

Review - Others

Secularism, the Singapore way

Thio Li-ann, For The Straits Times

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SINGAPORE is a multi-religious society and a secular democracy, as a matter of social fact and constitutional law, respectively.

There is no explicit constitutional principle of secularism, but the 1966 Constitutional Commission Report described Singapore as a 'democratic secular state'.

Independent Singapore departed from Malaysia's secularism model, which constitutionally recognises an official religion and restricts propagating other faiths to Muslims.

The term 'secular' stems from the Latin term saecularis, meaning 'of this age'.

There are degrees of secularism. How 'secular' a country is depends on the model of state-religion relations it adopts to define the jurisdictional boundaries between Caesar and God.

At one end of the spectrum are theocracies, where a religion's divine text is the basis for the state's general law. At the other extreme are atheistic systems like communist regimes which uphold 'secular fundamentalism' by demanding a strict separation of state and religion.

Both models are undesirable in societies where people are of many religions.

Between these two extremes, secular democratic countries have adopted models ranging from 'co-operationist' to 'accommodationist' regimes.

Singapore's model of religion-state relations, which does not prefer one religion over others, has elements of both. For example, the Central Provident Fund system facilitates the collection of Mosque Building Fund contributions, a co-operationist move. A number of religious holidays are officially recognised, an accommodationist move. In 1999, the Court of Appeal in *Nappalli v Institute of Technical Education* characterised the Singapore system as 'accommodative secularism'.

A strict separationist model would not allow followers of a particular religion to be exempted from general law. The Singapore Constitution, on the other hand, mandates special religious and personal laws and syariah courts for Muslims.

In 1989, Mr George Yeo, who was then the Minister of State for Finance and Foreign Affairs, observed that the Government was secular but 'not atheistic'.

'It is neutral. This is an important principle because all the major religions of the world are represented here,' he said at that time.

What would not be neutral? Anti-religious attitudes such as 'militant secularism', as noted by the European Human Rights Court in *Dahlab v Switzerland* (2001).

Some governments ban religious participation in national memorial services for tragedies such as the Sept 11, 2001, terror attacks. In Singapore however, political and religious leaders shared the stage to commemorate the 1997 SilkAir plane crash and the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. Such a pragmatic understanding of secularism appreciates that many Singaporeans consider their respective religions important.

When should the state be separated from religion and vice-versa? That depends on the activity involved. In Singapore, religion is to be separated from politics, but no law dictates that it be separate from public policy debates. This warrants elaboration.

The constitutional right of religious freedom operates within the structure of public order. Laws like the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act (MRHA) aim to preserve social order. The mixing of religion and politics as when religious groups enter into politics or religious sentiments are exploited to mobilise the faithful for subversive purposes typifies such threats. The Government is disinterested in the veracity of any religious belief. Singapore's secularism provides a framework for the peaceful co-existence of different religious communities.

The MRHA White Paper noted the impossibility and undesirability of compartmentalising voters' minds into 'secular and religious halves'. This equally applies to how a citizen evaluates public policy.

Radical secularists championing a 'strict separationist' model argue that religious values should be kept out of public debate. But as philosophers have demonstrated through the ages, 'faith' and 'reason' cannot be easily distinguished. It would in any case be undemocratic to preclude religious views from public debate.

Religious and secular values may overlap, as in condemning murder. The 1991 White Paper on Shared Values recognised that, for many Singaporeans, religion was 'the source of their sense of morality'. Religion influences the contours of our 'public morality', it stated. All views, whether religious and secular or a hybrid, should be welcomed in openly debating morally controversial questions, each assessed on its merits. The persuasiveness of any view turns on its cogency.

In Singapore, secularism is useful as a framework to promote the co-existence of different religions and belief systems, towards which the government is neutral and even-handed. However, reading 'secularism' in an anti-theistic manner to exclude religious perspectives would no longer be a neutral posture.

Indeed, the Government has demonstrated its neutrality by soliciting views from all citizens, religious or otherwise. On the casino issue, for example, it made its final decision to go ahead with the integrated resorts despite the representations of the anti-casino lobby, which included the Islamic Religious Council, the Singapore Buddhist Federation, the Hindu Endowments Board and the National Council of Churches. Ultimately, the Government based its decision on what it considered best served the national interest. While disappointed, religious groups recognised the legitimacy of the government in a democracy to have the final say. Many pledged to work with the Government to help gambling addicts. They were heard, and that lends stability to the process.

In considering state-religion relations in any country, the central issue is the role religion plays in that society and the type of secularism it practices.

Mr Zainul Rasheed, Senior Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, once described Singapore's 'unique' model as 'secularism with a soul'. While religion must not mix with politics to incite subversion or undermine public order, clearly religion and public policy do engage as a matter of principle and accepted practice in this republic.

Professor **Thio Li-ann** teaches constitutional law at the National University of Singapore and is a Nominated Member of Parliament. The views expressed here are her own.

A NEUTRAL POSITION

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