

RESEARCHERS AT SINGAPORE'S INSTITUTE OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES SHARE THEIR UNDERSTANDING OF CURRENT EVENTS

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Christian Evangelicals and Public Morality in Singapore

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The engagement of evangelical Christians in public morality debates has been on the increase in Singapore over the last decade. This increase has been partly the result of two general trends.
- Firstly, historic and spiritual shifts within the Christian community saw the decline of liberal Christianity in the 1960s and early 1970s, and the rise of evangelical Christianity in the 1980s. Many evangelicals were less concerned with issues like poverty or social injustice because they were part of the new middle class reaping the benefits of global capital and the status quo. Instead, many turned their spiritual attention towards public morality issues that arose in tandem with the country's increasing mass consumption and affluence.
- Secondly, it is argued that when the People's Action Party came to power in 1959, it portrayed itself as both a *morally upright* state that did not tolerate corruption, nepotism or patronage, and a *morally conservative* state that led the purge of pornography and drugs, liberal sexual attitudes, and decadent lifestyle values. These two portrayals were aligned with Christian interests.

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- However, since the 1990s, the country's global city status demanded a greater tolerance of liberal lifestyle values and less morally conservative policies. It is argued that many evangelicals saw the state become less morally conservative, with many believing that it was up to them to fill the moral void.
- Middle class and well-educated conservative evangelicals are adopting modes of engagement such as the use of legal and secular arguments, moral panic, and civil society activism to sway public opinion and policy decisions.

Evangelical Christians have increasingly engaged in debates over issues of public morality over the last decade.¹ In late 2004, the government's announcement that two casinos would be built in downtown Marina Bay and Sentosa was met with disapproval from many Singaporeans. Conservative Christians also voiced their concern, with the National Council of Churches of Singapore making clear that it opposed the casinos (*The Straits Times* 30 December 2004).

2007 saw a highly charged Parliamentary debate over Section 377A of the Penal Code which penalises homosexuality, reflecting the mobilisation of different camps in the public sphere (*The Straits Times* 23 October 2007). Two years later, in 2009, a group of Anglican Pentecostal Christian women gained control of the women's rights group, AWARE, because they felt that the NGO had shifted its focus from gender equality to the promotion of homosexuality, including lesbianism. These Christian women attacked AWARE's sex education syllabus for secondary school students because it presented homosexuality in "neutral" terms instead of "negatively" (*The Straits Times* 24 April 2009).

Most recently, in February 2014, Christian conservatives accused the Health Promotion Board (HPB) for 'normalising' homosexuality in its information materials. Evangelical pastor Lawrence Khong lamented HPB's take on the issue because "It desensitises Singapore's young on issues of decency and morality. It goes against the majority view that the homosexual lifestyle is wrong and undesirable for our nation" (Khong 2014).

This is not to say that the Christian community has not engaged in national debates in the past. The controversy over the 1984 Graduate Mothers' Scheme and the so-called "Marxist conspiracy" in 1987 saw a push to articulate moral views on public issues by the Christian community. This is also not to say that such public morality debates are unique to Singapore. The 'culture wars' in America underlines the clash of religious and ideological values in the spheres of education, law, medicine, and the arts (Hunter 1991). Furthermore, in addition to 'astroturfing'², the strategy of 'steeplejacking'—where Christian groups take over civil institutions to further their own agenda and divide interests, and polarise views with 'wedge issues' such as homosexuality—has been documented (Culver and Dorhauser 2007).

Nevertheless, the question has to be asked – why has there been a rise in the engagement of evangelical Christians in public morality debates in Singapore over the last decade?

¹ An 'evangelical Christian' may be described as one who adheres to four characteristics, namely, 'conversion' (emphasis on the need to change one's life); 'activism' (emphasis on missionary work and proselytizing); 'biblicism' (emphasis on biblical texts) and 'crucicentricism' (emphasis on Christ's crucifixion for our sins) (see Freston 2001).

² Astroturfing refers to political or public relations campaigns that are formally planned by an organisation, but designed to create the impression of being spontaneous, popular grassroots behaviour.

THE 'MORAL' AND 'SECULAR' STATE

Upon coming to power in 1959, the People's Action Party (PAP) government presented itself as a 'moral state'. Government efforts to combat gangsterism, regulate prostitution, and curb illegal gambling, as well as the 'anti-yellow culture' campaign, went down well with the Christian community. However, the new government did not do this for spiritual reasons but for law and order concerns, as well as to expediently win over the Chinese-educated who "held the English-educated in contempt for their... receptiveness to 'yellow culture' such as juke-boxes, Playboy magazines, sex films and dancing" (Yeo 1973:177-8). Furthermore, "pornography, striptease shows, pin-table saloons, even decadent songs" were banned because, according to Lee Kuan Yew (1998:326), it was a useful move for "outflanking the communists," which the PAP did with "puritanical zeal".

In doing so, the new postcolonial state portrayed itself as 'moral' in two distinct ways – first as a *morally upright* state that did not tolerate corruption, nepotism or patronage, and secondly, as a *morally conservative* state that led the purge of pornography and drugs, liberal sexual attitudes, and decadent lifestyle values (Chong 2011). This morally conservative state also valued cultural conservatism, traditional institutions like the nuclear family unit, and the generally patriarchal structures that delineate social norms. Oscillating between these two constructions, the state's relationship with the Christian community was largely amenable and non-confrontational for the first two decades.

The relationship between the church and the state has since been a carefully mediated one. The state acknowledges the interests of the church and, as with other major religions, recognises its contributions to nation-building whether in the form of welfare services or moral guidance.³ However, the state is also advantageously positioned as mediator between such religious interests and those of broader society. Singapore is a 'secular state' insofar as it guarantees secular pluralism, that is, the freedom to practice and observe one's religion under a secular constitution. As a multi-religious and multicultural society, this means that the 'secular state' is not one that is free from religion but, instead, one that ensures religious spaces are protected and that no single faith becomes overly dominant in terms of political or ideological power. At its disposal to maintain this balance of secular pluralism are a series of hard measures and 'soft mechanisms' (Tan 2008) and "a complete arsenal of general laws that may be utilized to limit religious freedom" (Tan and Thio 1997: 905).

³ According to Sia Kah Hui, Minister of State for Labour, "Since Singapore is a poly-ethnic and multi-religious society and its government is secular, it is not for us, men of the government, to communicate to our people and inculcate in them the spiritual values of any one religion. But this does not mean that the government is unaware of how important the functions of religion are in society. A man armed with a panoply of spiritual values, be he Christian, Moslem, or another creed, has within him the extra spiritual force to sustain the assaults of growing industrialism, and hence of materialism" (*The Mirror* 25 September 1972).

DECLINE OF EARLY LIBERAL CHRISTIANITY....

Singapore's separation from Malaysia in 1965 came at a time of another separation in the global Christian landscape. Churches around the world were experiencing a Protestant and Catholic Charismatic revival throughout the 1960s, many of which saw painful schisms.⁴ With this global revival came a more 'liberal' strain of Christianity that emphasised social activism to advance welfare and industrial rights, social equality and justice, as well as community organisation for empowerment.⁵

Liberal Christianity in Singapore can be traced to the establishment of the Malayan Christian Council in 1948 comprising Anglican, Methodist and Presbyterian representation, among others. The Council was active in the Emergency between the British and the Malayan Communist Party, particularly in the opening of libraries and student hostels, performing educational and pastoral roles, and the delivering of essential services to many of the communities that had to be resettled in so-called 'New Villages' (Sng 2003). However, as the communist threat dwindled, and with the unexpected birth of a new nation, the local church began to turn its pastoral energies and spiritual focus on the challenges of nationhood, namely, mass industrialisation, urbanisation, and alienation.

This Protestant-led liberal Christianity came to the fore in 1966 when the Council of Churches in Malaysia and Singapore⁶ supported Lutheran efforts to set up the Jurong Christian Church (JCC). Jurong, a new industrial site on the western part of the island, was an integral part of the ruling PAP government's strategy to attract global capital and investment. In addition to meeting spiritual needs, JCC addressed infrastructural inadequacies and social needs in the industrial site with medical care, recreational and transportation facilities, and counselling for workers in need of pastoral care. The Singapore Industrial Mission (SIM) was set up under the Council of Churches in Malaysia and Singapore to tackle such issues and was housed in JCC when it was constructed in 1968.

However, tensions soon arose between SIM and those it engaged with. "Civil servants connected with the development of Jurong felt threatened by the high pressure techniques; management expressed concern on seeing their employees agitated by outsiders; established union leaders saw in CO [community organisation] workers a rivalry to their leadership" (Sng 2003: 255). These tensions invariably drew a sharp response from the government. The Registrar of Societies warned JCC

⁴ From the Greek word 'charismata', 'Charismatic Christianity' refers to the belief that the gifts of the Holy Spirit as described in the New Testament are offered to Christians. They include the gift of tongues, the gift of interpretation, the gift of healing, the gift of apostleship, the gift of prophecy, as well as the belief in signs, miracles and wonders (Menziez and Menziez 2000)

⁵ 'Liberal Christianity' may be argued to be an earlier movement, though not without variation, to Miller and Yamamori's (2007:2) neo-Pentecostal description of 'progressive Pentecostalism' which they define as "Christians who claim to be inspired by the Holy Spirit and the life of Jesus and seek to holistically address the spiritual, physical, and social needs of people in their community".

⁶ It was known as the Malayan Christian Council prior to 1959.

against allowing its premises to be used for non-religious purposes in 1971. SIM was told to leave the church's premises the following year, thus "bringing to an inglorious end the Christians' first experiment in community development" (Sng 2003:256).

..... AND THE RISE OF THE EVANGELICALS

Entering the 1980s, the total number of Christians in Singapore came up to 203,517, or nearly 11 per cent of the 1.9 million population. Of these, 91,042 were Catholics and 112,475 were Protestants (Department of Statistics 1980).⁷ While not the biggest faith group, it was certainly the most well-educated with an overrepresentation of its numbers in higher education. Interestingly almost half of all Christians – 91,958 – said they were 'literate' in 'English only' (ibid.).

The 1980s also saw the emergence of evangelical Christianity from its middle class Charismatic base. This was partly the result of transnational trends like the 'Third Wave renewal Pentecostals' (Synan 1997) or 'neo-Pentecostal movement' which had strong evangelical and proselytising impulses, and partly due to local conditions like the government's preoccupation with the nation's cultural values and its utilisation of religion to provide citizens with a moral compass.

Strong economic growth and increased mass consumption led to concern amongst PAP leaders that the local populace was becoming more susceptible to 'westernisation' (read: liberalism, hedonism and individualism). The 1978 *Report on the Ministry of Education* warned that the ubiquity of the English language had made the risk of 'deculturalisation' difficult to ignore (Goh 1978). In response, the 1979 *Report on Moral Education*, religion was advanced as a bulwark to this 'deculturalisation' process. In harnessing the perceived benefits of religion, the latter *Report* noted that "religious studies help to reinforce the teaching of moral values" (Ong 1979:12). In 1984, Religious Knowledge was made compulsory for secondary school students who had to choose between Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism, together with Confucian ethics, as a subject for the classroom.⁸

On hindsight, these political-ideological concerns over cultural loss and moral waywardness, though not solely responsible for the subsequent rise of evangelical Christianity, certainly made the ground fertile for its entrenchment. The fundamental difference between liberal Christians and evangelical Christians was that while both were compelled to move outside the church into the real world to do God's work,

⁷ In contrast the Buddhist community stood at 529,140; the Taoist community, the largest faith group, at 580,535; the Muslim community was 323,867 strong; and the Hindu community at 72,401 (Department of Statistics 1980).

⁸ This education policy brought religious differences into closer proximity. Reports of Christian proselytisation in schools grew in number, much to the concern of Buddhists and Muslim students, and their parents. Evangelical fervour also saw unkind remarks made by Christian instructors and students about other religions. Religious Knowledge was relegated to a non-compulsory subject in 1990, effectively allowing for it to be phased out.

the latter did not “identify Christ with the suffering multitudes” (Goh 2010:65). Many evangelicals were less concerned with issues like poverty or social injustice because they were part of the new middle class who were reaping the benefits of global capital and the status quo. Two decades of strong economic growth had made poverty and human suffering less obvious and thus these became less of a spiritual priority. Instead, many turned their spiritual attention and energies towards public morality issues which centred on the social consequences of becoming an affluent and ‘westernised’ city.

FILLING THE MORAL VOID

The 1990s was a turning point of sorts. The government’s ambition for ‘global city’ status meant a certain amount of cultural liberalisation and policy deregulation. This was deemed necessary to inject vibrancy into the cultural scene in the face of keen competition for global talent and the need to retain globally mobile Singaporeans. The landmark 1992 *Censorship Review Committee Report* paved the way for movies with nudity to be shown in suburban cinemas.⁹ The now-defunct topless Parisian cabaret show, *Crazy Horse*, also aroused great consternation from conservative Christians when it came to Singapore. According to Lee Kuan Yew, several ministers were against the idea when the cabinet debated the cabaret. As such “He said to his colleagues: Let the show in. It does not make sense to keep things out in this globalised age” (*The Straits Times* 23 April 2007). The paper went on to quote him as saying:

Look, once upon a time, Singaporeans watched peep shows. You know, you pay 10 cents and you turn an old film in a box at Chinese wayangs. Today, they are going to Paris, they go to the *Folies Bergere*. I mean it doesn’t make sense anymore,” he said, referring to the renowned topless cabaret show. I said, “Let it go.” So they said, “No, we must stop this, stop that.” I said, “You either go with the world and be part of the world, or you will find that we become a quaint, a quixotic, esoteric appendage of the world.

Not only was this a sharp contrast to the “anti-yellow culture” campaign of the 1960s, it also suggested to conservative evangelicals that changing economic realities and globalisation had rendered what to them are timeless moral values, ‘quaint’ and ‘quixotic’. By the tail-end of the 1990s, these signs of cultural liberalisation and moral

⁹ This provoked a backlash from conservatives thus forcing the government to restrict risqué films to downtown cinemas.

laxity were crystallised by two high profile remarks from the political elite. Lee Kuan Yew, in a 1998 CNN interview, suggested that it was not the government's role to decide if homosexuality was acceptable, but that of society's. In 2003, then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong revealed to *TIME* magazine (30 June 2003) that gays were well entrenched in the civil service, some in high positions. The writing was on the wall for many conservative Christians. The PAP state, once morally conservative, had over the last decade or so become keenly focused on global city status, resulting in a greater tolerance of liberal lifestyle values and a tendency for less morally conservative policies.

In addition, it also seemed that the state was taking a step *back* when it came to moral issues and was in fact *inviting* citizens to fill the moral void. Appearing to confirm this was Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's Parliament speech in 2007 during the Section 377A debate in which he noted:

When it comes to issues like the economy, technology, education, we better stay ahead of the game, watch where people are moving and adapt faster than others, ahead of the curve, leading the pack," but on issues concerning moral values, "we will let others take the lead, we will stay one step behind the front line of change; watch how things work out elsewhere before we make any irrevocable moves (Lee 2007).

In the belief that the state that had previously defined the moral tone of the nation was now looking to society to set it, both conservative Christians and liberal citizens alike have sought to make themselves heard in the hopes of swaying public discourse and policy decisions.

CONCLUSION

But what are the modes of engagement deployed by conservative evangelicals? Given that local political parties are strongly discouraged from mobilising support based on religious values, not to mention the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act which prohibits the use of the pulpit for politics, there are as yet no visible links between faith-based groups and political parties.

However, without platforms for direct political engagement, evangelicals have been known to deploy other strategies of engagement, namely, the use of legal and secular arguments, moral panic, and civil society activism.

Legal and secular arguments were used during the Parliamentary debate in 2007 on the retention or repeal of Section 377A of the Penal Code. In addition to religious-moral arguments, then Nominated Member of Parliament and law academic Thio

Li-Ann (2007) argued that abolishing a law just because it was “archaic” was mere “chronological snobbery” and that Section 377A was only seen as ‘regressive’ because it was measured against the social norms of the more ‘liberal west’.¹⁰

The second mode of engagement is by way of moral panic. Here events or actions are portrayed by certain groups as forebodings of impending doom. Take for example, Archbishop John Chew’s, then President of the National Council of Churches of Singapore, warning against the Hollywood movie *Brokeback Mountain* about two Wyoming cowboys who fall in love. He observed that “It is just too dangerous, we have no fallback. It’s not like in the West, where these things take time to trickle down. My conclusion is we don’t have room for error. We are too small not to think of future generations” (*The Straits Times* 16 April 2006). Another example is the stark warning from the Christian leader who was dismayed with AWARE’s sex education syllabus: “This is something which should concern parents in Singapore. Are we going to have an entire generation of lesbians?” (*The Straits Times* 24 April 2009).

Finally, civil society activism is another means of engagement for evangelical Christians. The AWARE takeover was enacted through democratic and constitutional means. The Christian-influenced group Focus on the Family is also actively engaged in a variety of social and welfare programmes. Such modes of activism, which utilise civic avenues, constitutional means, or corporate tie-ups, will only grow as middle-class Christians become better informed and better educated. In addition to conventional tactics such as petitions or traditional fund-raising, they will adopt the vocabulary of capitalism and corporate-speak to expand their networks and influence. All this is symptomatic of an increasingly educated middle class evangelical Christianity using its cultural capital to further their interests.

¹⁰ Another law academic, Yvonne Lee (2008:372), argued against the repeal attempt on communitarian grounds by observing that “Communitarianism does not accord a sacrosanct status to individual autonomy; the individual is not viewed as an isolated atom but in relational terms, with bonds to the family, associations and community.”

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