non-western world. He added that secularism's doctrine of separation does not detract from its global relevance because there are alternative ways in which nations have embraced the idea of secularism without departing from the principle of separation (Asad 2003, pp. 1–2). State secularism is not neutral; in reality, it is ideological as it is a political doctrine that is employed to answer the question of where to draw the line between religion and politics and where the proper place of religion should be. Secularism, to him, is a political doctrine, or what he identifies as "political secularism"—the idea which refers to the modern state's sovereign power to reorganise the substantive features of religion, stipulate what religion is and what its place ought to be in society, assign its proper content and disseminate its ethical framework (Asad 2013). It then follows that the state has the right to ultimately decide where to draw the lines between religion, the state and politics.

Based on this approach, and where the line between religion, state and politics must be drawn, Singapore's secularism aims to protect the state from the intervention of religion and to protect religion from state intervention. This is not only true in theory but also in practice; though the Singaporean state is not puritanical in its conduct, because it is a sovereign state, it is present in many aspects of the lives of its citizenry, including their religious life (A. E. Lai 2010, p. 327). It is not surprising, then, that within the secular framework, the state continues to be involved in religious matters (Tan 2008, p. 66). This means that the Singaporean state defines how and when religion can enter common spaces.

From a political perspective, Singapore's secularism follows Rajeev Bhargava's definition of political secularism, which imposes two requirements. First, religious communities are expected to forgo some of their rights in their religious practices, even if these are of utmost importance to them so that the rights of others in society are not impinged. For example, the Muslim right to ritual slaughter during *Eidul Adha* celebration (Day of

Sacrifice) is curtailed as such a ritual may impinge on rights which are more important to society (that is the preservation of public health and hygiene). The second requirement is that the state will act to prevent blind pursuits of ultimate ideals (beliefs) to protect public life as the strong religious emotions generated in times of interreligious conflicts may lead to bloody violence (Bhargava 1998, pp. 496–97).

5. Embracing Religious Pluralism to Deal with Social Fragmentation

Singapore took a cautious yet pre-emptive step to mitigate the possible threat of social fragmentation that could arise when debates about truth or falsehood involve self-claims of superiority, claims of self-righteousness and denigrating other religions. It did so by defining the 'red lines' that must not be crossed and providing an effective social framework that encourage citizens to respect the plurality of beliefs, reminding them that there could be more than one correct account of a given subject matter, from the perspectives of different religions (Baghramian and Ingram 2000, p. 1). Singaporean leaders in the early years of the state's formation put in place a structure consisting of non-religious organisations in civil society to 'accommodate pluralism in a just social order that could avoid intolerance and conflict due to differences' (Baghramian and Ingram 2000, p. 3). Singapore's positive attitude towards pluralism was inspired by the positive experience of co-existence living in post-colonial India and America in the 1960s—two major countries that had evolved into religiously plural societies (Calhoun et al. 2011, p. 16). Moreover, conflicts due to irreconcilable ways of life were settled by a 'give and take' attitude on the part of the people who co-exist in a religiously diverse society based on their common interests in leading a harmonious and prosperous life. The phraseology used for this is 'achieving a modus vivendi' as the baseline for social reconciliation (Baghramian and Ingram 2000, p. 7).

Singapore's modus vivendi was aptly defined by the current president of Singapore, Madam Halimah Yacob (2019), as consisting of three commonalities to bind society: (i) a shared sense of safeguarding national security, (ii) social stability linked to a shared experience of communal living and (iii) economic prosperity. These commonalities support the foundation of Singapore's governance, which is an effective combination of secularism, rationalism and multiculturalism that can address both equality and cultural differences. This is akin to the egalitarian multiculturalism advocated by British sociologist John Rex (d. 2011), which is not about achieving uniformity but accepting cultural diversity in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance (Hutchinson and Smith 1996, p. 243).

6. Differentiation of Roles, Common Space and State Power

Prior to Singapore's establishment of the secular state in 1965, religious institutions ran hospitals, clinics, schools and other public services. Following independence, the secular state completely revamped its public services and reclaimed functions that were mundane in nature, leaving religious functions and practices to religious institutions. In short, secularisation shifted medical, educational and other public functions from religious institutions to state-run and state-financed institutions (Calhoun et al. 2011, p. 13). This demarcation of functions in society as either mundane or sacred is the manifestation of secularism as described by philosopher Charles Taylor (Smith 2014, pp. 20–23). This demarcation has resulted in the diminished role of religion in Singapore's public square. Taylor would call this the effect of the subtraction theory, and Singapore's experience has validated this theory (Calhoun et al. 2011, pp. 6–9). This approach of differentiating roles to manage the mundane affairs of the Singaporean state has been consistently practiced since the country's independence. Indeed, the public sphere in Singapore is regarded as a non-sectarian, neutral and areligious common space. Singapore staunchly enforces this conception of the common space as the key to operationalising state secularism and managing people's diversity of beliefs. It is also through the idea of the common space that Singapore can ensure a social environment that is conducive to the co-existence of diverse religious communities.

Charles Taylor laid out two possible ways to establish a common space for co-existence: (i) the common ground strategy and (ii) the independent political ethic. He also mentioned a third way—the overlapping consensus strategy made famous by John Rawls. Singapore has adopted the third approach because, unlike the first two approaches, the overlapping consensus approach does not require the society to have a common religious foundation, which is ideal for a country in which religious diversity is a key feature. What is needed is for society to agree on certain political principles, for example the doctrine of human rights, of popular sovereignty, of freedom and equality. It is not imperative for these political principles to be based on consensus of religious principles of the different communities. Indeed, these political principles represent the agreed rules for living and working together, which are embraced by diverse religious communities to achieve interests that they share (Taylor 1998, pp. 32–38). The common space is an essential characteristic of modern secularism that, according to Charles Taylor, allows a plurality of views to emerge in the spirit of mutual respect for diverse cultures, equal recognition of all religions by the state and tolerance of different beliefs. Singapore relies heavily on the idea of the common space as a political tool to hold its diverse society together. Its commitment to secularism, growing the common space and preventing its diminution have contributed to religious harmony, which, according to Lee Hsien Loong (the current prime minister of Singapore), is one of Singapore's most remarkable achievements since gaining independence in 1965 (Sim 2015). Singapore's model of secularism enables a high degree of tolerance to be exercised in social relations. According to Singapore's founding prime minister, Lee Kuan Yew (d. 2015), 'every Singaporean knows the first ingredient, the first attribute, we must have to be a successful multi-racial, cosmopolitan society, is a high degree of tolerance. It is our way of life' (Han et al. 2011, pp. 240–41).

7. Freedom of Religion, Religious Laws and State Neutrality

The common space (or public square) is a secular space with broad-minded institutions run by people who are not prejudiced against or in favour of any religion, meaning that freedom of religion is a key principle in the Singaporean Constitution (Smith 2014, pp. 20–21). Article 15 of the Constitution states that citizens have freedom with respect to professing, practicing and propagating their religion as long as they do not violate any laws relating to public order, public health and morality. The fourth president of Singapore, Wee Kim Wee (d. 2005), in his presidential address to Parliament on 9 January 1989, reiterated that 'Singapore is a secular state, and the supreme source of political authority is the Constitution. The Constitution guarantees freedom of religion' (Wee 1989). This was repeated by then Deputy Prime Minister Wong Kan Seng (Han et al. 2011, pp. 240–41): 'Our laws and policies do not derive from religious authority but reflect the judgements and decisions of the secular government and Parliament to serve the national interest and collective good. These laws and public policies apply equally to all, regardless of one's race, religion or social status'. The Singapore Police Force, for example, has been even-handed in handling religious incidents, and citizens overwhelmingly believe that the police treat them fairly, regardless of race or religion. This indicates that the state takes a neutral position vis-à-vis religious beliefs of its citizens (Tham 2015).

A relevant example demonstrating the state's neutrality vis-à-vis religion is the State Court's decision in 2013, wherein a lady went before the State Court claiming that she was wrongfully dismissed by her employer (the Faith Community Baptist Church) when she became pregnant following an adulterous relationship with a male co-worker. The Court's ruling in favour of the woman reinforced the state's position that civil laws must be applied instead of religious laws—in this case, those defined in Christianity (The Straits Times 2013). The tension seemed to be whether the Ministry of Manpower, which was involved in the adjudication, had the right to interfere in what the Church believed was a religious affair and whether a place of employment in a house of worship was regarded as a secular public space. Such state–religion tensions are not uncommon in secular Singapore, but the

way they are usually resolved reflects the amiable nature of the relationship between its religious and political leaders (Tham 2014).

8. Balancing Interests

It is worth noting that Singapore does not seek to eliminate religion from the common space even though the state works ardently to keep the common space neutral, areligious and non-sectarian. The state is sensitive to the need to fulfil specific requests from religious communities and to allow them to perform their rituals in public space. Each religious community has different needs and, therefore, the state judiciously caters to such needs in a way that is seen as neutral through its equitable provision of concessions. For example, the Hindus are the only religious group permitted to conduct processions along public streets because such a procession is a requirement in their celebration of Thaipusam (Shanmugam 2015). Other religious communities are also given concessions, though in different forms. Taoists are allowed to conduct their ritual burning of worship paraphernalia in public areas when they pray for the dead while Muslims are allowed to perform their prayers at designated public sites during the month of *Ramadhan* (fasting month). In short, the state balances its actions by making concessions in common space to each religious community, although in varied ways.

Notwithstanding the concessions given to religious communities to conduct their practices in common space and the constitutional right to freedom of worship, the state has not blindsided itself with the problems associated with religion. Notably, Singapore's founding prime minister, Lee Kuan Yew, regarded religion as a deep fault line that would persist for decades (Han et al. 2011, p. 219).

In the 1980s, Singapore saw the rise of religious fundamentalism, transnational pulls of renewed religiosity and new forms of post-traditional and new age spirituality. In addition, as a response to the global revival of religions in the 1980s, particularly Islam (after the 1979 Iranian Revolution), Christianity (with the plan to increase its following through active proselytising) and Buddhism (with the attempt to preserve its numbers by modernising its teachings), there was a re-awakening of religions in Singapore. Open proselytising was on the rise, and the state had to step in to maintain cordial ethnic relations (Kuah-Pearce 2003, pp. 137–38).

The state is also mindful of the encroachment of a dominant religion upon the territory of a weaker religion that it considers a threat, the denigration of other faiths and insensitive attempts at conversion (Parliament of Singapore 1989, p. 4). This explains the tough actions undertaken by the state to confront those who intend to denigrate other religions as shown in cases where several foreign Christian and Muslim preachers were denied entry into Singapore. One of the Christian preachers described Allah as a false god, praying for those held captive in the darkness of Islam, and another Christian preacher referred to the evils of Islam and the malevolent nature of Islam and Muhammad (Lim 2017). The Muslim foreign preacher was also known for his hostile remarks towards Christians and Jews (Arshad 2017).

More issues have emerged since the year 2000, such as the opening of the first two casinos, the promotion of biomedical research involving stem cells as well as DNA and the latest decision by the state to accommodate gay rights by repealing the law (Section 377A) that criminalises sex between two men. The actions and decisions of the Singaporean state has led to some tension within the country's religions (A. E. Lai 2010, p. 312). The government reached out to faith communities as part of active citizenry and sought a better understanding to accommodate their unique interests. For example, in the case of the opening of the first two casinos in Singapore, religious groups accepted the state's decision to proceed with them as a fait accompli, but the government addressed the concern expressed about the social impact of gambling by working with these groups to minimise it (A. E. Lai 2010, p. 70). The state is acutely aware of the power of religion to mobilise, motivate and enforce behaviour, values and norms among the faithful (A. E. Lai 2010, p. 66; Tham 2008, p. 18). The state, therefore, pre-empts problematic situations with religions

with regard to its political interventions by making expectations clear about how faith communities can play their roles in Singapore's development and pursue their interests in a secular state.

9. Management of Religion and Religious Leaders

The aforementioned challenges that Singapore has encountered with religion, as well as the tough and decisive manner in which it has dealt with them, demonstrate that it does not allow the involvement of religion in the management of affairs of the state. Similarly, the state does not allow religious leaders to encroach on political affairs. Indeed, religious leaders are prohibited by law from encroaching on political affairs and religious credentials are not required for people to assume political leadership (Al-Attas 2001, pp. 196–97). In the words of former Minister for Home Affairs S. Jayakumar (1990):

> It is important that religion and politics be kept separate because religious leaders are seen to have a special status and their pronouncements will have an emotional effect on their flock. If one religious group enters the political arena, so will others. Inevitably, there must be collision between different religious groups, or between religious groups and Government to the detriment of our nation.

To avoid this, the state has not hesitated to use its power to respond strongly when it is deemed that religious actors have threatened national security and/or social stability, in line with its hegemonic role in social control and management (A. E. Lai 2010, p. 327). The management of religious matters in Singapore is undertaken by several pieces of legislation, the most important being the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act (MRHA)— the legislation that keeps religion out of politics and seeks to legislate moderation and tolerance (Tan 2007, p. 446). Based on this legislation, the state imposes limits on the freedom of religious leaders to enter the political domain by challenging ministers or agitating people against government policies. Essentially, the MRHA curtails the freedom of religious leaders to politicise religion (Tamney 1996, p. 35). It also prohibits religious leaders and groups from using religion to cause feelings of enmity, hatred or of hostility between the different religious groups and from carrying out subversive activities under the guise of practicing any religious belief.

The state has also created institutional frameworks for the management of religion, which, other than the Constitution, include the Presidential Council for Minority Rights (to safeguard the interests of minorities, including their religious interests, when new laws are enacted) and the Presidential Council of Religious Harmony (to advise on actions to be taken to preserve the harmonious relations amongst religions) (A. E. Lai 2010, pp. 311–12).

Despite these state controls, religious communities are free to express their views on policies and laws. The law does not preclude religious leaders from exercising their civil and political rights. They can even become members of political parties (Shanmugam 2019). However, they must not mobilise congregations to be confrontational in their engagement with the state. They must not undermine the government's authority, its legitimacy or the democratic process (Tan 2008, p. 70). The state asserts that religious organisations must neither stray into radical social action nor be involved in political processes nor exploit religious issues. It does not tolerate the use of religious freedom accorded in the Constitution for any individual or group to undermine racial or religious harmony. As an example, the state disallowed the screening of the movie *The Last Temptation of Christ*, the circulation of the book *The Satanic Verses* and the staging of the play *Talaq*, as they would have created backlashes from the religious communities (A. E. Lai 2010, p. 67).

10. Engagement and Cooperation with Religious Groups

Singapore's political leadership did not assume that society would simply accept that religion and politics are distinct spheres of influence and experience. In dealing with issues of concern, religious leaders have also developed an ethos of engaging the state in a constructive manner (Mohd Sah et al. 2014). For example, in the early years of Singapore's history, religious leaders were consulted to determine the number of public holidays to cel-

ebrate religious festivals in Singapore. The then law minister, E. W. Barker, told Parliament that Hindu leaders were given the choice of having Deepavali or Thaipusam as a public holiday, and both Easter and the Prophet Muhammad's birthday were dropped as public holidays after consultation with Christian and Muslim leaders (Lim 2015, p. A8). Another example of religion–state engagement is the public issue of whether Muslim women employed in uniformed services (for example, nurses) should be allowed to wear headscarves (*hijab*). In this debate, Muslim leaders aligned their actions to the state's expectations that they remained committed not to diminishing the secular public sphere or disrupting social cohesion and religious harmony (Chan 2014). Another example is the successful engagement between the government and Hindu leaders to resolve a demand from the Hindu community to have live music during the annual Thaipusam street procession. Despite public safety concerns, the state finally agreed to allow the playing of musical instruments at designated locations but that this agreement be based on trust that Hindu participants would observe the terms of the agreement (Zaccheus 2016).

In responding to criticism that politics was mixed with religion when government officials intermingled with religious leaders (especially during electioneering for parliamentary elections), Minister of Home Affairs K. Shanmugam (2019) put forth the state's position: 'good, deep friendships between government leaders and religious leaders are extremely important because it allows issues to be dealt with in an atmosphere of trust.'

11. Religion, State and Secularisation: What form of Secularisation?

The Singaporean state does not view secularity and religion as mutually exclusive. In the White Paper presented to Parliament to introduce the MRHA in 1989, it was noted that it was 'neither possible nor desirable' for people to separate their secular and religious identity (Parliament of Singapore 1989, p. 4). Therefore, secularism in Singapore does not seek to marginalize religion but, as an adaptable model of secularism, it intends to accommodate religion—a secularism that is 'friendly' to religion.

As already noted, religion continues to occupy an important position in Singaporean society. Though the Singaporean state embarked on a rapid path of modernisation, its society has generally remained religious. Almost 80 percent of the Singaporean population are affiliated to a religion, and the rate of participation in religious celebrations and worship services is high. There has been no 'displacement of religion from the centre of human life' (Bruce 2011, p. 1). There has been no decrease in the importance of religion to society, contrary to what sociologist Bryan Wilson argued, namely that secularisation ought to result in the decline in the social significance of religion (Bruce 2011, p. 2).

Therefore, Singaporean society is religious, but the state is secular. This explains the imperative for Singapore to embrace an 'adaptable' model of secularism, because the act of protecting the secular public sphere from the influence of religion within a religious society and a religiously diverse context can be undertaken more by goodwill and a 'give-and-take' attitude (Sim 2014). This adaptable form of secularism exists due to the state's acceptance of the fact that religions have utilitarian benefits. Lee Kuan Yew affirmed this point when, in 1987, he said that 'we must match our economic progress with advances in the moral, ethical and aesthetic dimensions of our life. The established religions have an important role to play in our moral and spiritual development' (Amrine and Davis 2013, p. 90).

Social practices, habits and public rituals that are associated with a belief in a transcendent being still exist and are entrenched in peoples' lives. Williams (2012, p. 2) described a society with such characteristics as one that has not been secularised. Singapore's ability to preserve the importance of religion is also a negation of the secularisation theory that was put forward in the 1960s and 1970s, a theory which states that, as countries develop through modernisation and rationalisation, religion loses its influence and relevance in society. It also validates Charles Taylor's belief that modern civilisation cannot bring about the 'death of God' and that 'not only has religion not declined, but it is also impossible to remove something like religion which is a central dimension of culture' (Calhoun et al.

2011, pp. 8–9). This is evidenced by the words of Member of Parliament Dr. Chit Chung Ong (1991), who said the following:

> We should, I believe, therefore remain a strictly secular nation in this regard. That does not mean that the State should be against religions, or it is unmindful of the religious needs or spiritual needs of the people. At Singapore Armed Forces commissioning ceremonies, for example, the leaders of the major religions are invited to say prayers and meet the spiritual needs of the officers.

Clearly, Singapore has modernised differently when compared with many countries in Europe that turned secular upon embarking on a pathway of modernisation and development. Singapore has allowed religion to thrive, and religiosity has retained importance in society. Singapore's model of secularism therefore supports the notion of 'multiple modernity' espoused by sociologist Shmuel Eisenstadt. Eisenstadt argues that there are many regional and national paths to secularity (Bellah 2013, p. 35; Taylor 2007, p. 21). That is, secularism does not have a fixed legal and cultural framework (Gole 2013, p. 250). Therefore, given the profound presence of religion in its society, Singapore uniquely builds its adaptability in its embrace of secularism to make it 'religion-friendly'.

12. Assertiveness of the State in Drawing the Line between Religion and the State

To further explore state–religion relations in Singapore and demonstrate how the state may impose restrictions on certain religious activities, in this final section I present three examples of the dominance of the state in deciding on issues that are deemed religious in nature. The first is the case of Muslim women serving in uniformed public services (for example, police constables) who feel religiously obliged to don the head scarf (*hijab*) but are not allowed by the state to do so to protect what is 'generally valuable' (that is, the religiously neutral common space) despite 'the preparedness of society to tolerate diversity that different members of a population bring' (Lim and Ong 2013).

Second, the state took steps to curb foreign influence on religious organisations by mandating a law (amendments to the MRHA) that states that key religious leadership roles be filled by Singaporean citizens, donations to religious organisations of $10,000 or more be reported and affiliations with foreign religious bodies and individuals be declared. These new laws require that religious communities curtail their rights and freedoms to protect Singapore from foreign actors who might exploit religious fault lines or impose values that could undermine religious harmony (L. Lai 2019). The state further stipulated that its interventions to limit religious freedom are needed to ensure social peace and the continued co-existence of religions within a harmonious setting.

Third, according to Eugene Tan (constitutional law expert at Singapore Management University), the state exerts influence on the administration of Islam, Hinduism and Sikhism, evidenced by the state's appointment of their religious office-bearers. The Inter-Religious Organisation (a major interfaith NGO comprising leaders from 10 religions) has also been co-opted by the government to promote greater religious understanding (Tan 2007, p. 446). The state can positively influence the administration of these faiths through the Islamic Religious Council, the Hindu Advisory Board, the Hindu Endowment and the Central Sikh Gurdwara Board (Tan 2008, p. 67). Nevertheless, the Minister in charge of Muslim Affairs promised that the government would not exert any political influence on the proceedings of the Islamic Religious Council even though it is not meant to be totally free from government control and supervision (Bedlington 1974, p. 178).

The state's power is vested in legal authority and the rule of law. The MRHA's important function is to clearly delineate the boundaries of what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour (L. Lai 2019, p. 1). One relevant example is the state's decision to regulate the use of loudspeakers in mosques in Singapore for the Muslim call to prayer and the subsequent contestation by Muslims of that claim of authority (Kong 2016). Where conflicting positions exist, uneasy compromises between the state and religions remain the only viable option. This was clearly evident in another case: the controversial debate to repeal Section 377A, which criminalises sex between men. While religious groups vehemently objected to the

repeal, the state adopted the uneasy compromise of retaining the law (to appease religious groups) but not enforcing it (to placate LGBTQ advocates) (Toh 2018). Importantly, the state makes it clear that such sensitive issues must be discussed using a secular framework, though it realistically acknowledges that arguments will be informed by people's religious convictions (Shanmugam 2013). (Note: The latest accommodation by the state is that it has agreed to repeal Section 377A and at the same time hardwire the definition of marriage as between man and woman, in the Singapore Constitution.)

While the state recognises that religion can be mobilised for the strengthening of a spirit of unity within society, it ensures that the secular framework always takes precedence over religious principles or teachings in political discourse, public policy and governance (Tan 2008, p. 67). Religious identities, according to Lai Ah Eng (a sociologist at the National University of Singapore), would have to therefore sit comfortably with larger interests of social cohesion, national unity and the common good of society (A. E. Lai 2010, p. 326). While the government provides an environment for religious diversity, it also ensures that religious practices do not prevent the nation-building process. As explained above, the balance is managed in a broad and informal way through conversation and dialogue to reach amicable solutions to contentious issues or reconciliation in situations of conflict (Lee 2014). Nevertheless, religions that have doctrinal positions contrary to important tenets of nation-building or that are disruptive to public order may be banned (Yuen 2019). An example is the Jehovah's Witness group.

13. Conclusions

This paper has highlighted the way that Singapore has adopted a pragmatic approach to secularism. This is unsurprising, given the pragmatism of the state, as it mediates between a liberal and an illiberal style of governance. This paper has argued that, depending on the needs and circumstances of the time, the model of secularism in Singapore provides the state with the flexibility to easily switch between a softer version of secularism, which is religion-friendly, and a harder variety which the state employs as a tool for political control and management of society. Finally, this paper has emphasised that the usefulness of Singapore's eclectic model of secularism has been sustained over the past 57 years because it has acknowledged the centrality of religion in society, which has remained an important feature throughout the history of Singapore.

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