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"Muscular" versus "Liberal" Secularism and the Religious Fundamentalist Challenge in Singapore

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ABSTRACT

This essay examines how the divisive forces of religious fundamentalism have been a recurring feature of Singapore's history. It shows why events in 2009 and 2010 appear to suggest that the Singapore State may well be justified in continuing to consider religious fundamentalism as a potential threat to the social fabric of the nation. The essay then addresses two contending perspectives in coping with religious fundamentalism in Singapore, the so-called "Muscular Secularist" and "Liberal Secularist" views – the former favoured by the State and the latter reflecting the aspirations of some sections of civil society. The essay discusses the increasing pressure both from inside and outside Singapore on the State to soften its no-nonsense Muscular Secularist stance on coping with religious fundamentalism in Singapore and imbibe elements of the more nuanced Liberal Secularist perspective. Finally, it explains why Muscular Secularism is likely to remain the State's preferred philosophy for managing religious fundamentalism for the foreseeable future.

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Strategies, published by Eastern Universities Press in January 2003, and *After Bali: The Threat of Terrorism in Southeast Asia*, co-published by the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies and World Scientific Publishing in January 2004.His

latest book is *Radical Pathways: Understanding Muslim Radicalization in Indonesia*, published by Praeger Security International in 2009.

"Muscular" versus "Liberal" Secularism and the Religious Fundamentalist Challenge in Singapore

Singapore in 2009: Religious Fundamentalisms Observed

2009 was a significant year for Singapore. For most security analysts, the highlight of the year was the re-arrest, in May, of Singapore's most wanted terrorist, Mas Selamat Kastari, the operational leader of the local cell of the Al Qaeda-affiliated but Indonesia-based Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) network. Mas Selamat or "MSK" as he is known, had created a furore in February 2008, escaping from detention and sparking a massive nationwide manhunt. Eventually, based on information supplied by the Singapore and Indonesian authorities, the Malaysian Special Branch re-arrested MSK in Johore, in southern Malaysia—just across the Causeway from Singapore.[1] While violent religious extremism as exemplified by the MSK affair appeared to dominate the headlines, a more careful appraisal of the security landscape in Singapore suggests that this was in fact not a stand-alone phenomenon but rather merely one "species" of a much broader trend—*religious fundamentalism*—that appeared to afflict the city-state that year. In this respect, the MSK recapture aside, the nation was also captivated by the so-called AWARE saga that took place between March and May 2009. AWARE—which stands for Association of Women for Action and Research—is a secular, civil society grouping that has sought to promote women's rights over the years. In March 2009, a group of Christian women from a church captured control of AWARE because they had been offended by what they felt was AWARE's pro-homosexual agenda.[2] Partly because of unusually sensationalistic reporting by the normally careful pro-government mass media, the issue very quickly became framed as a clash between a rapacious, thrusting, Christian minority and an Alternative Lifestyle lobby fighting a rearguard action to preserve its rights. In a—by Singaporean standards—raucous Extraordinary General Meeting (EGM) in early May, the Christian women were booted out and a more secular management team voted in to take charge of AWARE affairs.[3] As if that was not enough excitement, in

[1] "Mas Selamat Captured", *The Straits Times* (Singapore), 8 May 2009, available online at http://www.straitstimes.com/Breaking%2BNews/Singapore/Story/STIStory_374011.html (accessed 28 January 2010).
[2] "Taken Unawares", *The Economist*, 7 May 2009.
[3] "DPM on AWARE Saga", *The Straits Times* (Singapore), 15 May 2009.

late May, a Christian couple was hauled up and charged under the Sedition Act for distributing inflammatory materials about Islam that had offended some Malay-Muslims.[4]

The Singapore State was extremely concerned about these various developments. To be sure, it paid as much attention to the MSK affair as to these other manifestations of a broader trend of religious fundamentalism. As this essay shall show, the State regards religious fundamentalism as a serious existential threat to the social fabric of the nation—and regards it as a national security issue of the utmost importance. The essay, following an introductory section sketching the geopolitical, multi-religious, multi-cultural context of Singapore, will then engage in a brief conceptual discussion to examine why religious fundamentalism deserves to be framed as a national security issue. It will then show that the divisive forces of religious fundamentalism have been a recurring feature of Singapore's post-war history. The essay will then address two contending perspectives in coping with religious fundamentalism in Singapore, which we may term the "Muscular Secularist" and "Liberal Secularist" views. The essay discusses the increasing pressure both from inside and outside Singapore on the State to soften its no-nonsense Muscular Secularist stance on coping with religious fundamentalism in Singapore and imbibe elements of the more nuanced Liberal Secularist perspective. However, it assesses that Muscular Secularism is likely to remain the State's preferred philosophy for managing religious fundamentalism for the foreseeable future.

Singapore: A Brief Snapshot

Singapore is by no means an old established nation, which is not an unimportant point. It is a young and densely populated Chinese-majority island city-state in the midst of a largely Malay-Muslim archipelago, 704 square kilometres in size—which makes it similar in geographical extent to New York City. A former British colony, modern Singapore is a thriving, cosmopolitan metropolis with a population of about five million, which includes about 1.8 million non-citizens and

[4] "Christian Couple Found Guilty of Distributing Seditious Materials to Muslims", available online at http://www.channelnewsasia.com/stories/singaporelocalnews/view/432444/1/.html (accessed 27 January 2010).

permanent residents.[5] A multi-cultural, multi-lingual and multi-religious society, the city-state's citizenry comprises principally ethnic Chinese (74 per cent) with large ethnic Malay (13 per cent) and Indian (9.2 per cent) minorities.[6] Importantly, in terms of religious affiliation, most Chinese in Singapore are Buddhists, Taoists and Christians (both Protestant and Catholic), while most Indians are Hindus, with a smaller number being Christians as well. The Malays are, however, overwhelmingly Muslims.[7] To be sure, Singapore has had a rather tumultuous history since the end of World War Two. Geopolitically, the Cold War did not spare the city-state from its complex zero-sum power calculus: colonial and later self-governing Singapore had to endure a debilitating campaign of Communist subversion that started immediately after the end of the Second World War and ensured a long period of tension lasting from the 1950s till well into the 1970s. On top of that, the first generation of Singapore State elites had to cope with a politically painful ejection from the Federation of Malaysia in August 1965 while fighting a rearguard action against the ambitious Indonesian President Soekarno's so-called policy of Confrontation—a conflict that ended only with his ouster by the more sober-minded and pragmatic General Suharto in the mid-1960s. These historic global, regional and internal instabilities imposed considerable stress on the State elites and helped create an existential siege mentality that has lasted till this day.[8] As we shall see, such a siege-driven, take-nothing-for-granted mindset continues to shape the response to the religious fundamentalism that has always been part of the historic politico-security landscape but has gathered apace over the past two decades. Hence, the State has never for once assumed that socio-religious harmony and political stability—long regarded as the basic and irreducible requirements for rapid and continuous economic growth and ultimately national survival—is something that occurs naturally. Instead, the State's attitude has always been that one has to work hard to attain religious harmony. Senior Minister and Co-ordinating Minister for National Security Professor S. Jayakumar's October 2007 comment is typical. He noted that for Singapore, "racial

[5] See Table 1, "Population and Annual Growth", *Population Trends 2009* (Singapore: Department of Statistics, Ministry of Trade and Industry, 2009), p. 1, available online at http://www.singstat.gov.sg/pubn/popn/population2009.pdf (accessed 28 January 2010).
[6] *Population Trends 2009*, p. 4.
[7] Kamaludeen Mohamed Nasir, Alexius A. Pereira and Bryan S. Turner, *Muslims in Singapore: Piety, Politics and Policies* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), p. 5.
[8] Robert O. Tilman, *Southeast Asia and the Enemy Beyond: ASEAN Perceptions of External Threats* (Boulder: Westview, 1987); see also Lee Kuan Yew, *The Singapore Story: Memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew* (Singapore: Times Editions, 1998).

and religious harmony is not just a desirable objective to achieve but is the *fundamental basis for our social stability, cohesion and security*."[9]

Conceptual Interlude: Framing Religious Fundamentalism as a National Security Concern

To understand why a seemingly innocuous topic such as religious fundamentalism should be a national security concern to State elites in Singapore, a brief conceptual discussion justifying framing religious fundamentalism as a national security issue is warranted. In general, all human beings seek cognitive consistency—that is, for emotional and psychological health it is very important that their deeply-held beliefs enable them to embed readily into their surrounding societal milieu. This inside-outside integration does not always happen however, creating a significant disconnect between the mental worlds of some individuals and the realities that surround them; this is what psychologists term "cognitive dissonance".[10] As far as religious individuals are concerned, they could respond to the cognitive dissonance generated when they find themselves embedded in a societal milieu that does not accord with their innermost beliefs in one of three basic ways. First, they could decide that their beliefs are outmoded and make a conscious decision to renounce them, adopt secular attitudes and assimilate into the environment. The Dutch-Somali writer and activist, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, is a good example of such an assimilationist response to modernity, as her poignant memoir illustrates.[11] Assimilation aside**,** a second option would be *reinterpretation or adaptation*, where religious individuals seek to update or modernize their beliefs so as to ensure that they remain relevant in the context of globalized modernity. This is what animated the reform efforts of the nineteenth century Muslim modernist intellectuals such as Muhammad Abduh and Jamal al-Afghani, who sought to modernize Islam so as to ensure that the Muslim community could keep pace with Western intellectual, social and political achievements.[12] A third

[9] "The Meaning and Importance of the Rule of Law", Keynote Address by Professor S. Jayakumar, Deputy Prime Minister, Co-ordinating Minister for National Security and Minister for Law, International Bar Association Symposium on Rule of Law, Singapore, 19 October 2007.
[10] Charles Selengut, *Sacred Fury: Understanding Religious Violence* (Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press, 2003), pp. 64–7.
[11] Ayaan Hirsi Ali, *Infidel* (London: The Free Press, 2007), pp. 247–8.
[12] John L. Esposito and John O. Voll, *Makers of Contemporary Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 18–9.

option to reduce cognitive dissonance is the polar opposite of assimilation: transformation. In this case, the religious individual may seek to actively transform the environment in order to ensure that it accords with his interpretation of what the holy texts proclaim. Religious fundamentalists—regardless of the background of their faith—are in fact transformationists.[13] Religious fundamentalists believe that they alone hold the "Truth" and that they have the religious legitimacy and duty to restructure the wider sociopolitical environment to accord with that Truth.[14]

Religious fundamentalism should be distinguished from *spirituality*. According to psychiatrist Robert Cloninger, who has studied both Eastern and Western religious traditions and analysed the "lives of prophets and saints, mystics and seers, gurus and yogis", spirituality may be regarded as concerned with "self-transcendence".[15] In particular, the latter quality may be seen as comprising three inter-related elements: "self-forgetfulness, transpersonal identification and mysticism". [16] Religious fundamentalism correctly understood is of a different category altogether. It may be regarded as a particularly strict form of "piety or deep personal religiosity", where overriding emphasis is put on uncompromising adherence to literal readings of holy texts—and hence utter purity in doctrine and praxis. Often the by-product of such a standpoint is an obsession with the avoidance of "contamination" through close contact with those outside the imagined moral circle. Thus "the consequence of piety is to sharpen the sense of separate religious identities and to reinforce social boundaries" between "insiders and outsiders".[17] Moreover, as ultimate moral security is to be found in a transformationistal strategy that restructures the surrounding environment so that it accords with one's beliefs, religious fundamentalism at its core—as critical theorist Stuart Sim rightly posits—*has more to do with power rather than spirituality per se*. Religious fundamentalists, regardless of the specific content of their beliefs, ultimately seek "control, control, control".[18] Hence, religious fundamentalism ultimately seeks the *power to dominate*

[13] Selengut, *Sacred Fury*, pp. 66–7.
[14] Geert Hofstede and Gert Jan Hofstede, *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind* (New York; McGraw-Hill, 2005), p. 200.
[15] See Dean Hamer, *The God Gene: How Faith is Hardwired into Our Genes* (New York: Anchor Books, 2004), pp. 21–35.
[16] Hamer, *The God Gene*, p. 23.
[17] Nasir et al., *Muslims in Singapore*, p. 11.
[18] Stuart Sim, *Fundamentalist World: The New Dark Age of Dogma* (Cambridge: Icon Books, 2004), p. 100.

and transform the environment so as to impose one's epistemological system to the exclusion of other contending perspectives. Religious fundamentalists may seek such sociopolitical domination and transformation through several modalities. To take a Southeast Asian Muslim example, religious fundamentalism could take the form of aggressive civil society activity to influence the State and Society—as is the case with the Indonesian Mujahidin Council [MMI] in Indonesia.[19] Religious fundamentalists may also seek actual State capture through constitutional means such as elections—as is the case with the Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS)[20] and the well-known if controversial Prosperity and Justice Party (PKS) in Indonesia.[21] Of no small importance, other religious fundamentalists may turn to illegal, violent means to restructure society in accordance with their versions of the Truth—in this connection, the religiously-motivated political violence and terrorism of Al Qaeda and in Southeast Asia, JI, springs to mind. Religious fundamentalism—with its intrinsic us-versus-them, black-and-white, good-versus-evil "binary worldview", can therefore give the right mix of circumstances and accelerants, generating a pathway leading towards violent religious extremism and terrorism.[22] It is in this sense that religious fundamentalism deserves to be considered as a national security concern *par excellence.*

Religious Fundamentalism in Singapore's History: A Recurring Concern

In his National Day Rally Speech in August 2009, Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong pointed out three risks facing Singapore's social fabric:

Aggressive preaching—proselytization. You push your own religion on others, you cause nuisance and offence … Intolerance is another problem—not respecting the beliefs of others or not accommodating others who belong to different religions …

[19] Din Wahid, "Islamic State or Islamic Society?", in *Islamic Thought and Movements in Contemporary Indonesia*, ed. by Rizal Sukma and Clara Joewono (Jakarta: Centre for Strategic and International Studies, 2007), pp. 79–104.
[20] See Farish A. Noor, "The Localisation of Islamist Discourse in the *Tafsir* of Tuan Guru Nik Aziz Nik Mat, *Murshid'ul Am* of PAS", in *Malaysia: Islam, Society and Politics*, ed. by Virginia Hooker and Noraini Othman (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2003), pp. 195–220.
[21] Anthony Bubalo and Greg Fealy, *Joining the Caravan? The Middle East, Islamism and Indonesia* (Alexandria, NSW: Lowy Institute for International Policy Paper 5, 2005), pp. 66–74.
[22] Kumar Ramakrishna, *Radical Pathways: Understanding Muslim Radicalisation in Indonesia* (Westport: Praeger Security International, 2009).

Exclusiveness is a third problem—segregating into separate exclusive circles, not integrating with other faiths. That means you mix with your own people. You'll end up as separate communities.[23]

In other words—rather than just singling out the continuing threat of religiously-motivated terrorism per se—Lee expressed a *wider worry* about the threat of religious fundamentalism more generally to Singapore's social fabric. To be sure, this is not exactly a new concern. Religious fundamentalism has left an indelible mark on the political history of Singapore. During the colonial era, the so-called Maria Hertogh Riots in December 1950, for instance, erupted over a court decision to award custody of a Dutch girl who had converted to Islam during World War Two, to her biological Christian parents who had returned to seek her whereabouts. Thanks to toxic reporting by the mass media that portrayed the affair in terms of a zero-sum contest between Christianity and Islam, Muslim resentment was stoked to the point at which violence broke out that killed 18 people, injured 173 others and resulted in much property damage. The Hertogh riots had a lasting effect in shaping Singapore leaders' views on religious fault-lines in Singapore society.[24] The 1980s, moreover, which witnessed a general upsurge of religious revivalism worldwide, had discernible effects on faith communities in Singapore. This was not lost on the State. Former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, very much the master architect of the Singapore State, in a speech to a Buddhist gathering in December 1988, pointed out:

The present phase in Singapore tends more towards intensely held beliefs than towards tolerant co-existence. At a time when Islam is resurgent and thrusting, Christians, especially Charismatics, are in a dynamic, evangelical phase. This has sometimes led to friction and requires sensitive handling.[25]

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[23] "Risks of Religious Fervour", *The Straits Times* (Singapore), 18 August 2009, available online at http://www.straitstimes.com/STI/STIMEDIA/sp/nationaldayrally2009/090818_risks_of_religious_fervour.html (accessed 28 January 2010).

[24] "Maria Hertogh Dies", *The Straits Times* (Singapore), 10 July 2009, available online at http://www.straitstimes.com/Breaking%2BNews/Singapore/Story/STIStory_401270.html (accessed 27 January 2010).

[25] "Jaya: Don't Take Harmony for Granted", 24 July 2009, available online at http://74.125.153.132/search?q=cache:XoF1xyz4LSQJ:www.singaporeunited.sg/cep/index.php/cluster/News-Room/Jaya-Don-t-take-harmony-for-granted/(cluster)/MHA+late+1980s+university+students+were+harassed+by+extremely+zealous+Christian+students&cd=1&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=sg (accessed 28 January 2010).

Lee had a point actually. In the late 1980s, university undergraduates were harassed by extremely zealous Christian students, while in hospitals, some doctors and medical students sought to convert critically ill patients to Christianity. In addition, in August 1986, worshippers in a Hindu temple found posters announcing a Christian seminar pasted at the entrance of their temple. Hindus were also outraged when Christian missionaries appeared to distribute pamphlets to people going into temples. It was not just pugnacious Christian fundamentalists who were causing much angst, though. Well before the emergence of JI in 2001, one lecturer from Indonesia in 1973 had branded Singaporean Muslims as "stooges" for not standing up for Islam. Moreover, after Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi had been assassinated by her Sikh bodyguards in 1984 following the Indian Army assault on the Golden Temple in Amritsar, in Singapore itself Hindu fundamentalists attacked local Sikhs, committed acts of vandalism on Sikh properties, and made threatening phone calls to Sikh individuals and institutions.[26] That's not all. Soon after the September 11 2001 Al Qaeda strikes in New York and Washington, Singaporeans were stunned to learn of the JI plot to attack Western diplomatic and commercial interests in the city-state[27]—while in early 2002, the Muslim fundamentalist activist, Zulfikar Mohamad Shariff, posted inflammatory materials on his website *fateha.com* accusing the State of oppressing Singaporean Muslims and preventing them from freely practising their religion. For instance, he pilloried the State for imposing restrictions on the wearing of the headscarf (*tudung*) by Muslim girls in government schools, and criticized Muslim members of parliament for not doing enough to defend and advance Malay Muslim rights in Singapore.[28] These previous episodes—over and above the incidents that occurred in 2009, as mentioned earlier—exemplify the very real tensions between the State's ongoing quest to forge an overarching Singaporean identity and the divergent pulls of Singaporeans' globalized, transnational religious allegiances.[29] As far as the State is concerned, it has sought to ensure that the centre holds in the face of such centrifugal primordial forces. It has never assumed that religious pluralism and

[26] "Jaya: Don't Take Harmony For Granted".
[27] See the Singapore Ministry of Home Affairs White Paper "The Jemaah Islamiyah Arrests and the Threat of Terrorism", January 2003, available online at http://www.mha.gov.sg/publication_details.aspx?pageid=35&cid=354 (accessed 28 January 2010).
[28] Hussin Mutalib, "Singapore Muslims: The Quest for Identity in a Modern City-State", *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, Vo. 25. No. 1 (April 2005), p. 63.
[29] For a discussion of this challenge in the case of the State and the Malay-Muslim community, see Mutalib, "Singapore Muslims", pp. 57–8.

religious harmony are two sides of the same coin.[30] Rather, the potential for conflict generated by the collision of competing and in particular, absolutist versions of the various religions is always regarded as a possibility that requires guarding against. This concern has shaped the Singapore State's response to religious fundamentalism—a policy posture that we may characterize as Muscular Secularism.[31]

The State's Response to Religious Fundamentalism: Muscular Secularism

In August 2009, Deputy Prime Minister Wong Kan Seng found it necessary to reiterate the State's no-nonsense position on religion in Singapore:

As we seek out religion, we must not do so in a way that leads to closed minds and exclusive groups. Singapore is a dense urban city with people of different races and religions living in close proximity. Our diversity can be both a source of our strength as well as our Achilles heel. The practice of religion should not lead to exclusivity where we only interact with people of the same faith or worse, criticize and exclude people of other faiths.[32]

A few months earlier Wong had also reminded one and all of the main lines of the State's policy posture of Muscular Secularism:

Religious individuals have the same rights as any citizen to express their views on issues in the public space, as guided by their teachings and personal conscience. However, like every citizen, they should always be mindful of the sensitivities of living in a multi-religious society … ***We are not a Christian Singapore, or a Muslim Singapore, or a Buddhist or Hindu Singapore. We are a secular Singapore, in***

[30] Vineeta Sinha, "Theorising 'Talk' About 'Religious Pluralism' and 'Religious Harmony' in Singapore", *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, Vol. 20, no. 1 (2005), p. 35.
[31] I am indebted to Professor Sumit Ganguly of the University of Indiana at Bloomington for coining this phrase during a talk at a workshop on ethnic and religious conflict at Arizona State University in October 2004. Professor Ganguly was not making reference to Singapore, however.
[32] "The Single Most Important Principle in Our Approach is to Build Common Spaces", Mr. Wong Kan Seng, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Home Affairs, 2 August 2009, available online at http://74.125.153.132/search?q=cache:NrwAzh1Y5EgJ:www.singaporeunited.sg/cep/index.php/cluster/News-Room/The-single-most-important-principle-in-our-approach-is-to-build-common-spaces/(cluster)/MHA+As+we+seek+out+religion,+we+must+not+do+so+in+a+way+that+leads+to+closed+minds+and+exclusive+groups.+Singapore+is+a+dense+urban+city+with+people+of+different+races+and+religions+living+in+close+proximit&cd=1&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=sg (accessed 28 January 2010).

which Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus and others all have to live in peace with one another (emphasis added). [33]

In other words, Wong was intimating that the State in Singapore was "secular" in the sense that it does not profess a state religion nor does it promote any particular faith at the expense of others. It acts as a neutral umpire between the contending interests of the various faiths.[34] Wong added that religious groups should stay out of the political arena and not "campaign to change certain government policies, or use the pulpit to mobilize their followers to pressure the Government, or push aggressively to gain ground at the expense of other groups". He asserted that "keeping religion and politics separate is a key rule of political engagement". Driving home the point, he made it clear that Singapore's "political arena must always be a secular one", because its "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 interests and collective good".[35]

Wong's rhetoric has been buttressed over the years by several potent legislative and administrative instruments that have given substance to its policy of Muscular Secularism. For example, the Internal Security Act empowers the State to engage in preventive detention of individuals suspected of being involved in terrorist or other activities deemed prejudicial to public order and national security,[36] while the Sedition Act empowers the State to prosecute individuals that post offensive comments against other religions on websites or pass out offensive materials**.** For instance in October 2005, the latter Act was invoked against three ethnic Chinese who had posted disparaging and incendiary comments about ethnic Malay Muslims and

[33] "DPM on AWARE Saga".
[34] Although it should be noted that the Singapore Constitution does explicitly recognize the "special position of the Malays" as the "indigenous people of Singapore", and the requirement to "protect, safeguard, support, foster and promote their political, economic, social and cultural identity and the Malay language"—an injunction that could be interpreted technically to mandate safeguarding the special position of Islam. Cited in Mutalib, "Singapore Muslims", pp. 57–8. Nevertheless, in practice, while the State, through the Administration of Muslim Law Act (AMLA) does provide for the routine needs of the Muslim community, it cannot be said to be promoting Islam per se as a "special religion" in relation to the other faiths.
[35] "DPM on AWARE Saga".
[36] For a brief overview, see http://presspedia.journalism.sg/doku.php?id=internal_security_act (accessed 27 January 2010).

Islam online.[37] In addition, the Undesirable Publications Act enables authorities to ban "objectionable" publications that are regarded as threatening religious harmony and/or public morality.[38] Last but by no means least, a most significant piece of legislation that truly exemplifies the policy of Muscular Secularism is the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act, passed in November 1990, which empowers the State to prosecute "any religious leader, official or member of any religious group or institution, who causes ill-will between different religious groups or promotes a political cause or carries out subversive activities under the guise of propagating or practising any religious belief".[39]

It should be noted, however, that the State's Muscular Secularism policy is not all about tough punitive measures per se. Complementing tough legislation to preserve religious harmony is a set of less draconian policies that have sought the same broad objective through promoting a sense of overarching commonalities in the midst of religious diversity. For instance, the so-called Ethnic Integration Policy (EIP) in public housing, introduced in 1989, aims to prevent the development of ethnic and religious enclaves within the public housing estates where 8 out of 10 Singaporeans reside. The National Development Minister's justification for the policy demonstrates clearly the set of core assumptions underlying the State's extant Muscular Secularism policy:

Racial harmony is not a given for Singapore. It's not a given for any multi-racial society … the EIP must remain. By maintaining a multi-racial environment in our housing estates, schools, shops and playgrounds, we maintain social stability, racial harmony and religious tolerance, and keep Singapore safe, secure and prosperous for all races.[40]

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[37] Gillian Wong, "Singapore Prosecutes Bloggers with Colonial-Era Sedition Law", *Associated Press*, 1 October 2005, available online at http://www.singapore-window.org/sw05/051001ap.htm (accessed 27 January 2010).
[38] For a full explanation of the legislation, see http://74.125.153.132/search?q=cache:4PdkzduAPCUJ:statutes.agc.gov.sg/non_version/cgi-bin/cgi_getdata.pl%3Factno%3D1998-REVED-338%26doctitle%3DUNDESIRABLE%2520PUBLICATIONS%2520ACT%250A%26date%3Dlatest%26method%3Dwhole+undesirable+publications+act+singapore&cd=1&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=sg (accessed 27 January 2010).
[39] See Sinha, "Theorising 'Talk'", pp. 27–8.
[40] "Ethnic Integration Policy", available online at http://74.125.153.132/search?q=cache:F-7zjtmd1XsJ:www.pl.sg/ShowBinary/BEA%2520Repository/Docs/doc_RH_Ethnic%2520Integration%2520Policy.doc+ethnic+integration+policy&cd=1&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=sg (accessed 29 January 2010).

The inauguration of the EIP, incidentally, coincided with the abolition of the Religious Knowledge programme in the same year. Originally introduced in 1982 in an attempt to inculcate moral and especially Confucian values in the educational curriculum, two years later the programme was made a compulsory subject in secondary schools,[41] with students able to opt to study Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist, Confucian, Bible or Sikh Studies. However, it was eventually found that the curriculum had had the unintended side effect of actually intensifying the religious fervour of students as well as emphasizing inter-religious differences.[42] Against the backdrop in the late 1980s, as noted above, "of both increased proselytism by Christians and emerging Islamic fundamentalism", the State "scrapped the Religious Knowledge curriculum in 1989 out of concern for racial cohesiveness",[43] replacing it with a religiously neutral and less divisive "Civic and Moral Education Programme".[44]

Since the foiling of the JI plot in Singapore in December 2001, moreover, the State has promulgated a whole slew of measures aimed at fostering inter-religious amity and unity. These have included Inter-Racial Confidence Circles (later re-christened Inter- Racial and Religious Confidence Circles or IRCCs) that were set up in each of Singapore's 84 constituencies in January 2002 and that represent grassroots social networks seeking to promote inter-religious activities. In addition, so-called Harmony Circles were organized to promote what former Prime Minister and current Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong called "inter-racial confidence building" in schools, workplaces and neighbourhoods.[45] A major initiative, the Community Engagement Programme (CEP) was inaugurated by current Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong in February 2006. The CEP is designed to promote a bottom-up approach to "outreach and community bonding" among religious and ethnic groups in addition to other functional sectors of society.[46] Revealing the Muscular Secularist logic of the CEP is

[41] Monte Rice, "Emergence of Buddhist Revivalism as the Primary Challenge to Church Growth in Singapore", *Church and Society*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (2003), p. 19.
[42] Nasir et al., *Muslims in Singapore*, p. 79.
[43]Rice, "Emergence of Buddhist Revivalism", pp. 19–20.
[44] Nasir et al., *Muslims in Singapore*, p. 79.
[45] Sinha, "Theorising 'Talk'", p. 39,No?. 18.
[46] For some information on the CEP, see http://www.sgemployers.com/public/industry/cep.jsp (accessed 29 January 2010). The CEP has also spawned a very informative portal "Singapore United", available at http://74.125.153.132/search?q=cache:Cb80H-

the fact that it is spearheaded by a Ministerial Committee for Community Engagement chaired by the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Home Affairs and *not* the community development, information or educational agencies.[47] Yet another Muscular Secularist policy initiative of no small significance has been the Singapore Muslim Identity Project. With a view to "cognitively immunizing" the Malay-Muslim community against the violent extremism of Al Qaeda and JI, the project seeks to promote a "contextualized" Singaporean identity for Singapore Muslims. Developed by the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS), a government statutory board charged with administering the religious affairs of Singaporean Muslims, the project has identified 10 "Desired Attributes of a Singapore Muslim Community of Excellence". These attributes, in a nutshell, call for local Muslims to develop the capacity to mesh their religious faith with the demands of living in a globalized, multi-religious city-state like Singapore. The project, in other words, represents an attempt at *adapting* the faith to keep up with modernity (see earlier discussion above) and eschew narrow-minded us-them fundamentalist worldviews.[48] What ties these various initiatives together, to reiterate, is the state-driven logic of Muscular Secularism. Senior Minister Goh sums up very nicely the assumptions inherent in this standpoint—and the plethora of aforementioned policies animated by it—in the following telling comment made in February 2002:

Some Singaporeans have argued that racial and religious harmony cannot be forced, and hence, these artificial mechanisms will not work. But some things need prodding. In the absence of external stimulus, the natural tendency is to congregate among our own kind. Over the years our racial and religious relations have been smooth, Singaporeans have drifted towards this more natural pattern of human behaviour. It is time to give Singaporeans a jolt, to remind them they are living in a multi-racial, multi-religious society.[49]

EBg3AJ:www.singaporeunited.sg/+community+engagement+programme&cd=1&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=sg (accessed 29 January 2010).

[47] See http://www4.mha.gov.sg/data/NewsFiles/b15_2252_312_Singapore%20United%20Annex%20A.pdf (accessed 29 January 2010).

[48] See http://www.cscollege.gov.sg/cgl/pdf/SMI.pdf (accessed 29 January 2010).

[49] Sinha, "Theorising 'Talk'", p. 37.

Coping with Religious Fundamentalism in Multi-Religious Singapore: A Liberal Secularist Alternative?

Senior Minister Goh's terse assertion that Singaporeans need to be "prodded" and subjected to the occasional "jolt" to do the right thing for the greater good, suggests that politics in the country retain the somewhat unique characteristics—as founding father Lee Kuan Yew famously put it in 1966—of a "tightly organized society".[50] This is a fact not lost on scholars of comparative politics for whom Singapore has long been regarded as an anomaly and a subject of intense academic interest.[51] Despite being a wealthy country—between independence in 1965 and 1995, for example, the economy grew three times as fast as the United States while gross national income shot up from US$1 billion to US$86 billion—and an extremely well-travelled, highly educated population, Singapore has long defied optimistic post-Cold War prognoses that liberal democracy represents the best political system for meeting humanity's deepest aspirations and that ultimately all political systems will evolve towards this end-state.[52] The Singapore State can certainly be considered as a democracy in the procedural sense that it subjects itself to regular free and fair elections—as even the U.S. State Department has acknowledged.[53] Nevertheless, as we have noted in our discussion of the State's Muscular Secularism posture, while basic freedoms are guaranteed by the Constitution, these are heavily qualified by restrictive legislation circumscribing freedom of expression and association as provided for under such laws as the Sedition and Internal Security Acts. Moreover,

[50] Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's speech, Joint Celebrations at Bukit Timah Community Centre, in Honour of Mr Chor Yeok Eng Being Returned as MP for Bukit Timah, 3 December 1966, available online at http://stars.nhb.gov.sg/stars/tmp/lky19661203.pdf (accessed 3 February 2010).

[51] Singapore's political system has been variously labelled in the comparative politics literature as *inter alia*, "soft authoritarian", "semidemocratic", "communitarian", "corporatist", "illiberal democratic" and more recently as a "networked autocracy". See respectively, Gordon P. Means, "Soft Authoritarianism in Malaysia and Singapore", *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 7, No. 4 (1996), pp. 103–117; William F. Case, "Can the 'Half-Way House' Stand? Semidemocracy and Elite Theory in Three Southeast Asian Countries", *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 28, No. 4 (July 1996), pp. 437–64; Chua Beng Huat, *Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore* (London: Routledge, 1997); David Brown, *The State and Ethnic Politics in South-East Asia* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), chapter 3; Hussin Mutalib, "Illberal Democracy and the Future of Opposition in Singapore", *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (2000), pp. 313–42; and Cherian George, "Networked Autocracy: Consolidating Singapore's Political System", in *Political Change, Democratic Transitions and Security in Southeast Asia*, ed. by Mely C. Anthony (London: Routledge, 2009), Chapter 7.

[52] Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (London: Penguin, 1992). See also John Kampfner, *Freedom for Sale: How We Made Money and Lost Our Liberty* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2009), pp. 16–39.

[53] U.S. Department of State, 1999 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, cited in Cherian George, *Singapore: the Air-Conditioned Nation: Essays on the Politics of Comfort and Control, 1990–2000* (Singapore: Landmark Books, 2000), p. 84.

while the local print and broadcast media are expected to "have an instinctive grasp of Singapore's national interests and how to protect them",[54] the 1986 Newspapers and Printing Presses Act empowers the State to slap costly defamation suits in response to perceived scurrilous reporting by the foreign media—as the editors of notable international periodicals and newspapers such as the *Economist*, *International Herald Tribune* and the *Wall Street Journal* have discovered to their chagrin down the years.[55]

It should be noted that the State's philosophy of Muscular Secularism has had its critics. There are two main counter-arguments. The first posits that the State in Singapore needs to cede more political space so as to engender the spontaneously active citizenry and civil society characteristic of mature polities. The other argues that faith groups should have greater liberty, within the secular constitutional framework, for untrammelled religious expression without the State setting limits on what those modes of expression should be. Taken together, these two strands of arguments may be regarded as constituting a "Liberal Secularist" perspective on the issue of coping with religious fundamentalism in Singapore. In the first instance, Liberal Secularist advocates insist that the twenty-first century Singapore citizenry, despite their diverse faith and ethnic backgrounds, are well able to display the necessary political and emotional maturity to exercise rational judgement in matters of religion. The State, they argue, should therefore trust Singaporeans to do the right thing and do away with its paternalistic attitude towards governance. The prevailing State philosophy of "guidance without trust" in the "self-steering mechanisms of civil society" may not be politically healthy over the longer term, it is asserted.[56] Such views have been well articulated by the well-known Singaporean writer, Catherine Lim, in her astute political commentaries, especially her well-known and controversial "The PAP and the People – A Great Affective Divide", published in 1994.[57] The corollary Liberal Secularist notion that the citizenry is well able to fend off religious fundamentalists of all stripes on their own—without State prodding or jolting—appeared to be buttressed by a much-quoted 2007 report, *The Ties that Bind and Blind.* Based on a survey of 1,824 Singaporeans of all faith and ethnic

[54] George, *Air-Conditioned Nation*, p. 67.
[55] *The Guardian* (U.K.), 30 November 2009.
[56] Nasir et al., *Muslims in Singapore*, p. 34.
[57] Catherine Lim, "The PAP and the People – A Great Affective Divide", *The Straits Times* (Singapore), 3 September 1994.

backgrounds, it found that race and religion played virtually no role on Singaporeans' preferences concerning their "next-door neighbour, co-worker, member of parliament or policeman".[58] In this regard, the resolution of the AWARE saga in May 2009 with the entirely constitutional (if boisterous) removal of the religious hardliners from the leadership, arguably vindicated the Liberal Secularists by demonstrating the innate capacity of Singaporean civil society—in this specific instance the Alternative Lifestyle lobby, many of whom are well-represented in the well-educated professional classes—to counter and neutralize the machinations of religious fundamentalists without any assistance from the State. The episode, one blogger suggested, debunked the State's long-held premise that "politics, if left unattended by the heavy hand of autocracy, degenerates into anarchy," proving instead that by and large "Singaporeans are an educated lot, and they know that civility and passion can mix, often to good effect."[59] Interestingly, in like vein, Shiv Malik argues that the British State should not ban radical Islamist organizations but rather—in Liberal Secularist fashion, shall we say—permit their virulent ideologies to be intellectually demolished in open debate in the marketplace of ideas.[60]

While some Liberal Secularists argue for more political space, others press for greater *religious* space—expressing discontent at the way the State has appeared to have exceeded its remit by defining the acceptable limits and modes of religious expression. In this regard the lingering perception, since the public discussions leading to the passage of the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act in 1989, of Christianity in Singapore being characterized by "aggressive proselytizing",[61] has remained a source of irritation in some Christian quarters. The AWARE episode as well as the case of the Christian couple prosecuted under the Sedition Act in mid-2009 (see above) only stoked concerns in these circles that the community would face

[58] Yolanda Chin and Norman Vasu, "Multiculturalism in Singapore: The Ties that Bind and Blind", *RSIS Commentaries* 116/2007, 2 November 2007, available online at http://www.rsis.edu.sg/cens/publications/commentaries/RSIS1162007.pdf (accessed 30 January 2010). See also *The Ties that Bind and Blind: A Report on Inter-Religious Relations in Singapore* (Singapore: S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, 2007), available online at http://www.rsis.edu.sg/cens/publications/reports/RSIS%20Social%20resilience%20report.pdf (accessed 30 January 2010).
[59] "Political Parallels of the AWARE Saga", *Sgpolitics.net*, 5 May 2009, available online at http://74.125.153.132/search?q=cache:yxkwqMHSARgJ:www.sgpolitics.net/%3Fp%3D2917+AWARE,+democracy+in+singapore&cd=7&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=sg (accessed 30 January 2010).
[60] See Shiv Malik, "A Boost for Radical Islam", *Prospect* 166, 13 January 2010, available online at http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/2010/01/a-boost-for-radical-islam (accessed 3 February 2010).
[61] Sinha, "Theorising 'Talk'", p. 32.

even greater State scrutiny in future, with further restrictions placed on proselytization efforts—a core facet of evangelical Christianity. In August 2009, for example, Protestant Christian Singaporeans faced a barrage of online complaints by Buddhists and Catholics about perceived overzealous proselytization efforts by Protestant doctors, nurses and teachers. One respondent replied to the criticism by reminding all concerned that "while we must be mindful of causing undue offence, each individual has a constitutional right to freedom of religion, and to profess, practise and propagate his belief within reasonable limits". [62] Another cautioned that "banning" proselytization or "evangelism" would be "detrimental to racial and religious harmony". [63] While some Christians chafe about the limits on untrammelled proselytization, it is the Malay-Muslim community that arguably continues to best exemplify the clamour for greater religious space. While Islam has been an integral aspect of being ethnically Malays for centuries, the global wave of Islamic revivalism of the 1980s led to a strong "reaffirmation of Islamic ethos among the republic's Muslim community", thereby sharpening its "particularistic desires and aspirations as Malays and as Muslims".[64] This greatly heightened sense of "piety or deep personal religiosity" has generated friction between the community and the State since the late 1990s, most evidently in the sensitive realm of Islamic education. Specifically, the State's desire to rationalize Islamic school (*madrasah*) education so as to ensure that there would be no future over-supply of Islamic teachers and conversely a dearth of Malay-Muslim graduates "economically prepared for work and to 'experience' multiracial integration" provoked a sharp negative reaction from widespread sections of the community.[65] Some observers added that if the State wants to limit so-called "mono-racial" schools like the *madrasahs* in the name of multi-racialism, then why are Special Assistance Plan (SAP) schools, which are "almost exclusively all-Chinese

[62] See the entry by Madam Yeo Meng Eng, *The Online Citizen*, 21 August 2009, available online at http://74.125.153.132/search?q=cache:Pon0htmNFY8J:theonlinecitizen.com/2009/08/proselytisation-should-it-be-allowed/+christians+in+singapore,+limits+on+proselytization&cd=1&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=sg (accessed 30 January 2010).
[63] See the entry by Ms Chan Lai Gwen, *The Online Citizen*, 21 August 2009, available online at http://74.125.153.132/search?q=cache:Pon0htmNFY8J:theonlinecitizen.com/2009/08/proselytisation-should-it-be-allowed/+christians+in+singapore,+limits+on+proselytization&cd=1&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=sg (accessed 30 January 2010).
[64] Mutalib, "Singapore Muslims", p. 58.
[65] Nasir et al., *Muslims in Singapore*, p. 73. See also "Singapore's Muslim Schools under Threat", *BBC News*, 28 April 1998, available online at http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programs/from_our_own_correspondent/84556.stm (accessed 1 February 2010).

in composition" and whose publicly declared aim is to train "bicultural" students proficient in English and Mandarin, supported?[66] In addition, the ban of the wearing of headscarves or *tudung* by Muslim schoolgirls attending national schools led to more grumbling that the State was being overly "severe and rigid" (read Muscular Secularist) in its policies—and again, as in the case of the *madrasahs* and the SAP schools, not entirely consistent: Sikh students in Singapore schools are permitted to wear turbans as mandated by their religion.[67] The following exasperated comment of a 40-year old male Malay-Muslim accountant nicely captures the essence of that strand of the Liberal Secularist perspective that calls for the State to cede greater religious space to society:

But this [concern about the tudung] is a silly notion; I honestly don't think a Singaporean worries about this, other than the government. The Chinese don't bother about this, the Christians are also not going to bother … why does the state think that allowing the tudung will lead to a slippery slope where everybody will make his own demands? There should be a live-and-let-live mentality, not a one-size-fits-all! [68]

Muscular Secularism Sustained?

Lest the wrong impression is created, it should be emphasized that the State is most keen to keep Singaporeans on-side politically—for solidly pragmatic reasons. The first is that a combination of low birth rates and significant numbers of Western-educated young Singaporeans opting to stay away has meant that immigration of educated professionals from China, India and elsewhere has been needed to maintain a critical and economically viable population mass. This, however, has led to other sorts of problems and eventually resulted in the creation in April 2009 of a National Integration Council to promote better interaction between indigenous local-born

[66] Nasir et al., *Muslims in Singapore*, pp. 72, 83. It should be noted that in 1999 the State had pointed out that the rationale behind the SAP policy was to ensure that the "cultural and linguistic roots" of Singaporeans were preserved in "a predominantly and increasingly English language environment". In April 2010 moreover, it was reiterated that the State was seeking to review the teaching of Malay and Tamil in schools as well. See Imelda Saad and Jeremy Koh, "Maintaining Racial Harmony Imperative to Singapore's Survival: MFA", *Channel NewsAsia.com*, 28 April 2010, available online at http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:ri7hC_bqI0cJ:www.channelnewsasia.com/stories/singaporelocalnews/view/1053184/1/.html+singaporeans+religious&cd=5&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=sg (accessed 16 May 2010).
[67] Nasir et al., *Muslims in Singapore* pp. 78–82.
[68] Cited in Nasir et al., *Muslims in Singapore* p. 78.

Singaporeans and the new arrivals.[69] Second, and more fundamentally, it is increasingly recognized that loosening up and empowering various combinations of governmental, civil and business networks to flexibly and nimbly adapt to and exploit the complex, non-linear peculiarities of a world characterized by accelerating technological changes, may increasingly represent a *sine qua non* for longer-term national productivity, competitiveness and ultimately national security.[70] The respected American economist, Barry Eichengreen, alluded to this in March 2010:

I think there is a little bit of tension between the orderly, well-organized tradition of how things are done in Singapore … and the kind of chaos that you need to raise productivity. You need non-conformists. You need renegades. And that's not the "Singapore Way".[71]

Juan Jose Daboub of the World Bank articulated a very similar point in May 2008:

One such challenge is the tricky task of balancing a desire for social order and stability—for many years a defining quality of Singapore's growth—with a need to allow more innovation and creativity to produce high-value goods and services in a more competitive global economy.[72]

Daboub added that "innovation and creativity" are not commodities that can be regulated. Hence the State in Singapore simply has to strike "the right balance" between order and creative chaos and will not be able to avoid "skilled stewardship and probably some risk-taking".[73]

Should the Singapore State, in the spirit of Daboub's advice, take the risk of loosening its hitherto unwavering adherence to its Muscular Secularist philosophy and rely on Liberal Secularist notions of the "market forces" of ideas to diminish the appeal of religious fundamentalism and its more insidious extremist variants? To be frank, the Singapore State would be remiss to ignore how pronounced religious piety

[69] "National Integration Council to Foster Social Integration", Ministry of Community, Youth and Sports (MCYS) Media Release 15/2009, 26 April 2009, available online at http://www.mcys.gov.sg/MCDSFiles/Press/Articles/15-2009.pdf (accessed 1 February 2010).
[70] See Joshua Cooper Ramo, *The Age of the Unthinkable: Why the New World Disorder Constantly Surprises Us and What We Can Do About It* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2009).
[71] Cheong Suk Wai, "Wanted: Renegades, to Raise Productivity", *The Straits Times* (Singapore), 23 March 2010.
[72] Cited in Kampfner, *Freedom for Sale*, p. 37.
[73] Kampfner, *Freedom for Sale*, p. 37.

could, given the right stimuli, progress towards religious fundamentalism and even ultimately violent extremism. The intrinsic potential of religious belief systems to be manipulated so as to spark calamitous violence, is a major reason why the respected if controversial British evolutionary biologist, Richard Dawkins, and the American philosopher, Sam Harris, argue so strongly for the adoption of atheistic over religious outlooks.[74] To recapitulate, while the genuinely spiritually self-transcendent believer, whatever his religion, would be well able to practise his faith within the extant secular political system, other believers whose focus is more on ritual piety, while still feeling able to accept an overall secular framework, would be more likely to engage in various social distancing practices to preserve ritual purity in diet, behaviour and dress.[75] Moreover, for a smaller minority of these deeply pious believers, the focus may imperceptibly shift towards preserving the social boundaries between insiders and outsiders as the overriding requirement for preserving ritual piety and moral purity. From that point onwards, the transition to full-blown religious fundamentalism with its incipient rejection of the secular framework is well within the realms of possibility; the emphasis now being on promoting societal transformation as the best means of securing the sanctity of the imagined moral community. For instance, the aforementioned Zulfikar Mohamad Shariff, who gained notoriety in 2002 for his strong criticisms of the State's Muscular Secularist approach to the *tudung* issue, had wanted the State to also cease dealings with the United States and American multinational companies so as not to offend local Malay-Muslim sensitivities.[76] Finally, it is often from the ranks of the religious fundamentalists, with their deeply-held binary us-them outlooks, that the violent extremists arise. It is thus no surprise that some of the Singapore JI detainees, in discussing the myriad factors that had driven them down the path of violence, mentioned that—as with fundamentalist Singapore Muslims like Zulfikar Mohamad Shariff—they had been incensed by perceived State encroachments on Malay-Muslim religious space such as the no-*tudung* rule in national schools and the compulsory educational policy that

[74] Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: Bantam Press, 2006); Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror and the Future of Reason* (London: The Free Press, 2005).
[75] For a good discussion of religiously-inspired social distancing practices as they apply to Singapore Muslims, see Nasir et al., *Muslims in Singapore*, chapter 4.
[76] Speech by Dr. Yaacob Ibrahim, Minister of State, Ministry of Community Development and Sports, and Member of Parliament for Jalan Besar Group Representation Constituency (GRC), Kampong Siglap Mosque Workplan Seminar, 26 January 2002, available online at http://74.125.153.132/search?q=cache:vVgH3TZ9qCYJ:www.channelnewsasia.com/cna/arrests/speech_020126.htm+zulfikar+shariff&cd=2&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=sg (accessed 2 February 2010).

rationalized *madrasah* education. However, unlike other Muslim fundamentalists, they had embraced violent *jihad* ideology as a solution.[77]

The fact of the matter more generally is that the potential for religiously-motivated unrest and conflict, no matter how remote, cannot be ruled out entirely in modern Singapore. This is because Singaporeans remain—despite their international exposure and worldliness—a generally religious lot. Secularization and atheism do not appear to have taken root in a big way. While a big part of the reason for this is that "religious beliefs have a genetic component"[78] and "spirituality is one of our basic human inheritances", culture also plays a big role.[79] The respected World Values Survey in 2002 for instance showed that over 70 per cent of Singaporean respondents considered religion "important" or "very important" in their lives, generally fulfilled religious obligations and "were more likely to place religious activities above other social activities".[80] Hence, tackling religious fundamentalism within Singapore—to reiterate a national security concern well recognized by the State, and as shown, not just because of its links with violent extremism—is by no means an academic or for that matter straightforward matter. The plot thickens, moreover, when one factors in the external environment. Thanks to the World Wide Web, global *jihad* ideology is well able to penetrate national borders and permeate Singaporean homes, resulting in the worrying phenomenon of the Internet-inhabiting, self-radicalized, "clean-skin" militant. In 2007, for instance, a well-educated young Muslim law lecturer who had studied at top Singapore schools and even practised at one time with a prestigious local law firm was detained before he had put into effect plans to go abroad to train with the murderous Pakistani Lashkar-e-Toiba (LeT) terrorist network—the very outfit that was implicated in the November 2008 Mumbai

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[77] Kumar Ramakrishna, "A Holistic Critique of Singapore's Counter-Ideological Programme", *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 2, Issue 1 (January 2009), p. 9, available online at http://www.rsis.edu.sg/cens/publications/others/CTCSentinel-Vol2Iss1.pdf (accessed 2 February 2010). It should be reiterated that in the case of the JI detainees in Singapore, without doubt the decisive factor that led them down a violent path was the embrace of the virulent global jihad ideology of Al Qaeda and its ideological acolytes in the Southeast Asian JI milieu. See Ramakrishna, *Radical Pathways*, and idem, *It's the Story Stupid: Developing a Counter-Strategy for Neutralising Radical Islamism in Southeast Asia* (Swindon: Advanced Research and Assessment Group, September 2005) http://cc.bingj.com/cache.aspx?q=ramakrishna%2c+it's+the+story%2c+stupid&d=4829523312051561&mkt=en-SG&setlang=en-SG&w=b70fd19f,c6b5734d (accessed 16 May 2010).

[78] Lewis Wolpert, *Six Impossible Things Before Breakfast: The Evolutionary Origins of Belief* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p. 138.

[79] Hamer, *The God Gene*, pp. 6–8.

[80] Alexius A. Pereira, "Religiosity and Economic Development in Singapore", *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (2005), pp. 161–77.

terror attacks that killed 165 people.[81] In early 2010, moreover, just across the Strait of Johore, neighbouring Malaysia was wracked with mounting religious tension between the majority Malay-Muslim community and the significant Christian minority—mainly ethnic Chinese and Indians—over whether the latter have the right to use the name "Allah" in their religious services and publications.[82] Singapore's leadership remembers only too well that racial and religious unrest in Malaysia has spilled over into Singapore in the past. In addition, in late January 2010, the Malaysian authorities announced that it had arrested a number of foreigners suspected of having connections with Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, the young Nigerian with links to Al Qaeda elements in Yemen, who had tried to blow up a U.S. commercial flight en route to Detroit from Amsterdam on Christmas Day 2009.[83]

Given the sober realities within and outside Singapore, it is little surprise that the State has opted for caution. Hence in July 2009, Senior Minister and Co-ordinating Minister for National Security Professor S Jayakumar sent a strong signal that the State's Muscular Secularist posture was being sustained, in remarks worth quoting at length:

I worry that an entire new generation which has never experienced communal conflict may believe that we have nothing to worry about, that our present religious harmony is a natural state of affairs and will never be under threat. I worry that people don't realize how fragile racial and religious harmony is. It is foolhardy to take these things for granted and become complacent. The greatest danger to racial and religious harmony is complacency—to believe that all will be fine always; that we have arrived. The reality is that maintaining religious harmony will always be a work in

[81] Kumar Ramakrishna, "Self-Radicalisation: The Case of Abdul Basheer Abdul Kader", *RSIS Commentaries* 61/2007, 11 June 2007, available online at http://dr.ntu.edu.sg/bitstream/handle/10220/4318/RSIS-COMMENT_54.pdf?sequence=1 (accessed 2 February 2010). For more on the Mumbai terror attacks, see "Take Action Over Mumbai Attack", *The Straits Times* (Singapore), 13 March 2009, available online at http://74.125.153.132/search?q=cache:VxJ7G5BpcJMJ:www.straitstimes.com/Breaking%252BNews/Asia/Story/STIStory_349779.html+mumbai+attacks,+LeT&cd=15&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=sg (accessed 3 February 2010).

[82] Baradan Kuppusamy, "Can Christians Say 'Allah'? In Malaysia, Muslims Say No", *Time.com*, 8 January 2010, available online at http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1952497,00.html (accessed 2 February 2010).

[83] "Nigerian Underwear Bomber: 10 Suspects Held", *New Straits Times* (Malaysia), 28 January 2010, available online at http://www.asiaone.com/News/AsiaOne%2BNews/Crime/Story/A1Story20100128-194994.html (accessed 2 February 2010).

progress. It requires active monitoring and intervention when necessary. I worry that some of our people are taking racial and religious harmony for granted.[84]

In March 2010, another minister, Vivian Balakrishnan, criticized the Liberal Secularist posture favoured by "younger people of a Western, liberal bent". He opined that simply permitting "lots of talk", including comments critical of other faiths, "in the belief that someone who says something wrong will be drowned out by a chorus of people correcting him or her"—was "overly optimistic".[85] The following month, Foreign Minister George Yeo informed the visiting United Nations Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, Githu Muigai, that the Singapore State would continue to preserve restrictions on the public discussion of sensitive issues pertaining to race and religion as "it is the government and not the that bears the responsibility, should things go wrong".[86] Perhaps the two Singaporean ministers were on to something; it is worth recalling in this respect the argument put forth by Jack Snyder that where sectarian identities tend to be stronger than overarching civic ones, nascent liberal democratic processes can be subverted by extremists, with violence at times the ultimate result.[87]

In his excellent book on the Bosnian war, *The Warrior's Honor*, Michael Ignatieff argues that the effective citizenship required for successful and stable polities requires that individuals consciously "fly free" of the primordial "nets of nationality, religion and language" and learn to think in us-us rather than us-them terms. In Singapore, the State has apparently decided that in the final analysis, despite the increasingly challenging demands of preserving domestic legitimacy with influential elements of a generally well-educated, well-travelled and demanding civil polity—while simultaneously negotiating strategies for survival in a globalized, unendingly complex, competitive economic order—there remains a basic and irreducible fundamental assumption that must never be forgotten: Singaporeans, being in the end, inescapably human, simply are not likely to achieve the ideal of "flying free" of the "nets of religion" on their own volition without vigilant, occasional

[84] "Jaya: Don't Take Harmony For Granted".
[85] "Religious Leaders Must Speak Up", *The Straits Times* (Singapore), 7 March 2010.
[86] Saad and Koh, "Maintaining Racial Harmony Imperative to Singapore's Survival".
[87] Jack L. Snyder, *From Voting to Violence: Democratization and Nationalist Conflict* (New York: Norton, 2000).

"prodding". The mutually reinforcing, virtuous cycle of religious harmony, political stability and economic growth remains the perceived sacrosanct formula for continued national success—and this has to be managed assiduously and not left to chance.[88] While finer future details of policy and strategy may evolve at the edges, ultimately, everything else must continue to be organized around the core formula.

Still, there is probably a bit of scope for the State to adjust Muscular Secularism at its edges. Some concession on the no-*tudung* rule in national schools, for example, may have salutary effects. After all, as some sociologists note, "we do not foresee that *hijab* wearing female students would pose any greater threat to Singapore's multiracial integration than Sikh boys wearing a turban".[89] Moreover, continued careful oversight by the relevant parties of the Singapore Muslim Identity Project seems warranted as well, if only to forestall the apparent impression among some that the State, in the name of national security, appears to dilute the essence of Singaporean Islam, which one Muslim writer reminded all and sundry, "is inextricable from the wider Islamic world".[90] All these should remain as adjustments at the edges of existing policy however, rather than any fundamental reformulation. In February 2010, three Chinese youths were arrested for posting remarks about Indians on the social networking site Facebook that came across as "mindless, point-blank racism" and prompted an irate Indian Singaporean to lodge a complaint with the police.[91] During the same month a pastor of a large church was called up by the Internal Security Department and warned about unflattering videotaped comments he had made about Buddhists and Taoists that ultimately emerged on YouTube and other websites.[92] The episode raised a storm of protests among non-Christian Singaporeans,

[88] Lam Peng Er, "Singapore: Rich State, Illiberal regime", in *Driven by Growth: Political Change in the Asia-Pacific Region*, ed. by James Morley (New York: East Gate/M.E. Sharpe, 1999), pp. 255–74.
[89] Nasir et al., *Muslims in Singapore*, p. 83.
[90] Syed Alwi, "Islam in Singapore: Where To From Here?" *The Online Citizen*, 1 May 2008, available online at http://theonlinecitizen.com/2008/05/islam-in-singapore-where-to-from-here/ (accessed 3 December 2008).
[91] Chua Hian Hou, "Facebook User Made Police Report", *The Straits Times* (Singapore), 5 February 2010, p. A3. See also http://talkback.stomp.com.sg/forums/showthread.php?t=96276 (accessed 5 February 2010).
[92] "Pastor's Comments on Buddhism/Taoism 'inappropriate/unacceptable': MHA," *Channel NewsAsia.com*, 8 February 2010, available online at http://www.channelnewsasia.com/stories/singaporelocalnews/view/1036211/1/.html (accessed 22 March 2010).

many of whom blogged angrily about the matter, calling for tougher actions to be taken against the errant pastor.[93]

In coping with religious fundamentalism in a post-9/11 world therefore—and despite the protestations of liberal advocates in the media, academe and even evidently the new U.S. envoy to Singapore[94]—Muscular Secularism can be expected to remain the philosophy of choice for quite a while to come. This, it should be gently reiterated, may not be such a bad thing. After all, the historical, enduring prevalence of religious fundamentalism and its occasional offspring—extremist violence and terrorism—in Southeast Asia, Europe, the United States, Africa and elsewhere appears, sadly, to have vindicated Hobbes' visions of a nasty and brutish existence in the absence of a Leviathan. Rousseau's romantic ideal of the peace-loving, amiable Noble Savage may never have existed.[95] Dispassionate, ideologically neutral future historians may yet judge the hard-nosed Singapore State on balance, relatively favourably—for having the nous to cleave to a Muscular Secularist philosophy in managing the fundamentalist impulses lurking dormant within the social fabric of the tiny, trans-nationalized, multi-religious polity.

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[93] See for instance, the posts on *My Car Forum*, available online at http://74.125.153.132/search?q=cache:sCwb8MO147MJ:www.mycarforum.com/index.php%3Fshowtopic%3D2648539+rony+tan+forum&cd=14&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=sg (accessed 22 March 2010). See also *Sam's Alfresco Heaven*, available online at http://www.singsupplies.com/showthread.php?t=51244 (accessed 22 March 2010).

[94] "U.S. Nominee Wants Greater Openness in Singapore", *AFP*, 3 February 2010, available online at http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5h2-y2_cYPtzBAtmHnhaY7HM9uo0Q (accessed 5 February 2010). David Adelman, a state senator from Georgia, indicated at his Senate confirmation hearing that he would like to use public diplomacy to, among other things, work towards "greater press freedoms" and "greater freedom of assembly" in Singapore—a stance that, in matters relating to religious freedoms, would likely require him to engage with the prevailing State policy of Muscular Secularism.

[95] As Steven Pinker points out in *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature* (London: Penguin, 2003), pp. 56–8.

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