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### Countering exclusivism, promoting Inclusivism: The way forward for Singapore

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# INTERRELIGIOUS RELATIONS

Countering Exclusivism, Promoting Inclusivism:  
The Way Forward for Singapore

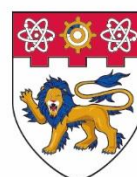
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**NANYANG  
TECHNOLOGICAL  
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# **INTERRELIGIOUS RELATIONS**

**Occasional Papers of  
The Studies in Inter-Religious Relations  
in Plural Societies Programme**

**Countering Exclusivism, Promoting Inclusivism:  
The Way Forward for Singapore**

Lily Kong, Orlando Woods and  
Acmal Zuheyr Idefan bin Abdul Wahid

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## **Abstract**

This paper addresses the situation in Singapore, where a state of religious harmony has prevailed over the past few decades, though evidencing skirmishes and tensions periodically. These skirmishes are a consequence of exclusivist attitudes held by those with religion and those without religion. While some of the strategies that have been in place to address such exclusivist behaviours have been largely effective, the extent to which they have been successful in addressing, more fundamentally, exclusivist attitudes and beliefs is more questionable. Three key dialectics that operate in everyday interreligious encounter are identified to be consequential in countering exclusivism and promoting inclusivism. The first is the dialectic between ideology and praxis; the second is between enhancing interreligious interactions and interreligious understanding; and the third is between emphasising the personal and private in religion, and the communal and public.

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Singapore is characterised by a high degree of religious heterogeneity. According to the 2015 General Household Survey, Singapore's resident population comprises Buddhists (33.2%), Taoists (10%), Christians (18.8%), Muslims (14%), and Hindus (5%). In addition, 19.1% of the population identify with other religions or no religion.<sup>2</sup> These are simplified categories, masking still greater heterogeneity. For example, many who self-declare as Buddhists are not canonical Buddhists, but practice ancestor worship or some other variant of "Chinese religion." Similarly, those who have "no religion" may practise certain religious rituals. Those who declare themselves Taoists or Buddhists may also visit and pray at Hindu temples, and so forth. Thus, while a Pew Research Center report describing Singapore as the most religiously diverse country in the world is true<sup>3</sup>, the specific characterisation of that multireligiosity using established categories belies the still greater richness and complexity of Singapore's religious tapestry.

Within such a multireligious setting, the official declaration is that Singapore is a secular state. Given this, it should come as little surprise that the state managerially constructs religion as distinct from other spheres of life.<sup>4</sup> For example, a key tenet of the state's secular policy is to construct religion and politics as separate domains of power and life. Religious groups should not venture into politics and political parties should not use religious sentiments to gather popular support. If members of religious groups are to participate in the democratic political process, they must do so as individuals or as members of political parties and not as leaders of religious groups. As such, various legal and policy measures are put in place to manage religion and religious relations in Singapore, some of which are directed specifically at countering exclusivism – which to a large extent has been effective considering the decades of interreligious peace Singapore has enjoyed, albeit with occasional fissures and resistance.

This paper argues that on top of these existing legal and policy tools, addressing three dialectics operating in the everyday, quotidian experience remains crucial in rooting out exclusivist behaviours and promoting inclusivist ones. These are the dialectics of ideology and practice; between enhancing interreligious interactions and interreligious understanding; and lastly, between emphasising the personal and private in religion, and the communal and public. It is important to address these dialectics because they play a fundamental role in underpinning interreligious relationships, even while the legislative tools tend to deal with problems that have already emerged.

To understand the need for an inclusivist ethic to emerge out of these dialectics, some background to Singapore's managerialist approach to religion is necessary. We thus turn, first, to Singapore's historical context in the management of religion, leading to an outline of existing legal, policy and discursive tools. Second, recent fissures in the form of exclusivist behaviours that periodically emerge, in spite of available measures, shall be scrutinised. Following that, we will reflect on the drawbacks of this managerialist approach that inadvertently provides conditions that render exclusivist dispositions more likely before finally discussing the aforementioned three dialectics. To be clear from the outset, although this paper does not pretend to have a fool proof solution to the problems emerging from religious diversity, it hopes to point out the everyday ways in which exclusivism can fester or inclusivism promoted depend not only on policy or legislation but on addressing some of these dialectics.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is based on a speech originally presented by the author at the Studies in Inter-Religious Relations in Plural Societies (SRP) Programme's 5<sup>th</sup> Distinguished Lecture and Inter-Religious Symposium on 3 April 2019. The author would like to thank Nursheila Muez for her editorial assistance.

<sup>2</sup> Department of Statistics, *General Household Survey 2015: Key Findings*, Singapore: Ministry of Trade & Industry, 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Pew Research Center, *Global Religious Diversity* (4 April 2014), available at: <https://www.pewforum.org/2014/04/04/global-religious-diversity/>.

<sup>4</sup> Lily Kong, "'Managerialist' constructions of religion: the geographical and historical contingencies of religion in Singapore," paper presented at the *International Conference on 'Concepts of Religion between Asia and Europe'*, 1-3 November 2012, University of Zurich.

## From benign colonial inattention to active post-independence official management

Historically, colonial Singapore was a city divided. The British adopted an approach of divide and rule, spatially carving up the city along racial lines – Chinese in Chinatown, Indians in the Little India area, and Malays in the Kampong Glam area – and governed each separately. Race, and indeed, dialect among the Chinese, tended to be the axes of division. Congregations of Chinese dialect groups around certain areas (Cantonese in Kreta Ayer, Teochews in Boat Quay, Hokkiens in Telok Ayer) formed the territorial bases upon which incursions were not welcomed, and from which conflicts and clashes frequently arose.

While race and religion are closely correlated in Singapore, they do not map exactly one onto the other. Although the British colonial authorities addressed racial divisions, by and large, they did not seek to manage religions. Indeed, there was no collection of data about religion. Pre-independence municipal records are mostly silent about religion, even though details exist about other aspects of life, for example, sanitary conditions.<sup>5</sup> This is perhaps indicative of a lack of concern on the part of the colonial rulers about the religious inclinations of the population, who were free to subscribe to whichever faith they chose as long as they did not create problems. This was in line with the broader British ethos of not interfering with local life and customs. To the extent that there was evidence of colonial management of religion, one could point to the establishment of the Hindu Advisory Board in March 1917, to advise the government on matters concerning Hinduism and the Hindu community.<sup>6</sup>

A more active approach to managing religious relations emerged post-independence. Freedom of worship became constitutionally enshrined, providing a framework for multiple religions to exist. Specifically, every person has the right to profess and practise his or her religion and to propagate it. Every religious group has the right to manage its own religious affairs, to establish and maintain institutions for religious or charitable purposes, and to acquire and own property and to hold and administer it in accordance with law. Every religious group also has the right to establish and maintain institutions for the education of children and to provide instruction in its own religion, but there must be no discrimination on the grounds of religion only, in any law relating to such institutions or in the administration of any such law.<sup>7</sup> What follows are a few of the more notable legislative, policy and discursive tools that are employed by the state to manage religious diversity.

Beyond the constitution, several pieces of legislation and administrative apparatuses were instituted to manage religion and interreligious relations. In part, some of these were prompted by conflicts and indeed violence arising from religious sensitivities, or from concerns about the mixing of religion and politics. Episodes that stand out in the history of interreligious relations in Singapore include the 1950 Maria Hertogh affair where a child custody dispute between Dutch biological parents and Malay-Muslim foster ones erupted into violent protests by Muslims when the verdict was thought unfair.<sup>8</sup> Another occurred in 1964 during Prophet Muhammad's birthday procession, which quickly escalated into a series of deadly ethnic violence between the Malays and Chinese.<sup>9</sup> A third episode which led to the establishment of a major piece of legislation, the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act (MRHA) occurred in the late 1980s. This episode was not so much a single event, but more a response to the noticeable increase in religious fervour and assertiveness, especially on behalf of evangelical Protestant groups. This led to various incidences of inter- and intra-religious tensions, and the encroachment of religion into the political domain.<sup>10</sup>

One of the most prominent pieces of legislation, the MRHA allows the relevant government minister to issue prohibition orders should any individual engage in any of four categories of harmful conduct. These are:

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<sup>5</sup> Administration Report of the Singapore Municipality for the years 1888 -1930, Singapore: Singapore & Straits Printing Office.

<sup>6</sup> Barbara Leitch Lepoer (for the Washington Library of Congress), "Singapore – Religion," *Country Studies Index*, available at: <http://countrystudies.us/singapore/24.htm>.

<sup>7</sup> Khun Eng Kuah, "Maintaining Ethno-Religious Harmony in Singapore," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 28.1 (1998): 103-21.

<sup>8</sup> Ganesan Narayanan, "The Political History of Ethnic Relations in Singapore," in *Beyond Rituals and Riots: Ethnic Pluralism and Social Cohesion in Singapore*, ed. Lai Ah Eng, Singapore: Marshall Cavendish, 2004, 44-47.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Government of Singapore, *White Paper on Maintenance of Religious Harmony*, 1989.

(1) where a person causes feelings of enmity or hatred between different religious groups; (2) where, if under the guise of religion or propagating religious activity, a person carries out political activities for promoting a political cause or the cause of any political party; (3) where a person carries out subversive activities under the guise of propagation of religion; and (4) where a person instigates and provokes feelings of disloyalty or hatred against the President or the government.<sup>11</sup> In 2019, the government amended the MRHA to introduce stronger safeguards against foreign influence, and to curb the spread of hate speech online.<sup>12</sup>

Amongst the key pieces of administrative apparatuses instituted are the following. First, the *Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura* (Islamic Religious Council of Singapore, or MUIS for short) was inaugurated in 1968, empowered by the Administration of Muslim Law Act (AMLA for short) of 1966.<sup>13</sup> It advises the President on matters relating to the Muslim religion in Singapore, and at the same time carries out a wide range of other functions: for example, the collection of *zakat* (religious tax), the administration of *wakaf* (endowments), the management of pilgrimage affairs, the registration of Islamic religious schools, the provision of bursaries and study grants to deserving Muslim students, the issuance of *fatwa* (religious rulings), the administration of mosques in Singapore, and the co-ordination of services to Muslim converts. It also runs the Mosque Building Fund Scheme established in 1975, which oversees public donations for the building of mosques. Second, in addition to the Hindu Advisory Board established in 1917, the Hindu Endowments Board, established in 1968 under the Hindu Endowments Act, was introduced, to be responsible for the administration and management of four temples and all the property belonging to these endowments.<sup>14</sup>

9/11 and the subsequent War on Terror renewed the significance of interreligious dialogue and relations. During the height of the War on Terror, the mistrust towards Muslims heightened the need for platforms of interfaith dialogue. This saw the state mandating a pluralist initiative in the form of Inter-Racial Confidence Circles (IRCCs) and the Community Engagement Programmes (CEPs). IRCCs and CEPs are designed to foster greater trust amongst faith communities. Beyond the more immediate concerns that these two policy constructions were designed to resolve, activities and events under IRCCs and CEPs include visits to the different sacred spaces as well as celebrations of the different festivities to promote inter-ethnic and interreligious learning and understanding.<sup>15</sup> Despite criticisms that the IRCCs are not “ground-up”, a study by Mathew Mathews and Danielle Hong points out that such a state-initiated arrangement, especially with the involvement of Members of Parliament, can help address grievances and resolve minor inter-ethnic and interreligious conflicts that arise on the ground.<sup>16</sup>

On top of all these, we are reminded of how the post-independent state discursively reifies an instrumentalist construction of religion that citizens are expected to internalise and live by. This was achieved through public speeches by ministers, members of parliament and government officials who advocated for a particular religious orientation believed to be “conducive” to Singapore. Two key aspects to emerge from this state-vaunted discourse on the role of religion are namely, religion as an “agent of progress and development”, and religion as a “sponsor of moral and wellbeing”. To elaborate, the former refers to religious teachings being utilised to inspire economic progress. For example, Quranic values are picked to encourage the Muslim community to be more productive while Buddhist ethos of self-discipline and self-reliance are advocated.<sup>17</sup> Often, these religious values are emphasised as necessary ingredients of economic prosperity for the nation. Meanwhile, religion should also act as a sponsor of moral well-being. In public discourses, government officials alluded to religion’s role in providing a moral compass for Singaporeans.<sup>18</sup> This has been the case since the early years of Singapore’s independence. In the 1970s and 1980s, government leaders looked to religion as the solution to a perceived moral crisis, and in the 1980s, introduced Religious Knowledge as a compulsory

<sup>11</sup> Khun, “Maintaining Ethno-Religious Harmony in Singapore.”

<sup>12</sup> Grace Ho, “Key Amendments to Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act,” *The Straits Times* (8 October 2019), available at: <https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/key-amendments-to-maintenance-of-religious-harmony-act>.

<sup>13</sup> Khun, “Maintaining Ethno-Religious Harmony in Singapore.”

<sup>14</sup> Eugene K.B Tan, “Keeping God in place: the management of religion in Singapore,” in *Religious Diversity in Singapore*, ed. Lai Ah Eng, Singapore: ISEAS, 2008, 55-82.

<sup>15</sup> Lai Ah Eng, *Religion*, Singapore: Institute of Policy Studies, 2017.

<sup>16</sup> Mathew Mathews and Danielle Hong, “Keeping Harmony in Singapore: An Examination of the Inter-Racial and Religious Confidence Circles (IRCC) in Singapore,” in *Managing Diversity in Singapore: Policies and Prospects*, eds. Mathew Mathews and Chiang Wai Fong, London: Imperial College Press, 2016, 65-84.

<sup>17</sup> Kong, “‘Managerialist’ constructions of religion.”

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*



school subject to address the “lack of spiritual and moral education” among youth.<sup>19</sup> As we will discuss later, this particular trope being propagated has proven problematic when members of different religious groups with diverging moral commitments claim monopoly over society’s moral direction.

Since 1965, modern independent Singapore has had a relatively long history free of interreligious strife. The national narrative has centred on how important this is for the survival of the country, given its smallness. Religious conflict and violence in the city *is* religious conflict and violence in the country. Given this geographical framing, managing religions and interreligious relations to ensure peaceful co-existence and harmony is thus high on the political leadership’s agenda in this multireligious and multicultural society. While peaceful interreligious coexistence has been largely undisturbed, instances of religiously exclusivist behaviour that threaten to induce social cleavages continue to periodically occur.

## Contemporary instances of exclusivism

Fundamentally, interreligious strife, conflict, and violence stem from exclusivist and sometimes superior attitudes and behaviours. Instances of exclusivist behaviours have been predominantly discursive, and fall into three categories: those involving religious leaders, those involving foreign preachers, and those involving lay persons. Additionally, there has also been one case of physical violence. Below are some examples of instances of each that occurred in the last decade.

The first category involves remarks by religious leaders that are deemed offensive. Three examples will illustrate. First, on 8 February 2010, Lighthouse Evangelism’s founder and Senior Pastor, Rony Tan, was called up by the Internal Security Department (ISD) for uploading videos that contained testimonials of an ex-monk and ex-nun. In the videos, Rony Tan ridiculed Buddhist belief of reincarnation, karma and nirvana. The audience was also captured laughing at his comments. Rony Tan immediately took down the videos after his meeting with the ISD and posted an apology on the church’s website. He personally apologised to the Secretary-General of the Singapore Buddhist Federation Venerable Kwang Sheng and the Taoist Federation Chairman Tan Thiam Lye.<sup>20</sup> In addition, he also combed his Miracle TV library to remove any other insensitive material on other religions. While the Singapore Buddhist Federation accepted his apology, they also wanted the authorities to look closely into the matter and ensure that such an incident does not occur again. Singaporeans were divided on the matter, with some accepting his apologies and others demanding he was punished more severely, or at the very least, be held accountable for his words.

A second example occurred on 15 June 2010, when audio tapes of a sermon by New Creation Church’s Pastor Mark Ng (that was delivered in August 2008) were circulated online. In the sermon, Mark Ng mocked a number of Taoist beliefs, including joking about how Taoist deities were turned to for protection by secret society gangsters and how one needs to be careful of ghosts during the 7<sup>th</sup> lunar month. The audio clips gained attention a couple of months after Rony Tan’s remarks, and the New Creation Church had initially responded to that incident by checking their material to ensure that no disparaging remarks about other religions were distributed by their pastors. They discovered that a number of Mark Ng’s sermons (that were available for sale) could be deemed to be insensitive and removed the sermons from their shelves. However, the New Creation Church was unsure how those particular audio clips (in which Mark Ng made fun of Taoism) were made available to the public. Mark Ng used to be a Taoist and some members of the public gave him the benefit of the doubt by believing that he was also poking fun at himself by making politically incorrect jokes. Mark Ng met with the chairman of the Taoist Federation, Tan Thiam Lye, and apologised to him. His actions, and that of the church (to remove all material) was received favourably by the general public.<sup>21</sup>

Another example occurred during sermons at Jamae Chulia Mosque in January and February 2017, when its chief *imam*, Nalla Mohamed Abdul Jameel Abdul Malik, made a supplication from an old Arabic text

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<sup>19</sup> Mohammad Alami Musa, “Engaging Religion with Pragmatism: The Singapore’s State Management of Social Issues and Religious Tensions in the 1980s,” *RSIS Working Paper* 305 (21 August 2017), available at: <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/srp/wp305-engaging-religion-with-pragmatism-the-singapore-states-management-of-social-issues-and-religious-tensions-in-the-1980s/#.X5kK9e0RV6I>.

<sup>20</sup> Yen Feng, “ISD Calls Up Pastor For Insensitive Comments,” *The Straits Times* (9 February 2010), available at: <https://www.asiaone.com/News/the%2BStraits%2BTimes/Story/A1Story20100209-197516.html>.

<sup>21</sup> Yen Feng, “ISD Looks Into Clip Of Sermon Which Mocked Taoist Beliefs,” *The Straits Times* (15 June 2010).

which came from his village in India. He recited, "God help us against Jews and Christians". This phrase is not an extract from the Quran. Terence Kenneth John Nunis, had uploaded his sermon onto Facebook, while Dr Syed Muhammad Khairudin Aljunied, an associate professor at the National University of Singapore, liked the video and posted a favourable response to it. Both men were issued a warning by the Ministry of Home Affairs for turning to social media, instead of reporting the sermon to the police. Dr Syed was also suspended by NUS and issued an internal warning. The message the government wanted to send was for individuals to turn to the authorities first on matters that can potentially be religiously sensitive, rather than turning to social media.<sup>22</sup> The Muslim community in Singapore reacted to the video on Facebook, arguing that the sermon was taken out of context and placed the Muslim community in a negative light. Nalla pleaded guilty to one count of knowingly committing an act which was prejudicial to the maintenance of harmony between different religious groups and was likely to disturb public tranquillity (Section 298A(b) of the Penal Code). He was fined \$4,000, his work permit was revoked and he was repatriated back to India in April 2017. He met with 30 different religious leaders and apologised to them. He also met with Rabbi Mordechai Abergel and apologised for his remarks. He also included all Singaporeans in his apology and sought to bear full responsibility for his actions.<sup>23</sup>

A second category involves foreign preachers whose views are deemed unacceptable. Two examples will illustrate the nature of the concerns. In October 2017, two Islamic preachers from Zimbabwe and Malaysia were barred from entering Singapore because their religious views were deemed to be too fundamentalist and counter to Singapore's multi-religious values. Zimbabwean Ismail Menk claims that it is blasphemous for Muslims to acknowledge the religious days of other faiths<sup>24</sup>, while Malaysian Haslin Baharim has publicly asserted the superiority of Muslims over non-Muslims. The two preachers were to participate in a religious cruise which was scheduled to depart from and conclude in Singapore in November. The Ministry of Home Affairs' decision to not let the preachers enter Singapore was supported by MUIS, which "does not support applications for foreign preachers whose views contravene the Code of Ethics under the Asatizah Recognition Scheme, and whose ideas are deeply problematic and very unsuited to a multi-religious context in Singapore."<sup>25</sup> Online reaction to the decision was mixed, with some supporting the government's decision, and others supporting Menk as a religious leader who promotes peace, but whose message was misinterpreted and taken out of context.

A month later, American Muslim preacher, Yusuf Estes, was also denied entry into Singapore on 24 November 2017. He was going to attend the same religious cruise as Menk and Baharim. He was travelling with his wife, and had flown into Changi Airport from Kuala Lumpur. The Ministry of Home Affairs, in consultation with MUIS, denied him entry to Singapore because his "divisive views breed intolerance and exclusivist practices that will damage social harmony, and cause communities to drift apart."<sup>26</sup>

A third example involves the case of Lou Engle, an American preacher, who had been invited to speak at an annual conference (called the Kingdom Invasion Conference) organised by the Cornerstone Community Church. In March 2018, Engle claimed that Islam was a threat to Christianity and invited his fellow Christians to "push back a new modern Muslim movement." The speech was recorded by an attendee, who subsequently posted an article on Rice Media, questioning why Engle was not briefed about respecting religious sensitivities in Singapore.<sup>27</sup> He also wondered why such a prominent preacher with numerous documented instances of

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<sup>22</sup> Toh Yong Chuan, "Duo Warned For Uploading, Supporting Video," *The Straits Times* (4 April 2017), available at: <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/duo-warned-for-uploading-supporting-video>.

<sup>23</sup> Toh Yong Chuan, "Imam Fined \$4,000, Repatriated For Offensive Remarks Against Christians And Jews," *The Straits Times*, (3 April 2017), available at: <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/imam-who-made-offensive-remarks-against-christians-and-jews-charged-in-court>.

<sup>24</sup> In its statement on the issue, the Ministry of Home Affairs noted that Menk "had preached segregationist and divisive teachings" because he "holds the view that it is a sin and crime" for Muslims to wish other believers on their religious holidays. There was no direct reference to his sermons, though his lectures on this topic can be easily found on YouTube. Later, Menk clarified his position that not wishing a Christian Merry Christmas is based on a theological belief, and does not equate to insulting Christians or Christmas.

<sup>25</sup> Tham Yuen-C, "2 Foreign Islamic Preachers Barred From Entering S'pore," *The Straits Times* (31 October 2017), available at: <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/2-foreign-islamic-preachers-barred-from-entering-spore>.

<sup>26</sup> Arlina Arshad, "Preacher Had Expressed Unacceptable Views: MHA," *The Straits Times* (2 December 2017), available at: <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/preacher-had-expressed-unacceptable-views-mha>.

<sup>27</sup> Benjamin Lim, "Lou Engle: An American Threatens A Christian-Muslim Divide In Singapore," *Rice Media*, (25 March 2018), available at: <https://www.ricemedia.co/current-affairs-features-lou-engle-american-threatens-christian-muslim-divide-singapore/>.

speaking against Islam<sup>28</sup> managed to enter Singapore, especially in light of the recent ban against two Muslim preachers who were deemed to hold too fundamentalist views. In response, Cornerstone Community Church filed a police report against Rice Media, claiming that the article's aim was to stir up religious tensions and ill feelings between Christians and Muslims. Rice Media stood by its journalist and article. Subsequently, the founder of Cornerstone Community Church apologised to Muslim leaders and Singapore and promised to be extremely vigilant in inviting foreign preachers. He also said that the church made a mistake by forgetting to remind Lou Eagle about being aware of religious sensitivities, and that they would be more careful in future.<sup>29</sup> They also posted an apology on their Facebook page, and indicated that they would not tolerate any foreign preacher who espoused insensitive or extreme views.

The third category involves lay persons making insensitive comments about other religions. A case in point is the case of a student group at the National University of Singapore, the Campus Crusade for Christ, which had, in February 2012, distributed promotional posters for their mission work to Thailand and Turkey which included insensitive comments on Buddhism and Islam. The posters were available throughout the university and were also on their website and on their Facebook page. The posters stated that "Thailand was a place of little true joy. Buddhism is so much of the Thai national identity and permeates into every level of society and culture that only one hundred Thais accept Christ each year" and that because Turkey is predominately Muslim, "much prayer and work is needed in this place." The group received much backlash online, particularly on Hardware Zone, where it was posted. The NUS Buddhist Society also lodged a formal complaint with NUS Office of Student Affairs. The Office of the Provost asked the group to remove all of their material from campus grounds.<sup>30</sup> Campus Crusade for Christ subsequently also removed their online posters. They also issued an apology on Hardware Zone and on their Facebook page, recognising that their choice of words was insensitive and tactless. Students who shared their comments on the incident mostly felt that Campus Crusade for Christ should have been more aware of their actions, and needed to recognise the sensitivity that is needed to live in a multi-religious society.

Finally, there has only been one public report – an isolated case – of physical abuse. In April 2016, a 48 year-old Singaporean Chinese man, Koh Weng Onn, attacked three female students (aged 14 to 16) from Madrasah Al Maarif Al Islamiah in three separate incidents. The public and high-level government ministers immediately spoke up for the students and madrasah, and strongly condemned the assault on social media platforms. The man was arrested the day after the attack, after the madrasah's discipline mistress posted an appeal for eyewitnesses on Facebook. He was sentenced to six months of jail time. His brother apologised to the students and to the Muslim community on his behalf, and explained that Weng Onn was suffering from mental health issues.<sup>31</sup>

## **Current approaches to countering exclusivism and promoting inclusivity: adequacies and gaps**

The above instances of exclusivist behaviour are clearly problematic. They demonstrate that the current managerialist approach to religion, while both "defensive" (addressing issues as they arise), and "preventive," in essence, it only seeks to prevent behaviours but does not necessarily address deeper attitudes. This thus invites us to reflect on more fundamentally embedded values and predilections, challenges and fissures. These include, first, the maturity of a plural society in handling the challenges posed by its own diversity; second, a potential perception of unfairness in managing interreligious affairs; and lastly, the irony of a society that

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<sup>28</sup> Engle is notorious for his homophobic and Islamophobic comments. Most notably, he organised a mass prayer event in 2011 for his followers to pray against Muslims. See Christina Caron, "Large Group Denouncing Islam Mobilizes in Detroit," *ABC News* (12 November 2011), available at: <https://abcnews.go.com/US/large-group-denouncing-islam-mobilizes-detroit/story?id=14933906>.

<sup>29</sup> Justin Ong, "Singapore Pastor Apologises To Muslim Leaders For US Preacher's Alleged Statements On Islam," *Channel NewsAsia* (4 April 2018), available at: <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/cornerstone-church-pastor-apologises-over-lou-engle-statement-10104680>.

<sup>30</sup> Jessica Lim, "NUS Orders Christian Group To Stop All Activities On Campus," *The Straits Times* (22 February 2012).

<sup>31</sup> Elena Chong, "Man Who Attacked 3 Madrasah Girls Jailed," *The Straits Times* (21 May 2016), available at: <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/courts-crime/man-who-attacked-3-madrasah-girls-jailed>.

inadvertently views diversity with greater hesitance – an outlook that is not conducive to promoting inclusivity. All these can shape the conditions that make exclusivist understandings of religion more palatable.

The various legislative and policy instruments adopted by the secular state mentioned earlier indeed point to a managerial and regulatory approach to religious diversity. While these existing tools have been largely effective in curtailing any kind of ethnic hostility from metastasising to destabilising levels, a continued reliance on the state to regulate diversity can be unhealthy for a society as diverse as Singapore's. In psychoanalytically assessing the state's paternalistic relationship with society, Kenneth Paul Tan warns us that civil society will not mature if this style of governance continues.<sup>32</sup> If we accept that the managerial approach to religion can also be understood to be an overly-paternalistic one in handling diversity, we also have to brace ourselves for a society that continues to be infantilised – one whose maturity in encountering inter-ethnic, interreligious diversity remains stunted as it continues to be spoon-fed the peace it enjoys. Akin to a child whose holistic growth is prevented by an overly protective parent, the Singapore society's maturity in encountering inter-religious diversity, as well as be more inclusive, would not be fully realised with an overreliance on the state. As Eugene Tan acknowledges, a top-down approach to promoting interreligious dialogue is never adequate to genuinely facilitate deeper inter-ethnic, interreligious understanding.<sup>33</sup>

In addition, an overreliance on the state's management of diversity can potentially breed suspicion over lack of even-handedness. In the earlier examples of various preachers being banned and reprimanded for espousing exclusivist rhetoric, there is the probable scenario where a religious group sees itself as being more than proportionately at the receiving end of such bans. This has the potential danger of engendering some loss in faith in the legitimacy of state institutions to impartially manage disputing religious demands – which is undesirable for both state and society.

Moreover, the managerialist approach to religious diversity here carries with it an inherent presupposition that can ironically be unconducive to inclusivism – it assumes that diversity is a problem that needs to be managed instead of celebrated. As Hussin Mutalib posits, the way the government approaches diversity in Singapore suggests a mistrust about it.<sup>34</sup> While there is good reason for it given Singapore's tumultuous experience with inter-ethnic strife, this caution towards diversity – as exhibited in the state's careful managerialist approach – can potentially and unwittingly influence societal attitudes towards difference. People would be less prepared to embrace difference for fear of tipping the delicate balance that is believed to have kept Singapore's peace for a long time now. For example, as noted by Yasmin Ortiga, Singaporeans have re-appropriated state-sanctioned ideas of multiculturalism in Singapore to exclude rather than include migrants who are seen to be too different.<sup>35</sup> This is despite the assumed ethnic similarities of the migrant population.

Similarly, the state's approach to interreligious relations has resulted in a condition of what Paul Hedges and Mohamed Imran Taib termed "precarious toleration" among the different religious groups in Singapore. The state views the interreligious peace that Singapore enjoys as only possible because it exercises tight control in preventing interreligious conflicts.<sup>36</sup> Clearly, the existing legal and policy instruments have played a significant role in managing the interreligious relations in Singapore. What we wish to draw attention to is how continuing fissures that emerge require more than direct state intervention, which can only be effective in a limited sense in influencing everyday and quotidian experience.

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<sup>32</sup> Kenneth Paul Tan, "Who's Afraid of Catherine Lim? The State in Patriarchal Singapore," *Asian Studies Review* 33.1 (2009): 43-62.

<sup>33</sup> Tan, "Keeping God in Place."

<sup>34</sup> Hussin Mutalib, *Singapore Malays: Being Ethnic Minority and Muslim in a Global City-State*, London: Routledge, 2014.

<sup>35</sup> Yasmin Ortiga, "Multiculturalism on Its Head: Unexpected Boundaries and New Migration in Singapore," *Journal of International Migration and Integration* 16.4 (July 2014): 947-63.

<sup>36</sup> Paul Hedges and Mohamed Imran Mohamed Taib, "The Interfaith Movement in Singapore: Precarious Toleration and Embedded Autonomy," in *The Interfaith Movement*, eds. John Fahy and Jan-Jonathan Bock, London and New York: Routledge, 2019, 139-56.

## The micro-politics of everyday life

It is at the level of quotidian experience where interreligious encounters take place that we have a pivotal stage in either cultivating inclusivism or condoning exclusivism. Inter-ethnic and interreligious tensions occur frequently amidst the activities of everyday life, perhaps more than is commonly acknowledged. Individuals' ordinary actions, spoken or unspoken, are almost always socially inflected. It is the micro-politics of everyday life that can speak to us about the shifting dynamics of interreligious relations in Singapore. As such, when fault lines do emerge at the micro-level, such as the school or the workplace or the playground, resolving disputes at that level by the actors most directly affected by incidents marks the maturity of a society in addressing its own fissures. The converse is that these tensions and skirmishes that emerge at the micro-setting accumulate over time and challenge society at a macro-level which then require state intervention.

As Linda Woodhead notes, "making the people who are directly involved in a disputed issue work out a successful solution amongst themselves – often a compromise – seems to have better outcomes."<sup>37</sup> This strategy could provide society a range of different and potentially viable solutions that do not only de-escalate contentious issues stemming from diversity, but enable society overall to become more inclusive and more importantly, self-reliant in encountering potential fault lines that may emerge as a result of diversity. In a managerialist environment, and one that has been so for a long time, there is no denying that this approach appears a potentially risky one.

## Three dialectics

Given the importance of this quotidian dimension – not just as a stage where fissures amidst diversity can emerge and accumulate, but also where compromise and accommodation can be organically negotiated – it is vital that a diverse society has the capacity to navigate through interreligious diversity at the scale of the everyday so as to counter exclusivism and promote inclusivism. In what follows, we discuss three dialectics that operate in the day-to-day realm that are pertinent to the Singapore experience. The first is the dialectic between ideology and praxis, or between what people think and what they actually do. The second is the dialectic between enhancing interreligious interactions and interreligious understanding. The third is the dialectic between emphasising the personal and private in religion, and, the communal and public. If a society is able to deal with these dialectics, one can reasonably see the way forward with optimism. If the outcomes of these dialectics are not favourable, at a micro-level, skirmishes will emerge. When they accumulate over time, they can become more challenging to manage. Although these dialectics can be understood to be analytically distinct, they are interlinked and can be mutually contradictory, thus further complicating the challenges of a multireligious society.

### *Ideology and Practice*

The first dialectic is between ideology and practice or in other words, between what people think and believe, and, what they actually do. In reaffirming a vision of inclusiveness, it is difficult to identify whether people are reproducing a public narrative as opposed to a private belief. An individual may very well be expressing politically correct responses or socially conforming attitudes. However, it is in action that the essence of one's position becomes clear. If a gap exists between professed ideology and daily praxis, and this persists over time, fissures will begin to appear in society. For example, if employers and managers articulate a commitment to an inclusive environment that does not differentiate on the basis of religion, the question needs to be asked

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<sup>37</sup> Linda Woodhead, "Religious Other or Religious Inferior?" *India International Centre Quarterly* 40.3/4 (December 2013): 1–14.

whether this is fully upheld in the workplace and whether employment practices fall short. For example, do Muslim women wearing the hijab face employment discrimination – do they get turned down from certain job opportunities or are they advised to remove the headscarf during work? Or in work-related dinners, are the religious dietary requirements of minorities in the company adequately considered?<sup>38</sup> Do employers facilitate when Hindu employees apply for leave or time-off for Thaipusam? Albeit mundane, these examples should provoke questions regarding whether or not current societal practices are genuinely inclusive. Managing the right balance in this dialectic does not necessarily entail one to maintain complete consistency in rhetoric and praxis, but if there is a chasm, then we have to ask ourselves whether, in effect, this is a society that is more exclusive and less inclusive than we would like to acknowledge.

In further problematising this relationship, it is worthy to note that not all chasms are inimical to inclusivism and automatically encourage exclusivism. Indeed, if we accept that an inclusivist ideology and exclusivist practice can undermine a plural society, then we also have to acknowledge the possibility that the reverse could also be true – a dissonance between exclusivist ideology and inclusivist practice can ironically also preserve the diversity of society. To demonstrate this nuance, Walid Jumblatt Abdullah argues that a Muslim's refusal to wish Christians "Merry Christmas" represents an adoption on the part of that Muslim of a particular tradition of thought within Islam.<sup>39</sup> According to this strand of thought, wishing others Merry Christmas sits uncomfortably close to accepting the divinity of Jesus, a celebrated prophet in Islam, but believed to be no more divine than other men. As such, abstaining from wishing "Merry Christmas," at least for Muslims who adhere to this line of thinking, has more to do with a theological concern. The purported intolerance and exclusivism represented by these kinds of Muslims is complicated by the very real possibility that these Muslims often find a substitute to convey their well wishes to their Christian neighbours, such as in the form of "Happy Holidays" or "Seasons Greetings." Perhaps then it would not be entirely justifiable to presuppose intolerance in judging the hesitance of these Muslims to wish others "Merry Christmas." Theirs is an exclusivist ideology but their modified practice/greeting is not necessarily divisive. It would potentially be alarmist and a missed opportunity to generate greater mutual understanding of different beliefs, a precursor in promoting inclusivism.

#### *Enhancing interreligious interactions and interreligious understanding*

The second dialectic is between enhancing interreligious interactions and interreligious understanding. In a multi-religious society, it is often assumed that individuals who engage in interreligious interactions will enhance interreligious understanding. This, however, is not necessarily a simple linear relationship.

In society in general, there is still much to be desired in terms of deeper interreligious understanding. Often, observers remark how the interreligious harmony in Singapore is underlined more by apathetic tolerance than genuine understanding.<sup>40</sup> Yet, amidst the backdrop of religious revivalism and the exclusivism that can go with it, a tolerance-based approach is insufficient.<sup>41</sup> One reason the latter approach continues to be the *modus operandi* could be the perceived incompatibility in truth-claims that different religious traditions make. Indeed, believers of a particular religious tradition could fear that their own personal beliefs would be compromised when they participate in interfaith gestures such as worshipping together. For instance, as Mathews discovered, many Protestant clergyman expressed hesitance to engage in interreligious dialogue and interfaith worship precisely for such reasons.<sup>42</sup> Similarly, based on a study of the local interfaith scene,<sup>43</sup> leaders of religious organisations often have to justify any interreligious activity with their followers who in turn frequently express concern over their community's vulnerability and loyalty, especially when encountering more intimately other faiths in interfaith sessions and events.

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<sup>38</sup> Michael D. Barr and Zlatko Skrbiš, *Constructing Singapore: Elitism, Ethnicity and the Nation-Building Project*, Copenhagen: NIAS, 2011, 87-111.

<sup>39</sup> Walid Jumblatt Abdullah, "Conflating Muslim 'Conservatism' with 'Extremism': Examining the 'Merry Christmas' Saga in Singapore," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 37.3 (March 2017): 344-56.

<sup>40</sup> Charles Phua, Anita Hui and Ching Wi Yap, "Interactions Among Youth Leaders Of Different Faiths: Realities from the Ground and Lessons Learnt," in *Religious Diversity in Singapore*, ed. Lai Ah Eng, Singapore: ISEAS, 2008, 642-67.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> Mathew Mathews, "Negotiating Christianity With Other Religions: The Views of Christian Clergymen in Singapore," in *Religious Diversity in Singapore*, ed. Lai Ah Eng, Singapore: ISEAS, 2008, 571-604.

<sup>43</sup> Phua, Hui and Ching, "Interactions Among Youth Leaders Of Different Faiths."

There is no guarantee that greater interreligious encounter through interfaith initiatives can successfully promote inclusivism and discourage exclusivism. As Kong and Woods highlight in their study of local and migrant Christian interactions in Singapore churches, the inclusionary opportunity offered by encounter and proximity in a common space can often be offset by exclusionary practices. While their study explored the bordering of identity that differentiates ethno-nationalities in spite of common religious identities, we learn that proximity “often also leads to construction of clearer boundaries and more apparent forms of separation.”<sup>44</sup> Proximity comes in the form of more frequent intimate encounters in interfaith sessions. If intra-community cleavages can form despite converging religious identities, what more interreligious ones where difference is already obvious from the start. Furthermore, as Charles Phua, Anita Hui and, Ching Wi Yap note, a common obstacle to interfaith dialogue here is participants who only want to find fault with other religious traditions and “focus on weeding out differences between different faiths as proof that theirs is the best.”<sup>45</sup> This challenge of exclusivist impulses that may emerge out of interfaith interactions certainly complicates efforts to find the right balance between interreligious interactions and interreligious understanding. Interfaith organisers have to keep in mind these potential fault lines that can occur in advocating for an increase in interreligious interactions. Organisers must be prepared to anticipate as well as overcome instances of such exclusivist behaviour that can manifest.

As such, the challenge would be to promote a public discourse about religion that coheres with private religious beliefs. As difficult as it is to dispute the peaceful coexistence of religious groups here, it is also difficult to categorically assert that genuine interreligious understanding exists. Developing the appropriate kinds of interreligious interactions to deepen interreligious understanding remains a challenge. Thus, a trial-and-error approach to interfaith initiatives from the ground up is necessary so that Singapore’s interfaith scene can organically mature, propagating inclusivist understandings and practices of religious traditions that leave less room for exclusivist ones to emerge.<sup>46</sup>

#### *Emphasising the personal and private, and the communal and public, in religion*

The third dialectic between emphasising the personal and private in religion, and, the communal and public is related to Erving Goffman’s dramaturgical perspective of the frontstage and backstage of micro-level interaction and behaviour. The frontstage of social interaction represents a “stage” where the individual is more concerned with “impression-management” whereas the backstage entails a more frank and personal self-understanding.<sup>47</sup> As such, the frontstage of religious practice is associated with the very public manifestation and evidencing of one’s religious beliefs while the backstage refers to one’s own private beliefs and practices within the confines of private space. As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, the post-independence Singapore state believes that there is a communal and public dimension of the frontstage of religion that does need managing.

This is evidenced by the state’s “instrumentalist construction” of religion as “practical resource, rather than esoteric belief.”<sup>48</sup> In other words, religious practices and beliefs should facilitate an individual’s role and contribution as a citizen of Singapore. Specifically, religion should be understood as a catalyst of progress and development as well as a sponsor of moral well-being – all of which inculcates in the Singaporean believer a sense of national duty that is simultaneously fulfilled as he or she surrenders to a transcendental authority. In this context, it does not mean that the backstage is relegated to irrelevance or divorced entirely from the frontstage. On the contrary, the frontstage and backstage of religious practice and belief can arguably become more dialectically inflected than ever before. Woodhead and Ole Riis delineate this dialectical relationship between the frontstage and backstage of religious practice especially in the modern secular state. They note how, in secular settings, individuals are continually pressured to reflect on whether their frontstage behaviour

<sup>44</sup> Lily Kong and Orlando Woods, “Disjunctures of Belonging and Belief: Christian Migrants and the Bordering of Identity in Singapore,” *Population, Space and Place* 25.6 (October 2019): 1-10.

<sup>45</sup> Phua, Hui and Ching, “Interactions Among Youth Leaders Of Different Faiths.”

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> D. Michael Lindsay, “Is the National Prayer Breakfast Surrounded by a ‘Christian Mafia’? Religious Publicity and Secrecy Within the Corridors of Power,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 74.2 (December 2006): 390-419.

<sup>48</sup> Kong, “‘Managerialist’ constructions of religion.”



accords with their sentiments backstage.<sup>49</sup> Secularism raises the stakes of religious practice by increasing the desire for a more “authentic” being where frontstage beliefs and practices should correspond with backstage ones. In what follows, we can observe how this reconciliation between frontstage and backstage, catalysed partly by state discourses, may result in exclusivist behaviours that inadvertently diverge from what the state originally envisaged.

The recent Christian and Muslim anti-LGBTQ discourse can reveal why this dialectic between frontstage and backstage plays a role in promoting or discouraging exclusivist behaviour. The favourable outcomes of the previous two dialectics presuppose some kind of coherence between public and private belief and praxis. At the same time, in trying to reconcile this dialectic between frontstage and backstage coherently, individuals may choose to conflate the frontstage and backstage, risking exclusivist religious beliefs and behaviours to manifest more frequently. As Nur Amali Ibrahim suggests, evangelical Christian homophobic discourse is underpinned by an understanding that they are the gatekeepers of morality in Singapore. Moreover, the demography of evangelical Christians – middle-class and highly-educated – speaks of their “ideal” citizenship. On the other hand, Muslims’ relatively recent, and overt, homophobic discourse which accords with Christian ones – can be seen as an attempt to reconfigure their religiosity to be compatible with perceptions of religion’s role on the national stage. It is also important to note that much of the homophobic discourse being perpetuated was by Muslim university graduates.<sup>50</sup> What these two interreligious strands of homophobic discourses demonstrate is a kind of frontstage role that speaks to the “instrumentalist constructions” of religion as a driver of progress and development – informed by the socio-economically “ideal” citizen – and, also as a sponsor of national moral well-being which Christians and Muslims believe they have a role in helping to maintain. As such, exclusionary Christian and Muslim homophobic discourses, originating backstage, can be said to be a product of a particular dialectical relationship between the frontstage and backstage of religious practice and belief that is not just unintentionally conflated, but mutually reinforcing.

In short, the outcome of this dialectic between frontstage and backstage is crucial in shaping the kinds of exclusivist or inclusivist attitudes that can emerge from society. On top of the other two dialectics, the dialectic between conflating and demarcating the frontstage and backstage is something Singaporeans have to simultaneously grapple with, especially within the context of the state’s instrumentalist construction of religion. As the previous example has demonstrated, how these frontstage and backstage roles are emphasised in society can prove to be as consequential as it is counter-intuitive to promoting inclusivity and countering exclusivism. It remains vital that Singapore society realises the right balance to navigate this dialectic so as to avoid privileging certain exclusivist rhetoric over inclusivist ones.

## Conclusion

Navigating these three dialectics can prove critical in terms of addressing the incursions of exclusivist attitudes and behaviours into everyday life. Because these dialectics operate at the quotidian realm beyond the initial reach of state mechanisms, it could prove to be a decisive arena where exclusivist behaviour and rhetoric could be discouraged and avoided. To be sure, although existing managerial approaches to governing religious diversity have hitherto proven effective, they are not fool proof as evidenced by the episodic emergence of exclusivist sentiments. As also discussed, an overreliance on existing measures can contribute in shaping the conditions that make society more susceptible to exclusivist tendencies and wary of inclusivity. This is especially so when society lacks maturity in navigating its own diversity; when groups perceive unfairness in implementation of these measures; and also when society internalises the caution to diversity implied in these measures. In many societies, there is no one answer to these problems, and every society finds its own solutions that vary over time. Ongoing research into these quotidian dialectics will provide helpful insights as societies manage their diversities.

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<sup>49</sup> Ole Riis and Linda Woodhead, *A Sociology of Religious Emotion*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012, 95-122.

<sup>50</sup> Nur Amali Ibrahim, “Homophobic Muslims: Emerging Trends in Multireligious Singapore,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 58.4 (2016): 955-81.



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The Studies in Inter-Religious Relations in Plural Societies (SRP) Programme aims to study various models of how religious communities develop their teachings to meet the contemporary challenges of living in plural societies. It will also deepen the study of inter-religious relations, formulate models for the positive role of religions in peace-building and produce knowledge to strengthen social ties between communities. The Programme seeks to be at the forefront in the development of scholarship and applied knowledge on the roles of religion and inter-religious relations in plural societies today.

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