

**SECULARITY IN THE SINGAPORE HABITUS:
AN INVESTIGATION OF THE GENEALOGY OF SECULARITY
IN SINGAPORE FROM 1819 TO 1990**

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates the genealogy of secularity in modern-day Singapore from 1819 to 1990. It argues that existing paradigms tend to approach secularity from either societal or institutional perspectives, thus reducing the meaning of secularity to either state-religion relations or the public role of religions. Thus, this thesis studies the interactions between institutional and societal perspectives of religion to reveal a more complex and case-specific study of secularity in Singapore, focusing on state-religion relations and the societal status of religion from the perspectives of Christians, Muslims, and state actors.

This thesis uses Michel Foucault's genealogy as methodology and Norbert Elias' concept of the habitus as analytical framework to capture how tensions between religious and state actors produce secularity dispositions in the national habitus of Singapore. In gist, the habitus is a product of history and interactions between groups in society that produces instincts or dispositions that the society operates upon. The habitus as a framework presents viable tools to analyse interactions between state and religious actors, and intersections between religious and national identities. In its investigation, this thesis identifies significant historical sequences that contributed to the production of secularity principles and structures in the present-day habitus in Singapore. At these junctures, there are corresponding shifts and continuities in the society's secularity dispositions brought about by contestations between state and religious actors on the shape of secularity in the national habitus. This thesis hopes that it has challenged the existing theories and models of state-religion relations by presenting the habitus as a useful framework for studying the specificities of secularity in different societies.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my heavenly Father,
and my earthly father,
both of whom I know are in Heaven,
watching over me.

Dear Lord,
For with Your grace,
You made all things possible.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AMLA	Administration of Muslim Law Act
AMP	Association of Muslim Professors
CCA	Christian Conference of Asia
EIC	British East India Company
EFOS	Evangelical Fellowship of Singapore
FES	Fellowship of Evangelical Students
GCF	Graduates' Christian Fellowship
HBI	Himpunan Belia Islam (Muslim Youth Assembly)
HOTA	Human Organ Transplant Act
IRO	Inter-Religious Organisation
ISA	Internal Security Act
ISD	Internal Security Department
JHD	Jawatankuasa Haiah Dakwah (Department of Missionary Activities)
MBF	Mosque Building Fund
MHA	Ministry of Home Affairs
MP	Member of Parliament
MRHA	Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act
MUIS	Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura (Islamic Religious Council of Singapore)
NCC	National Council of Churches
PAP	People's Action Party
SAF	Singapore Armed Forces
SCCC	Singapore Council of Christian Churches
SPLO	Organisasi Pembebasan Rakyat Singapura (Singapore People's Liberation Organisation)
SIM	Singapore Industrial Mission

TRAC	Trinity Annual Conference
UMNO	United Malays National Organisation
WCC	World Council of Churches

EXPLANATION OF MALAY TERMS

<i>Adat</i>	Malay customary law
<i>Asatizah</i>	Islamic religious teachers
<i>Azan</i>	Call to prayer
<i>Campong/ Kampong</i>	Village
<i>Dakwah</i>	To invite, call or summon; Islamic missionary work
<i>Fatwa/ fatawa</i> (plural)	Islamic ruling issued by a recognised authority
<i>Fitrah</i>	Charitable contribution required to be made by a Muslim
<i>Hajj</i>	Male Muslims who had gone on pilgrimages to Mecca
<i>Halal</i>	Permissible by Islam
<i>Haram</i>	Non-permissible by Islam
<i>Imam</i>	Islamic preacher
<i>Kadi</i>	Islamic judge
<i>Kafir</i>	Non-believer
<i>Masjid</i>	Mosque
<i>Mazhab</i>	Schools of Islamic jurisprudence
<i>Murtad</i>	Apostate from Islam
<i>Temenggong</i>	Member of Malay nobility responsible for maintaining law and order
<i>Tudung</i>	Islamic veil
<i>Ummah</i>	Community of Muslim believers
<i>Usrah</i>	Study circle
<i>Ustaz</i>	Islamic religious teacher
<i>Wakaf</i>	Non-obligatory charitable endowment, usually given in the form of cash or property
<i>Yang Di-Pertuan Negara</i>	Head of State

Zakat

Islamic obligation which mandates that a Muslim has to donate a certain proportion of his or her wealth each year to charitable causes

1 INTRODUCTION: EXISTING FRAMEWORKS STUDYING SECULARITY NORMS IN THE SINGAPORE HABITUS AND METHODOLOGY

In a dark, smoky Taoist temple in post-war Singapore, Uncle Yim knocked three ancient Chinese coins against a tortoise shell, inserted them into the shell and then scattered them across the table. He was discerning the fortunes of Peranakan lawyer Dennis Chiang. Dennis, his cousin June and his *Mak* (mother) were at the temple to seek blessings and protection from the Chinese gods. The next day, June visited a Malay kampung with Ms Rider, a British lady, to search for the latter's long-lost niece. Rider's niece, Marge, was orphaned after her parents died during the war and she was adopted by a Malay family. Upon seeing Marge, Rider removed Marge's headscarf before embracing her, and thanked God for protecting her. The emotional Rider insisted on bringing Marge back to England. Marge refused and declared, "my name is now Mariam". She considered the native Malays who had adopted her as her family, and Singapore was her home. A custody battle was fought between Rider and Marge's adoptive family, with heated debates on Syariah (Islamic) and civil law's different interpretations of marriage and adoption in the civil courts, and clashes between the Malays and British policemen.¹

The above scenes were from *This Land is Mine*, a historical drama aired on Singapore's National Day (9 August) in 2021. Pierre Png, the actor who played Dennis, urged viewers to watch the show to appreciate better what the earlier generations of Singaporeans went through. Png said, "nation-building began even before we gained independence".²

¹ Thean-jeen Lee, "This Land Is Mine" (Mediacorp, 2021), accessed September 21, 2021.

² Yong Ping Teng, "Period Drama This Land Is Mine, Based On Walter Woon Novel, Delves Into Post-War Singapore," *Yahoo!life*, August 5, 2021, <https://sg.style.yahoo.com/period-drama-this-land-is-mine-walter-woon-novel-singapore-070420465.html>.

On the same day, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong touched on matters of race and religion, and stressed that social harmony in Singapore was hard-won, taking generations of persistent efforts. He talked about the various racial fault lines in present-day Singapore and highlighted “how issues of race and religion will always be highly emotive, and can easily divide us”. He said that today's social harmony resulted from “mutual understanding and compromise by all parties”, and there is a need to maintain this balance. The Government’s role was to “manage these issues on behalf of all Singaporeans”, with the “cooperation, support, and trust” of all citizens.³

What does the drama have to do with nation-building and religion? What is the connection between the drama and Lee’s speech? The drama scenes revealed the visibility of religion in colonial Singapore. The Peranakans, of mixed Chinese-Malay heritage, were Chinese religionists, although Dennis displayed scepticism towards what he regarded as irrational superstitions. The native Malays were Muslims living in rural villages. Rider was probably thanking the Christian God. Religious identity is closely linked to racial identity in Singapore society. The legal system was confusing because of the parallel systems of Syariah law and civil law. The story of Mariam was loosely based on the real-life custody case of Maria Hertogh in 1950.

It is no coincidence that Lee’s speech on racial and religious fault lines coincided with a historical drama that sought to remind Singaporeans of the country’s nation-building experiences. Lee’s speech and *This Land is Mine* were state efforts to remind Singaporeans of the earliest historical experiences of a shared Singapore and the need for mutual tolerance and understanding to maintain harmony in a multi-religious and multiracial society. Both the speech and the drama were, in fact,

³ Hsien Loong Lee, “National Day Message 2021” (Text, Singapore Botanic Gardens, Alvin_Chong, August 8, 2021), <https://www.pmo.gov.sg/Newsroom/National-Day-Message-2021>.

reflecting the long-standing norms, beliefs, and emotions associated with race, religion and politics in Singapore.

This thesis is an investigation of these norms, ideas and beliefs to understand the status of secular cultures in Singapore since its passage from “colony” to nation-state. Will Dennis continue to visit the temple after his *Mak*’s death? How did the colonial court balance the competing claims of Rider and Mariam’s foster family when their understandings of the law were derived from two separate habitus? How does religion figure in the process of nation-building, legislation-making, public policies, the formation of a shared Singapore identity, and in the way Singaporeans interact with each other? This thesis aims to trace the genealogy of secularity by looking at the interactions between institutional and societal perspectives of secularisation as a parallel development to Singapore’s formation as a nation-state.

My choice of the term secularity to examine the status of religion in society in Singapore will help to clarify the problematic understanding of secularism, which will be further discussed in Section 1.1.a. As a premise, this thesis recognises the significance of religion as a structuring force in society, and its contribution to our understanding of the nation-state today. Religion is not something to be structured or managed, as suggested by existing paradigms and models for studying religion in society. Our understanding of religion is shaped by power struggles between the state and groups in society that seek to define secular cultures and related notions of religion and politics.

This thesis draws upon Jocelyne Cesari’s theory and method that combines Norbert Elias’s concept of habitus and Michel Foucault’s genealogical method to show that the advent of the nation-state has changed the societal relevance of religious

traditions.⁴ The premise is that the nation-state is the decisive institutional and societal frame that has initiated the secularisation of religious communities through the expansion of the Westphalian order.

For this reason, the term *secularity* is preferred over *secularism* which connotes a western-centred understanding of the process of secularisation and the separation of religion and politics. Talal Asad deconstructs the western understanding of secularism to reveal it as an ideology that “brings together certain behaviours, knowledges, and sensibilities in modern life”.⁵ Asad shows that religion’s definition and status in society changes in various historical periods and societies, and that the religious element has always been visible.⁶ The term secularisation also connotes different meanings at different points in time; secularisation initially referred to the “legal transition from monastic life (*regularis*) to the life of canons (*saecularis*)”. After the Reformation, secularisation refers to the transfer of property from the Church to the laity.⁷ Rather than focusing on theories like secularisation that fixates on the “proper” spatial location of religion, we can concentrate on “how, when, and by whom are the categories of religion and the secular defined” and the presumed beliefs underlying the behaviours that define the two categories.⁸

From this perspective, the thesis identifies significant historical sequences where notions of religion and politics have changed due to specific dynamics of power between state and religious institutions, ideas and actors. The added value of Cesari’s approach resides in the combination of institutional and ideational changes, while

⁴ Jocelyne Cesari, *We God’s People: Christianity, Islam and Hinduism in the World of Nations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 9-27.

⁵ Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 25.

⁶ Asad, 190–92.

⁷ Asad, 192

⁸ Asad, 200–201.

different sets of theory address either one or the other. Ultimately, this thesis offers an alternative approach to secularity that combines societal and institutional perspectives to decipher the ongoing tensions and sites of contestation of what is religion and politics in any given context.

The first chapter will therefore assess the existing paradigms of secularisation to justify the choice of this alternative approach to secularity. In other words, in this thesis, secularity refers to the combination of institutional and societal processes of secularisation. Sections 1.2 and 1.3 will discuss the thesis's methodology and analytical approach. Sections 1.4 will state this thesis's hypothesis.

1.1 Paradigms of State–Religion Relations

Various paradigms of analysis have sought to explain relations between multiple religious communities and states. These works look at how and why the role of religion in society has changed over the years and observe patterns of state-religion relations. This thesis argues that such works look at secularity from dominantly institutional or societal perspectives, without acknowledging the power dynamics or the interaction between the institutional and societal ideas of religion and how this interaction impacts notions of religion, politics and secularity.

A fuller picture of secularity will involve looking at the interaction between institutional and societal perspectives of secularism and religion in society. Institutional perspectives of secularisation focus on state, government-centric, or top-down frames of reference. Scholars adopting the institutional approach place the impetus on the state to govern, manage and define the role of religion in society. Thus, these approaches tend to examine state-religion relations through theories and models. Societal approaches consider the capacity of religious groups and actors to provide norms and values for the political community and “shape the whole

community”. These roles include “welfare, education, culture [and] civil work”.⁹ These approaches also capture the aspirations of religious actors to define the role of religion in society. Nonetheless, the separation between institutional and societal dimensions is not clear cut, one-sided or flat; while the works discussed tend to emphasise one perspective over the other, some works pay attention to both institutional and societal perspectives. Few authors combine the institutional and societal perspectives of secularisation across different historical periods like Cesari.

1.1.a Locating the research – Secularisation, Secularisms, Secular and Secularity

This section will unpack the meanings of secularisation, secularism, secular, and secularity. Steve Bruce defines secularisation as the process by which the societal significance of religion declines because of modernisation, individualism, and rationality.¹⁰ Secularisation entails the weakening of religious institutions, the transfer of power from religious groups to political institutions, and the substitution of religious beliefs with rationality.¹¹ The secularisation theory has been invalidated and criticised.

The process of secularisation gives rise to the meaning of the secular. José Casanova describes secularisation as an institutional arrangement that differentiates between the secular and the religious, consequently giving rise to the dichotomous separation of public and private spheres, religious and state institutions, and the secular and religious. Thus, the secular refers to institutions or spheres of activities that do not fall under the purview of religious activities, such as the state, economy,

⁹ Cesari, *We God's People*, 14.

¹⁰ Steve Bruce, *Religion in the Modern World: From Cathedrals to Cult* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 230.

¹¹ Steve Bruce, *Secularization: In Defence of an Unfashionable* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 2. Steve Bruce has written extensively on the defence of the secularisation thesis. His other works on the secularisation theory include *God is Dead: Secularization in the West* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2002) and *British Gods: Religion in Modern Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020). Other proponents of the secularisation theory include Peter Berger, David Martin, and Bryan Wilson.

science, art, entertainment, health, and welfare.¹² However, in reality, there is no differentiation of spheres; religion and politics tend to overlap.

Secularism also refers to the statecraft principle of governance used to describe some form of separation between religion and politics, sometimes with the state prescribing the role of religion to the private sphere, although there are other times where the state does not actively define the functions of religions. Asad suggests that secularism as a political doctrine emerged from nineteenth-century liberal society, amidst ideas of societal change like universal suffrage. Secularism is also an ideology. Asad traces the genealogy of “secularism” and “secularist” to show that these words were first introduced to English terminology by those who wanted to avoid being labelled as “atheists” or “infidels”, as such terms contained implications of immorality in a Christian-majority society.¹³ Furthermore, Peter Berger defines secularism as an ideology that “celebrates secularity and seeks to enlarge its space at the expense of religion”.¹⁴ In addition, secularism refers to normative models describing and analysing the legal and constitutional separation of state and religion, such as Alfred Stepan’s democratic and non-democratic patterns of religion-state relations.¹⁵

The postcolonial state’s encounters with the West define its general understanding of secularity. Daniel Goh recognises that the modern nation-state inherited secularism as a Western colonial legacy; therefore, the Singapore state, informed by historical experience, defines the religious sphere as “private reason” and the secular sphere as “public principle”. The secular sphere is where the state

¹² José Casanova, “The Secular and Secularisms,” *Social Research* 76, no. 4 (2009): 1049–52..

¹³ Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 23–24.

¹⁴ Peter L. Berger, “The Texas State Bar and the Ambiguities of Secularity,” *The American Interest* (blog), December 16, 2015, <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2015/12/16/the-texas-state-bar-and-the-ambiguities-of-secularity/>.

¹⁵ Casanova, “The Secular and Secularisms,” *Social Research*, 76, no. 4 (Winter 2009): 1051-2; Alfred Stepan, “Religion, Democracy, and the “Twin Tolerations””, *Journal of Democracy*, 11, no. 4 (October 2000): 37-57.

competes with religious traditions to define and fulfil social needs.¹⁶ The prevalence of the private/ public versus religion/ politics dichotomy shows that the concept of secularisation still influences some Singaporean scholars and political elites. They are inclined to identify secularisation as a process involving the separation of religion and politics and secularism or secularity as the result or goal of that process. Such an interpretation falls back onto the institutional view of secularism as the separation of religion and politics.

On the other hand, this thesis's approach will show that secularity is a set of notions and understandings of the secular, religion and politics arising from the interaction between institutional and societal aspirations of secularity. In this vein, this thesis will adopt the combination of institutional and societal approaches to secularisation as defined and applied by Cesari.¹⁷ The third layer of secularity – individual religiosity – will not be examined here as large-scale studies have been conducted on this area.¹⁸

1.1.b Societal Approaches to Secularity

This section will discuss scholars who approach secularity mainly from the societal perspective. Their works mainly examine the impetus of religious actors in seeking to redefine the societal role of religion. In the context of the increasing public visibility of religions, Casanova formulates the deprivatisation theory to make the

¹⁶ Daniel P.S. Goh, "State and Social Christianity in Post-Colonial Singapore," *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia*, Religion and Politics in Southeast Asia, 25, no. 1 (April 2010): 58.

¹⁷ Jocelyne Cesari, *We God's People: Christianity, Islam and Hinduism in the World of Nations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 9-27.

¹⁸ Mathew Mathews, Mohammad Khamsya Bin Khidzer, and Kay Key Teo, "Religiosity and the Management of Religious Harmony: Responses from the IPS Survey on Race, Religion and Language," *Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) Working Papers*, no. 21 (June 2014); Mathew Mathews, "Insights from the IPS Survey on Race, Religion and Language"; Mathew Mathews, Leonard Lim, and Shanthini Selvarajan, "Religion in Singapore: The Private and the Public Spheres," *Institute of Policy Studies Working Papers* No. 33 (March 2019); Mathew Mathews, Leonard Lim, and Selvarajan, "Religion, Morality and Conservatism in Singapore," *Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) Working Papers*, no. 34 (May 2019): 114. The Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), an autonomous research centre of the Lee Kuan School of Public Policy, has conducted two surveys on public religiosity in 2013 and 2018, respectively. Several papers have been published on the findings from these two surveys.

secularisation theory relevant. He clarifies that secularisation did not necessarily lead to the decline of religious beliefs or the privatisation of religions.¹⁹ What was new was that religious actors had abandoned their prescribed roles in the private sphere and become more visible in the public sphere in the late 1970s and 1980s. Casanova argues that it was difficult “to find any serious political conflict in the world that did not show behind it the not-so-hidden hand of religion” during this period.²⁰ The deprivatisation of religion meant religious groups rejected the peripheral and privatised role in society that secularisation had assigned them.²¹ Casanova argues that deprivatisation is valid for Spain, Poland and Brazil, where the Catholic Church has assumed a vital role in pushing for democratisation. Deprivatisation is also relevant to the United States (US), which has seen the rise of Protestant fundamentalism and the “Moral Majority”, and the public role of American Catholic bishops.²²

Deprivatisation rests mainly on the differentiation of public and private spheres within the tripartite spheres of family, civil society and state, and the different roles of religion in these spheres. Casanova describes three scenarios to explain why religion “enters” the public sphere to become a “modern public religion”. In the first scenario, religion enters the public sphere to protect all modern freedoms and rights, particularly in opposition to an absolutist, authoritarian state. Secondly, religion deprivatises to “question and contest the absolute lawful autonomy of secular spheres”, especially in cases where political elites do not consider religion’s ethical or moral reasoning. In the last instance, religion enters the public sphere to protect private life from

¹⁹ Jose Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1994), 213–16.

²⁰ The decade saw the formation of an Islamic state after the Iranian Revolution (1979); the role of Catholicism in the Solidarity Movement in Poland (1980s), the Sandinista revolution (1979) in Nicaragua and other political struggles in Latin America; and the revival of Protestant fundamentalism in the form of the Moral Majority as a force to be reckoned with in American politics.

²¹ Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, 4–6..

²² Casanova, 221.

administrative or juridical state intervention.²³ Deprivatisation studies tensions between the state and religious groups as the latter struggled to redefine its societal role and challenge state power, though Casanova does not expressly comment on the power dynamics between state institutions and society.

Further, Casanova excludes other factors accounting for deprivatisation, such as the growth of Islam in the US, the rise of evangelical Protestantism in Latin America, and New Age spirituality, because these religions were “private” or “invisible” and did not disrupt the existing structures or theories on religion. Such exclusion is built upon the notion of secularisation, and the “norm” that religion belongs only to the private sphere. In contrast, Asad’s approach to secularism is the more relevant in showing that the western-centred approach to the differences between public/private are borrowed from the western experience.²⁴ Casanova also recognises limits to deprivatisation – its Western-Christian centrism; the restriction of modern public religions to the public sphere of civil society without transgressing into political society or the democratic state; the framing of church-state-nation-civil society paradigm; and the neglect of the global dimensions of religion.²⁵

Jürgen Habermas proposes the term post-secular to describe Western societies, such as Canada and New Zealand, that have already experienced secularisation conditions like the decline of individual religiosity.²⁶ Habermas’ post-secularity considers both societal and institutional dimensions of secularity. He suggests that both religious and secular groups must enter into reciprocal relations or “complementary learning” processes to maintain social harmony. The religious

²³ Casanova, 57–58, 224–29.

²⁴ Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 184-6.

²⁵ Jose Casanova, “Rethinking Public Religions,” in *Rethinking Religion and World Affairs*, ed. Timothy Samuel Shah, Alfred Stepan, and Monica Duffy Toft (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 26.

²⁶ Jürgen Habermas, “Notes on Post-Secular Society,” *New Perspectives Quarterly* 25, no. 4 (2008): 17.

citizens have to adapt to competing faith discourses and recognise the necessity of the state's neutrality to all groups. The religious groups should try, as far as possible, to translate their religious reasoning into a more secular voice that is accessible to others in the public sphere. The state should also recognise that it cannot expect its citizens to lead lives incompatible with their religious values, and it should allow religious groups to voice their opinions on public policies or institutions that may impinge upon religious beliefs. In this reciprocal process, the secular citizen also accepts and recognises that religious reasons can contribute to discussions in the public sphere.²⁷

Scholars such as Erin Wilson have criticised Habermas for his emphasis on the secular that requires religious voices to be “‘translated’ in secular language” to be heard in the public sphere. Postsecularity also reduces religions’ role to “addressing the crisis of instrumental secular reason” in the public sphere.²⁸ Most importantly, postsecularity still considers the secular and religious to be two separate spheres.²⁹

Wilson challenges institutionalised dichotomies of religion and proposes a relationist dialogue approach to focus on the role of religion in international relations and politics. She suggests that post-secularism scholars tend to see religion as “institutional”, “individual/ private”, and “irrational”, ignoring the other side of the dichotomies – religion as “ideational”, “communal”, and “rational”.³⁰ Wilson’s

²⁷ Jürgen Habermas, “An Awareness of What Is Missing,” in *An Awareness of What Is Missing: Faith and Reason in a Post-Secular Age*, trans. Ciaran Cronin (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2008; Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), 20–22.

²⁸ Luca Mavelli and Erin K. Wilson, “Postsecularism and International Relations,” in *Routledge Handbook of Religion and Politics*, ed. Jeffrey Haynes, 2nd edition (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 253–254.

²⁹ Mavelli and Wilson, 258.

³⁰ Erin K Wilson, *After Secularism: Rethinking Religion in Global Politics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 16.

proposed approach studies all the above six traits of religion.³¹ However, Wilson remains within the binaries constructed by secularisation; religion's societal influence can fall outside of these dichotomies.

Relevant to our research are the critiques of the taken for granted concept of secularism initiated over the last two decades by scholars of international relations.³² These critiques stress the need to move away from fixed notions of religion and politics and show how religion influences politics, which is the position adopted in this thesis to explain Singapore secularity. Notably, Hurd challenges the notion of the resurgence of religion in politics; the "resurgence" is labelled as such because religious forces are seen as challenges to specific and static notions of secularism and politics.³³

More generally, Bruce, Casanova, and Habermas derive their theories from Western historical case studies; as described by Asad, it follows that there is only a single linear progression from modernity to the decline of religion, which makes their approaches not central to this thesis. The most significant societal analysis for our thesis comes from Charles Taylor, who describes secularisation as a process of change in the status of religious beliefs in societies. He traces secularity to its roots in Western Christendom, where these societies developed from a stage where "it was virtually impossible not to believe in God", to the present-day stage where "faith, even for the staunchest believer is one human possibility among others".³⁴ Taylor's examination of religion's link to society through different phases, from the Middle Ages through the Enlightenment, the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, World Wars

³¹ Wilson is cognisant that not all six traits might apply to a case study. Wilson only looks at US presidents' political speeches, thus restricting religion's influence on politics; she fails to consider other dimensions of religion that this thesis seeks to examine by looking at political, religious and non-religious consideration of critical events

³² See Daniel Philpott, "Has the Study of Global Politics Found Religion," *Annual Review of Political Science* 12 (15 Jun 2009), 183-202.

³³ Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, *The Politics of Secularism in International Relations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 146.

³⁴ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2007), 3.

One and Two, to the present day, shows “a retreat of Christendom”.³⁵ This retreat meant society and cultures became less influenced by the Christian faith. Nonetheless, he suggests that Western societies “will remain historically informed by Christianity”.³⁶ Rather than being a linear trajectory, secularisation is “a process which can be repeated many times” and is one of “destabilisation and recomposition” as new religious forms emerge to “destabilise older forms”.³⁷ Taylor’s study of Western secularity is relevant to our research because it highlights how the process of secularisation in Western Christianity meant a change in the societal and political status of religion, which is similar to what this thesis aims to achieve – in the case of Singapore, involves looking at how societal notions of religion and politics have evolved.

Berger, a former proponent of secularisation theory, proposes two pluralisms to address the trend of religious pluralism in society. The two pluralisms refer to the plurality of religions co-existing within a society and the pluralism of religious and secular rhetoric. In religiously diverse societies, the state has to manage its relations with different religious groups and inter-religious relations to find “formulas of peace” that allow religious groups and institutions to co-exist harmoniously.³⁸

Berger examines how the two pluralisms co-exist with the individual’s consciousness and society. Adopting Alfred Schutz’s concepts of “multiple realities” and “relevance structures”, Berger argues that modernity leads to the “differentiation of reality into multiple relevance structures” rather than the straightforward decline of religion.³⁹ Religion constitutes only one of the many relevance structures. Modernity

³⁵ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 514.

³⁶ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 514.

³⁷ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 461.

³⁸ Peter L. Berger, *The Many Altars of Modernity: Toward a Paradigm for Religion in a Pluralist Age* (Boston: De Gruyter, Inc., 2014), ix, 79.

³⁹ Berger, 57.

has given individuals the rationality to manage various discourses in their lives, and secular and religious discourses co-exist as overlapping relevance structures. Further, sociology informs us that there is a connection between an event and the individual's consciousness; thus, corresponding to a secular institutional arrangement is an imprint on one's internal consciousness.

For instance, the First Constitution in the US exists as an institutional structure of secularity. Correspondingly, there is a "miniaturised First Constitution in the minds of the individual citizens" who consciously behave and think with the Constitution in mind while subscribing to other belief systems.⁴⁰ The modern citizen can navigate between these multiple relevance structures or religious and secular discourses. The "miniaturised Constitution" is in fact, part of the American citizen's consciousness, informing his actions and notions of the secular and religious. Berger's two pluralisms show that there can be different and clashing understandings of secularism between religious groups, and that the secular and religious selves are constantly interacting to influence the individual's behaviour. The overlapping relevance structures are relevant to this thesis because it shows how the secularity of Singapore can be defined as a site of contestation between different religious and secular protagonists. Within each religious structure, there could also be different and clashing understandings of secularism.

Muhammad Alami studies Islamic perspectives of secularity in Singapore. He interviewed 37 *asatizah* (religious teachers) in Singapore to investigate their views on secularity, revealing different expectations and understanding of secularity. The minority of the interviewees rejected secularism because there was no separation of religion and politics during the Prophet Muhammad's time, and they felt that the state's

⁴⁰ Berger, 53–60.

secular ideology had “intruded” into their lives. This group also said that they had to compromise on their religious practices. They were critical that secularism has become a religion in its own right and claimed that the state prefers secularism over other religions.⁴¹ These *asatizah* perceived secularism as a non-faith belief competing with other belief systems, in line with Berger’s definition of secularism as an ideology.

However, most interviewees saw secularism as a necessary statecraft principle in governing public life. They said that Singapore’s secularism is not anti-religion and that it fosters religious life in Singapore as the state recognises the positive role of religion.⁴² Many also said that a secular country is “beneficial, even necessary” for Muslim-minority countries to better protect their rights. Several aspects of Singapore’s secularism appealed to them: Singapore is neither irreligious nor anti-religion; the state’s secularism is religion-friendly and accommodates the needs of religions; the state’s approach to secularism is neither doctrinal nor aggressive; and the state’s judicious application of the principle of equidistance concerning religion in the public space.⁴³ Notably, the aspects of secularity observed by this group of *asatizah* are similar to Stepan’s twin tolerations model of guaranteeing “the minimal boundaries of freedom for action” for religious and political institutions.⁴⁴ The *asatizah* places the onus on the state to define and manage secularism, a point of discussion that we will return to later. Further, Alami’s study of *asatizah* residing in the same society holding different notions of secularism is valuable in showing that there are different interpretations of secularity depending on context and individual beliefs. His approach

⁴¹ Mohammad Alami Musa, “Islam and Secularism: Between Embrace and Belief,” *Interreligious Relations*, no. 3 (April 2019): 8–9.

⁴² Musa, 7.

⁴³ Mohammad Alami Musa and Nursheila Muez, “Secularism in Singapore: *Asatizah*’s Perspectives on Its Reconcilability with Islam,” *Interreligious Relations*, no. 2 (April 2020): 9–10.

⁴⁴ Stepan’s twin tolerations model will be discussed in Section 1.1.c.

is similar to this thesis's method of examining various discourses on secularity to present a secularity that is specific to Singapore society.

This thesis avoids Alami's starting point of investigating Islam's (in)compatibility with secularity. Cesari argues that the dichotomy between private beliefs and public behaviour – which stems from the secularisation theory – gives rise to an ingrained perception that religion is a manifestation of personal intimacy and should not be visible in the public expression of one's identity. This perception leads to debates on why Islam is not compatible with secularism.⁴⁵ Similarly, Asad contends that the issue with Muslims and the secular environment is due more to European conceptions of secularism than Islam the religion.⁴⁶

This section has examined works that attempt to situate religion's place in the public sphere, from Casanova's deprivatisation of religion to Habermas' postsecularity. These theories were formulated on the premise of religion's public/private role derived from the Western notion of secularity. We have also looked at approaches by Taylor and scholars of international relations that approach secularity as a fluid and evolving ideology. These societal approaches comprise part of this thesis's approach to studying the interaction between societal and institutional views of secularity. However, the societal perspectives of religion only look at how religion's role in society has changed, and not how the change in religion's role has affected state institutions and related notions of religion, politics and secularity in society.

⁴⁵ Cesari, *Why the West Fears Islam: An Exploration of Muslims in Liberal Democracies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 112.

⁴⁶ Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 159.

1.1.c Institutional Approaches to Secularity

Other paradigms address secularity from the institutional or state level, examining how state, institutional or political actors define the role of religion in societies. Stepan, Rajeev Bhargava, and Taylor have construed models to study state-religion relations. Notably, these scholars also examine non-Western, multireligious societies and formulate models of state-religion relations that accommodate plurality and differences.

Stepan construes the twin tolerations model for analysing state-religion-society relations. He stresses the notion of “twin tolerations” rather than a “wall of separation”, as there is no clear separation of the church and the state in Western European democracies today. “Twin tolerations” is defined as “the minimal boundaries of freedom of action that must somehow be crafted for political institutions vis-à-vis religious authorities, and religious individuals and groups vis-à-vis political institutions” within a democratic state.⁴⁷ Stepan constructs different models of state-religion relations within the framework of twin tolerations that accommodates non-European countries.⁴⁸

A noteworthy feature of twin tolerations is its observance of the government’s co-operation with religious groups. For instance, the Senegal Government provides support for Catholics to undertake pilgrimages to the Vatican. Senegal’s Government and religious groups have also embarked on policy co-operation in several areas, including human rights abuses.⁴⁹ Furthermore, principled distance does not necessarily mean “equidistance” between all religions. The state may sometimes act

⁴⁷ Alfred Stepan, *Arguing Comparative Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 212.

⁴⁸ Stepan, “The Multiple Secularisms of Modern Democratic and Non-Democratic Regimes,” in *Rethinking Secularism*, ed. Craig Calhoun, Mark Juergensmeyer, and Jonathan VanAntwerpen (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 126.

⁴⁹ Stepan, “The Multiple Secularisms,” 132-3.

via “legitimate democratic coercive powers” against a religious group, if the latter has violated citizens’ rights.⁵⁰ Stepan notes that his examples of “respect all countries”, particularly India and Indonesia, are more heterogeneous in religious complexion than European countries like Holland, Belgium, Germany, or Switzerland. Therefore, the former countries have to develop more inclusive strategies to accommodate religious pluralism.⁵¹ Stepan’s twin tolerations place the onus on state and government institutions to manage secularity. Nonetheless, twin tolerations accommodate for fluidity; state-religion relations are in flux, and both state and religious actors react and respond according to circumstances.

Stepan also considers why Western-dominated frameworks are resistant or inflexible in accommodating religiously diverse societies. For instance, in Germany, mosques and *imams* (Islamic preachers) are not beneficiaries of the church tax for Catholic and Protestant churches, not as a matter of deliberate policy exclusion but due to the state’s lack of an existing framework to accommodate non-Christian religions.⁵² Such awareness shows that Stepan is situating secularity within the context of religiously diverse societies; this is a different view from some scholars or societies who view multiculturalism as a challenge to secularism. I contend that these scholars or societies hold the latter view because they view secularism as a fixed institutional arrangement. Taylor has also criticised secularism as an institutional arrangement and the “master formula” for governance that does not consider alternative arrangements for different scenarios.⁵³ Here, “different scenarios” refer to multi-religious societies or non-Christian majority countries.

⁵⁰ Stepan, “The Multiple Secularisms,” 134-5.

⁵¹ Stepan, “The Multiple Secularisms,” 139.

⁵² Stepan, “The Multiple Secularisms,” 123-5.

⁵³ Charles Taylor, “Why We Need a Radical Redefinition of Secularism,” in *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, ed. Eduardo Mendieta and Jonathan VanAntwerpen (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 40.

Scholars like Tariq Modood have argued that the crisis of secularism in the West is not so much about the resurgence of religion but the realities of multiculturalism. Other scholars contend that multiculturalist accommodation of religious minorities is incompatible with secular demands for the separation of religion and politics. Modood argues that secularism must grapple with “the new ethno-religious diversity” and the “multiculturalist approach to this diversity”.⁵⁴ European societies have to contend with the primacy given to religion as the basis of identities such as “gender, ethnicity, class”, organisation, political representation and justification for behaviours.⁵⁵ Thus, he pushes for a reconceptualisation of political secularism in the face of multiculturalism.⁵⁶

Modood uses “moderate” secularism and “radical secularism” to describe the different spectrums of state secularity. On one end, radical secularism and its privatisation of religion are “incompatible with multicultural citizenship” because citizens are forced to exclude religious identities in self- or group- identification.⁵⁷ On the other end, Modood offers moderate secularism and the type of “state-religion connexions” (SRC) it promotes as the solution to managing multicultural citizenship. One form of SRC takes the shape of established or formalised state-religion relations with the church holding weak political power, such as the Church of England. Another form takes on informal state-religion relations. Moderate secularism is the dominant mode of secularism in Western Europe; it involves state support for religion but insists that religious authority must not dominate political power.⁵⁸ Modood suggests that the state should not be neutral but should play an active role in fostering “multiculturalism

⁵⁴ Tariq Modood, *Essays on Secularism and Multiculturalism* (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, Ltd, 2019), 1.

⁵⁵ Modood, 164-165.

⁵⁶ Modood, 174.

⁵⁷ Modood, 183-185.

⁵⁸ Modood, 2.

and national identity”.⁵⁹ The state should also be responsible for “checking the bad [and] enhancing the good” of religions.⁶⁰ Like Stepan, Modood places the onus on the state to manage religious presence or foster multiculturalism in the public sphere. The reliance on state impetus could be due to their recognition that the state is the highest form of power in state and society. However, they miss the opportunity to look at power negotiations inherent in state-religion relations by mainly focusing on state impetus.

Bhargava offers another model to examine secularism and multiculturalism. He suggests two features of Indian secularism – principled distance and contextual secularism – for further discussion. Like the aforementioned scholars, Bhargava stresses the need for state intervention in religious groups to promote values like freedom and equality.⁶¹ Bhargava’s notion of principled distance allows for a two-way intervention between the state and the religion; the state can choose to include or exclude religion depending on the context, while religions can interfere in matters of the state if such interference supports values that are necessary for secularism to thrive. Contextual secularism allows for differences and nuances in the state’s treatment of religions according to situations.

However, Modood disagrees with Bhargava because contextual secularism only examines SRC on one level. Contextual relations only allow for some nature of “formal or legal union or alliance between state and religion” and does not accommodate “elasticity”. For instance, Bhargava argues that “there can be no overlap or duality of function between state and religious personnel”. On the contrary,

⁵⁹ Modood, 179-180.

⁶⁰ Modood, 180-181.

⁶¹ Rajeev Bhargava, “How Should States Deal with Deep Religious Diversity?,” in *Rethinking Religion and World Affairs*, ed. Timothy Samuel Shah, Alfred Stepan, and Monica Duffy Toft (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 78–79.

Modood suggests there is an “overlap” of state-religion relations, public policies and state institutions.⁶² Indeed, the Mufti of Singapore is also a government bureaucrat; the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura; MUIS) is established as a statutory board under the executive branch of the Government, as mandated by the Administration of Muslim Law Act (AMLA).

Taylor later argues for a “radical redefinition of secularism” and proposes that secularist countries shape their institutional arrangements to fulfil three principles. Such a position departs from his earlier conceptualisation of secularity, which emphasises the centrality of religion’s place in society. Taylor clarifies that secularism is more than the nature of state-religious relations; it is also “the [correct] response of the democratic state to diversity”. Secular institutions should uphold the following principles: no compulsion in religious belief or non-belief; equality between people of different religious adherence; and the consideration of all voices in deciding how the society’s political identity and common aspirations can be fulfilled. He also considers a fourth principle; balancing religious and social harmony between religious groups and society. While these aims might conflict with each other, the three-principle model seeks, as far as possible, to find a balance between them.⁶³

A concept relevant to this thesis, that Taylor introduces, is the overlap of one’s individual and political identities. The political identity is formed from basic values, such as democracy, equality, and historical, linguistic, and faith traditions. As societies become increasingly diverse, individuals will have to go through redefinitions of their identities.⁶⁴ Berger, Habermas, and Taylor acknowledge that multiple identities can co-exist in an individual. For instance, Habermas questions if the state expects

⁶² Modood, *Essays on Secularism and Multiculturalism*, 182-3.

⁶³ Taylor, “Why We Need a Radical Redefinition of Secularism,” 34–35.

⁶⁴ Taylor, 44–46.

citizens to divide their identities into the secular and religious to justify their political participation on non-religious terms.⁶⁵

Works on multiculturalism, like Modood and Christian Joppke's studies, often involve discussion on secularism because multiculturalism also looks at state-religion relations, and religion is one of the markers of diversity. Joppke argues that "historically accommodationist religion-state regimes" in Europe mean that Islam can be accommodated within the secularist framework, helping Muslim minorities to push for their rights. The Netherlands' Constitution, which allows "wide state support to the main religions without ever privileging any one of them", made the country "Western Europe's most hospitable place for Muslims".⁶⁶ Similarly, he suggests that Germany will eventually recognise Islam as "corporation under public law" because the failure to do so would compromise its "religion-friendly system of 'open neutrality'".⁶⁷ Joppke is arguing that religion can be accommodated within existing state-religion models, thus giving impetus to religious voices. Joppke's study shows intersections between state, religion, and other multicultural markers like language and race, revealing that the institutional approach can also accommodate the societal significance of other identity markers.

The above-mentioned institutional approaches are focused on the role of the state and institutions in managing religion, and the societal role of religion appears to be very much determined by existing state structures. Such approaches neglect the impetus of religious actors in pushing for their views of the roles of religion in society that will transform state institutions. I will further explain why the institutional

⁶⁵ Habermas, "An Awareness of What Is Missing," 21.

⁶⁶ Christian Joppke, *Is Multiculturalism Dead?* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017), 106-108.

⁶⁷ Joppke, 30.

approaches are insufficient for this thesis's methodology by comparing them to the existing literature on secularism in Singapore.

1.1.d Institutional and Societal Approaches to Secularity – The Singapore Case Studies

Studies on secularity in Singapore tend to focus on the institutional, or state management, of religious groups and individuals. Further, most studies discuss two main secularity models – the top-down, authoritarian approach, and the co-operative, accommodative model. Kumar Ramakrishna, Daniel Goh and Thio Li-ann perceive the Singapore state as the “neutral” arbiter of state-religion relations. Similarly, Lily Zubaidah Rahim asserts that the Singapore state practises an “authoritarian top-down assertive secularism”, similar to France and Turkey, especially in the management of Islam. On the other hand, Mathew Mathews and Walid Jumblatt Abdullah look at state institutions' relations with Christianity and Islam respectively, to show that while the state prescribes specific roles to religious actors, state and religious actors also accommodate each other in some instances.⁶⁸

Ramakrishna uses “muscular secularism” to describe Singapore's state policy approach to managing religious groups in society. There are several aspects to Singapore's muscular secularism. There is no official state religion in Singapore, and the state does not prioritise the needs of a particular faith over others. The state also serves as a “neutral empire” between various religious groups. Further, Ramakrishna recognises that the Singapore Constitution's obligation to acknowledge the “special position of the Malays” becomes “an injunction ... to mandate safeguarding the special position of Islam”, as most Malays are also Muslims.⁶⁹ Singapore's muscular

⁶⁸ For Malay names, after their first mention, I will be referencing them by their personal names. This is because the Malay last name is the father's name.

⁶⁹ Kumar Ramakrishna, ““Diagnosing “Extremism”: The Case of “Muscular” Secularism in Singapore,”” *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression* 11, no. 1 (January 2, 2019): 29.

secularism also involves a rigorous separation of religion and politics.⁷⁰ The “muscular” aspect of Singapore secularism refers to the state’s active intervention in managing religion through legislation and policies in public housing, education policies, and media governance.⁷¹ Ramakrishna recommends that the state be more explicit in conveying its stance on muscular secularism, particularly in the post-9/11 context and the associated urgent need to tackle extremist interpretations of Islam.⁷²

Alami examines state policy perspectives in the 1980s, which this thesis also recognises as a pivotal point in the definition of Singapore’s secularity, that led to increased restrictions on religious actors in the public sphere via the MRHA. He argues that Singapore needs a “strong, centralised government that subordinates all institutions, spiritual and temporal” to maintain “public order” and “economic survival”.⁷³ He places the impetus on the state to “take the lead” in regulating state-religion, interracial, and interreligious relations to maintain social harmony.⁷⁴ While Alami recognises that charismatic Christian leaders influence the public behaviour of their followers, he does not venture to examine religious rhetoric.⁷⁵ The religious dimension is something that this thesis will investigate through its study of local Christian publications.

Ramakrishna and Alami’s focus on the institutional, or state, management of religion neglects the societal aspect of secularity – how religious groups respond to the state’s management of religion, and how religion’s societal significance is redefined by state-religion interactions. Ramakrishna’s model is also far from twin

⁷⁰ Ramakrishna, 30.

⁷¹ Ramakrishna, 39–40.

⁷² Ramakrishna, 43.

⁷³ Mohammad Alami Musa, “Engaging Religion with Pragmatism,” *RSIS Working Paper*, no. 305 (August 21, 2017): ii.

⁷⁴ Musa, 14.

⁷⁵ Musa, 16.

tolerations, which Stepan describes as the ideal secular equilibrium; muscular secularism justifies the state's preventive intervention in a religious group even if the group has not yet infringed the rights of other citizens. Further, Ramakrishna's suggestion of increased state intervention in religious affairs, particularly Islamic matters, securitises religion, perceiving religion as a security problem to be managed by the state.

Similarly, Zubaidah claims that the state defines state-Islam relations and seeks to control religious voices in the public sphere. She argues that after 9/11, the state policed the local Muslim community because political elites perceived that rapid Islamisation in neighbouring countries like Malaysia and Indonesia threatened Singapore's secularism. The state also perceived increased Muslim religiosity as a security threat due to concerns that the local Muslim community might become vulnerable to radical Islamist propaganda.⁷⁶ The state uses legislation like the MRHA so that it has the power to define the line between religion and politics. Similar to Ramakrishna, Zubaidah focuses on the state's securitisation of Islam. She argues that the state uses secularism as a justification for greater state interference with religion, as in European countries and the US, where some political actors viewed Islam as an existential threat to their political and secular order. The securitisation angle is more focused on examining whether secularism is compatible with Islam than on what this thesis is concerned with – investigating how the interactions between state and religious actors affect the significance of religion in society.

Like Ramakrishna, Goh sees the state as the arbiter of state-religious relations in the public sphere, as a result of his study on the interactions between Pentecostal

⁷⁶ Lily Zubaidah Rahim, "Governing Muslims in Singapore's Secular Authoritarian State," *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 66, no. 2 (April 1, 2012): 172.

Christians and state institutions. Goh observes that Singapore practices pluralist secularism, and religious pluralism lies at the foundation of society. Goh places the onus on the state as a “neutral empire” to establish ground rules and mediate between religious groups when tensions arise. The Government chooses to co-opt religious institutions to fulfil social functions in education and welfare services and propagate moral values. The Government also becomes the “guarantor and cultivator of secular public morality crafted from the wellsprings of the citizens’ religious beliefs and values”; and it polices the separation of religion and politics through legislation and public policies, as seen in the 1980s.⁷⁷

Goh later characterises state-religion relations in Singapore as patronage secularism; the state assumes its role as the secular patron of religious institutions by “guiding and working with religious groups to engage society along approved routes”.⁷⁸ While Goh identifies the critical historical crossroads that led to the redefinition of the societal role of religion in Singapore, his approach is only concerned with how state institutions manage religions and not with studying the dynamics of state-religion interactions at these historical junctures, the latter of which this thesis proposes to study.

Thio’s principled pluralism and Goh’s pluralist model share some features – a neutral state equitable to religions and non-religions, and a co-operationist model where the state co-operates with religious groups, and allows them to be constructive social forces providing public services like medical, educational and social services.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Daniel P.S. Goh, “Pluralist Secularism and the Displacements of Christian Proselytising in Singapore,” in *Proselytising and the Limits of Religious Pluralism in Contemporary Asia*, ed. Juliana Finucane and R Michael Feener (Singapore: Springer, 2014), 125–26; Goh, “State and Social Christianity in Post-Colonial Singapore,” 58.

⁷⁸ Goh, “Legal Pluralism, Patronage Secularism, and the Challenge of Prophetic Christianity in Singapore,” in *Regulating Religion in Asia*, ed. Jaclyn L. Neo, Arif A. Jamal, and Daniel P.S. Goh (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 256, 260–61.

⁷⁹ Li-ann Thio, “Principled Pluralism, Relational Constitutionalism and Regulating Religion within Singapore’s Secular Democratic Mode,” in *Regulating Religion in Asia*, 121–23, 135.

The connection described between secularism and religious pluralism can also be found in Taylor and Berger's later works that conceive alternative secularity paradigms to address religiously diverse societies. Thio's principled pluralism differs from that of Goh and Ramakrishna's models, in her recognition that Singapore's secularity is also pragmatic and accommodative.⁸⁰ She considers that both the state and religious actors actively define the societal role of religion through their interactions. As religious actors can seek to define their roles in society, the principled pluralism model also involves other aspects: a "reasonable" accommodation between general laws and fundamental civil rights and religious views; a public space that accommodates diverse viewpoints and is neither "sacred" nor "naked" (where religious views are not permitted); and some "give-and-take" between the state and religious communities.⁸¹

Thio's approach is more balanced, and more relevant to the argument of this thesis – both state and religious actors define secularity through their interactions with each other. Principled pluralism recognises the reciprocal nature of the relationship between the state and religious groups, and allows for principled distance and contextual secularism as proposed by Bhargava. The accommodative aspect of Thio's approach is also similar to Habermas' complementary learning process, which recognises that religious and secular actors adjust their discourses and expectations to accommodate each other. Thio and Goh's approaches are also similar to Modood's moderate secularism, whereby the state plays an active role in promoting multiculturalism and encouraging the "good" of religion. However, Goh and Thio neglect to examine the responses of religious actors to the state's role in maintaining secularism, hence only illustrating the institutional view of secularity.

⁸⁰ Thio, 127–28.

⁸¹ Thio, 121–23, 135.

Mathews examines church-state relations from the societal perspective, showing how Singapore churches have adapted to institutional structures of secularity by accommodating state demands and obtaining the concessions necessary for their survival in society.⁸² He observes that Singaporean Christians shifted their focus from evangelisation in the 1980s, to the provision of social services in the 1990s after the Government became concerned about increasing levels of Christian conversion among Singaporeans. By presenting themselves as good citizens, Christians obtained concessions from the state, allowing them to expand their presence in Singapore. For instance, churches are allowed some leeway in using factories, warehouses, office buildings, and entertainment venues like cinemas and conference halls as places of worship.⁸³

Thio and Mathews' analyses of secularity in Singapore are similar to Stepan and Bhargava's principled distance models, which consider the state's unequal relationships with different religious groups. Like Bhargava, Thio and Mathews observe that secularity is a reciprocal relationship between state institutions and religious groups. In addition, Mathews captures the religious impetus in defining the societal role of religion in response to the institutional view of secularity. One limitation to Mathews' study is that he focuses solely on church-state relations, thus neglecting dimensions of the state's relations with other religious groups and interreligious dynamics.

Walid observes that the Singapore state practises both calibrated and muscular secularism. Notably, Walid's notion of muscular secularism differs from

⁸² Mathew Mathews, "Accommodating Relationships: The Church and State in Singapore," in *Christianity and the State in Asia: Complicity and Conflict*, ed. Bautista Julius and Francis Gee Lim Khek (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), 186.

⁸³ Mathews, 190–91, 195. Due to the scarcity of land in Singapore, there was intense competition among religious groups to bid for land and build places of worship.

Ramakrishna's. Further, Walid's description of secularism, adapted from Nurallah Ardic, is different from that of Casanova and Habermas. Walid defines secularism as "the submission of religion to the overarching authority of the state, rendering the state the final arbiter in all affairs within its borders".⁸⁴ Walid also contends that secularity in Singapore differs from Taylor's definition of the separation of the church and state, as there is "a fair bit of intervention from the state".⁸⁵ Muscular secularism also refers to "the suppressive measures taken against individuals who are perceived to be stirring anti-Government sentiments via the usage of religious doctrine".⁸⁶ Walid takes a different position on secularism from Ramakrishna; while Ramakrishna suggests the state implement a more aggressive form of muscular secularism, Abdullah argues that state interference in religious affairs borders on authoritarianism. Their different perspectives revealed different expectations and perceptions of secularity in Singapore.

Walid's model of calibrated secularism presents two elements of state-religion relations, depending on the context: informal state interference in religious matters and informal co-operation between the state and religious groups.⁸⁷ Religious organisations choose to partake in co-optation as they are mindful of the consequences of not toeing the official line and the benefits they can gain from the co-operation.⁸⁸ Walid highlights that MUIS chooses to remain silent on controversial issues that might contradict governmental policies. One example is the Government's

⁸⁴ Walid Jumblatt Abdullah, "Religious Representation in Singapore: A Study of MUIS and PERGAS," Unpublished Master's Dissertation (National University of Singapore, 2012), 2.

⁸⁵ Abdullah, 6.

⁸⁶ Abdullah, 31–32.

⁸⁷ Abdullah, 4, 46.

⁸⁸ Abdullah, 48.

ban on the *tudung* (headscarf or Islamic veil) in some public spaces.⁸⁹ By contrast, Muslim non-governmental organisation Pergas (Persatuan Ulama dan Guru-Guru Agama Islam Singapura; Singapore Islamic Scholars and Religious Teachers Association) was “unrelenting towards the state” on the *tudung* issue in 2002. Nonetheless, Walid observes that Pergas-state relations shifted to co-optation in 2003, when a group of *asatizah* from Pergas formed the Religious Rehabilitation Group with the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) and the Internal Security Department (ISD) to work on the ideological rehabilitation of Islamist terrorists.⁹⁰ The above examples show that state-religion relations, and expectations of religion’s role in society, are fluid. Calibrated secularism is similar to Mathews’ accommodative secularism and Bhargava’s principled distance model. All three models recognise the reciprocal relationship between the state and religious groups, and are similar to this thesis’s investigation of secularity as it seeks to argue that state and religious actors both influence the notions of politics and religion. We also see religious actors responding to the institutional views of secularity.

Thus far, we have seen that most paradigms approach secularity from the societal or institutional dominant perspective, or rely heavily on models of state-

⁸⁹ Abdullah, 58–59, 70–71; Ahmad Osman, “Muslims Urged to Discuss Tudung Issue,” *The Straits Times*, January 28, 2002; Pauline Leong, “Tudung Girl’s School Return Welcomed,” *The Straits Times*, June 16, 2002; Ahmad Osman, “Mufti Puts School First,” *The Straits Times*, February 2, 2002; Hariz Baharudin, “National Day Rally 2021: Muslim Nurses in Public Healthcare Allowed to Wear Tudung from November; Policy Will Apply to 7,000 Staff,” *The Straits Times*, August 29, 2021. At the time of Walid’s writing, the *tudung* was not allowed for students in government schools, and employees in uniformed and healthcare services. The Government’s rationale for the tudung ban in schools was that secular schools were the “only space the Government feels allows ... kids to mix very freely without being reminded of one’s religious or ethnic manifestations”. Walid was referring to an incident in early 2002, when four Malay/Muslim Primary One female students attended government schools in their *tudung*. The Ministry of Education suspended them from their schools for their refusal to adhere to dress code regulations. Maarof Salleh, then-President of MUIS, had encouraged the parents to allow their children to return to school, after consulting Mufti Syed Isa Semait. The Mufti had said that it was not compulsory for the girls to don the *tudung* as they had not undergone puberty. In August 2021, PM Lee announced the Government’s policy change, allowing for Muslim nurses in public healthcare to wear the *tudung* from November 2021.

⁹⁰ Abdullah, 84–88, 91.

religion relations. These approaches do not account for the emergence of the civil sphere. Habermas and Casanova proposes that civil society is an informal public space separate from the political public sphere.⁹¹ However, most Singapore citizens do not see religious organisations as part of civil society; in fact, they will actively thwart attempts by religious organisations to participate in the civil sphere. Goh observes that while the Singapore Government had allowed the secular civil society a higher degree of participation in the public space since the 2000s, religious activism continued to be excluded from the space.⁹² In 2009, the local Pentecostal Christians felt compelled to “get themselves a civil society outfit for greater impact” when they were denied space for religious expression in the civil sphere.⁹³ Nine new members with church affiliations launched a “coup” to take over the Executive council of AWARE (Association for Women for Action and Research).⁹⁴ Letters written to the local newspapers *Straits Times* discussed if the AWARE coup had breached the line between religion and secularism, and a segment of society deemed civil societies as secular organisations.⁹⁵ Singapore citizens rallied to vote out the new Executive

⁹¹ For a specific explanation of how civil society emerged from the evolution of public and private spheres, see Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, trans. Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence (Darmstadt and Neuwied: Hermann Luchterhand Verlag, 1962; Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1991). Jürgen Habermas, “Religion in the Public Sphere,” *European Journal of Philosophy* 14, no. 1 (2006): 3, 5, 10.

⁹² Goh, “Pluralist Secularism and the Displacements of Christian Proselytising in Singapore,” 140–41.

⁹³ Goh, “Pluralist Secularism and the Displacements of Christian Proselytising in Singapore,” 140–41.

⁹⁴ Ajay Nair, “The AWARE Saga: Ten Years Later, What’s Changed?,” *RICE* (blog), May 1, 2019, <https://www.ricemedia.co/current-affairs-commentary-aware-saga-ten-years-later-whats-changed/>; Kim Hoh Wong, “Unknowns Knock out Veterans at Aware Polls; Caught off-Guard by Big Turnout, Longtime Members Lose to Fresh Faces,” *Straits Times*, April 10, 2009; Dawn Wei Tan, “Some Attend the Same Church,” *Straits Times*, April 18, 2009. New Aware President Josie Lau and her husband Alan Chin, and other members of the New Guard – Charlotte Wong, Irene Yee, Jenice Chua, Maureen Ong and Sally Ang attend the Anglican Church of Our Saviour. Chin is the nephew of Thio Su Mien who also attended the same church, and her daughter Nominated Member of Parliament Professor Thio Li-Ann. Thio Li-Ann had also spoken up against calls to repeal Section 377A of the Penal Code, which criminalises the act of sexual intercourse between men, in Parliament. The Church’s website stated, “Homosexual practice is contrary to God’s Word. So we stand against that and the active and aggressive promotion of such behaviour.”

⁹⁵ Wilfred Ong, “For Peace’s Sake, Start a Separate Group,” *Straits Times*, April 25, 2009; Zakir Hussain, Aaron Low, and Jeremy Au Yong, “Should Faith-Driven Groups Take over Secular Organisations?,” *Straits Times*, May 2, 2009”

Council members at an Extraordinary meeting held in May 2009. The AWARE episode reveals that many Singaporeans see the civil sphere in Singapore as secular and thus should be devoid of religious influence. Notably, the Government did not intervene directly to remove church influence from AWARE; Singaporeans had acted to vote the religious out of the secular. This observation relates to our central question: how did this notion of the secular become internalised among segments of Singapore society? The episode also illustrates that notions of civil society, secular and religious in the Singapore context differ from Habermas and Casanova's civil society.

The distinct scholarship of institutional and societal approaches to secularisation both capture in their own right some aspect of the secularisation processes but not its totality. Thus, this thesis will adopt Cesari's approach of Elias' figurational sociology to uncover the habitus of Singapore as defined by Elias to reveal perceptions, feelings, and evaluations of the public dimension of religion in Singapore. Elias uses the term habitus to "describe the perceptions, feelings and evaluation of Frenchmen" in relation to the "public dimension of bodily practices" like dining etiquette. Elias seeks to capture changes in such bodily practices in conjunction with processes of feudalism, the rise of the monarchy and nation-state formation.⁹⁶ Following Elias, Pierre Bourdieu describes habitus as "mental structures" that are "related to the tastes, preferences, perceptions, and other properties of 'agents'".⁹⁷ Thus, Cesari suggests that it is insufficient to examine "existing discourses and positions by religious and political actors" to discern religion's role in politics since some of their actions or positions might not make sense immediately. Instead, she

⁹⁶ Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations*, eds. Eric Dunning, Johan Goudsblom, and Stephen Mennell, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 2000), 277; Cesari, *We God's People*, 16.

⁹⁷ Pierre Bourdieu, *Theory of Practice. Pierre Bourdieu: Education and Training* (Cambridge, U.K., Cambridge University Press, 1984), 18-19 quoted in Cesari, *We God's People*, 16.

proposes to look at the “mental structures” that “inform the actions and rationalisation” process of the actors involved, without which there could not even be “competition and tensions between them”.⁹⁸

This thesis adopts the reference of Elias’ national habitus over that of Bourdieu. Cesari defines the national habitus as a “particular, historically specific, concrete social formation that changes under structural conditions such as building of institutions, historical events and so on”. The national habitus “goes deeper than political legitimacy and sovereignty” and “operates at the level of an entire community”. The habitus is shaped by various historical sequences and competition between religious and political actors to define secularity.⁹⁹ While secularism is very much a Western construct, the interaction between secularism and local notions of religion and politics, particularly in colonial and postcolonial societies, creates a national habitus specific to the local society. This view is different from that held by postcolonial scholars like Saba Mahmood and Abdullah Ahmed An-Na’im, whose works blame the colonial legacy of Western secularism for creating rifts in postcolonial societies like Egypt and India.¹⁰⁰

The thesis uses the method of genealogy that can be traced back to Friedrich Nietzsche and Foucault. Asad also uses the habitus to analyse the genealogy of secularity. He attributes the habitus to Marcel Mauss, who defines habitus as “acquired ability” and “faculty” that is specific to “societies, educations, proprieties and fashions”.¹⁰¹ Asad mentions the habitus as a possible method to analyse links

⁹⁸ Cesari, *We God’s People*, 16.

⁹⁹ Cesari, *We God’s People*, 17.

¹⁰⁰ Saba Mahmood, *Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A Minority Report* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016); Abdullah Ahmed An-Na’im, *Islam and the Secular State: Negotiating the Future of Shari’a* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008).

¹⁰¹ Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1993), 75.

between human behaviour and power institutions. The habitus was first used by Elias and then popularised by Bourdieu. This thesis will use genealogy as a method and habitus as an analytical toolkit to reinstitute the ongoing dynamics between state, religious institutions, and religious actors. Combining institutional and societal approaches shows that secularity is a fluid notion that religious, state and societal actors struggle to define. Sections 1.2 and 1.3 will lay out the methodological and analytical framework of genealogy and habitus in this thesis.

1.1.e Features of Singapore's Secularity

From the above discussion on the literature on Singapore, we can determine several characteristics of Singapore's secularity. We will trace the genealogy of how these characteristics came to be in this thesis. State-religion relations can be characterised as top-down, authoritative, co-operative, or accommodative. Scholars sometimes view religious actors as passive receivers of the state's definition of religion. In other cases, religious actors are perceived to be active participants. In addition, the state acts as a neutral empire between religious groups to regulate secularity in the public sphere. This neutrality is sometimes perceived as the state's active intervention or management of religious elements through public policies. However, there are exceptions to state neutrality towards religious groups, due to the special status of Malay/Muslims enshrined in the Constitution. By tracing the genealogy of secularity, this thesis will show how these secularity principles came to exist and gain legitimacy among citizens.

1.2 The Method – Foucault, Genealogy, and Power

Nietzsche and Foucault develop the method of genealogy as historical method and examination of power relations that Asad and Taylor draw from. Genealogy looks at the origin of a notion, rather than examining why a specific notion or institution originated. Nietzsche argues that moral genealogists should move away from looking at "purpose in law" while investigating the "history of the emergence of law" because

“origin” and “practical application” should be differentiated.¹⁰² He continues, “anything in existence, having somehow come about, is continually interpreted anew, requisitioned anew, transformed and redirected to a new purpose by a power superior in it”. The “development of a thing” involves processes of subjugation for the “purpose of defence and reaction [...] and [...] successful countermeasures”. Notably, Nietzsche emphasises the power dynamics in “everything”, and thus “everything” is fluid; “everything” is an ongoing process in which “meaning” and purpose” changes. History is thus “a continuous chain of signs”, and the method of history, or genealogy, is to excavate “new interpretations and adaptations”.¹⁰³

The abovementioned points illustrated by Nietzsche are crucial for this thesis’s investigation of the genealogy of secularity in Singapore. Secularity, like morality or “anything in existence”, is a concept that is constantly evolving. Rather than focus on the usefulness of secularity as a governing principle, this thesis seeks to examine how secularity and the meanings of related words – “religion”, “politics” and “secular” – have evolved. In addition, the method of genealogy recognises and emphasises relationships and power relations in society and how these, in turn, impact and change the meaning of words, concepts and beliefs. Thus, the method of genealogy will allow this thesis to examine power dynamics and conflicts that led to changes in the meanings of secularity and related concepts for the state and various groups in society and examine secularity not only from both institutional and societal levels, but also interactions between institutional and societal dimensions.

¹⁰² Friedrich Nietzsche, "Second Essay: 'Guilt', 'Bad Conscience' and Related Matters", in *On the Genealogy of Morality*, ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson, trans. Carol Diethe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 50–51.

¹⁰³ Nietzsche, 51.

Foucault's use of genealogy is a continuation of Nietzsche's method.¹⁰⁴ For Foucault, Nietzsche's origin is characterised by "disparity".¹⁰⁵ Foucault restores the original meanings of the words Nietzsche uses to describe origin. *Herkunft* refers to "descent"; in tracing descent, the genealogist's task is not about detecting continuity, evolution or locating history in the present. The genealogist observes "accidents, the minute deviations – or conversely – the complete reversals – the errors, the false appraisals, and the faulty calculations that gave birth to those things which continue to exist and have value for us."¹⁰⁶ Another word, *Entstehung*, refers to "emergence, the moment of arising" that "is only produced in a particular state of forces". Genealogy, according to Foucault, seeks to re-establish the "various systems of subjection" and the "hazardous play of dominations".¹⁰⁷ Foucault observes that Nietzsche sees an event as not just an event per se, but "the reversal of a relationship of forces, the usurpation of power, [and] the appropriation of a vocabulary turned against those who had once used it".¹⁰⁸ Similar to Nietzsche, Foucault emphasises relationships between "layers" of "practices, institutions, social relations, political relations, and so on".¹⁰⁹ Further, Foucault emphasises that "discontinuity was both the given and the unthinkable", presented in the forms of "scattered events, institutions, ideas or practices."¹¹⁰ Foucault's emphasis on discontinuity and power relations between groups in society, institutions, and government is similar to Nietzsche's.

¹⁰⁴ However, Foucault does not reference Nietzsche in *Discipline and Punish* (which is often said to be Foucault's first work practising genealogy). Foucault later acknowledges Nietzsche's influence in his essay, "Nietzsche, Genealogy and History" (1977).

¹⁰⁵ Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy and History" in *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, ed. James D. Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley and et. al., Essential Works of Foucault, 1954- 1984 (New York: The New Press, 1998), 372.

¹⁰⁶ Foucault, 374.

¹⁰⁷ Foucault, 376.

¹⁰⁸ Foucault, 381.

¹⁰⁹ Foucault, "On the Ways of Writing History," in *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, 284.

¹¹⁰ Foucault, "On the Archaeology of the Sciences," in *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, 299.

Nonetheless, while Nietzsche is more preoccupied with explaining the relations between etymology and will to power, Foucault's method appears to be more grounded in history and processes. Foucault questions traditional, linear history and explains that a historian "must, at least as a systematic hypothesis, distinguish between the possible levels of his analysis, and establish the periodisations that suit them".¹¹¹ Changes occur at junctures of power conflicts; for instance, Foucault identifies penal reforms emerged from challenges to the sovereign's power posed by illegal activities such as "fraud, tax evasion, [and] irregular commercial operations".¹¹² Oscillations and periodisations are where significant power shifts had occurred, or notable institutions were established.

These periodisations, or historical sequences, can only be identified through archival research,. Foucault addresses this limitation by presenting another method of analysing language – looking at discourses and meanings. Foucault argues that his focus lies in "not language, but the archive, which is to say, the accumulated existence of discourses".¹¹³ Archival research involves not just the mere interpretation of a document; the historian must "manipulate and process" the "internal or external relation" of archival materials. There is thus an emphasis on "different layers of events" that "determine, and finally, and profoundly, the history of the world".¹¹⁴ Such an approach will lead to the increase in "history's continuities" and allow the historian to identify oscillations, or cycles, that might occur every few decades; an instance will be economic expansion or recession.¹¹⁵ In this vein, this thesis looks at the different societal and institutional – interpretations of an event by considering various historical

¹¹¹ Foucault, 299.

¹¹² Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, trans. Alan Sheridan, Second ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 87.

¹¹³ Michel Foucault, "On the Ways of Writing History," in *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, 289.

¹¹⁴ Foucault, "Return to History," in *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, 427-8.

¹¹⁵ Foucault, "On the Ways of Writing History," 284.

sources covering a single event. For a single event, various state and religious actors may hold different expectations and interpretations; these differences, which sometimes manifest as power struggles, can be gathered from looking at various sources. Thus, this thesis adopts an approach to uncover the archive of Singapore, without a priori determining what the notion of secularism in Singapore entails.

1.2.a Thesis Outline

Following Foucault's periodisations, this thesis has identified several critical historical sequences in Singapore's history where there had been significant power shifts between state and society, or notable legislation were enacted. I hypothesise that the concepts of secularity, religion and politics have acquired new or old meanings at these junctures; there were also shifts in power relations in society. These historical sequences are where institutions (i.e., mechanisms) are introduced or discontinued because of power contestations between groups and where changes to notions of secularity, religion and politics have occurred. The chapters are structured according to critical historical sequences or junctures which this thesis has uncovered through its archival research.

This thesis situates the "beginning" of these concepts in 1819 with the introduction of British colonial rule, the parallel introduction of the concept of secularism and the implementation of modern state-like structures in Chapter 2. Postcolonial scholars have noted that colonial rule introduced the notion of secularity to precolonial societies with consequences that continue till present-day. Saba Mahmood observes that the study of secularism in the Middle East cannot disregard European history because of the "legacies" left by colonial rule.¹¹⁶ Abdullah Ahmed An-Na'im mentions that European colonialism was "spectacularly successful" in many

¹¹⁶ Mahmood, *Religious Difference in a Secular Age*, 25, 31.

aspects, including “transforming... the political and legal institutions of the colonised societies”, thus impacting how Muslims perceive the role of Syariah law in their lives.¹¹⁷ Similarly, Cesari notes that the advent of the nation-state and “religion in nationhood is different from premodern forms because it can be used as the foundation of identity for the majority group [and] the minorities”.¹¹⁸

We also see the conjunction of the growth of government institutions and colonial rule. Here, we draw on Foucault’s concept of governmentality, taken from Guillaume de La Perriere: “government is the right disposition of things, arranged to lead to a convenient end”.¹¹⁹ The emergence of the population in 18th century Europe saw that the population became “the ultimate end of government”; the end, in turn, refers to the “welfare of the population, the improvement of its condition” and increase of various resources.¹²⁰ The colonial period in Singapore coincided with the governmentalisation of the territory, which became a colonial state. Governmentalisation is also inextricably linked to the import of secularism as a governing strategy in colonial societies. British rule and the colonial economy also resulted in an influx of immigrants into colonial Singapore; these immigrants constituted the emerging population. The colonial period was characterised by episodes of the colonial power struggling to dominate disparate immigrant groups with loyalty to their home habitus, and through this domination, we see the redefinition of religion and politics. Further, Chapter 2 will examine how the societal significance of religion shifted, for the colonial administration and for the Chinese, Malay, and Indian communities, between 1819 and 1941.

¹¹⁷ Ahmed An-Na’im, *Islam and the Secular State*, 286.

¹¹⁸ Cesari, *We God’s People*, 18.

¹¹⁹ Foucault, “Governmentality” in *Power*, ed. James D. Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley, vol. 3, *Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984* (New York: The New Press, 2000), 208.

¹²⁰ Foucault, 217.

The next period is Singapore's self-governance and short-lived merger with Malaysia; between 1950 and 1965, political power shifted from the British to the new local elites, who debated and enacted their visions of the Singapore state and the secular. Chapter 3 will examine historical processes which influenced how the meanings of secularity, nation and religion came to be constructed for political and religious elites. During the self-governance period, a large number of immigrants became citizens of a new nation-state. In addition, three significant events – the Hertogh riots in 1950, Singapore's merger with Malaysia and the race riots in 1964 – reinforced the necessity of secularity in the collective consciousness of the political elites. Legislative Assembly debates and policy deliberations on religion revealed how the political and religious elites debated, negotiated, and agreed on the place of religion in society. The consensus reached among the political elites and structures instituted during this period formed the secularity dispositions and structures in the national habitus. The examination of why local political elites chose to dismantle some colonial structures of secularity and retain others also reveal secularity dispositions specific to the Singapore context. Notably, the self-governance years were characterised by tensions between overlapping habitus of nation, race, and religion. A closer look at these tensions in Chapter 3 will help this thesis identify patterns that may lead to changes in notions of religion, politics and secularity in future, and anticipate how political and religious elites will respond.

The next significant period, the early decade of independence from 1965 to the mid-1970s, saw notions of the secular, politics and religion being normalised through political discourses, state institutions and legislation. Chapter 4 will examine political and social changes in the first decade of Singapore's independence. Significant state institutions include the Singapore Constitution and the AMLA. This thesis will show

how principles of Singapore's secularity were embedded into these two pieces of legislation, which in turn reinforced these principles in the national habitus. This chapter will also examine changes to Singapore's religious profile in society in the 1970s, an unplanned social change that saw a significant increase in the number of Christians in society.

The 1980s was a decade of social and economic changes, and religious revivalism, which we will examine in Chapter 5. In the 1980s, religious groups with improved socio-economic statuses attempted to re-interpret the meanings of secularity, religion, and politics, and the state responded with countermeasures. This response came in the form of the MRHA; which will be examined in the penultimate chapter. The genealogy of secularity in Singapore is the struggle between first the colonial state, and then the independent state, and religious groups to define politics and religion.

The penultimate chapter will examine the discussions leading to the MRHA, which came into force in 1990. The Act provided enforcement powers for the Government to intervene in religious affairs in order to maintain religious harmony. Notably, the MRHA has not been used in the 30 years since its enactment. However, this does not mean that religious and racial tensions have not existed in society since the 1980s. The MRHA can thus be seen as the third approach of harmonisation; the construction of a structure clearly stating secularity dispositions so that the acquiescence of religious and political elites can be sought.

The concluding chapter will re-examine the genealogy of secularity in Singapore, as discussed in Chapters 2 to 6. This thesis will also identify secularity dispositions and structuring structures in the Singapore habitus, and examine how the secularity norms remains constant, or adapts in a consistent manner to social

changes, at crucial historical crossroads and sites of contestations between religious groups and political elites. We will also examine the contribution of the thesis to the field of religion and politics.

While genealogy as a method provides us with a conceptual framework to investigate the “origins” of secularity, it is still insufficient for us to understand how “things” become normalised and internalised among citizens. The habitus as an analytical approach combined with genealogy will allow us to better study how behaviours, actions and mindsets are shaped by ongoing interactions between state and society and between groups.

1.2.b Archival Research and Source Discussion

This thesis will study state and institutional perspectives of religion in society mainly by examining primary sources. However, I will rely on existing historical accounts since Chapter 2 provides a historical backdrop to contemporary Singapore. While most of these narratives do not focus exclusively on religion, they are helpful as sources from which we can observe patterns and shifts in how the colonial state managed religious actors and institutions, and changes in the power status of religion in society during colonial rule.

I choose to consider discourses from the state, societal, and religious perspectives related to specific discussions or events as this will provide us with the “internal or external” relation of these archival materials. My role as a historian in investigating the genealogy of secularity in Singapore is thus to piece and process these sources in relation to each other, to reveal “different layers of events”.¹²¹

¹²¹ Foucault, "Return to History," 427-8. This thesis has discussed Foucault's archival method in Section 1.2

This thesis will look at state perspectives through discourses of the political elites. Their perspectives can be gathered from official sources, including the proceedings of the Legislative Assembly, parliamentary debates, and Select Committees established to look into various issues. I will also examine newspapers and public speeches to investigate the views of these political elites.¹²²

The views of groups or individuals in society, for both secular and religious perspectives, can be gathered from letters written by concerned individuals to the newspapers, and individual submissions to the Select Committees. Chen Ai Yen notes that Singapore newspapers “achieved the right balance between being supportive of government[al] policies ... and offering constructive criticism”. Letters written to newspapers editors offered a forum “for an active continuous dialogue between the people and the government” as these letters were usually followed by official replies from government ministries.¹²³ Therefore, the letters were representative of the pressing concerns of the time in which they were written. The forum sometimes witnessed exchanges between different groups or individuals on specific topics, thus presenting different perspectives. Nonetheless, this thesis is cognisant that such a study cannot claim to represent all the views present in the government and society.

Newspapers of different languages catered to different audiences, since race, language and religion were interrelated identifiers of a group habitus. Malay newspapers like *Utusan Melayu*, *Melayu Raya* and *Berita Harian* catered to a Malay/Muslim audience. The *Straits Times* was an English-language newspaper, and its audience was English-educated political elites and community leaders. This thesis

¹²² From Chapters 4 to 6, parliamentary debates will replace Legislative Assembly discussions, as Singapore gained independence in 1965 and the Parliament succeeded the Legislative Assembly.

¹²³ Ai Yen Chen, “The Mass Media, 1819-1980,” in *A History of Singapore*, ed. Edwin Lee and Ernest Chew (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1991), 308.

will not be examining Chinese and Tamil newspapers, as it is focused on examining secularity with a specific focus on the government, Christians, and Muslims.¹²⁴ During the 1950s and 1960s, Muslims were likely to be reading Malay newspapers, while the number of Christians – in particular local Christians – was negligible. Thus, this thesis will limit its attention to the English and Malay local newspapers.

In addition, the use of autobiographies and oral archives provide the perspectives of local religious and political elites. Notwithstanding that autobiographies are probably biased and written in hindsight, they are valuable for providing insights if they are viewed as records of how events have been experienced from specific perspectives.

Further, this thesis will study Christian and Islamic tracts published by local organisations between the mid-1970s and 1990. This was the period of Christian and Islamic revivalism, as Chapter 5 will discuss. With their distribution usually limited to audiences from specific churches or organisations, these tracts provide valuable insights into the religious perspectives on state-religion relations and the societal role of religion.

However, there are limitations in terms of presenting a full picture of Muslim representation, given that most of the source materials are in the Malay language. Most of the materials used in this thesis are in English. In addition, this thesis's investigation found that there were significantly more Christian tracts than Muslim publications. It could be that the respective mosques did not independently publish their own tracts. Another possible reason is that tracts published by mosques in the 1970s and 1980s were informal printouts, and no printing licence was required. As

¹²⁴ Preliminary research on Chinese-language discourses on specific events related to discussions on secularity and religion did not surface significant chatter.

such, the mosques were not mandated by law to deposit locally published Islamic tracts with the National Archives of Singapore.

1.3 Mode of Analysis – The Habitus and Sociogenesis of Secularity

This section will address the differences between Bourdieu and Elias' habitus and why this thesis chooses to use the latter's conception of the habitus. Further, this section will explain how the habitus as an analytical approach will address the limitations of other theories on state-religious relations and secularity. We will also identify key concepts of Elias's habitus that are important for this thesis's use as an approach to study the parallel developments of religion in society and nation-state formation in Singapore.

1.3.a Comparison Between Elias and Bourdieu's Habitus

While Bourdieu and Elias's approaches to the habitus appear similar in their definitions, this thesis argues that the latter's conception of the habitus is more closely aligned with its historical processual approach. This is despite Bowen Paille and et. al's observation that Elias and Bourdieu's approaches to the habitus are similar and can be seen as a "single theoretical approach" as both "investigate how specific social configurations ... serve as the sources of second natures and as the dynamic contexts in which habitus (plural) function".¹²⁵

For Bourdieu, the group habitus is homogenous while allowing for "diversity [of individual habitus] within homogeneity". Bourdieu sees the individual habitus as "a structural variant of all the other group or class habitus" that articulates differences in perspectives within and outside the group habitus and "never more than a deviation". This is because the deviant individual is still related to the group habitus, and is, in

¹²⁵ Bowen Paille, Bart van Heerikhuizen, and Mustafa Emirbayer, "Elias and Bourdieu," in *The Legacy of Pierre Bourdieu: Critical Essays*, ed. Bryan Turner and Simon Susen (London: Anthem Press, 2011), 145, 149.

fact, a product of the group habitus. The individual habitus is still “dominated by the earliest experiences, of the experiences statistically common to the members of the same class” and will encounter similar restructuring based on its encounter with the group habitus and other related habitus.¹²⁶ Bourdieu's habitus focuses on how individuals embody a set of principles derived from the group habitus.

Further, Bourdieu's habitus is self-protective and appears unresponsive to external changes. Bourdieu suggests that the habitus is inclined to “ensure its own constancy and its defence against change” by rejecting “new information capable of calling into question its accumulated information, if exposed to it accidentally or by force, and especially by avoiding exposure to such information”.¹²⁷ The new information here probably refers to knowledge production from another habitus that is deemed by the “home” habitus to be disruptive. Thus, the habitus is self-protective and will defend itself from challenges by producing social structures which will support its second nature.¹²⁸ Differing opinions are also viewed in correlation to the shared habitus, and changes are explained as deviants of the group habitus; thus, Bourdieu's concept of the habitus is predetermined by structural factors and does not appear to be fluid to changes. Cesari observes that Bourdieu's habitus is shaped and predetermined by “structural positions (class, education, etc.)”. The behaviour of individuals thus perpetuates existing social structures, “leaving very little agency to individuals”.¹²⁹ Further, Bourdieu's focus on how social customs become reinforced in individuals through the habitus thus leaves little room for fluidity, which is different from Nietzsche's genealogy, which emphasises that “the form is fluid” and the

¹²⁶ Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of a Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Switzerland: Librairie Droz S.A., 1972; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 86–87; Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Les Éditions de Minuit, 1980; Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 60.

¹²⁷ Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 60–61.

¹²⁸ Bourdieu, 61.

¹²⁹ Cesari, *We God's People*, 16.

meanings of “everything” originate and change according to power relations in society.¹³⁰

Even though the habitus is loosely defined as second nature, it does not entirely pre-determine the individual’s thoughts and behaviours. The habitus is fluid and considers continuities and changes to its institutions and dispositions, similar to Nietzsche and Foucault’s description of “things” as fluid and interconnected. Elias notes that at any point in time, there are “analogous connections between a people’s long-term fortunes and experiences and their social habitus”. Given the analogous connections between groups and states, the shared national habitus evolves and changes with time.¹³¹ Both the social habitus and “the layer of habitus forming the national character” are “hard and tough, but also flexible and far from immutable”.¹³² Further, Stephen Mennell mentions that Elias sees learning as a “long-term social process, as prevailing social standards change from generation to generation”. While Elias believes that experiences can lead to changes to the habitus, he also identifies dominant tendencies running through several centuries of European history”.¹³³ This thesis will show dispositions and structures of the shared habitus might respond to changes in the corresponding social habitus. In particular, continuities and changes in habitus dispositions or structures at critical historical junctures are significant for the understanding of Singapore’s secularity, especially in predicting how the state and society will respond to similar events or processes in future.

Scholars in postcolonial studies have also criticised Bourdieu’s structural determinism. Terry Rey notes that some scholars criticise Bourdieu’s habitus for its

¹³⁰ Nietzsche, "Second Essay", 51.

¹³¹ Elias, *The Germans: Power Struggles and the Development of Habitus in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, 2, 19.

¹³² Elias, *The Society of Individuals*, 209.

¹³³ Mennell, “Norbert Elias’s Contribution to Andrew Linklater’s Contribution to International Relations,” 659.

“supposed denial of subaltern agency” and its inability to accommodate resistance or changes to the colonial habitus.¹³⁴ Further, Bourdieu’s discussion on religion is top-heavy and places too much emphasis on “institutional structures” and worldviews already defined by “religious specialists”. He thus ignores the “relative autonomy and cultural agency of ordinary people”.¹³⁵ This thesis seeks to avoid such reliance on institutions and institutionalised religion.

On the other hand, scholars have used Elias’ habitus to examine postcolonial societies. Marta Bucholc argues that the Eliasian habitus addresses the limitations of essentialism – the habitus focuses on “the historical genesis of any national group” and considers the “contingent relationship of group characteristics to the interdependencies within the group” and relatedness to external groups.¹³⁶ Bucholc argues that the postcolonial habitus seeks to “decolonise” on two levels. The society “locat[es] the impact of colonialism on society, such as imposed legal, political, social and cultural orders”, and either “eliminate” or “problematise their embeddedness”. The individual might be too ingrained in his “colonial dependency” to become a member of the postcolonial community; the national community can choose to exclude those who cannot subscribe to the habitus.¹³⁷ Notably, Bucholc extends her analysis to international relations; she suggests that Poland is a “state-society with a postcolonial problem” and likely to become “a loose satellite of the European Union” due to its past.¹³⁸

¹³⁴ Terry Rey, *Bourdieu on Religion: Imposing Faith and Legitimacy* (London: Equinox Publishing Ltd, 2007), 121-3.

¹³⁵ Rey, 125.

¹³⁶ Marta Bucholc, “Schengen and the Rosary: Catholic Religion and the Postcolonial Syndrome in Polish National Habitus,” *Historical Social Research/ Historische Sozialforschung* 45, No. 1 (171) (2020), 154-5, 167.

¹³⁷ Bucholc, 173.

¹³⁸ Bucholc, 177-8.

Similarly, Cesari suggests that the Eliasian framework traces the “transformation of institutions in the *longue durée* and actors’ efforts to control, change, or oppose them”.¹³⁹ She identifies critical junctures that led to changes in state-religion relations in several societies. For instance, pan-Islamic and pan-Arabic movements emerged as resistance to the colonial intrusion into Egypt (1798) and Tunisia (1881).¹⁴⁰ Upon independence, Cesari notes that some Middle Eastern states “co-opted Islamic educational and charitable institutions and clerical authorities” to gain legitimacy among their citizens.¹⁴¹ Similarly, in Sri Lanka, Buddhism was reshaped by local resistance to colonial rule and after independence, when state-Buddhism relations became institutionalised.¹⁴² Notably, Cesari presents examples from public school curricula in the countries mentioned above to show how religious notions are transmitted and legitimised as norms in societies.¹⁴³ Cesari’s use of the Eliasian habitus addresses the limitations of Bourdieu’s habitus, as the latter does not accommodate resistance or changes.

Bourdieu’s use of the habitus does not perform conceptual and institutional genealogy of concepts, which is key to this thesis’s investigation of the genealogy of secularity. On the other hand, Elias’ habitus allows for the investigation of the genealogy of concepts and changes to the habitus at critical junctures. Elias uses the historical processual method to examine the habitus, allowing us to trace how concepts have evolved across time. Elias’ focus on genealogy is similar to Foucault’s. The habitus as an analytical framework thus allows us to discover and make sense of

¹³⁹ Cesari, “Disciplining Religion: The Role of the State and Its Consequences on Democracy,” *Journal of Religious and Political Practice* 2, no. 2 (May 3, 2016): 137; Cesari, “Civilization as Disciplinization and the Consequences for Religion and World Politics,” *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 17, no. 1 (January 2, 2019), 24–33.

¹⁴⁰ Cesari, “Disciplining Religion,” 140-1.

¹⁴¹ Cesari, 142.

¹⁴² Cesari, 143.

¹⁴³ Cesari, 144-146.

“a framework of processes in which scattered facts can be fitted”.¹⁴⁴ Elias’ line of inquiry asks, “why institutions, and people’s conduct and affective make-up change and why they change in this particular way”.¹⁴⁵ In this vein, he studies both historical events and human behaviour. For instance, Elias uses historical sources to examine the interaction of social, political, and economic processes that led to civilising processes, evident in the court manners which developed alongside and fed into these processes, from feudalisation to state formation in France, England and Germany.¹⁴⁶ Elias prefers this historical processual approach over traditional historical narratives that investigate how a specific ruler came into power, and how his regime was consolidated or ruined by his successors. While both approaches use the same historical sources for investigation, only the first approach “attains to the plane of historical reality on which the civilising process takes place”.¹⁴⁷ The random and scattered facts are what constitute the historical processes that produce and inform the habitus. Thus, the habitus allows us to make sense of these seemingly scattered events as patterns and interconnected processes.

More importantly, as Elias’s habitus studies both historical processes and human behaviour, this analytical approach circumvents the individual-society dichotomy. Such an approach helps address the limitations of current works on secularity that usually focus on either the institutional or societal approach, as discussed in Chapter 1.1. Elias’ habitus is relational across the collective-individual dimensions through his conceptualisation of human figurations. Eric Dunning and Jason Hughes suggest that Elias’ use of “human figurations” is intentional in revealing the “radical interdependence” of “social agencies’, ‘institutions’, ‘societies’ ... [and] the

¹⁴⁴ Elias, 412.

¹⁴⁵ Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, 277.

¹⁴⁶ See Elias, *The Civilizing Process*.

¹⁴⁷ Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, 188.

people who comprise them.” These interdependencies include “shifting networks of people with fluctuating, asymmetrical power balances”.¹⁴⁸ For instance, Elias uses dance to guide his readers into thinking about “families, cities, nation-states, and even feudal, capitalist, and communist societies”. Figurations can continue to exist even if individuals contributing to that specific figuration have ceased to exist, provided that other members of the habitus continue to participate in the perpetuation of that figuration.¹⁴⁹ Elias’ conception of human figurations thus enables us to investigate the multi-layered interactions between “we” (institutions, groups and society) and “I” (individual) configurations that lead to the formulation of behaviours and beliefs as internalisation on the part of individuals and collective beliefs on the part of the larger society.

Notably, Bourdieu and Elias use the habitus to study societies and nation-states, and not religion per se. The usefulness of the habitus lies in its applicability as a method in examining social and political processes. This aligns with the aim, in the current thesis, of studying the institutional and societal perspectives of secularity, which emphasises investigating the dynamics of state-religion and societal interactions.

Thus far, relatively few studies engage the concept of habitus to study religion or secularity.¹⁵⁰ Elias notes that it is uncommon for intellectuals to establish connections between present-day social and national habitus (on the one hand) and its history and the process of state formation (on the other); this is what this thesis

¹⁴⁸ Eric Dunning and Jason Hughes, *Norbert Elias and Modern Sociology: Knowledge, Interdependence, Power, Process* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 52-3.

¹⁴⁹ Dunning and Hughes, *Norbert Elias and Modern Sociology*, 53.

¹⁵⁰ See Rey, “Pierre Bourdieu and the Study of Religion: Recent Developments, Directions, and Departures,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Pierre Bourdieu*, ed. Thomas Medvetz and Jeffrey J Sallaz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 299–326 for an overview of works using the Bourdieusian study of religion.

proposes to do.¹⁵¹ In recent years, Andrew Linklater and Cesari have engaged with Eliasian structures in their works. Linklater draws on Elias' process-sociological approach to examine the civilising process among nation-states and the consequent structuring of the global order.¹⁵² Both Linklater and Cesari demonstrate an appreciation of the interconnectedness of domains widely assumed to be disconnected – religion and politics, international and domestic, and the interrelatedness of events over time.

Separately, Werner Schiffauer uses the habitus to explain why the second-generation leadership of Millî Görüş, a leading Islamic organisation in Europe, have used the courts and the Constitution to fight for their rights; this was the result of “an initially abstract commitment to the Constitution” which has concretised into “inner habitus, a second nature”.¹⁵³ This example shows that an Islamic habitus can coexist and intersect with the national habitus, where knowledge of the Constitution resides.

We also need to note that the habitus does not simply refer to context or history. This thesis redefines the definition of “habitus” by returning to its roots in Elias' approach to the habitus. Elias' use of the habitus as a historical processual method shows that the habitus is a collective set of beliefs and behaviours shaped by ongoing interactions between human figurations, as Linklater, Cesari and Schiffauer have shown.

The Eliasian approach describes how the habitus is informed by the building of national community and culture, which is a dimension Asad does not address. Elias uses a processual approach to trace the development of the state through crucial

¹⁵¹ Elias, *The Germans: Power Struggles and the Development of Habitus in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, 19.

¹⁵² See Andrew Linklater, *The Idea of Civilization and the Making of the Global Order* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2020).

¹⁵³ Werner Schiffauer, *Nach dem Islamismus: die Islamische Gemeinschaft Millî Görüş* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2010), 325-6 in Joppke, *Is Multiculturalism Dead?*, 97.

historical processes, from feudalism to the rise of the monarchy and the eventual formation of the state. Such a sociogenetic approach is relevant for the study of secularity in this thesis; it helps us trace the genealogy of secularity from the colonial period to present-day Singapore. The present-day “accepted” notion of secularity did not just come to be. The national habitus, which includes the state and society’s knowledge of secularity, politics and religion, is a product of historical interactions and power struggles between the state, society, and different groups of people. Thus, the habitus provides an analytical framework for us to examine the building blocks of secularity in Singapore and how the Singaporean brand of secularity came to be internalised by Singaporeans over time.

1.3.b Laying the Foundations of Elias’ Habitus

Several features of Elias’ concept of the habitus contribute to this thesis’s analytical toolkit to investigate the genealogy of secularity in Singapore. An important feature of the habitus is interactions between human, institutional and structural figurations. The habitus as an analytical lens will allow us to unpack power relations between institutions, individuals, religious groups and the state. Notably, the Eliasian habitus operates on a collective sense, as compared to Bourdieu’s, which operates on an individual level. The layers of interaction between groups produce historical experiences that form the collective, social habitus. The social habitus informs how the individual or group, on various levels of group identification, chooses to behave in relationships in “greater circumspection, more conscious forms of self-control, reduced spontaneity in action and speech in the forming and management of relationships”.

Elias provides a theoretical framework to examine different levels of interactions, which are “basic structures that give all the individual processes within

this field their direction and their specific stamps".¹⁵⁴ The study of processes and interactions between figurations will show that concepts previously thought to be separated, like economic and political spheres, are in "permanent interdependence".¹⁵⁵ This mode of inquiry allows us to study the different layers of intersection in society, thus addressing the limitations posed by current paradigms that fail to integrate institutional-religious interaction.

Group identification comes in many forms, uniting individuals through religious affiliation, ethnicity or the larger structures of society and the modern nation-state. These groups constitute the collective "we" on many integration planes, and these different levels intersect at many points.¹⁵⁶ Elias observes that the characteristics of the "national group identity ... are a layer of the social habitus built very deeply and firmly into the personality structure of the individual".¹⁵⁷ The colonial habitus, and the national habitus that it evolves into after decolonisation, is the overarching habitus that citizens collectively share in a nation-state.

However, Elias recognises that an individual or group might have various group identifications, and that the group identities residing in each individual or group overlap and may be in conflict. An example would be the conflict between national and tribal habitus in the decolonisation process and the consequent formation of the modern nation-state in Africa.¹⁵⁸ As discussed earlier, Habermas had questioned if one had to divide his religious and secular self in a post-secular society while translating his views to be heard in various spheres (political, religious and civil society). The above example shows that the individual can belong to many layers of habitus, similar to

¹⁵⁴ Elias, 411.

¹⁵⁵ Elias, 437, 469-473.

¹⁵⁶ Elias, *The Society of Individuals*, 172, 202–4.

¹⁵⁷ Elias, *The Society of Individuals*, ed. Michael Schroter, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Suhrkamp Verlag, 1987; New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group Ltd, 2001), 209.

¹⁵⁸ Elias, *The Society of Individuals*, 211.

Berger's multiple relevance structures and Taylor's co-existence of individual and political identities. The other levels of "we" habitus in Singapore that intersect include religious and racial habitus.

Elias explains that "the fortunes of a nation become crystallised in institutions which are responsible for ensuring that the most different people of society acquire the same characteristics, possess the same national habitus".¹⁵⁹ The institutions thus ensure that "second natures" of the habitus become ingrained in the consciousnesses of people belonging to the habitus. In this thesis, institutions refer to both state and religious institutions. The study of interactions between institutions and groups will reveal processes of social learning that lead to the individual and collective internalisation of concepts of secularity, religion and politics articulated by the nation-state habitus.

Notably, Elias notes ways of observing shifts in power between groups in the habitus and the ways in which members of the shared habitus may force, compel, or persuade others to acquire characteristics of the national habitus. This builds upon Foucault's notion of discipline; discipline "fixes; it arrests or regulates movements; it clears up confusion; it dissipates compact groupings of individuals" who behave erratically, and "master all forces", thus defusing "counter-power", resistance and "other forms of horizontal conjunctions".¹⁶⁰ In particular, Elias recognises that states have become "the highest-ranking survival units"; tribes are ceding their roles as autonomous units to the state, which has become the "highest-ranking reference groups for the we-identity of individuals".¹⁶¹ In this case, the state, or we-identity, is usually more powerful than the I-identity (or individual self) or the smaller habitus.

¹⁵⁹ Elias, *The Germans: Power Struggles and the Development of Habitus in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, 18.

¹⁶⁰ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 219.

¹⁶¹ Elias, *The Society of Individuals*, 206.

Like Elias who notes that smaller groups cede their powers to the state, Foucault notes that the state has emerged at the top of the power hierarchy. However, state power is not necessarily authoritarian or repressive, as scholars like Zubaidah have observed. Foucault suggests we move away from negative connotations of power with terms like “excludes”, “represses”, “censors”, “abstracts”, “masks”, and “conceals”.¹⁶² While the state has emerged as the highest form of power, the state is not necessarily the only object of power and power does not originate only from the state. Foucault attributes this trend of the state as the highest form of power to the governmentalisation of power relations, in which such relations have been “elaborated, rationalised, and centralised in the form of, or under the auspices of, state institutions”.¹⁶³ This is likely why scholars who favour the institutional approach to secularity place the onus on the state to manage religious groups and multiculturalism. A neutral view of state power will thus enable us to move away from the different spectrums of secularity and state power in Singapore offered by various scholars.

Foucault uses normalisation and surveillance, the two “great instruments of power at the end of the classical age”, to explain how ideas become normalised.¹⁶⁴ Foucault describes discipline as repeated exercises that create “second nature” or new behaviours. Normalisation is when such exercises become standardised to redirect the individual to adhere to these norms. Normalisation, in turn, creates the “abnormal”, and new disciplinary techniques were introduced to normalise the “abnormal”. Normalisation creates “a normalised society where everyone and almost

¹⁶² Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 194.

¹⁶³ Foucault, “The Subject and Power” in *Power*, 345.

¹⁶⁴ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 184.

everything (from economic trends to crop production)” is seen as “normal” or “deviant” from the norm.¹⁶⁵

However, beyond his example of the discipline of the body, Foucault’s normalisation does not break down the process by which normalisation occurs, like for instance how ideas proposed by a more powerful subject, for instance the state or a political figure, becomes internalised by the collective object (referring to the party or group over which the subject exercises its power). The use of Eliasian habitus helps us to examine how ideas gain legitimacy among groups.

Elias posits that a drag effect may occur when a group resist changes to the principles and structures of the existing habitus because of an “unplanned social process” that might bring about change. This change is not coincidental and can be seen as an element of the civilising process.¹⁶⁶ The manner of change depends on many factors. How deeply entrenched the social habitus is will determine the form of resistance mounted to prevent the change; alternatively, the event might have happened so spontaneously that the members of the habitus might not have a chance to react to it. Otherwise, they might resist changes to the social habitus by “slowing it down or blocking it entirely”.¹⁶⁷ The drag effect is helpful for this thesis’s investigation of secularity; it will help us to observe possible conflict points and how the habitus might respond to changes in the public status of religion or state-religion relations. The degree of resistance to an unplanned social change will help us identify dominant tendencies in Singapore’s habitus. The drag effect helps to identify how power and

¹⁶⁵ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 184; Ladelle McWhorter, “Normalisation” in *The Cambridge Foucault Lexicon*, ed. Leonard Lawlor and John Nale (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 316-7.

¹⁶⁶ Elias, 213.

¹⁶⁷ Elias, 211.

discipline is exercised over societies or groups in a society, and how ideas gain dominance and become the norm.

The Eliasian explanation of constraints and civilising processes allows us to appreciate how the habitus works and what happens when conflict arises. This is explained by the civilising process. In the early stages of social development, Elias observes “people took their own way of life, their own social conventions, entirely for granted”. It was only when people became conscious of their differences that the situation became problematic. The “key problem of any civilising process” is how people or groups can satisfy their basic needs, without these needs being achieved at the expense of others. Elias proposes four types of constraints, of which only two will be discussed here as they are more relevant to this thesis.¹⁶⁸ These two constraints explain how concepts like secularity gain legitimacy among or become internalised on a collective basis. This is what Elias terms the social learning process or Foucault’s normalisation process.

The first is social or external constraints that people impose over “the other” in their social lives. The second is self-control. According to Elias, self-control is only “actualised through learning and experience”; otherwise, it stays dormant. The extent of actualisation is dependent on societal context and continually evolves. Further, self-restraint is reliant on “a very great deal of reinforcement through the fear created and pressure exerted by others”. The pressure can be imposed by other people or imaginary constructs such as spiritual beings. Elias’ research reveals that the “hallmark of civilising processes ... is a change in the relation between external social constraints and individual self-restraints”. In the civilising process, or normalisation,

¹⁶⁸ Elias, *The Germans: Power Struggles and the Development of Habitus in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, 31–32. The other two constraints are: (i) limitations imposed by human nature, e.g. dying of old age, loneliness, hunger; and (ii) limits placed by “natural circumstances”, e.g. need for shelter from natural elements.

self-constraint increases while social constraint correspondingly diminishes, and the differences in power distribution between groups will also decrease. Self-constraint would gradually be formed through less coercion, and more through gentle persuasion and one's conviction.¹⁶⁹ The external constraints of the nation-state are mirrored by the internal constraints of the individuals. Societies, individuals, the state, and groups are all "aspects of social processes" which are "functionally interdependent varying degrees of harmony and conflict". They are all actors or passive receivers at varying points.¹⁷⁰ Such an approach allows us to examine how notions of secularity, religion and politics gain legitimacy and become internalised by Singapore citizens. Elias' habitus also allows us to study shifts in power between institutions and groups in the Singapore society and how these power shifts consequently influence the habitus' dispositions and structures.

Unlike Bourdieu, who emphasises the homogenisation of the habitus, Elias presents a processual approach to examining how individuals or groups interact to maintain the harmony of the shared habitus. Social harmony, in this vein, does not necessarily mean harmonisation of all individual views within the habitus or submission of an individual's view to that of the collective habitus. Elias sees interactions between different individuals and groups as dynamic and multi-dimensional, and the power shifts between them as fluid. Elias also acknowledges that conflicts are "normal, indispensable aspects of social life". Therefore, the democratic state does not need to stifle conflicts; the state's role is to "regulate the resolution of a society's most important group conflicts via special institutions", so that conflict is limited to "non-violent forms of struggle", such as discussion or exchanges

¹⁶⁹ Elias, 32–35.

¹⁷⁰ Elias, 335–36.

of words. The resolution of conflict is dependent on whether the parties involved abide by the principles of the habitus.¹⁷¹

Further, Elias presents a model of correlation and interdependence between external structures (like state institutions and norms) and the internal dispositions of the individual. Presumably, as a nation-state progresses towards increased democratisation, the state relies less on policing and enforcement of rules, depending more on the individual's habitus dispositions to restrain oneself according to the limits imposed by the habitus. This differs from Bourdieu's approach to harmonisation, which immediately places the onus on mobilising agents or skilful workers to impose external constraints. Thus, by Elias' suggestion, in the initial phases of state formation, the government and group leaders are likely to impose more external restraints. A civilised state will thereafter probably rely more on self-control on the part of the individuals who have internalised the collective notions of the habitus. This is a notable point of discussion that the thesis will return to in Chapter 7 – does state management of religious affairs decrease over time?

In addition, Elias places emphasis on the importance of early experiences in the national habitus. Elias notes that “the contemporary problems of a group are crucially influenced by their earlier fortunes, by their beginningless development”.¹⁷² Notably, Cesari builds on the concept of habitus to show how the meaning of Islam in Islamic societies has evolved as “Islamic institutions became identified with the nation” through the processes of colonisation, decolonisation, and nation-building. For Cesari, the earliest fortune refers to Islamic societies' encounters with Western imperialism, which heralded the advent of the modern nation-state. After the

¹⁷¹ Elias, 292–93.

¹⁷² Elias, 19.

European wars of religion, the monarch took charge of “worldly affairs”, such as civil law and education. Religious believers were expected to keep their beliefs private, and ensure that those beliefs did not influence political or social policies. This dichotomy was imported into Islamic territories via Western colonial rule, and affected how postcolonial elites envisioned the role of religion in the postcolonial state. The nation-state played a critical role in the construct of political Islam as political elites used religion to unite citizens of the new modern, decolonised state.¹⁷³ As mentioned earlier, Goh also observes that secularism in Singapore is inherited from colonial legacy.¹⁷⁴ Thus, the conjuncture of the introduction of the Western notion of nation-state during colonial rule and religious identity has led to changes in religion's social and political significance.

The habitus, which considers historical experiences and the interdependence between figurations to explain dispositions, structures, and practices by collective groups in society, will thus help us to move away from existing models or theories on secularity. Elias' concept of the habitus is critical as an analytical toolkit for this thesis due to several reasons: (a) Elias' historical processual approach; (b) Elias' relational approach to studying interactions between state, institutions, and society; (c) the habitus explains how notions become legitimised in society and internalised by individuals; and (d) the habitus structure is fluid and allows for challenges, resistance and changes. Further, the combination of Foucault's normalisation and Elias' workings of the habitus will allow us to trace how notions of the secular become normalised or re-normalised as second nature in the collective habitus (referring to the national habitus and other “we” levels of identification).

¹⁷³ Cesari, *What Is Political Islam?* (Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2017), 6-7, 13–17.

¹⁷⁴ Goh, “State and Social Christianity in Post-Colonial Singapore,” 58.

1.4 Hypothesis

Having explained notable points from Elias' use of the habitus, this thesis will explain how genealogy and the habitus can be used to study the secularity norms in the Singapore habitus. This study's main aim is to investigate the genealogy of secularity in the modern nation-state of Singapore by looking at interactions between both institutional and societal levels of secularisation. This study involves looking at the genealogy of secularity since the beginnings of modern Singapore, as a colonial state under British rule to its establishment as an independent state in 1965, and the introduction of the MRHA in 1989. It involves looking at how the notions of secularity – the status of religion in society and state-religion relations – have changed over time. This thesis will also investigate transition points that led to the redistribution of political power between state and religious institutions, and changes or continuities in the habitus. After tracing the genealogy of secularity in Singapore, this thesis will reveal secularity traits of the national habitus which it has identified at various transition points.

As the previous discussion has shown, scholars generally look at ideas or institutions but fail to combine their analysis across both levels. I choose to adopt a processual approach that involves analysing institutional and societal levels of secularisation to examine the conjunction of nation-building and the subsequent redefinition of religion in society. I hypothesise that the status of religious communities in Singapore is redefined at significant historical crossroads of nation-building. Religious communities constantly have to realign themselves on the social level to calibrate their behaviour with the political elites' expectations and the national habitus. This study is not concerned with models or variables of secularism but with identifying historical crossroads or sites of contestations, and how religious and political elites will

respond to realign their expectations according to the national habitus, principles, and structures.

In this thesis, secularity norms in the national habitus refers to dispositions or principles on secularity and structures of secularity in Singapore for the religious and political elites, and the society. The concern is to investigate how different groups perceive the role of religion in society and how members of the shared national habitus in Singapore might adapt, control, or oppose attempted changes to the habitus. These changes are mostly unplanned social changes that might manifest as events like: Singapore's independence as a sovereign nation; the emergence of religious revivalism; and conflicts between religious groups. This thesis involves studying how different expectations of secularity are derived from religious and national habitus. It also entails understanding how historical experiences produced the habitus, and led to the acceptance of secularity as an institutional agreement between the state and the society. Such an approach moves away from institutional approaches, which see religion as something to be managed. The habitus is a fluid structure that will adapt to social changes and fluctuations in power configurations.

As mentioned in Section 1.1.a, this study will focus on investigating how state-religion relations and the societal dimension of religion have evolved. The assessment of interactions between each group will consequently shape the secularity dispositions constituting Singapore's habitus. The first layer of interactions examine state-religion relations, which refers to the positions of religious actors vis-à-vis state institutions and policies. The second layer of interactions looks at the significance of religion for these religious groups, and how it affects interreligious relations. The use of Elias' habitus allows us to investigate multi-layered interactions between the multiple "we" (institutions, groups and society) figurations.

Given Singapore's multireligious and multiracial composition, religious actors include Buddhists, Muslims, Taoists, Christians, and Hindus, among many other religions. According to an investigation by the Pew Research Center in 2014, Singapore is the most religiously diverse country in the world.¹⁷⁵ The 2020 Census revealed that 31.1% of Singapore residents identified as Buddhists, 20% professed to have no religious affiliations, 18.% identified as Christians, 15.6% as Muslims, 8.8% as Taoists and 5% as Hindus.¹⁷⁶ Physical religious confrontation has been kept to a minimum; in fact, there has been no overt religious clashes since the country's independence in 1965. It is also intriguing that a secular state like Singapore with a majority Chinese Buddhist population, has constituted a dual legal system with civil and Syariah courts.

This thesis chooses to focus its study on the Singapore state, Christians, and Muslims in its investigation of secularity in the Singapore habitus. The course of archival research conducted for this thesis revealed that despite the Buddhist majority in Singapore, Christian and Muslim-related discourses took up a significant portion of the discussion on state secularity, religion, and politics. Thus, this thesis chooses to focus on state-Christian-Muslim discussions on secularity, religion, and politics. These interactions will be studied through various historical sequences, identified as crossroads where significant changes in power relations and definitions of secularity, religion and politics occurred. It is hoped that such a processual approach will identify a habitus specific to Singapore. The habitus informs the genealogy of secularity in Singapore and helps us to identify scenarios that might lead to changes in notions of

¹⁷⁵ Pew Research Center, "Religious Diversity Around The World," *Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project* (blog), April 4, 2014, <https://www.pewforum.org/2014/04/04/global-religious-diversity/>.

¹⁷⁶ Grace Ho, "More S'poreans Have No Religious Affiliation: Population Census," *The Straits Times*, June 16, 2021.

secularity. The habitus will also help us to anticipate future fronts of tension between religious and political actors.

2 THE COLONIAL YEARS: THE FOUNDATION OF THE SINGAPORE HABITUS

Postcolonial scholars have commented on the importance of colonialism in importing Western ideas of secularity and transforming postcolonial societies' notions of religion, state and politics. The colonial period is important in our investigation of the development of secularity dispositions and structures in the Singapore habitus since the notion of secularity was first introduced to Singapore society at this juncture. This chapter will identify important points of transitions during British colonial rule in Singapore that have resulted in significant changes in the balance of power for political and religious institutions, and that have consequently shaped the national habitus. The development of notions of secularity in this era will help to illustrate how the status of religion, vis-à-vis the state and society, has evolved from the colonial period to present-day Singapore.

This chapter will first paint a portrait of colonial society. In 1819, the signing of a treaty between the British East India Company (EIC) and Malay rulers in Singapore gave the EIC the rights to establish a trading outpost in colonial Singapore. Singapore then comprised an estimated 1,000 inhabitants, most of whom were natives. There were 20 to 30 Malays who were part of the entourage of the *Temenggong* (members of the Malay nobility responsible for maintaining law and order) and a similar number of Chinese.¹⁷⁷ By 1821, Singapore had 5,000 inhabitants, including 3,000 Malays, some 1,000 Chinese and 500 to 600 Bugis people, with other minority groups like Indians, Arabs, Armenians, Europeans, and Eurasians.¹⁷⁸ The first section of this chapter will look at the period between 1819 and 1867 and examine the colonial

¹⁷⁷ C.M. Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore 1819-2005* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2020), 38.

¹⁷⁸ Turnbull, 52. Bugis people refer to immigrants from South Sulawesi, Indonesia.

management of Singapore. This section will also investigate how colonial rule and migration impacted the group habitus of the different racial groups in Singapore.

The following section will look at the consolidation of colonial rule in Singapore from 1867 to 1941 when the British established state institutions to manage religious groups and assert more control over society. In 1867, the British officially recognised Singapore as a Crown Colony, meaning that Singapore came under the direct control of the British Government and was no longer a company entity under the EIC. With the introduction of state institutions and new legislation which consolidated colonial power over society, political power was redistributed between colonial institutions and the different communities. This section will examine how the societal significance of religion changed with the redistribution of political power.

The third section will examine key transition points that resulted in the change in the status of religion in the Chinese, Malay, and Indian communities. This chapter will conclude by examining how interactions between the colonial state and inhabitants of Singapore have been accompanied by changes in concepts of secularity, for both political and religious institutions.

Notably, there is no single account of the role of religion in colonial Singapore society. Therefore, this thesis will weave together a narrative about the societal and institutional role of religion in colonial Singapore society through existing historical works. There are two types of such historical sources: narratives of general history in Singapore and research on specific aspects of the different racial communities. Several historians have written detailed historical accounts of colonial Singapore pieced together from archival sources and newspaper articles.¹⁷⁹ However, some

¹⁷⁹ Barbara Watson Andaya and Leonard Y. Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, 3rd ed. (London: Palgrave, 2017); Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore 1819-2005* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2009); Turnbull, *The Straits Settlements 1826-67: Indian Presidency to Crown Colony* (London: The Athlone Press, 1972).

accounts, like that of Mary Turnbull, are drawn exclusively from colonial sources; these accounts are discourses representing the colonial perspective. Turnbull notes that the history of Singapore's colonial past remains "under-researched", because the different immigrant communities in Singapore developed at their own respective paces, and the internal histories of these communities have not yet been investigated.¹⁸⁰ This thesis acknowledges the limitations of using narratives relying on colonial sources; such narratives, written by the Western hand, present the Western view of secularity.

Some accounts have sought to look at native sources to retrieve societal perspectives. Anthony Milner's investigation of the development of Malaysian politics includes accounts from Christian missionaries and indigenous Malay Muslim writers, who provided descriptions of Islam at the societal level in colonial Singapore.¹⁸¹ Some studies by local academics focus on specific racial communities, such as the consolidated volume by Kwa Chong Guan and Kua Bak Lim on the Chinese community and Rajesh Rai's research into the Indian community. These community-specific accounts provide some insights into the significance of religion for specific communities from the perspectives of the local inhabitants. For instance, Cheng Lim Keak uses a good mix of Chinese or local sources and colonial reports. These accounts provide a different perspective on religion from the above-mentioned historical accounts that rely primarily on colonial sources.

Separately, existing works on religion in colonial Singapore provide an insight into the colonial management of religions through legislative means. Vinheeta Sinha presents a comprehensive study of historical and secondary sources on the colonial administration of religion and the religious landscape on the Straits Settlement in the

¹⁸⁰ Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore 1819-2005*, 2020, 10.

¹⁸¹ Anthony Milner, *The Invention of Politics in Colonial Malaya: Contesting Nationalism and the Expansion of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

nineteenth and twentieth centuries. She uses an institutional approach to evaluate the British management of religions, particularly Hinduism and Islam, in the Straits Settlements.¹⁸² Ahmad bin Mohd Ibrahim's dated monograph examines the legal status of Muslims in colonial Singapore based on legal records from the Straits Settlements.¹⁸³ By integrating the different accounts that provide insights into state-religion relations and the societal status of religion from legislative, historical, and sociological perspectives, this thesis will show how meanings of race, religion, and nation have emerged, evolved, and interacted during colonial rule.

2.1 Beginnings of Colonial Singapore Under the British East India Company

2.1.a The British East India Company – From Tenant to Sovereign Authority

Singapore came under the control of the EIC in 1819 with the signing of a treaty between EIC representative Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles, Tengku Husain and *Temenggong* Abdur Rahman of Johor.¹⁸⁴ The EIC was formed in 1600 when Queen Elizabeth I issued a royal charter to a group of British traders which granted them exclusive trade rights to overseas trade in the East Indies.¹⁸⁵ Thus, the treaty was an agreement between a trading company and the indigenous rulers of Singapore; this had implications for the nature of relations between the EIC and the local inhabitants.

In the early years, political power was distributed between the *Temenggong* and the EIC. According to Turnbull, the *Temenggong* had complete control over the trading community, including judicial authority, leasing land, and collecting taxes. William Farquhar, the British Resident in charge of Singapore between 1819 and 1823,

¹⁸² Vineeta Sinha, *Religion-State Encounters in Hindu Domains: From the Straits Settlements to Singapore* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2011).

¹⁸³ Ahmad bin Mohd Ibrahim, "The Legal Status of the Muslims in Singapore" (1965).

¹⁸⁴ Chong Guan Kwa et al., *Seven Hundred Years: A History of Singapore* (Singapore: National Library Board Singapore, 2019), 198.

¹⁸⁵ Emily Erikson, *Between Monopoly and Free Trade: The English East India Company, 1600-1757* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 2.

felt that the treaty did not grant the EIC, which was a trading company, the right to land ownership or the right to formulate laws. The EIC's control was limited to that of the port and economic matters like taxation. Farquhar also paid the *Temenggong* and Sultan a stipend collected from taxes in return for their policing and judicial responsibilities.¹⁸⁶

According to existing historical accounts, the EIC adopted a policy of non-interference in governing Singapore. The EIC probably adopted a policy of non-intervention because its primary interest in Singapore was economic, and its policies in Singapore were geared towards ensuring that Singapore functioned smoothly as a trading port. Thus, it adopted a policy of non-intervention in most governance matters as political governance did not fall within the scope of their trading duties; Malay rulers were in charge of policing and judiciary duties. The British policy of non-interference in religious matters was also adopted in other colonies, such as British India.

The British policy of non-interference could also be attributed to parallel developments in England. Sinha attributes the policy of non-interference to the influence of the "Enlightenment compromise" in Britain, which consigned religion to the private sphere of citizens.¹⁸⁷ There was a relaxation of legislation on religions in Britain, starting from the late 1700s. The Catholic Relief Act of 1791 allowed Catholics the freedom to worship, assume junior public positions, and reside in London. The Act was followed by the Catholic Emancipation Act in 1829, granting Catholics more political rights; Catholics were allowed to be Members of Parliaments (MPs), vote in elections, and assume senior public positions.¹⁸⁸ Stewart Brown observes that there were also calls to end established churches and formal links between the Church and

¹⁸⁶ Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore 1819-2005*, 2020, 56–57, 63.

¹⁸⁷ Sinha, *Religion-State Encounters in Hindu Domains*, 62.

¹⁸⁸ "Emancipation," UK Parliament, accessed June 2, 2021, <https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/private-lives/religion/overview/emancipation/>.

the state.¹⁸⁹ Brown assesses that the British state had become, by the end of 1914, “secular” as established churches in England and Scotland did not have the legal authority to impose religious instruction on the people. The church was legally disestablished in Ireland and Wales, and different Christian denominations and Judaism were recognised as equals under the law.¹⁹⁰

Another reason could be the British lack of experience in establishing a system of governance capable of managing religious diversity. The Civil Marriage Act of England and Wales, which allowed marriages to be recognised by churches of other Christian denominations or by a civil registrar, was only passed in 1836. Before the Act, England did not have a civil law system for private affairs such as marriage, death, and birth; marriages could only be celebrated in Anglican churches.¹⁹¹ Thus, at the point of colonial rule, the British conflated family laws with one’s religious identification. Given Western political secularism’s separation of private and public spheres, religious law was synonymous with family law that resided within the private sphere.

Turnbull and Sinha explain that the policy of non-interference was enshrined in the stipulations of the 1819 treaty. According to Article VII of the treaty, the legal system was to “depend on the laws and usages of the various tribes who may be expected to settle in the vicinity of the English factory”. The treaty also guaranteed that the EIC would “respect the laws and customs of Malays”. Thus, Muslim laws were applied to matters relating to religious practices, marriages, and inheritance, on the condition that the indigenous laws and customs were “not contrary to reason”. Besides

¹⁸⁹ Stewart Brown, *Providence and Empire: Religion, Politics and Society in the United Kingdom, 1815-1914* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2008), 83–88, 256. Calls to end established churches began with the Scottish voluntary campaign that spread to England and led to a coordinated British campaign to disestablish the church in 1834. The British campaign sought to end “the unholy alliance” of the crown, parliament, and established church. The Irish church was disestablished in 1869, making religious beliefs voluntary and the state secular.

¹⁹⁰ Brown, 455.

¹⁹¹ Brown, 86, 96.

the indigenous Malay community, the 1819 treaty also allowed other communities to be governed by their respective traditions.¹⁹² In 1823, Raffles also stated that the EIC would apply the English civil code to the inhabitants of Singapore with mildness, common sense, “and a patriarchal kindness and indulgent consideration for the prejudices of each tribe”.¹⁹³ The above stipulations guaranteed that religious and cultural laws were retained for matters relating to family, marriage, divorce, and inheritance, while the criminal code was applied to all inhabitants. Here, we see the influence of the Western secularity - the distinction between public and private, and religion and politics. Economic and trading matters fell under the purview of the EIC, while the EIC did not interfere in matters like family, marriage, divorce, and inheritance, as these matters were deemed to be customary.

In the ensuing years, the EIC purchased more sovereign rights from the Malay rulers; this diminished the latter’s interference in local administrative matters. Turnbull assesses that the EIC wanted to establish more control over Singapore as the EIC authorities had conflicts with the Malay chiefs over monetary compensation and the issue of slavery. John Crawfurd, the British Resident of Singapore from 1823 to 1826, wanted more control over the territory so that the Malay chiefs would stop demanding increased monetary compensation, and drawing the EIC into local territorial disputes. Before Raffles departed from Singapore in 1823, he signed a new agreement with the *Temenggong* and the Sultan to purchase their ruling and property rights to Singapore.¹⁹⁴ Crawfurd negotiated for another agreement in 1824 that prevented the

¹⁹² IOR – G34/10 – ff127–131, “Treaty of Friendship and Alliance concluded between the Honorable Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles, Lieutenant-Governore of Fort Marlborough and its dependencies, Agent to the Most Noble Francis, Marquis Of Hastings, Governore-General of India, etc., for the Honorable EEIC on the one part, and Their Highnesses Sultan Hussin Muhammed Shah, Sultan of Johore, and Dato Tumungong Sri Maharajah Abdul Rahman, chief of Singapore and its dependencies, on the other part” quoted in Sinha, *Religion-State Encounters in Hindu Domains*, 34; Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore 1819-2005*, 2020, 64.

¹⁹³ Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore 1819-2005*, 2009, 40.

¹⁹⁴ Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore 1819-2005*, 2020, 63, 71.

local Malay rulers from interfering in the administration of Singapore; he felt the terms of Raffles' agreement were insufficient to accord full sovereignty to the EIC. He indicated that the only solution would be "the unequivocal cession of the island of Singapore in full sovereignty and property". In the Crawford Treaty of 1824, the Malay rulers surrendered control of Singapore and its surrounding islands, sea, and the straits to the EIC. The rulers were not allowed to establish relations with foreign parties without the EIC's permission.¹⁹⁵ The treaty was crucial in the transfer of political power from the local rulers to EIC. Power was instrumentalised with the transfer of judiciary and policing powers that previously resided with the *Temenggong* and the Sultan.

Despite the EIC's attempts to assert more control over the state's inhabitants, Turnbull assesses that the EIC's control was "tenuous". The EIC introduced the Second and Third Charter of Justice in 1826 and 1855 to address legal chaos in colonial Singapore as there was no system in place. Under the two charters, all inhabitants of Singapore were subjected to the English common law.¹⁹⁶ However, Turnbull observes there was little change as the inhabitants did not subscribe to the foreign English law system. The introduction of the two charters led to the removal of the informal *kapitan* (captain; also refers to community leader) system, in which the community leaders were given executive, administrative and judicial powers over their respective communities. Notably, Mak Lau-Fong suggests that the *kapitan* system was instituted in Singapore between 1820 and 1825, and that it was replaced by a *t'ingchu* (Master of Temple) system. The *t'ingchu* was "a leader elected by a group of

¹⁹⁵ Turnbull, 75–76. The British abolished the slave trade in 1807 for British ships. The Slavery Abolition Act of 1833 further abolished slavery in most parts of the British empire, with the exception of some territories.

¹⁹⁶ Ahmad bin Mohd Ibrahim, *The Legal Status of the Muslims in Singapore*, 1965, 9-10.

prominent Chinese connected with the temple concerned”.¹⁹⁷ As the two charters were only legal provisions, and the EIC did not establish institutional structures to govern the inhabitants of Singapore, the EIC continued to rely on the leaders of various immigrant groups to maintain law and order within their respective groups. Consequently, the different communities “retained and developed their organisations, virtually outside the pale of the official administrative”.¹⁹⁸ The “divide and rule” system meant that the EIC rarely interacted with the communities living in Singapore, and the immigrants and indigenous people were organised in their communities, with their own sets of law, customs, and religions.¹⁹⁹

At this juncture, multiple we-groups exist within the territorial boundaries of Singapore – the British and the separate habitus of the immigrants. The separation of these immigrants’ habitus also manifested in the physical separation of governing institutions; the EIC did not exercise power over the other groups and the groups did not recognise that they were the objects of EIC’s power.

2.1.b Contained “Nations” within Colonial Singapore – Race and Religion as Group Identifications

This section will discuss the different habitus that coexisted during British colonial rule in Singapore. At this juncture, the immigrants and the EIC imported their habitus with dispositions and structures from their homelands. The EIC’s introduction of the divide and rule system and non-interference in religious matters could be seen as structuring structures of British secularism. Notably, the divide and rule system

¹⁹⁷ Lau-Fong Mak, “The Kongsis and The Triad,” *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science* 3, no. 2 (1975): 51. According to Mak, the *kapitan* also helped to “police his own people” and maintained a “register of birth and marriages of all those of their [race]”. Apart from Mak’s work, I could not find further research on the *t’ingchu* system.

¹⁹⁸ Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore 1819-2005*, 2020, 109.

¹⁹⁹ Cheng Han Tan, “Private Ordering and the Chinese in Nineteenth Century Straits Settlements,” *Asian Journal of Comparative Law* 11, no. 1 (July 2016): 32–35; Turnbull, *The Straits Settlements 1826-67*, 123–24, 127.

created separate habitus structures, i.e. social, political and judiciary structures for different groups of immigrants, which reinforced differences between these groups.

By different accounts, it appears that the inhabitants of Singapore were left in their separate racial-religious enclaves to provide for their own specific economic and social needs. The examination of existing historical narratives on the Indian, Malay, and Chinese communities reveals three main observations. Firstly, race, dialect and religious habitus were intrinsically linked. Secondly, religions were usually imported from the immigrants' homelands. Thirdly, as religious affiliation corresponded to specific racial and dialect groupings, religious leaders served as providers of judiciary, economic and social services; physical places of worship became places where religious leaders carried out administrative functions in lieu of the state. These observations are important in tracing the evolution of secularity and related concepts in Singapore, which we will discuss later.

The EIC possibly viewed the different immigrant groups as separate nations residing within a shared territory. Raffles referred to the Malay community as its own distinct nation, without recognition of the other communities in Singapore. He stated that the morality of "native masters and teachers" should be judged "according to the opinions of their own nation".²⁰⁰ An official British report in 1875 observed that the majority of Chinese immigrants in Singapore were unaware that there was a government in the colony.²⁰¹ These accounts convey the sense of we-groups that do not intersect on a common plane. There appeared to be little acknowledgement from the inhabitants that the EIC was the sovereign power governing Singapore, nor did there appear to be an overarching colonial habitus recognised by inhabitants.

²⁰⁰ Thomas Stamford Raffles, *Formation of the Singapore Institution, A.D. 1823* (Mission Press, 1823), 95–96.

²⁰¹ Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore 1819-2005*, 2020, 148.

Carl A. Trocki also notes that the consciousnesses of individuals in a traditional Southeast Asian village rarely extended beyond their own villages, and there was no sense of a shared identity between racial groups in different areas. For example, a Malay from Selangor had no shared identity with a Malay in Kelantan. Neither were the Malays concerned that no Chinese individual, and only a minority of Indians, were Muslims.²⁰² This could be assumed to be the case in Singapore. Race was the main form of identification across various groups in Singapore society. Within the race habitus, there were distinct dialect and sub-dialect groups. We also see multiple we-groups; at this point, the Malays were not engaged in direct power relations with other groups and had no intention to dominate. Historical accounts of colonial Singapore by Turnbull and Andaya also tend to isolate their narratives of these groups into separate sections based on race classification; such accounts are reflective of the classifications that emerged from the colonial habitus.

Urban planning during the colonial period showed the enforced separation of living quarters for the different racial groups. According to Foucault, “the system of differentiation” that allows the object to act on the subject based on differing positions reflects relationships of power.²⁰³ In this case, the British created the knowledge of different residential spheres that correlated to a group’s racial identity. In 1822, Raffles divided Singapore into various residential zones to house specific racial groups, with the goal of maintaining communal harmony. The rationale was that housing the different groups separately would ensure minimal interaction and thus conflict; hence, minimal disruption would be caused to economic trade in the colonial port. The British were likely unwilling to let we-groups interact out of concerns that interactions would

²⁰² Carl A. Trocki, “Political Structures in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries,” in *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia*, ed. Nicholas Tarling, vol. Two (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 111–14.

²⁰³ Foucault, “The Subject and Power”, 344.

result in group conflicts and power struggles. The British approach possibly stemmed from the British habitus of dealing with heterogeneous religions in society at this point, bearing in mind that the Catholics in the UK were exempted from public life till 1829.

Lieutenant Philip Jackson drew up the Jackson Plan in 1828. The plan made provisions for: a church in the European Town; a mosque at the intersection of the Arab *Campong* (Malay word for village), the Sultan's compound and the *Bugis Campong*; and a *Kling Chapel* (possibly referring to a temple for the Klings).²⁰⁴ The provision for places of worship in the EIC's urban plans revealed the centrality of religious spaces in the racial communities and reinforced the duality of race-religion identities.

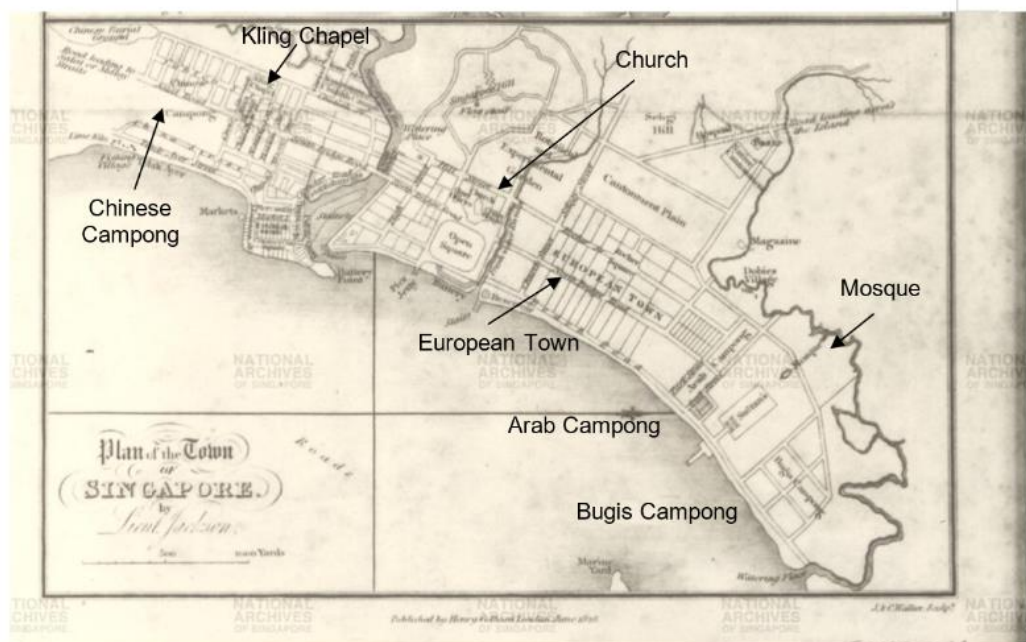


Figure 1 Jackson Plan (1828)²⁰⁵

²⁰⁴ Survey Department, Singapore, "Plan of the Town of Singapore by Lieut Jackson" (Survey Map, London, 1828), Accession Number SP002981, National Archives of Singapore. Refer to Figure 1. Klings is a term with derogatory connotation referring to Indian labourers. It is derived from the term Kalinga, an ancient Indian empire.

²⁰⁵ Survey Department, Singapore, "Plan of the Town of Singapore by Lieut Jackson". Annotations are my own.

It is likely that as the number of immigrants increased, there was some form of interaction between the we-groups as living spaces overlapped. A map in 1843 showed separate burial grounds for the Chinese, Christians, and Malay Princes. However, the map also depicted a couple of mosques, and Chinese and Hindu temples, located in close proximity to Telok Ayer, an area that was demarcated for the Chinese immigrants.²⁰⁶ The proximity of the different places of worship to each other showed that the different communities gradually interacted. Combining the analytical framework of Foucault and Elias, the mid-1800s could be seen as a critical juncture when we-groups interacted in the public sphere giving rise to some form of power struggle.

²⁰⁶ J.T. Thomson, "Plan of The Town of Singapore" (Survey Map, 1843), Accession Number SP006421, National Archives of Singapore. Refer to Figure 2 on page 66.

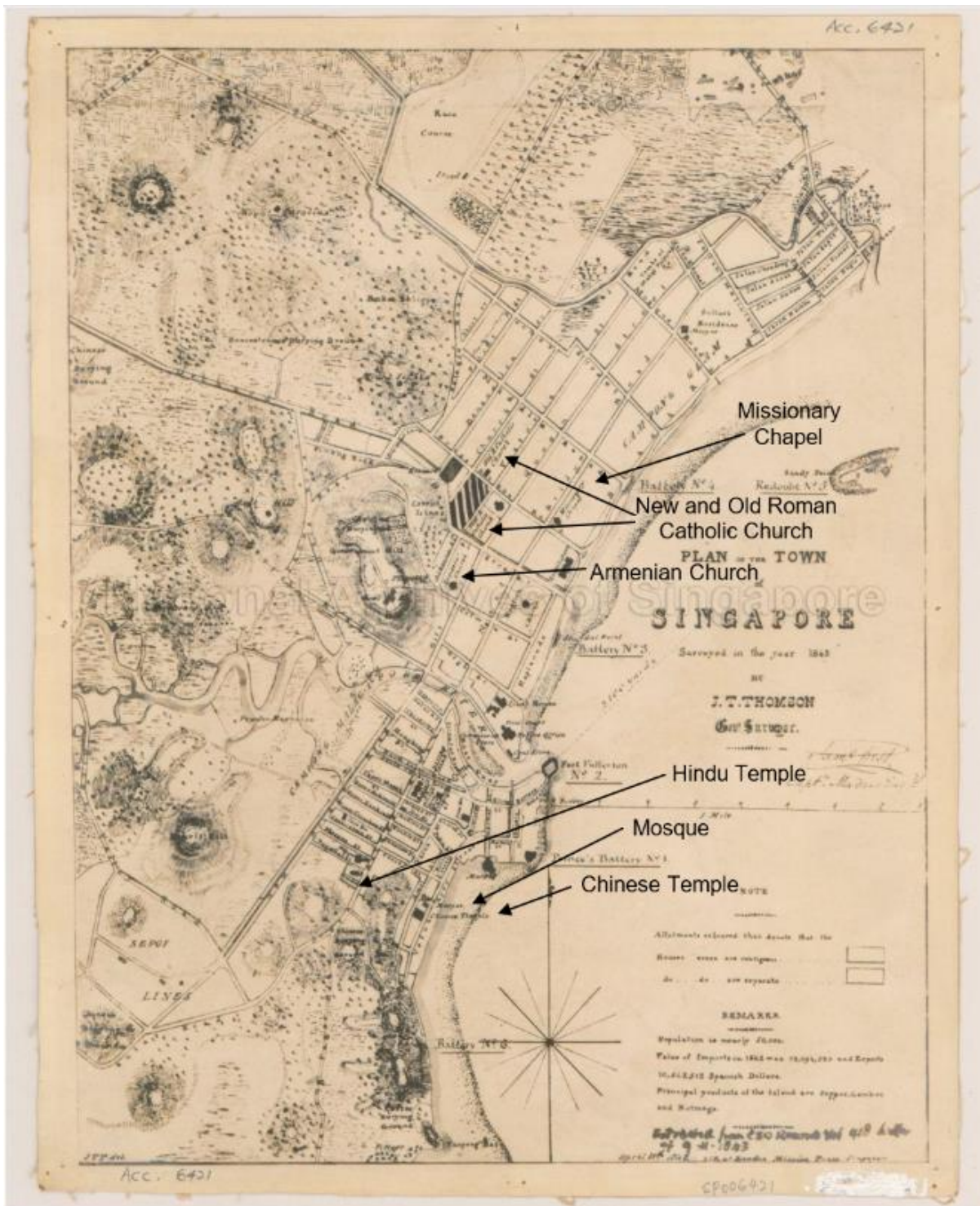


Figure 2 Plan of Singapore Town (1843)²⁰⁷

²⁰⁷ Thomson, "Plan of The Town of Singapore". Annotations are my own.

In the early years of colonisation, the Indian immigrants worked as labourers, boatmen or petty artisans; they were divided by their caste, linguistic and religious backgrounds.²⁰⁸ Rai surfaces an 1849 census of Singapore inhabitants, revealing that 78.5% of the Indian natives were Muslims, 21% were Hindus, and 39 were Christians.²⁰⁹ Turnbull states that the Indian community was diverse, and there was no strong local organisation or leader to unite them. There were divides between North and South Indians, and Indian sub-ethnic groups like the Sindhi, Gujarati, Sikh, Tamil, Telugu, and Malayalee immigrants. As they held different occupations and resided in different areas, their paths rarely crossed.

However, Rai disagrees with Turnbull's analysis that the Indian immigrants were divided. He observes that the early Hindu immigrants established temples that transcended caste and linguistic differences, possibly because many viewed their stay in Singapore as transitory. They were thus willing to share religious resources, such as physical places of worship.²¹⁰ According to the terms of the treaty in 1819, customary Hindu law was applied to the Indian Hindus, possibly through their community leaders.²¹¹

The two contrasting views likely stemmed from differences in sources. Turnbull relies mainly on colonial sources; thus, her narrative reflects the British spatial separation of racial groups to cope with diversity. On the other hand, Rai is writing from a postcolonial perspective, focusing on the societal aspect of religion in the Indian community. It does not necessarily mean one discourse is truer than the other; the

²⁰⁸ Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore 1819-2005*, 2020, 112–13.

²⁰⁹ Louis S. Jackson, "Census of Singapore and its Dependencies, Taken under Orders of Government in the Months of November and December, 1849", *Journal of the Indian Archipelago and Eastern Asia*, 4(1850): 107-8 quoted in Rajesh Rai, *Indians in Singapore: 1819-1945* (India: Oxford University Press, 2014), 27.

²¹⁰ Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore 1819-2005*, 2020, 177; Rai, *Indians in Singapore: 1819-1945*, 45.

²¹¹ Sinha, *Religion-State Encounters in Hindu Domains*, 36–37.

differences reveal that perspective matters, especially for the historian who needs to “manipulate and process” the “internal and external relation” of archival materials to reflect different layers of interpretation of the same event.²¹²

From the mid-1800s, the EIC increased its intervention in religious affairs. This was a departure from their earlier policy of strict non-interference in religious and local customs. During this period, clashes broke out between religious groups. Rai observes that British authorities sought to control the Hindus by restricting their public religious processions, after clashes erupted between religious groups during these processions. In April 1836, clashes broke out between Hindus and Muslims during a Hindu procession, leading to the Hindus’ destruction of a mosque. Media reports also suggested that religious processions were seen as an affront to Christianity.²¹³ In 1857, against the backdrop of rumours circulating about “imminent Chinese riots”, two European policemen attempted to disrupt a Tamil Muslim festival at a mosque in Telok Ayer. The incident escalated into physical violence; two Tamil Muslims were killed and several others injured.²¹⁴ Rai notes that colonial authorities increasingly restricted and prevented Hindu religious processions from taking place in the public space. In 1860, the Mariamman Temple was denied permission to perform *Thimithi* due to the need to “prevent the Peace of the Town being in any way disturbed”. Similarly, the Commissioner of Police rejected a request to celebrate *Dusserah*, a Hindu festival, in 1861.²¹⁵

The British response was probably due to their concerns that interactions between religious groups might result in further violent confrontations and disrupt civil

²¹² Foucault, “Return to History,” 427-8.

²¹³ Rai, *Indians in Singapore: 1819-1945*, 47–48.

²¹⁴ Rai, 54.

²¹⁵ Rai, 56. *Thimithi* refers to a Hindu firewalking ceremony originating from South India which is celebrated a week before Deepavali.

disorder. Significantly, as the we-groups (Hindus and Muslims) interacted in the public sphere, power conflicts arose. The colonial authorities' restriction manifested in the form of regulating religious processions in public. The regulation was a form of discipline to control groups of individuals who behaved erratically. As a habitus mechanism, the regulation acted as an external constraint that "civilises" religious practices in the public space, thus re-defining religious practices.

In contrast to the restrictions on public displays of Hindu religiosity, the British displayed some degree of deference to Malay laws and customs. The British policy of non-interference in religious affairs probably promoted the role of Islam in the Malay community. Milner suggests that even though Raffles was concerned with the influence of Islam among the Malays and wanted to promote Malay customs and laws to counter Islamic influence, Islam became more prominent in the lives of the Malays during colonial rule.²¹⁶ Christian missionaries observed that Muslims in British colonies took their religion more "seriously" than those in the other Malay states in Malaya that were not under colonial rule.²¹⁷ As colonial rule weakened the royal rulers' control over colonial Singapore, it probably allowed Islamic institutions and religious leaders to flourish, and fill the vacuum left by the Malay rulers. This was different from the situation in other Malay states not under colonial rule, where Malay rulers were still leaders in their communities. Christian missionaries and British settlers also observed that chief priests or the *hajjs* (Muslims who had gone on pilgrimages in Mecca) were considered as leaders of the Malay Muslim community in the Straits Settlements.²¹⁸

Separately, several historical and sociological studies observe that group identities of Chinese immigrants were centred around surname, dialect, sub-dialect,

²¹⁶ Raffles, S, *Memoir of Life and Public Services of Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1991), 80-3 quoted in Milner, *The Invention of Politics in Colonial Malaya*, 136.

²¹⁷ Milner, 153–54.

²¹⁸ Milner, 157.

guild, secret societies, and temple affiliations, all of which were inextricably linked. On the dialect and sub-dialect levels, they identified with other immigrants who came from the same villages, spoke similar dialects, and had similar religious practices. Their loyalties were still tied to their motherland China, and their sense of identity was tightly bound to familial and dialect groups. Due to the EIC's non-interference policy, the Chinese immigrants were mostly on their own and did not have a sense of the EIC's authority over Singapore. W. A. Pickering, the first Chinese Protector of Singapore, observed that the Chinese immigrants spoke "dialects and sub-dialects unintelligible; while all are ignorant of the language and motives of the governing nation".²¹⁹ The various dialect groups remained entrenched in their culture and related governing structures were established around dialect groupings; these dialect groups built places of worships and cemeteries and provided for their members' welfare.²²⁰ The ethnic Chinese habitus can thus be said to be unlinked to the colonial habitus and its physical institutions.

Buddhist or Taoist temples and cemeteries became congregation points, administrative centres, and power bases in the Chinese community. According to Cheng, temples were closely linked to dialect groups, and religious affiliation was interlinked to dialect affiliation. In the early years of colonisation, some temples functioned as the headquarters of dialect groups. For instance, the Hokkiens built the Heng San Teng temple in 1827. The temple also became responsible for the administration of the Hokkien cemetery. The Hokkiens also built the Thian Hock Keng Temple in 1840; the temple served as the headquarters of the Hokkiens before the

²¹⁹ W. A. Pickering, "Chinese Secret Societies," *Journal of the Straits Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, no. 3 (1879): 10.

²²⁰ Seng Lim How, "Social Structure and Bang Interactions," in *A General History of the Chinese in Singapore*, ed. Chong Guan Kwa and Bak Lim Kua (Singapore: Singapore Federation of Chinese Clan Associations and World Scientific Publishing Co Pte Ltd, 2019), 117.

completion of their own premises, the Singapore Hokkien Huay Kuan (Singapore Hokkien guild) in 1860. Similarly, the Yueh Hai Ching Temple was the headquarters of the Guangdong guild until the formation of Ngee Ann Kongsi in 1845.²²¹ Separately, Fuk Tak Chi Temple was built by Cantonese and Hakka immigrants from China. The temple served as the headquarters of these two communities in Singapore, and acted as a welfare organisation and dispute resolution centre.²²² The Chinese immigrants who found the foreign legal system complicated often turned to leaders of dialect groups to settle socio-economic and political conflicts within the Chinese community. Therefore, Chinese groups established administrative structures to fulfil state-like functions that the colonial state did not provide. This led to a reiteration of Raffles' earlier description of different nations within Singapore as each group built structures that reinforced their respective groupings.

There was also the parallel development of secret societies in Singapore, which served as a form of local government. According to Maurice Freedman, the secret society was a form of organisation structure that Chinese immigrants imported from China. However, the role of the secret society differed between China and Singapore. In China, these societies functioned as underground political associations, formed to overthrow the Qing dynasty. In Singapore, by contrast, secret societies served as a form of community organisation to address the Chinese immigrants' social, political, and economic needs. Freedman mentions that the British authorities used the secret societies "as an instrument of government" in place of an official administrative

²²¹ Lim Keak Cheng, "Traditional Religious Beliefs, Emigration and the Social Structure of the Chinese in Singapore," in *A General History of the Chinese in Singapore*, 497; How, "Social Structure and Bang Interactions," 119–20. It is likely that Cheng is referring to the *t'ingchu* system mentioned by Mak.

²²² "Historic Fuk Tak Chi Temple to Close," *The Straits Times*, July 6, 1994; "Thanksgiving Stop," *The Straits Times*, November, 19, 1998;

channel between the colonial government and the Chinese immigrants.²²³ The secret societies collected membership fees and, in return, offered assistance when the member needed help or assisted with their funeral rites.²²⁴ Like the dialect groups, secret societies also used temples as their bases. Cheng notes that some temples became headquarters of secret societies, though it was unclear if leaders of dialect groups were involved in secret societies.²²⁵

Due to the overlapping group affiliations of race, religion and dialect, and the social, economic, and political functions of these groups, it is observed that changes to the religious habitus of the Chinese immigrants gave rise to the drag effect. The drag effect is a resistance to an unplanned social process, which, in this case, was the Christian conversion of some Chinese immigrants. Tensions between Christian and non-Christian Chinese led to anti-Catholic riots in 1851. According to one narrative, several factors accounted for the outbreak of the riots. Membership was declining in Chinese secret societies because many former members had converted to Catholicism and left these societies. The non-Christian plantation owners who were part of the secret societies network also felt economically threatened by the Christian plantation owners. This was because the non-Christians perceived the Christian plantation owners to be competing with their economic interests as they no longer belonged to the same group. The non-Christians also believed that the Christians had impinged on the opium monopoly held by the secret societies by importing their own opium.²²⁶

²²³ Maurice Freedman, "Immigrants and Associations: Chinese in Nineteenth-Century Singapore," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 3, no. 1 (1960): 33–34.

²²⁴ Freedman, "Immigrants and Associations," 37.

²²⁵ Cheng, "Traditional Religious Beliefs, Emigration and the Social Structure of the Chinese in Singapore," 498.

²²⁶ Yong Chun Yuan, "Anti-Catholic Riots (1851) | Infopedia," Singapore Infopedia, accessed April 22, 2021, https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_100_2005-01-24.html. Since Chapter 2

Another account suggests that the Catholic Chinese plantation owners aligned themselves with French priests from the Societe des Missions Etrangeres, forming communities known as *hongkah* (Christianity). The Ghee Hin secret societies saw these Catholic communities as threats.²²⁷ Consequently, non-Christian Chinese conducted random attacks on Chinese Christian plantation owners in 1850, which eventually escalated to anti-Catholic riots in 1851. The conflict was only resolved through the mediation of Seah Eu Chin, a Chinese community leader. Only some of those involved were charged in the Criminal Court; the main perpetrators were reportedly released in return for monetary compensation from the non-Christian Chinese community.²²⁸

The above incident showed that race, religion, and secret society membership were overlapping we-groups; as a result, the disruption of one level of identification gave rise to conflicts within the community. According to Bobby Sng, Pickering estimated that at least 60% of the Chinese population belonged to the secret societies, and the remainder were also under the influence of these secret societies.²²⁹ The incident also illustrated that the immigrants were mainly left on their own as a result of British habitus structures. The authorities' link to the Chinese community was through the prominent Chinese businessmen who acted as conduits between the different dialect groups and the British officials; the Chinese did not recognise the British officials as part of the Chinese habitus, nor did they acknowledge the power of the British habitus. According to Foucault, the subject would have to recognise the actor's

provides the background to the focus of this thesis's research, I have decided to rely on Infopedia as a source. Infopedia's concise account of the anti-Catholic riots was pieced together from newspaper reports published in *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*.

²²⁷ Carl A. Trocki, "The Rise and Fall of the Ngee Heng Kongsi in Singapore," in *"Secret Societies" Reconsidered: Perspectives on the Social History of Early Modern South China and Southeast Asia*, ed. David Ownby and Mary Somers Heidhues (Abingdon: Routledge Taylor & Francis, 2015), 104.

²²⁸ "Anti-Catholic Riots (1851)."

²²⁹ Bobby E.K. Sng, *In His Good Time: The Story of the Church in Singapore 1819-1992* (Singapore: Graduates' Christian Fellowship, 1993), 62.

power before the latter's power tactics could work on normalising and disciplining the former. There was (so far) no shared habitus between the immigrants and the British officials. Despite British efforts to make the judiciary system more appealing to the Chinese, the latter did not recognise the former's rule of law.²³⁰

Incidentally, the Indians also formed secret societies. Rai states that it remains unclear if they had derived such an organisational structure from their homeland, or were influenced by Chinese secret societies. Like the latter, they took on religious-cultural, administrative, and political functions.²³¹ The Indian secret societies, which mainly comprised Malay Muslims and some Hindus and Malays, were initially involved in religious ceremonies like funerals and marriages, and in organising religious processions.²³²

The Europeans in Singapore were largely uninvolved with the administration of Singapore. Over time, they grew critical of the lack of state apparatus to maintain law and order due to the rise of conflicts between the various immigrant groups and began to push for consolidated British control over Singapore. The Europeans were mainly British merchants, law agents and newspaper editors.²³³ The senior merchants were more involved with the administration of the colonial state and served as Justices of Peace or grand jurymen at civil courts.²³⁴

They gradually became more vocal in their opposition to the EIC, and organised public meetings in the mid-1840s to speak against British policies. Various petitions were drawn up to voice their grievances during these meetings, including calling for

²³⁰ Tan, "Private Ordering and the Chinese in Nineteenth Century Straits Settlements," 32–35; Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore 1819-2005*, 2020, 113; Pickering, "Chinese Secret Societies," 17; Turnbull, *The Straits Settlements 1826-67*, 123–24, 127.

²³¹ Rai, *Indians in Singapore: 1819-1945*, 43.

²³² Rai, 49.

²³³ Turnbull, "The European Mercantile Community in Singapore, 1819-1867," *Journal of Southeast Asian History*, Singapore Commemorative Issue 1819-1969, 10, no. 1 (March 1969): 13.

²³⁴ Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore 1819-2005*, 2020, 139.

police reforms and constitutional changes. Their discontentment culminated in 1857 when the lack of efficient police enforcement led to strikes and riots among the Chinese and Indian communities". The European merchants forwarded a petition to the House of Commons in Britain to transfer the Straits Settlements to the Colonial Office, arguing that the EIC had failed to administer Singapore adequately. The merchants were critical of the EIC's failure to provide an efficient judiciary system and bolster British influence in the region. Turnbull suggests that they were also discontented with the EIC's inept handling of the Chinese immigrants, and with the Indian government's use of Singapore as a dumping ground for Indian convicts. The petition received support from British MPs, as the European merchants had close links to politicians and commercial enterprises in Britain.²³⁵ As Trocki has noted, the colonial state was responsible to the will of people in its nation-state, i.e. Britain, and not to the will of the inhabitants of Singapore. At the urging of the British merchants, Britain began to implant a more cohesive structure and institutions to govern Singapore and manage conflicts between racial and religious groups. Singapore became a Crown Colony in 1867.

The above sketch of colonial Singapore has shown that in the mid-nineteenth century, Singapore was an immigrant and transient society where the male immigrants worked for several years before returning to their home countries. The British tried, and failed, to promote female immigration to encourage permanent settlement and create a permanent resident workforce in Singapore. There was a gender imbalance among the Chinese, European and Indian communities; in the mid-1860s, there was only one Chinese woman to every 15 Chinese men.²³⁶ There was no sense of

²³⁵ Turnbull, "The European Mercantile Community in Singapore, 1819-1867," 27–29; Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore 1819-2005*, 2020, 138–41.

²³⁶ Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore 1819-2005*, 2020, 120–21.

rootedness among the Chinese, Indian, and European immigrants, and no shared habitus between the immigrants, the Malay community, and the British. The ethnic communities were each regarded as their own “nations”, and the EIC officials did not attempt to foster interactions between different groups. This gave rise to *we-habitus* that did not intersect, at least on an institutional level; religious and racial differences between groups were also emphasised.

The EIC policy of non-interference also meant that the different ethnic groups evolved to fulfil their own political, social, and economic needs as there was no state apparatus to cater to these needs. The immigrants imported religions and organisation structures from their homelands, and these groupings were left to develop organically. Each group built governance structures that reinforced their respective habitus dispositions and groupings.

2.2 Consolidation of Colonial Rule: Institutions Forming the Foundations for the Modern State

In April 1867, the Straits Settlements was formally recognised as a Crown Colony under the British.²³⁷ After Singapore became a Crown Colony, the British introduced a government with executive, judiciary, and legislative functions, thus establishing the infrastructure of a modern nation-state. The Executive Council comprised the Governor, the commanding officials in charge of British troops stationed in the Straits and six senior officials. The Legislative Council comprised members from the Executive Council, the chief justice, and “unofficials” appointed by the Governor.²³⁸ The initial years of Straits Settlement Governor William Orfeur Cavenagh’s administration were spent addressing the concerns of the European

²³⁷ Frank Swettenham, *British Malaya: An Account of the Origin and Progress of British Influence in Malaya* (London: John Lane the Bodley Head, 1937), 81–82; Jean E. Abshire, *The History of Singapore* (California: Greenwood, 2011), 14.; Kwa et al., *Seven Hundred Years: A History of Singapore*, 198.

²³⁸ Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore 1819-2005*, 2020, 149–50.

merchant community, by improving administration, public works, policing, the prisons system, and the courts; essentially installing the apparatus of a modern state in Singapore.²³⁹ Notably, these administrative structures were practices and structuring structures derived from the British habitus. An increase in political control over Singapore society, and the consequent ceding of control from local communities to British authorities, also meant that the British could forcibly incorporate immigrant groups into its Singapore habitus.

Another colonial legislation with profound implication was the 1874 Pangkor Treaty signed between the British and the Sultan Abdullah of Perak. The treaty recognised the Sultan as the ruler of Perak; in return, an appointed British Resident would be in charge of all aspects of administration, except on issues relating to the religious practices and customs of the Malays.²⁴⁰ Even though the Residential system was only enforced in a few Malay states, the implication of the indigenous ruler being in charge of all matters relating to Islamic and Malay practices were important for postcolonial Malaysia and Singapore.

Even as the colonial government was consolidating its control over the inhabitants, the inhabitants of Singapore remained deeply divided by their racial, language and religious differences. During this period, there was increased governmentalisation over society and the introduction of laws and institutions to introduce and normalise norms in society. At this point, we see colonial inhabitants of different races and religions rarely interacted in the social sphere. For instance, racial groups established their separate recreation clubs, such as the Chinese Swimming Club (1905), the Straits Chinese Recreation Club (1885), the Ceylon Sports Club

²³⁹ Turnbull, 142.

²⁴⁰ Sinha, *Religion-State Encounters in Hindu Domains*, 40–41.

(1928), the Tanglin Club (1865; established for the British), and the Singapore Cricket Club (1852; also established for the British).

2.2.a Modern State Institutions to Manage Religion

One notable feature of the centralisation of colonial rule is the introduction of institutions to manage religion, thus establishing formal state-religion relations. The establishment of formalised relations can be seen as the governmentalisation of power relations; state-religion relations became centralised under state institutions. The British continued with their policy of non-interference in religious affairs until 1905, when they introduced an Ordinance on Mohammedan and Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments. The Ordinance allowed for the Governor to appoint representatives to the Mohammedan and Hindu Endowment Board in each of the Straits Settlements to

administer, manage, and superintend such trusts as may be determined by the Governor in Council if it should appear to him that they are being mismanaged, or that there are no trustees for their management or that it would otherwise be advantageous for them to be placed under the Board's control.²⁴¹

Notably, the Singapore Mohammedan and Hindu Endowments Board in Singapore only handled matters relating to Hindu temples, Indian Muslim mosques, and Sikh gurdwaras. Mosques belonging to the Malay Muslim community, Christian churches, and Chinese Buddhist and Taoist temples, did not come under the Board's purview. The Board's function was mainly administrative – handling, for instance, the accounts of the temples.²⁴² Sinha suggests that mosques under the purview of Malay Muslims were possibly excluded due to earlier treaty agreements that prevented British interference in Malay customs. The Board faced resistance from the Sikh

²⁴¹ E.L. Brockman, Acting Colonial Secretary, "No.502. Straits Settlements (1905)", 1 June 1906, p.24 in *Annual Reports of the Straits Settlements 1855-1941, Vol 5: 1901-1907*, ed. Robert L. Jarman, (Archive Editions Limited, 1998), 490

²⁴² Sinha, *Religion-State Encounters in Hindu Domains*, 126–27.

community, and the Queen Street Gurdwara was returned to the Sikh community.²⁴³ The Ordinance was significant because it marked a shift, from a policy of non-interference, to the institutional management of religions in colonial Singapore. These institutions continue to exist in independent Singapore, showing the impact of colonial structures on present-day secularity norms and institutional structures in the national habitus.

State-religion relations were formalised when religious representatives were also incorporated into the state decision-making apparatus. The Mohammedan and Sikh Advisory Boards were established in 1915 to advise the colonial government on matters relating to Mohammedan and Sikh religion and customs, respectively. Members to the Boards were nominated on an annual basis by the Governor, and the Chairman was usually a senior European member of the Civil Service.²⁴⁴ The Hindu Advisory Board was established shortly after, in 1918. Rai observes that unlike the Chinese Advisory Board, which was a unitary group, the British made a “conscious policy” of ensuring that advisory boards for the Indians were formed primarily along religious lines.²⁴⁵

Rai assesses that the advisory boards were formed as a consequence of the Sepoy Mutiny in 1915. The Sepoy Mutiny was a critical event which saw an attempted change in power dynamics between local Malays, Indian immigrants and the colonial power. The Mutiny resulted in the introduction of new institutions to regulate power relations. The incident highlighted the potential for religious and racial sentiments to become inflammatory, arouse riots, and cause public disorder. It broke out when Indian soldiers from the 5th Light Infantry rebelled against the British over rumours

²⁴³ Sinha, 133.

²⁴⁴ Ahmad bin Mohd Ibrahim, The Legal Status of the Muslims in Singapore, 1965, 13; “Sikh Advisory Board, Singapore,” *Malaya Tribune*, November 27, 1915.

²⁴⁵ Rai, *Indians in Singapore: 1819-1945*, 158.

that they might be sent to fight Ottoman Turkish forces allied with Germany during World War One. The Malay States Guides also refused to fight against the troops who had mutinied.

Several factors led to the Sepoy Mutiny, and this thesis will discuss factors that are of concern to our current discussion. According to Rai, the British authorities had clarified that World War One was not anti-Muslim because they were concerned over the loyalty of Muslims in the colonies. The Ghadar Party, an Indian anti-colonial group from British India, had combined anti-colonial discourse with pan-Muslim sentiments to garner support from Indian Muslims. Further, Nur Alam Shah, the *imam* of a mosque in Kampong Java, frequently preached anti-British rhetoric and was said to have incited the troops to mutiny by creating rumours that a German warship was slated to arrive in Singapore.²⁴⁶

As a result of the Sepoy Mutiny, the British felt that it was expedient to establish formal links between the Government and the local elites, so that inflammatory issues relating to race and religion could be addressed quickly through co-operation with religious and community leaders, and crises could be averted.²⁴⁷ R. J. Wilkinson, the Colonial Secretary, reassured Muslims that the Mohammedan Board “should be the tongue of the Mohammedan people and any representation made through it would be considered favourably”.²⁴⁸ The Sepoy Mutiny was a historical episode that contributed to the production of dispositions in the colonial habitus, and reinforced the British disposition that religious sentiments were volatile and could disrupt civil order.

Another notable point was the distrust of Muslim loyalty, and the perception that their religious loyalty took precedence (even though, at this point, there was not much

²⁴⁶ Rai, 148–56.

²⁴⁷ Rai, 160.

²⁴⁸ “Mohammedan Advisory Board,” *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, February 7, 1919; “New Advisory Board,” *The Straits Times*, June 19, 1915.

of a national identity to speak of) over their national identities. In 1919, the British Government assured the Muslims that they were “free to follow without let or hindrance their religion and customs”, and the British Government would continue to adhere to these rules.²⁴⁹ It appears that the British were concerned that religious sentiments would be inflamed should the Muslims feel that the state threatened their religious practices and beliefs. The issue, of the dominance of religious loyalties over one’s allegiance to the colonial state, was thus an important factor behind the colonial state’s creation of Advisory Boards to establish more direct forms of control over the local groups.

The Indian and Sikh temples’ devolution of administrative power to the colonial government, and the formation of Advisory Boards to advise British authorities on religion-related matters, heralded the beginning of a formal institutionalised relationship between the colonial government and the inhabitants of colonial Singapore. The creation of shared institutions between religious groups and the colonial state created power interactions between them, thus establishing the colonial state as the overarching habitus of the different we-groups. Formalised religious institutions could also be seen as the colonial state’s disciplinary tactic to prevent future counter-power movements.

Notably, the British did not assert similar controls over religious institutions belonging to the Chinese and Europeans. It could be that religion played a less significant role in the lives of the Chinese at this juncture. Freedman and Marjorie Topley assess that while the Chinese dialect and sub-dialect groups established associations that revolved around specific temples, religious groupings “played a

²⁴⁹ “Mohammedan Advisory Board”; “New Advisory Board.”

relatively insignificant role in the li[ves] of the Chinese”.²⁵⁰ The British would assert control over the Chinese through the latter’s more significant groupings, most notably the secret societies, and the regulation of Chinese vernacular schools, which this thesis will discuss in Section 2.3.a.

2.2.b Legal Pluralism in Family Law

There were also developments in how the British handled native laws and customs in civil courts. The British policy of non-interference in native customs had extended to non-interference in religious and cultural traditions on family law, giving rise to a system of legal pluralism where each racial or religious group had specific and informal legal structures.

The British applied their interpretation of Syariah law in court cases involving Muslims. The British application of Syariah for cases related to marriage, divorce, and inheritance, bore implications on how Syariah is practised in Singapore today. The British implementation of Syariah reduced Islam and the practice of Syariah to a personal religion confined to the private sphere, and codified Islamic law. M.B. Hooker suggests that Islamic law in former colonial states is better known as Anglo-Muslim law. By providing that British civil law was to apply to all aspects except family law, and by using the British court structure to adjudicate over Syariah cases, the British interpreted Syariah law using English legal terminology.²⁵¹ While Syariah law was originally a system of legal, moral, and ethical guidance open to various interpretations according to different schools of jurisprudence, it became – under the British – a codified set of laws relating to marriage, divorce, and inheritance. Nurfadzilah Yahaya contends that “colonial regimes enforced a single interpretation in legal rulings” that

²⁵⁰ Maurice Freedman and Marjorie Topley, “Religion and Social Realignment among the Chinese in Singapore,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 21, no. 1 (1961): 7, 13.

²⁵¹ M. B. Hooker, “Introduction: Islamic Law in South-East Asia,” *Studia Islamika* 10, no. 1 (2003): 5.

differed from the multiple interpretations derived from consulting different legal authorities as per the Islamic legal tradition.²⁵² The “origin” of Syariah law in Singapore was thus situated in the Anglo interpretation of Islamic law, and could be seen as the product of intersection between two habitus – the Muslim and British habitus.

With the institutionalisation of the judiciary system, more Muslims turned to the colonial courts to administer Islamic law. Yahaya notes that Muslims willingly brought cases involving religious laws to the colonial courts, showing that they accepted the authority of the colonial government.²⁵³ One reason for the Muslims’ acceptance of the colonial court was the diverse backgrounds of Muslim immigrants. Yahaya mentions that Muslim communities in Singapore were very diverse (including Indians, Arabs, and Malays) and that each racial community appointed their own *kadi* (Islamic judges).²⁵⁴ However, given the interaction between Muslims who subscribed to different *mazhab* (school of thought), conflicts arose between them to impose their interpretation as the dominant one. For instance, in mixed marriages, the plaintiff would have to refer a case to the court, as the jurisdiction of one party’s racial-religious grouping was not necessarily recognised by the other. As more cases were brought to the colonial court, these religious rulings became standardised.

The Mahomedan Marriage Ordinance was introduced in 1880, prompted by some Arab Muslims who petitioned for more uniform legislation on Muslim marriages.²⁵⁵ The Arab Muslims’ discontentment with the prevailing system arose

²⁵² Nurfadzilah Yahaya, “Courting Jurisdictions: Colonial Administration of Islamic Law Pertaining to Arabs in the British Straits Settlements and the Netherlands East Indies, 1860-1941” (PhD Thesis, Princeton University, 2012), 75.

²⁵³ Yahaya, 52–53.

²⁵⁴ Yahaya, 43.

²⁵⁵ Ahmad bin Mohd Ibrahim, *The Legal Status of the Muslims in Singapore*, 1965, pp.17-21; Yahaya, “Craving Bureaucracy: Marriage, Islamic Law, and Arab Petitioners in the Straits Settlements,” *The Muslim World* 105, no. 4 (2015): 497. The Mahomedan Marriage Ordinance 1880 was subsequently amended by Mahomedan Marriage (Amendment) Ordinance in 1894, Mohamedan Marriage (Amendment) Ordinance 1902, Muhammadan Marriage Ordinances of 1908, 1909, 1917, 1934, and 1936 and the Muslims Ordinance in 1952.

from a marriage dispute involving Fatimah, an Arab woman, who married Ismail, a non-Arab man, without the permission of Fatimah's guardian. Fatimah was a Shafi'i, and the Shafi'i *mazhab* dictated that her guardian's permission was required for her marriage to be recognised. However, Fatimah had converted to the Hanafi *mazhab*, which meant that her marriage could be recognised without her guardian's permission. An Arab mufti whom the civil court consulted ruled that Fatimah's marriage was invalid, on the basis that the Indians and Malays were of a lower status than the Arabs. However, the British judge dismissed the mufti's ruling after consulting legal manuals on Islamic law published in British India, and ruled that Fatimah's marriage was valid.²⁵⁶ Following the case, Arab Muslims petitioned for more uniform legislation for Islamic marriages. Under the existing system, each ethnic community elected its own *kadi* and the authority of the *kadi* was only recognised by those who chose to do so. Before 1880, these *kadi* practised Islamic law without the supervision of the colonial authorities.²⁵⁷ Fatimah and Ismail came from two different racial backgrounds and schools of Islamic jurisprudence, and thus two competing habitus. The conflict needed to be resolved by a higher authority as both Islamic habitus were unable to dominate over the other.

Following the Mahomedan Marriage Ordinance, Islamic law was administered by the colonial government and not the *kadi*. The Ordinance ceded legal authority from the *kadi* to the colonial state also meant that religious opinions from *kadi* and muftis lost their significance in civil courts. Nurfadzilah notes that Fatimah and Ismail's case gave the British a sense of confidence in handling cases involving religious law, causing them to assert more control in that realm.²⁵⁸ She observes that the courts did

²⁵⁶ Yahaya, 498–501.

²⁵⁷ Yahaya, 501, 510.

²⁵⁸ Yahaya, 501.

not consult the muftis and *kadi* from 1882 onwards, as the judges replaced their roles and adjudicated over an increased number of cases concerning Islamic law.²⁵⁹ The *kadi*'s role was largely limited to solemnising marriages.²⁶⁰

In ceding their authority to the court, the *kadis* recognised the power of the colonial government. The colonial court thus became the highest authority in the colonial habitus that now shared intersections with other Muslim we-groups. The Ordinance also governmentalised power relations between the different habitus, containing intra-Muslim conflicts to within the court structure. The Ordinance served as a social constraint that Muslim inhabitants gradually actualised through experience as more Muslims turned to the colonial courts for disputes, gradually cultivating obedience to the colonial habitus.

The British also recognised or codified religious and civil laws for marriages to accommodate other religious and non-religious groups. Christian marriages were recognised under the Christian Marriage Ordinance, which came into force in April 1899. The British authorities also implemented a civil law for marriage. The Civil Marriage Bill came into force in 1941, allowing non-Christians to register their marriage with the Registry. Previously, civil marriages were limited to Christians, under the Christian Marriage Ordinance. The Civil Marriage Bill was introduced mainly for non-Christian Chinese, partly to address the “unsatisfactory” state of Chinese marriages held informally outside the civil law system.²⁶¹

²⁵⁹ Yahaya, *Fluid Jurisdictions: Colonial Law and Arabs in Southeast Asia*, Colonial Law and Arabs in Southeast Asia (New York: Cornell University Press, 2020), 46.

²⁶⁰ Yahaya, “Craving Bureaucracy,” 511.

²⁶¹ Tribune Staff Reporter, “New Marriage Bill In Force From This Week,” *Malaya Tribune*, December 30, 1940.

Meanwhile, Hindu marriages remained unlegislated in the civil courts, although sometimes related disputes were brought to the courts.²⁶² The civil court also recognised Chinese laws in marriage (including polygamous marriages), divorce, and inheritance matters, even though bigamy was banned in England.²⁶³ By introducing different structures to accommodate religious groups, legal pluralism had become a structure of colonial Singapore habitus. Legal pluralism reinforced the structures unique to each racial or religious habitus, and the separation of public and private spheres according to British dispositions. Religious or customary marriage laws were not legislated likely because these were considered to fall within the private sphere.

The discussion in this section shows the beginnings of a shared habitus. The introduction of civil marriage law particularly created a network of relations between the colonial inhabitants and colonial power under shared legal institutions and compelled the former to recognise the higher authority of the state legislature over their customary courts. However, the creation of shared habitus was a vertical relationship (a) between the colonial state and local Muslims; and (b) inhabitants (who chose to be married under civil law and thus already had some form of allegiance to the colonial habitus) and the colonial state. At this juncture, there were unlikely to be much horizontal interactions between the various race-religion habitus due to the administrative structure of the colonial habitus.

A key principle of the shared habitus was the policy of non-interference in most religious affairs, which resulted in creating multiple legal structures to accommodate family law. Another significant disposition was interference in religious affairs, when tensions threatened to surface between groups and disrupt societal harmony. The

²⁶² Ranjana Raghunathan, "Migrant Intimacies and Ambiguities of Law: The Case of Wife Enticement Among Indians in Colonial Singapore," *Gender & History* 0, no. 0 (March 2021): 6.

²⁶³ J. V. Mills, "Marriage and Kindred Subjects in England, Singapore and China," *Journal of Comparative Legislation and International Law* 31, no. 3/4 (1949): 25–36.

colonial state, now emerging as the highest form of authority and recognised as so by some we-groups, created institutions to manage power relations, as seen in structuring structures in the form of Advisory Boards and the Mahomedan Marriage Ordinance. A third principle of the colonial habitus was the unequal relationships between a) the Government and Muslims, and b) the Government and other religious groups. The system of differentiation was an indication of power relations between the colonial government and other we-groups.

2.3 Changes in Group Habitus for the Chinese, Malays, and Indians

This section will examine how the redistribution of power between colonial authorities and local communities affected changes in the status of religion for the Chinese, Malay, and Indian communities during the colonial period. While relying on Western sources means we cannot uncover the subaltern perspective, we can tease out junctures where there were challenges to state power. As Foucault and Elias have observed, changes like the establishment of new habitus mechanisms or drag effects represent junctures where significant power challenges have occurred. These changes might also result in corresponding shifts in notions of secularity, religion and politics in the religious and colonial habitus, respectively.

2.3.a Redistribution of Political Power between British Authorities, Chinese Dialect Associations and Secret Societies

The colonial government adopted a different approach to managing the Chinese community. The government sought to establish control over the Chinese immigrants through legislation over secret societies, which was different from the religion-based approaches used in the government's interactions with the Indians and Malays. Whereas the colonial state once regarded the secret societies as a governing apparatus, the societies had become a challenge to the British. As Foucault suggests,

penal reforms emerged from the conflict between “the super power of the sovereign and the infra-power of acquired and tolerated illegalities”.²⁶⁴ The secret societies were no longer “tolerated illegalities” in the view of the British colonial powers when these societies posed a threat to civil order and British authority.

In the late 1800s, the British introduced measures to consolidate political control over the Chinese immigrants because conflicts in the 1850s demonstrated how volatile Chinese secret societies could be. These British measures aimed to counter the economic, social, and political power these societies and their headmen asserted over the Chinese community. Further, the secret societies challenged state structures and civil order. Yoong Ng Siew suggests that when Malays and Indians also joined secret societies, the British felt that secret societies posed a greater threat to public order, as violence inspired by these secret societies could spill over beyond the Chinese community and into the public sphere.²⁶⁵ The membership of Malays and Indians in secret societies created networks of relationship between the local immigrants, thus creating a governance alternative that challenged the colonial state.

Thus, in 1877, the colonial government established the Chinese Protectorate to oversee the Chinese inhabitants of Singapore. Turnbull states that the Protectorate was created because the British realised they did not directly control the Chinese immigrants, and the secret societies disregarded British law.²⁶⁶ In 1890, the colonial government introduced Ordinance XIX, which declared that a society of any form was illegal unless it had been formally registered. The Governor had the power to dissolve any organisation, whether registered or otherwise. According to Yoong, the Ordinance, coupled with the threat of deportation for secret society members,

²⁶⁴ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 87.

²⁶⁵ Ng Siew Yoong, “The Chinese Protectorate in Singapore, 1877-1900,” *Journal of Southeast Asian History* 2, no. 1 (March 1961): 78.

²⁶⁶ Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore 1819-2005*, 2009, 104.

drastically reduced the influence of secret societies, and forced the Chinese immigrants to acknowledge the authority of the colonial state.²⁶⁷ The Protectorate also took over the functions of secret societies, settling financial and domestic disputes.²⁶⁸ Power relations between the Chinese immigrants and the colonial government became governmentalised under the Protectorate as power was transferred from the secret societies to an overarching authority. The outlaw of secret societies was an external constraint in the habitus mechanism; while secret society membership was a norm in the Chinese habitus previously, it became illegal and gradually ceased to be a norm for belonging to Singapore society. Over time, the illegality of secret societies became part of a norm in the colonial habitus.

The Ordinance removed the state-like administrative functions of the secret societies; religious leaders and temples associated with the secret societies were stripped of their respective roles as leaders and centres of administrative activities. Chinese secret societies were forced underground, and temples sometimes served as their underground headquarters. For instance, the She Gong Temple was used as a cover for Ghee Hin Kongsi.²⁶⁹

The dissolution of secret societies left a political and social vacuum which was filled by Chinese clans.²⁷⁰ Chinese clans refer to umbrella or larger groupings of smaller dialect or sub-dialect groups. As Chinese societies like clan and dialect groups

²⁶⁷ Yoong, "The Chinese Protectorate in Singapore, 1877-1900," 93–94.

²⁶⁸ Yoong, 96.

²⁶⁹ How, "Social Structure and Bang Interactions," 125.

²⁷⁰ Trocki, "The Rise and Fall of the Ngee Heng Kongsi in Singapore," 110–11. Trocki contends that another reason for the decline of secret societies was the shift of political and economic power from rural to urban areas. The balance of power had shifted to urban areas in Singapore and wealthy merchants who were not reliant on secret societies. The richer merchants had formed clan-based organisations – the Cheangs established Changtai, while the Seahs formed Ngee Ann Kongsi. Conflicts between secret societies starting from the mid-1840s had weakened Ghee Hin, which was further affected by divisions along dialect lines.

could still exist, they filled the political and social roles previously performed by secret societies and affiliated temples.

Leaders from the Chinese community established schools, hospitals, roads, temples, gardens, and markets. District-based dialect associations merged to form wider groups and provided financial funding for cemeteries, hospitals, schools, religious festivals, and social welfare, taking over some of the roles of secret societies. We-groups based on dialect affiliations performed the government's role of managing the population, "the welfare of the population", and "the improvement of its condition".²⁷¹ Nonetheless, the Chinese community was divided mainly into dialect and sub-dialect groupings. Besides, while most of them subscribed to Chinese religions, they worshipped different deities in separate temples and had separate cemeteries and schools.²⁷²

The Chinese immigrants were also still influenced by ongoing things in their homeland. As the colonial government did not make provisions for Chinese education, the Chinese community established Chinese vernacular schools, which taught in Chinese dialects. Under the guidance of the Qing and Republican governments through the local Chinese consulate, local Chinese schools modelled their curriculum after the schools in China and used Chinese textbooks. The dialect groups established schools where their dialects were the media for teaching.²⁷³ This meant that the local education structure continued to produce experiences that reinforced the Chinese habitus, which appeared to be disconnected from the colonial Singapore society. For instance, Tao Nan School established by Hokkien leaders taught Chinese

²⁷¹ Foucault, "Governmentality", 220.

²⁷² Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore 1819-2005*, 2020, 184–85.

²⁷³ Guan Hock Lim, "Development of Chinese Education in Singapore (1819-1979)," in *A General History of the Chinese in Singapore*, ed. Chong Guan Kwa and Bak Lim Kua (Singapore: Singapore Federation of Chinese Clan Associations and World Scientific Publishing Co Pte Ltd, 2019), 426, 437.

values and cultures, and Yeung Ching School set up by the Cantonese clan implemented the syllabus from China.²⁷⁴ In 1909, there were nine Chinese schools in Singapore. By 1919, there were 39 Chinese schools. These schools were supervised by the Chinese Education Affairs General Association, which China's Ministry of Education established in 1914.²⁷⁵

In addition, the Chinese immigrants remained responsive to political events in China. An example is the Republican Revolution in 1911 in China, which led to a revival of Chinese identity among the Chinese in British Malaya – which included Singapore – and the teaching of Mandarin, a common Chinese tongue promoted by the Chinese nationalists as a unifying factor between all Chinese groups. Nanyang Hua Chiao Middle School, the first Chinese secondary school, established in Singapore in 1911, taught in Mandarin rather than the usual dialects taught in Chinese vernacular schools.²⁷⁶ A commentator urged the Straits Chinese to encourage their daughters to relinquish the Malay language and return to their Chinese tongue.²⁷⁷ Sng observes that Chinese schools were fast becoming breeding grounds for anti-British sentiments, possibly in response to British actions in China. In June 1919, Chinese workers and students protested in the streets and destroyed Japanese products. They also refused to celebrate the end of World War One in July 1919, because the Allied countries had allowed Japan to take possession of the Shantung Province in China.²⁷⁸ The tug of the Chinese national habitus posed a challenge to the power dynamics between the colonial state and the Chinese inhabitants, as the power of the colonial state and its institutions can only work if the desired subjects recognise its authority.

²⁷⁴ Lim, 427.

²⁷⁵ Lim, 435.

²⁷⁶ Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore 1819-2005*, 2020, 226–27.

²⁷⁷ Andaya and Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, 300.

²⁷⁸ Sng, *In His Good Time: The Story of the Church in Singapore 1819-1992*, 164–65.

Thus, legislation of the education system was a strategy used to defuse “counter-power”, particularly anti-British sentiments. As Cesari and Foucault have noted, control over the education system was important as education is often used as an external constraint to inculcate norms that became modes of self-control in subjects.

The British attempted to further consolidate their control over the Chinese by introducing the Registration of Schools Ordinance. The Ordinance was introduced partly due to British concerns that Chinese nationalist and anti-British sentiments would continue to take root and grow among the Chinese community. The British also closed down the Chinese Education Affairs General Association. The Ordinance mandated the registration of all schools, teachers, and management committees. Textbooks from China were also screened, and Chinese schools were under tighter surveillance from the British authorities.²⁷⁹ In 1923, the colonial government offered grants to the Chinese schools for the first time, on the condition that these schools allowed for increased government supervision and taught in Chinese dialects rather than Mandarin.²⁸⁰ The colonial government attempted to control the education system in order to reassert its political control and disrupt the links between local inhabitants and the Chinese national habitus. Maintaining the different dialects as mediums for instruction created differentiation between the Chinese, who had grown to become the largest racial group in Singapore, thus disrupting the formation of networks of power and intersection between these dialect groups.

Apart from short historical accounts of temples, not much research has been conducted on the role of Chinese religions in colonial Singapore. It is likely that when social and legal institutions became formalised, and Chinese groups established clan

²⁷⁹ Sng, 164–65; Lim, “Development of Chinese Education in Singapore (1819-1979),” 435–36.

²⁸⁰ Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore 1819-2005*, 2020, 227.

headquarters in separate buildings, the temples declined in significance among the Chinese community. Temples no longer served as administrative centres but evolved to become places where religious worship was conducted.

The Chinese were protective of their group habitus, built on dual racial and religious identities. An attempted change to this habitus could incur a response from that habitus, as was the case in the anti-Catholic riots. The drag effect was seen in the response of Chinese parents who protested against a mission school's plans to introduce religious education. Sng notes that even though Chinese parents enrolled their children in Christian mission schools, they discouraged their children from showing interest in Christianity.²⁸¹ Sng also mentions that a revival of interest in Chinese language and Confucianism in the 1890s led to some resistance against Christian mission schools. Anonymous letters sent to two local newspapers in 1896 accused the Methodist mission of forcibly converting their students. Consequently, some Chinese members on the Anglo-Chinese School (ACS) Board of Trustees resigned and 100 students were withdrawn from the school by their parents.²⁸² Prominent businessman Tan Keong Saik clarified that the Chinese community was not against the proselytisation of Christianity to adults. The issue was that the ACS had repudiated its earlier agreement to introduce religious teaching only after school hours, and specifically only to Christian students. Tan took issue with the "unauthorised inculcation of foreign doctrine upon the immature minds of our children".²⁸³

On another occasion, the Chinese community rejected help from the Catholic nuns, who volunteered to take in female refugees from the *Poh Leong Kuk* (an office

²⁸¹ Sng, *In His Good Time: The Story of the Church in Singapore 1819-1992*, 130.

²⁸² Sng, 133–34.

²⁸³ Keong Saik Tan, "The Anglo-Chinese School to the Editor," *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser (Weekly)*, August 11, 1896.

to protect one's virtues) "on account of the Convent being a religious asylum". Tan said that the Chinese had found out that the Convent's matron was "tampering with the minds of the young girls in the home with foreign religion".²⁸⁴ "Foreign religion" referred to Catholicism. It was evident that as Christianity was considered a foreign influence and an intrusion into the Chinese racial habitus, the Chinese resisted changes to the habitus attempted by the Christians.

As shown above, the redistribution of power between the colonial government and the Chinese community led to a decline in the significance of Chinese temples. With the introduction of institutions like the Chinese Advisory Board and the Chinese Protectorate, the colonial state shifted political power from the temples and smaller dialect groups to the Chinese leaders, the larger dialect and clan associations, social institutions, and modern state institutions. There was increased governmentalisation of relations and disciplinary strategies like legislation to restrict and normalise relations between the colonial state and the Chinese immigrants.

Nonetheless, even though the political, social, and economic significance of religious groupings had diminished, religion was still closely tied to the Chinese we-identity. The Chinese still identified with Chinese religions and were hostile to Christian missionaries' attempts to provide social services like education and welfare homes, out of concern that this would lead to the disruption of the ethnic-religion habitus. A parallel Chinese habitus existed alongside the colonial Singapore habitus. The colonial state was still unsuccessful in asserting control over the education system that propagated a Chinese identity with close ties to China and did not recognise the overarching British sovereignty in Singapore.

²⁸⁴ Tan. The home, established by the Chinese Protectorate for suspected victims of the prostitution trade and abused females, was then running low on donations due to a lack of support from the Chinese community.

2.3.b Rise of Malay Muslim Consciousness

In contrast to the decline in the significance of Chinese temples, several accounts note that Islam became a central part of the Malay identity during the colonial period. In the early colonial period, conversion to Islam essentially meant the convert would become a Malay by identification. Turnbull notes that the Malay (from the neighbouring Malay states) and Indonesian immigrants adopted Sumatran Malay as their lingua franca, followed Islamic religious practices and customs, and married within the Malay community. By the end of the nineteenth century, the category of Malays – which initially referred to the native inhabitants of Singapore – expanded to include Malay, Indonesian and Arab immigrants. Turnbull suggests that the Indonesian Malays kept the least links with their homeland, compared to other immigrants; few returned to Indonesia or remitted money home.²⁸⁵ Similarly, Milner suggests that the category of “Malay” was redefined during colonial rule. Immigrants became Malay by adopting the Malay way of life, dressing, religion, language, and customs. Milner uses the example of Munshi Abdullah to show that the category of Malay ethnicity was a fluid category in the initial years of colonisation. Abdullah was a Muslim of Arab/ Indian descent; in his later writings, he identified himself as a Malay.²⁸⁶ Conversion to the Islamic faith thus came with belonging to the Malay racial category. There was a fluidity to the Malay habitus for “foreigners” to be accepted once they adopted “Malay” norms.

However, by the twentieth century, the category of Malay was less fluid. In the late 1930s, the readers of *The Straits Times* debated on what constituted Malay identity. The debate arose from a reader’s suggestion to merge Kesatuan Melayu

²⁸⁵ Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore 1819-2005*, 2020, 179.

²⁸⁶ Milner, *The Invention of Politics in Colonial Malaya*, 12.

Singapura (Singapore Malay Union) and the Straits Settlements (Singapore) Malay Association. The Malay Union defined Malay in its membership rules as “Malays, Javanese, Boyanese, etc., whose ancestors on the paternal side were born in the Malayan Archipelago, and who [were] Muslims and British subjects”. On the other hand, the Malay Association accepted “Malays, Javanese, Indians, Arabs, Chinese etc., so long as they [were] Muslims and British subjects”.²⁸⁷

For some, belonging to the Malay habitus was not just a matter of religious affiliation; it involved adopting the Islamic faith, and the Malay culture and language. An older Malay said that both Chinese and Indian Muslims were considered as Malays, and were “entitled to the rights and privileges of Malay subjects of the Malay sultans” before the Malay States fell under British protection (possibly referring to 1874).²⁸⁸ He clarified that they were considered Malays not only because they were Muslims, but also because they were “Malays to the core, where Malay interests and Malay honour were concerned. In short, they thought, they spoke, they moved, and they acted as Malays”. The Malay Union refused to accept converts or their descendants as they felt that “such men – particularly in Singapore – do not serve the interests of the Malays and are loyal to none but their own selfish cause”. Besides, “to be a Malay [was] not merely to be a Muslim but to be imbued with the Malay spirit, including a knowledge and practice of all the Malay’s *adat* (customs) and code of honour”.²⁸⁹ Another Indian Muslim said that Indian Muslims should “guard their birthright as Straits-born Muslim Indians and regard the Malays as brothers in religion”.²⁹⁰ In the above arguments, we can observe that race had become a distinct identity marker that transcended religious

²⁸⁷ British Subject, “What is a Malay In Singapore?,” *The Straits Times*, July 22, 1939.

²⁸⁸ The author was likely referring to 1896, when the four unprotected Malay states were amalgamated to form the Federated Malay States in 1896.

²⁸⁹ An Old Malay, “From an Old Malay,” *The Straits Times*, August 7, 1939.

²⁹⁰ A.A. Khan, ““Malays” and Malays”: Straits-Born Indian Muslim View,” *The Straits Times*, August 7, 1939.

affiliation, giving rise to hyphenated race-religion identities like Malay/Muslim and Indian Muslim.²⁹¹

Hashim, a member of the Legislative Council of the Straits Settlement and patron of the Malay Association, observed that assimilation into the Malay race was “made possible by the power of language and religion”. He considered Persians, Muslim Indians, Burmese, Siamese, and the Chinese to be Malays so long as they adopted the Malay tongue and religion. Further, Hashim said Islam “binds all races together in a great brotherhood” and “should play an important part in the life of the Malay race in Malaya”.²⁹² However, by this point, Indian and Arab Muslims were unwilling to give up their racial and cultural roots to assimilate into the Malay identity.

Further, an additional layer of identification – the Straits Singapore habitus – emerged as more colonial inhabitants identified an affinity with the British. An Arab Muslim identified himself as a “British subject” and said that he did not consider himself a Malay despite his religion.²⁹³ The Indian Muslim identified himself as a Straits Indian Muslim, possibly because he was born in the Straits Settlement. The Straits habitus was tied to the place of birth. The debate revealed that individuals could belong to multiple we-identities that intersect on many planes. The race-religion habitus of Malay had become a closed category because the place of birth, ancestral lineage, and racial loyalty were identifiers of belonging now considered as norms of the Malay habitus.

The above debate showed that inter-racial tensions began to surface as more immigrants settled permanently in Singapore. Conflicts are bound to arise in power relations between we-groups. According to Rai, the Malay Union was set up by

²⁹¹ In Singapore, Malay Muslims are referred to as “Malay/Muslims”. Other race-religion categories are usually identified without a hyphen, e.g. Indian Muslim, Chinese Buddhist.

²⁹² N.M. Hashim, “The Malays in Malaysia,” *Straits Times Annual*, January 1, 1940. Hashim.

²⁹³ British Subject, “What is a Malay In Singapore?,” *The Straits Times*, July 22, 1939.

Malays who were formerly from the Muslim Association, because they were suspicious of the intentions of other Muslim groups. The Malay/Muslims reportedly felt that the Indians and Arabs, who dominated the leadership of Muslim umbrella organisations, would not promote Malay interests. As such, these Malays decided to form a more exclusive, race-based religious organisation.²⁹⁴ The distrust and suspicions Malays had towards non-Malay Muslims were reflected in the elder Malay's interpretation of Malay. As we-identities begin to interact, tensions may emerge between various groups due to competing interests.

Islamic religion formed a central role in the Malay/Muslim identity. The importance of religion to the Malay community was reflected in the emphasis which the Malay/Muslim community placed on Quranic education. Malay parents stopped their children from attending Malay schools which were run by Christian missionaries, who had infused their curriculum with Christian components. This was because the parents were concerned that their children might convert to Christianity. Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied and Dayang Istiaisyah Hussin observe that A. M. Skinner, the Inspector of Schools, decided in 1871 to re-introduce the Malay vernacular school in Singapore to address the falling education rates among the Malay population.²⁹⁵ Notably, the Malay parents shared similar responses to the Chinese parents, when faced with the issue of Christian mission schools offering religious education to students. Both the Malay and the Chinese parents were resistant to changes, particularly against a foreign religion like Christianity, giving rise to the drag effect. Such forms of resistance highlighted the importance of religion in the formation of their respective habitus.

²⁹⁴ Rai, *Indians in Singapore: 1819-1945*, 174.

²⁹⁵ Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied and Dayang Istiaisyah Hussin, "Estranged from the Ideal Past: Historical Evolution of Madrassahs in Singapore," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 25, no. 2 (August 2006): 254–55.

The colonial government might have allowed for religious education in the school curriculum, but it did not make further concessions to fund the religious classes. At this juncture, Turnbull notes that the colonial authorities only made provisions for Malay education, because they “acknowledged a special responsibility to provide free vernacular primary education in Malay as the indigenous language”.²⁹⁶ While the state was willing to establish the necessary structures to provide Malay education, it drew the line at funding religious education. The colonial government only made financial provisions for the teacher instructing the students in morning Malay lessons; the parents were responsible for paying the teacher instructing the students in the Quranic classes, which were to be held in the afternoon.²⁹⁷ Here, we see the distinction between secular and religious education in state institutions, likely the product of Western notions of secularity. Separately, the provision of Malay schools reflected the unequal relationships between the state and various religious or racial groups and thus unequal power relations. While the British created infrastructures for Malay schools, the Chinese and Indian immigrants had to establish their own schools, or attend missionary schools.

The above discussion shows that Islam was important in the social aspects of Malay lives – social, and cultural customs and habits. However, Islamic ideology did not contribute to the formation of a Malay political identity in colonial Singapore.²⁹⁸ The pan-Islamic movement overseas did not gather momentum in Singapore. Reynaldo Ileto notes that anti-colonial movements in the Malay states were non-existent.²⁹⁹ Similarly, Paul Kratoska observes that the pan-Islamic movement did not

²⁹⁶ Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore 1819-2005*, 2020, 206.

²⁹⁷ Aljunied and Hussin, “Estranged from the Ideal Past,” 254–55.

²⁹⁸ Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore 1819-2005*, 2020, 12.

²⁹⁹ Reynaldo Ileto, “Religion and Anti-Colonial Movements,” in *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia*, ed. Nicholas Tarling, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 230.

gather momentum among the Muslim community. The collapse of the Ottoman caliphate did not arouse much attention in Southeast Asia. Kratoska assesses that the pan-Islamic movement did not take root in the region because the Muslim community was divided into religious issues and secular interests. Religious issues centred around debates on whether practices of Islam should be purified; but these debates were limited to a small number of Muslims. Secular interests centred around racial and cultural issues.³⁰⁰

Notably, some Malays harboured simmering anti-Chinese sentiments. Kratoska observes that anti-Japanese sentiments among the Chinese immigrants, and strikes and labour unrest caused by the Chinese immigrants in the late 1930s, had heightened Malay concerns that they were being subordinated to the Chinese.³⁰¹ In 1931, the reformist journal *Al-Ikhwan* (the Brotherhood) criticised a Chinese member of the Straits Settlement for saying that the Malay Peninsula was their country and not that of the Malays.³⁰² In 1939, the Singapore Malay Union established the Malay-language newspaper, *Utusan Melayu* (The Malay Courier), publishing articles that were resentful of the migrants' intrusion into the Malay way of life. We can observe that the Malay identity had become more assertive, in response to increasing Chinese assertiveness in the public sphere.

The Malays tended to unite along the lines of Malay Muslim identity, hence excluding the other Muslims. A generation of young and urban Muslim elites, known as Kaum Muda (new movement), emerged as a response to reformist Islamist teachings from Muslim universities such as Al-Azhar University in Cairo, Egypt. However, it was unlikely that Kaum Muda would have flourished as a Malay Muslim

³⁰⁰ Paul Kratoska, "Nationalism and Modernist Reform," in *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia*, ed. Nicholas Tarling, vol. Two (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 310.

³⁰¹ Kratoska, 302–3.

³⁰² Andaya and Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, 319.

nationalist movement. Kaum Muda advocated for Muslims to improve their situation so that they could resist the influence of the Christian West. Editorials published in the modernist Islamic journal *Al Imam* were critical of the Malay nobility, and spoke of the Malays being suppressed by the white colonial rulers. The editorials also called for social reforms, particularly property rights and education for women, and were critical of polygamy.³⁰³ Kaum Muda's ideas were not appealing to the majority of the Malay/Muslim community. Khairudin and Dayang Istiaisyah note that the Muslim community in Singapore rejected Kaum Muda's ideas due to their emphasis on rationality. Kaum Muda established Madrasah Al-Iqbal in 1907, which offered the national curriculum and religious studies. However, the madrasah shut down in the following year.³⁰⁴ The development of a Malay Muslim consciousness was largely apolitical, and centred around commonality of race, religion, customs, clothing, and language. This point of discussion is important as it will have implications for the evolution of the Malay/Muslim identity in Singapore.

2.3.c *The Indian Community*

There were several changes to the status of religion in the Indian community from 1819 to 1945. Rai notes that in the first few decades of colonial rule, Indian Hindus of different caste and language groups came together to build and maintain Hindu shrines and organise religious processions.³⁰⁵ By the 1920s, Rai observes that as more Indians arrived and settled in Singapore, their numbers were sufficient for each caste or Indian language group to establish its own place of worship.³⁰⁶ Rai suggests that as more Indian Hindus settled in Singapore, their significant numbers allowed them to splinter into smaller communities along "regional, vernacular, caste,

³⁰³ Andaya and Andaya, 276–77.

³⁰⁴ Aljunied and Hussin, "Estranged from the Ideal Past," 253.

³⁰⁵ Rai, *Indians in Singapore: 1819-1945*, 45.

³⁰⁶ Rai, 119.

class, and sectarian lines”.³⁰⁷ The habitus that initially encompassed Indians across caste and regional differences at the start of the colonial period began to fragment into Indian habitus (plural) imported from their home country.

Notably, Rai states that the emergence of an Indian middle class, who were inclined to settle more permanently in Singapore, “strengthened institutional development in the religious sphere”. Makeshift shrines were re-built and formally consecrated as permanent religious structures, and religious festivals took place on a larger scale. The shrines also took on social functions as places for the religious-ethnic groups to gather and hold meetings, festivals, and other events.³⁰⁸

However, religion did not unite the diverse caste and sub-ethnic groups. The divide between north and south Indians widened by the 1920s. Rai notes that the North Indian groups were concerned that places of religious worship previously shared between the two groups during the early colonial period were taken over by the larger South Indian groups. As shared shrines were rebuilt and consecrated, they tended to adopt South Indian architectural patterns and rituals. As a result, the early 1920s, North Indian organisations like the North Indian Hindu Union and the North Indian Hindu Funeral Association were established.³⁰⁹ For the Indian Hindus, much like the Muslims, religious identities were closely tied to racial identities, and the religious habitus did not transcend racial or caste differences. The dominant form of we-layer resurfaced above the temporary allegiances once the we-groups accumulated enough resources in numbers and, presumably, finances.

³⁰⁷ Rai, 147.

³⁰⁸ Rai, 168–69.

³⁰⁹ Rai, 173–74.

2.3.d Colonial Attempts to Sustain Shared Singapore Habitus

The colonial government continued to implement more modern state structures in Singapore. In 1920, the colonial government amended the constitution of the Straits Settlements, so that seats on the Legislative Council would be more representative of Singapore society. A Select Committee was appointed to consider and propose changes to the constitution. The Committee recognised the challenge of finding a constitutional model that would consider “the mixture of races and languages, a lack of a common religion, the transient nature of many of the people in Singapore and the small number of British subjects”. These factors militated against the policy of electing a “free representative Government” in Singapore.³¹⁰ The Government later introduced racial representation that reflected the social and economic realities in Singapore.³¹¹ The Committee’s findings revealed the difficulty in creating a national habitus shared among the local inhabitants, given the diversity of Singapore society.

The fact that the colonial government elected representatives along racial lines showed that group habitus in Singapore were predominantly based on religion-racial identification. Turnbull notes that when the Government wanted to elect an Asian representative to the Legislative Council in 1924, the Persekutuan Islam Singapura (Muslim Association of Singapore) preferred a Muslim nominee, while the Muslim Institute favoured a Malay nominee. The colonial government eventually elected Mohammed Eunos as the first Malay legislative councillor, on the basis of his race.³¹² The decisions showed that the colonial government was aware of, and sensitive towards, differences among Muslims of different races.

³¹⁰ E. Kay Gillis, *Singapore Civil Society and British Power* (Singapore: Talisman Publishing Ltd, 2005), 79–80.

³¹¹ Gillis, 81.

³¹² Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore 1819-2005*, 2020, 248.

In the 1930s, the British decided to increase the centralisation of its control by consolidating the administration of the Federated Malay States, the Unfederated Malay States, and the Straits Settlements. To this end, Cecil Clementi, the Governor of the Straits Settlements, introduced the Malayanisation policy. In 1933, Malay classes were introduced so that the Malay language could become the lingua franca of Malaya, and all inhabitants could share a common language.³¹³ Clementi had expressed his concern that although the people of different races were “in daily contact with each other”, they “nevertheless moved as it were in separate worlds without any real comprehension of each other’s mode of life or ways of thought”. There could, he said, be “no real sympathy between the various racial elements” unless they communicated in the same tongue.³¹⁴ The introduction of a common language was thus construed as a way of forging a shared, collective identity and racial harmony among inhabitants of diverse racial, language and religious backgrounds. This created a significant amount of discomfort among the Chinese and Indians, who felt that they were to become subordinated to Malay rule by nature of the latter’s indigenous roots in Singapore.³¹⁵ Despite some efforts by colonial authorities to create commonalities across racial groups, Singapore appeared to be divided by racial differences.

2.4 Colonial Habitus in Singapore

This chapter has identified shared historical experiences, in particular the earliest experiences, which bear significance for the current-day habitus. We can identify several key dispositions and structures of the secularity, focusing on state-

³¹³ Gillis, *Singapore Civil Society and British Power*, 89; “Malay and English,” *Malaya Tribune*, October 3, 1933.

³¹⁴ “Need For Racial Harmony,” *The Straits Times*, December 18, 1933.

³¹⁵ “The Pro-Malay Phase,” *The Straits Times*, October 30, 1933.

religion relations and the societal significance of religion for the different racial-religious communities.

A notable principle was the conflation of racial and religious identities, given the strong correlation between the two. Any disruption or forced change to the habitus might be met with a drag effect from the prevailing habitus. Christian evangelisation and conversion among the Chinese was an unplanned social change that affected the Chinese habitus, whose racial, religious, and secret society affiliations were closely intertwined before the 1890s. The Chinese habitus response was to react with violence, resulting in the anti-Catholic riots. The importance of religious identity to the Chinese could also be seen in continued Chinese resistance to Christian evangelisation. A similar pattern emerged in the 1890s when the Chinese community opposed Christian evangelisation to Chinese students in mission schools.

Similarly, the Malay race, most of whom were Muslims, came to be closely affiliated to the Islamic religion. Both the Malay language and Islam helped to unite the initial wave of Muslim immigrants, who assimilated into the Malay race in the early years of colonisation. However, membership to the Malay/ Muslim habitus became less fluid by the twentieth century as the habitus became exclusive in response to the emergence of other habitus, e.g. Straits Indian, and Arab Muslims. The Malay demand for Quranic education in Malay schools also showed the significance of Islam in their lives.

The parallel development of Hindu temples and the permanent settlement of Indian Hindu immigrants revealed the centrality of religious worship in their lives. Like the Muslims, religious identity alone was insufficient for forming a group habitus among the Hindus. Colonial rule had thus introduced the conflation of religious and racial

markers to the different group habitus, and race-religion identity became enshrined as an important disposition of the overarching colonial Singapore habitus.

Secondly, British authorities made accommodations for the special position of Malay/Muslims. For instance, the British made concessions to Malay education. The government's accommodation for the Malays was first provided in the 1819 treaty, which stated that the EIC would "respect the laws and customs of Malays". Thereafter, the treaty remains a historical structure that shapes the habitus and reinforces the special position of the Malays in Singapore. The privileged position of the Malay/Muslims vis-à-vis other racial and religious groups was, to adopt Foucauldian terms, "progressively governmentalised, elaborated, rationalised, and centralised in the form of, or under the auspices of, state institutions".³¹⁶ The treaty made Malay/Muslim privilege a norm in the colonial habitus, giving rise to related institutions like the codification of the Syariah law and British concession to establish schools for the Malays.

A third disposition is the British non-interference in religion, which was embedded in the earlier treaties. The principle of non-interference and separation of public and private spheres were imprints of Western secularity on the colonial state. This explained why the British's concessions to Malay education did not include funding Islamic religious education. The multiple religious legal systems for private laws like marriage and divorce were also structures to maintain non-interference in religious affairs. However, the system of legal pluralism was also conditional upon the separation of religious and racial groups, i.e. individuals do not marry across culture, race or religion. Power conflicts arise when we-groups interact in the public sphere.

³¹⁶ Foucault, "The Subject and Power", 345.

A fourth principle of the colonial habitus was the false separation of different aspects of people's lives into religious and civil law, which was derived from the British divide of the religious and the secular. In Britain, the ecclesiastical courts handled cases relating to "defamation, matrimony, tithe, probate and administration" until the 1850s.³¹⁷ Similarly, in Singapore, the inhabitants were allowed to keep their laws and customs, which applied to family, marriage, divorce, and inheritance; whereas the criminal law under the colonial court applied to all inhabitants.

A fifth product of the colonial habitus was the change in the societal status of religion for some groups in society. Due to the redistribution of political power between colonial institutions and racial-religious groups, the societal significance of religion evolved for the Chinese and Malays. The British ban on Chinese secret societies resulted in the diminished significance of religious temples and leaders in Chinese society. By banning secret societies which often centred their activities around a local temple, the temple ceased to be a gathering point where administrative, economic, and social activities were carried out. Consequently, the political power that resided with the temples and secret societies was ceded to the Chinese clans and leaders, who assumed the responsibility of governance and social welfare for the Chinese immigrants.

Separately, British policies towards Malay Muslims facilitated the development of a Malay Muslim identity that was defined by contrast to the non-Malay Muslims and the rest of the immigrants. A significant development was that the Mahomedan

³¹⁷ R. B. Outhwaite, *The Rise and Fall of the English Ecclesiastical Courts, 1500–1860*, Cambridge Studies in English Legal History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 157–73; Martin Ingram, "Church Courts in England," in *Judging Faith, Punishing Sin*, ed. Charles H. Parker and Gretchen Starr-LeBeau (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 102. In the 1850s, a series of reforms – "Taking Evidence" Act (1854), Defamation Act (1855), Divorce and Matrimonial Causes Act (1857), Probates and Letter of administration Act (1857), and Act of 1860 – ended the jurisdiction of ecclesiastical courts in matrimonial, defamation and probate cases.

Marriage Ordinance codified Syariah law under the civil law system; the definitive interpretation of Syariah law concerning private matters like divorce, marriage and inheritance became embedded in the Singapore legal system. The institutionalisation of Syariah law in the civil court system thus reduced the fluidity in the interpretation of Syariah law between different schools of legal jurisprudence.

Notably, the colonial state used disciplinary tactics in the form of policing and legislation to minimise power conflicts. This could be seen in the ban on public religious processions to curb physical clashes between religious groups and the formation of state-religion relations through the Advisory Boards. The colonial government also reduced the authority of secret societies through the Protectorate, when the societies emerged as a challenge to its power. Further, the state sought to use legislation to control education systems because the curriculum was one of the means of transmitting habitus ideas to individuals. An important criterion in determining the colonial state's "neutral" relations with religious groups was the necessity of civil order to ensure minimal disruption to the colonial economy.

We see an increased governmentalisation of relations as the colonial state's response to managing conflict in the public sphere. The Mahomedan Marriage was the result of a habitus response to interracial marriages, in order to minimise and contain conflicts between Muslims from various we-groups to the colonial court. The introduction of the Ordinance placed the colonial state as the highest authority in the habitus structures of these Muslims; they recognised the authority of the courts and through actualisation, it became a norm for Muslims to seek recourse in the courts due to the internal and external control mechanisms of the habitus. In this light, religion-state relations were formalised under the auspices of state institutions through different pieces of legislation and the various Advisory Boards.

As colonial society became more governmentalised, the colonial government took over some of the political power that was previously ceded to religious and community leaders. For instance, the development of the judiciary system removed the functions of the Malay rulers who had served as arbitrators alongside the EIC officials in the early years of colonisation. Another instance was the anti-Catholic riots in 1851, during which the Government had to rely on Chinese community leaders to mediate between groups. The introduction of political institutions, which took over the earlier roles of temples and religious leaders as providers of social services and arbiters of order, shifted the power from the religious leaders to the colonial government. Other modern state institutions, such as the Advisory and Endowment boards, structured state-religious relations and integrated the religious groups into the overarching colonial habitus.

It appeared that the groups had begun to recognise the state's authority as the highest authority in the colonial habitus. This could be seen in the Muslims' acceptance of the state as the arbiter of religious differences in the civil court. The request for the state to enact the Mahomedan Marriage Ordinance was significant because it removed the authority of locally elected *kadi*. Secret societies in the 1870s also recognised the authority of the colonial state. Pickering noted that in the induction ceremony performed by new secret society members, the society promised to provide assistance in cases where "outsiders oppress [them]" by referring them to official channels like the Registrars of Secret Societies, the Inspector General of Police and the Protector of Chinese, or by obtaining legal advice for them.³¹⁸ The group habitus thus recognised the colonial authorities as the highest authority that they were willing to cede power.

³¹⁸ Pickering, "Chinese Secret Societies," 9.

Up until the eve of World War Two, as discussed in this chapter, we can observe the beginnings of the formation of a shared habitus between the colonial state and religious groups. Individuals began to identify themselves as Straits-born or British subjects. Even though the colonial authorities and immigrant groups imported dispositions from their homelands, local habitus principles had developed from shared historical experiences, and these principles were translated into executive, legislative and judiciary policies. Nonetheless, as the Select Committee had observed in 1921, finding a model to govern Singapore was difficult; the inhabitants were divided by loyalties to their motherland's habitus. The period between 1819 and 1942 produced a tentative, shared habitus between the different groups. This habitus would inform how members articulated their views, or conducted themselves in society. It was also unlikely that religious identity would be used as an identifier of national belonging upon decolonisation, given the many racial, caste or cultural differences between the Muslim and Hindu groups.

Postcolonial scholars have discussed the negative impact of colonial rule and secularism that continue to impact postcolonial societies today. Saba and Abdullah suggest that inequalities in postcolonial societies like India and Egypt are "historically specific", due to the colonial state's "reliance on religious categories to structure and regulate social life".³¹⁹ Abdullah assesses that legal pluralism continues to "complicate secularism in postcolonial India".³²⁰ The codification of religious law in civil courts resulted in the colonial imposition of their notions of how Muslim and Hindu law ought to be. Such codification and legal pluralism also resulted in the overemphasis of "religious identity as the mark of identity itself, defining what was

³¹⁹ Mahmood, *Religious Difference in a Secular Age*. 11, 25.

³²⁰ Ahmed An-Na'im, *Islam and the Secular State*, 148.

particular to a community as well as setting its differences from other communities”.³²¹ Similarly, this thesis has highlighted the impact of divide and rule on the relations between religious and racial communities and forging a sense of belonging between religious habitus. We see this in the urban planning for colonial Singapore and the legal pluralism approach to managing “personal laws” like marriage. However, Saba and Abdullah’s narratives deny agency to postcolonial elites, who have the right to challenge and change colonial systems, as Bucholc and Cesari have noted. In Chapter 3, we will examine how local elites decolonise the colonial habitus and their efforts to forge a sense of belonging between various religious and racial habitus whose differences have been compounded by colonial institutions.

³²¹ Ahmed An-Na’im, *Islam and the Secular State*, 149.

3 BUILDING BLOCKS OF THE NATIONAL HABITUS IN SINGAPORE'S SELF-GOVERNANCE YEARS

During World War Two, between 1942 and 1945, Singapore fell under Japanese occupation, disrupting British rule over the colonial state. The post-war years saw the rebuilding of state institutions and the gradual transfer of sovereignty from Britain to Singapore. The Straits Settlements was dissolved in 1946, and Singapore became a standalone Crown Colony, while Penang and Malacca were integrated into the Malayan Union.

Notably, the Singapore Citizenship Ordinance in 1957 allowed inhabitants of Singapore, most of whom were immigrants, to apply for citizenship.³²² By 1960, an estimated 400,000 inhabitants had taken up Singapore citizenship; according to the 1957 census, Singapore had a population of 1,445,929 people. Minister for Home Affairs, Ong Pang Boon, stated that "Singapore citizenship [was] now the common link which unite[d] those who regard[ed] Singapore as their only home and the sole subject of their undivided loyalty. [Citizenship] carries with it rights, duties and responsibilities".³²³ Ong said that the granting of Singapore citizenship had given these immigrants "a stake in the country", which was a contrast to the previous neglect of colonial policies that had indirectly resulted in the lack of cohesion among immigrants in Singapore. Ong added that the immigrant population was politically orientated towards their birth countries, "liv[ing] in a world all by themselves and their

³²² Singapore Legislative Council, "Singapore Legislative Assembly Elections (Amendment) Bill," Parliament No. 0, Vol No. 4, Sitting No. 5 (November 18, 1957).

³²³ "Govt. Pamphlet Tells Public All About Citizenship in Singapore," *The Singapore Free Press*, July 22, 1961; Swee-Hock Saw, *The Population of Singapore*, Third Edition (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2012), 14.

ways of living and attitude of mind have in no way been identified with the country and its people".³²⁴

The Ordinance created the beginnings of a "new" habitus – self-governing Singapore, and the immigrants became citizens and members of the new habitus. In the Eliasian conception of habitus, members subscribe to a set of shared norms, dispositions, institutions and knowledge. As discussed in Chapter 2, these new citizens were British subjects under colonial rule. The commonalities they shared under the colonial habitus were likely their recognition of British rule and living within a shared territorial boundary. At this juncture, the "new" national habitus had to forge commonalities and a shared sense of belonging among the new citizens. These new citizens belonged to separate habitus tied to particular cultures, religions, customs and languages. They recognised the sovereignty of the Singapore government, but some aspects of their lives were governed under different institutions due to the divide and rule system, e.g. education systems and personal laws.

The postcolonial state took over the role of "global overseer, the principle of regulation and, to a certain extent, the distributor of all power relations in a given social ensemble" from the colonial ruler.³²⁵ The state had to obtain recognition for its new status from the new citizens; the we-groups had to be willing to cede some or all of their power to the state for it to be recognised as what Elias calls the "highest-ranking survival units" and the "highest-ranking reference group" for the disparate we-groups.³²⁶ The 1950s and 1960s were thus significant because it was the period where the state and groups in society were involved in power negotiations to define norms, institutions and identifiers of the new national habitus. Institutions and norms

³²⁴ Singapore Legislative Council, "Singapore Citizenship (Amendment) Bill," Parliament No. 0, Session No. 1, Vol No. 12, Sitting No. 12 (May 16, 1960).

³²⁵ Foucault, "The Subject and Power," 344.

³²⁶ Elias, *The Society of Individuals*, 206.

were discussed and agreed upon between elites and segments of the Singapore society, and the new population was “disciplined” through various strategies to recognise the authority and norms of the developing national habitus.

As discussed in Chapter 1, Bucholc suggests how the postcolonial society can “decolonise”. The society can identify structures and institutions that were “the impact of colonialism” and seek to “eliminate” or “problematise their embeddedness”. The national community might reject those who choose not to recognise the postcolonial state as the highest authority.³²⁷ The 1950s and 1960s were thus a period when Singaporeans were faced with several possibilities on how best to organise government, society, and religion in a self-governing state headed for independence. The government and society had to decide which structures and notions of secularity, religion and politics to keep or abandon from the colonial legacy to align with the national habitus. Singapore’s political elites had voiced similar sentiments on the importance of the 1950s and 1960s in the nation-building process. For instance, Singapore’s first Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, acknowledged that the 1950s and 1960s were a pivotal period in forming the historical consciousness of Singapore as a nation. He explained that “secularism [was] essential for the inter-religious harmony for our multi-religious community” because “religion cannot be a force for national unity”.³²⁸

This chapter will examine important historical processes in the 1950s and 1960s that influenced how secularity, nation, and religion came to be construed for the state and its citizens. Two important historical events during this period influenced religion-state relations in Singapore – the Hertogh riot in 1950 and the race riots in

³²⁷ Bucholc, 173.

³²⁸ Kuan Yew Lee, “The Meaning of Survival: Speech at the Dinner for the Establishment at Raffles Ballroom, Westin Hotel (29 August 1990),” in *The Papers of Lee Kuan Yew: Speeches, Interviews and Dialogues*, vol. 10, 1988-1990 (Singapore: Gale Asia, 2012), 728–29.

1964.³²⁹ These two riots took on religious overtones for the actors involved, and in terms of how past and present actors interpreted the significance of the events for the present habitus.

This chapter will first examine the implications of the Hertogh riots for the national habitus. Then, it will investigate the legislative debates between 1955 and 1965 to examine how secularity, and religion's status in society, was discussed and decided upon by political and religious elites. Several pieces of religion-related legislation were discussed in the Assembly, including the proposed Hindu Marriages legislation, the Muslim Ordinance of 1957, the proposed Muslim Marriage (Amendment) Bill, and the Women's Charter. The examination of their discussions informs how historical experiences have shaped and influenced Singapore's secular principles and structures. Identifying habitus structures, such as government institutions and legislation, will also help us – later in this thesis – to examine how these structures reinforce or change secularity principles at various historical junctures. The following section will discuss Singapore's brief merger with Malaysia, from 1963 to 1965, and how these historical experiences produced habitus dispositions leading to Singapore's construct as a democratic and secular nation-state.

³²⁹ *Public Prosecutor v. Koh Song Huat Benjamin* [2005] SGDC 272 cited in Jaclyn Ling-Chien Neo, Seditious in Singapore! Free Speech and the Offence of Promoting Ill-Will and Hostility Between Different Racial Groups, *Singapore Journal of Legal Studies* (2011), 359. To this day, Government and community leaders continue to use these two incidents as an example to show what religious agitation and an irresponsible press could do to undermine the social fabric of Singapore. The Maria Hertogh riot was mentioned in Parliament discussions on MRHA between 1987 and 1989, and the revision to the Act in 2019. It was also used as an antecedent in sentencing for religion and race-based cases. For instance, in 2005, during a court trial of an unnamed blogger who was prosecuted for making racist "invective and pejorative remarks" against the Malay/Muslim community, the judge said his sentencing was based on the historical and present context of Singapore's society and heightened Islamic sensitivities in the post 9/11 security climate. The court stated that religious issues were particularly sensitive in Singapore's "multi-cultural society, particularly given our history of the Maria Hertogh incident in the 1950s and the July and September 1964 race riots; and the current domestic and international security climate".

3.1 Maria Hertogh Riots

The Hertogh riots erupted from a custody case between Maria Hertogh's Dutch-Eurasian Catholic parents and her Malay//Muslim foster family. This case, from the onset and in subsequent interpretations of the event by Singaporeans in different generations, took on racial and religious overtones. Maria's mother, Mrs Hertogh, claimed that she had intended to leave Maria with Aminah binte Mohamad for a few nights. However, Mrs Hertogh was captured by the Japanese (during the Japanese occupation of Southeast Asia) while on her way to fetch Maria. Aminah said that Maria was handed over to her for adoption. Maria stayed with Aminah for seven years, during which time she was brought up as a Muslim and renamed as Nadra. Maria reportedly only spoke Malay, wore Malay clothes, and learnt the Quran. After the war, Dutch authorities in Java (present-day Indonesia) and Singapore tracked Maria down. The acting Dutch Consul-General, Jacob Van Der Gaag, commenced legal proceedings in April 1950 on behalf of the Hertogh family to regain custody of Maria. The court, through the Social Welfare Department, placed Maria in an institution while pending a court decision. On her part, Aminah lodged a successful appeal; the Court of Appeal overturned earlier court orders and returned Maria to Aminah on 28 July 1950. Shortly afterwards, on 1 August 1950, Maria married the 22-year-old Malay/Muslim Mansoor Adabi. A second appeal by the Hertoghs resulted in the judge ruling that Maria's marriage to Mansoor was invalid, and Maria was temporarily placed in a Catholic convent. Protests subsequently erupted, in December 1950, between Muslims and Christians, and between Malays and Europeans and the Chinese. The protests left 18 people dead and 173 injured.³³⁰

³³⁰ Norman Vasu and Juhi Ahuja, *Singapore Chronicles: Multiracialism* (Singapore: Institute of Policy Studies and Straits Times Press Pte Ltd, 2018), 28-9; Marican, *The Maria Hertogh (Nadra) Riots*, 16-24.

3.1.a *Impact of Hertogh Riots on Secularity Outlook of Malay/Muslims*³³¹

Historical accounts on the Hertogh incident argue that the Malay/Muslims' reactions to the custody case revealed the centrality of Islam in their identity.³³² A Muslim community leader wrote to the *Straits Times* expressing his support for Aminah, stating that "according to Muslim law", Maria was raised as a Muslim and was, therefore, a Muslim. Therefore, "her marriage [was] legal according to Muslim law".³³³ Khairudin suggests that the Malay/Muslims then felt that the British court and local media had denigrated Islam, hence leading them to react in defence of their faith.³³⁴ Malay/Muslims likely viewed the civil court's annulment of Maria and Mansoor's marriage as an affront to Muslim law. Recalling our discussion of the Malay/Muslim identity in Chapter 2, the Malays saw Maria as a member of their habitus because she adopted the religion, culture, language, way of life and descent (by way of adoption by Aminah).

This thesis argues that the difference in Malay/Muslim responses to the civil court's decisions on Islamic law between the colonial and self-governing periods could possibly be due to heightened Islamic awareness, and the emergence of a Malay/Muslim political consciousness. Ansari Marican suggests that one of the reasons leading to the increase in tensions between Muslims and Christians was

³³¹ From this section onwards, I use "Malay/Muslim" to refer to Malay Muslims. It can be argued that the Hertogh riots was a turning point that rallied the Malays to identify themselves as a group based on shared language, interests, religion, and customs. As discussed in Chapter 2, we see the emergence of a Malay/Muslim political consciousness in the 1930s, where there was a sense of "us" versus "others" in the Malay/Muslim definition of their identity.

³³² Judith Djamour, *Malay Kinship and Marriage in Singapore* (London: The Athlone Press, 1959), 16.

³³³ S.I.O Alsagoff, "Maria Hertogh's Marriage: A Muslim View," *The Straits Times*, August 10, 1950; Djamour, *Malay Kinship and Marriage in Singapore*, 16. Djamour notes that Muslims in Singapore were only mildly following their religious observances in 1949 and 1950. They adhered to religious practices like abstinence from pork, circumcision, Quranic recitation and followed the Syariah law in marriages and divorces. However, many Malays also drank alcohol, and few comprehended the Quran, which was in the Arabic language. Attendance at mosques for Friday prayers was also low. Djamour assesses that knowledge on "the most elementary principles and beliefs of Islam was very low".

³³⁴ Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied, "British Discourses and Malay Identity in Colonial Singapore," *Indonesia and the Malay World* 37, no. 107 (March 1, 2009): 1–21.

increased Islamic consciousness among Muslims, which consequently increased their sensitivities towards perceived threats or challenges to Islam. The Hertogh incident built upon rising Christian-Muslim tensions over the Christian missionaries' alleged attempts to entice Muslims to convert by offering them financial benefits.³³⁵

For several reasons, the Hertogh incident was significant in its production of secularity principles and structures. Firstly, the custody case highlighted that legal pluralism as an overarching habitus structure was not as viable as before, as multiple religious and racial groups began to interact, and only vertical state-religion relations existed then. Laws clearly could not be interpreted according to one's customs and traditions in cases involving two parties of different religious or racial backgrounds. Legal pluralism no longer served as a mechanism to minimise conflicts in society.

Secondly, the Hertogh incident was significant because it was the first of several state-Muslim disagreements during Singapore's self-governance. This thesis's investigation of newspaper archives revealed that the custody case coincided with several other incidents whereby the state and Muslims did not agree on state policies that might indirectly affect the Muslims. In 1950, the Legislative Council proposed to introduce the Age of Marriage Ordinance. The Ordinance, which proposed to ban marriages of children under the age of 16, was met with objection from several Muslim leaders.³³⁶ Some Muslim leaders objected to the Ordinance as they felt it was contrary to Islam. The All-Malaya Muslim Missionary Society also stated that they would not tolerate interference in Muslim laws.³³⁷

³³⁵ Ansari Marican, *The Maria Hertogh (Nadra) Riots*, 13-14.

³³⁶ "Bill to Ban Child Marriage Gazetted," *The Straits Times*, September 2, 1950. The Bill closely resembles the British Age of Marriage Act introduced in 1929.

³³⁷ "Interference Will Not Be Tolerated," *The Straits Times*, September 10, 1950; "Bill On Marriage Against Islam," *The Straits Times*, August 31, 1950.

In 1952, state schemes to introduce the Reorientation Plan were met with objections from the Malay community and were later abandoned. The plan involved teaching the English language, and other skillsets, in Malay schools to help Malays adapt to the changes in the post-war years.³³⁸ Some Malay elites objected, as they felt that the plan was part of a British plot to weaken the Malay community's affinity to Islam and the *adat*. Fifty-two local Malay/Muslim organisations established the Majlis Pelajaran Melayu (Malay Education Council), and they signed a petition expressing their objection to the plan.³³⁹ Like the Hertogh case, which challenged the minimum age of marriage for Muslims, the Age of Marriage Ordinance sought to reform the age of marriage. These incidents contributed to growing tensions between Malay/Muslims and the state. The Malay/Muslims likely felt that the state was asserting its power in the state's attempts to define religious and cultural aspects of their habitus – language and religious practices. Such conflicts could be seen as struggles to the state's attempt to assert control and the Malay/Muslim habitus' refusal to be subordinated to the state's authority.

Subsequent discourses showed that the Hertogh incident became an event within the habitus that reinforced Malay unhappiness towards what they perceived as governmental interference in Islamic law. For instance, in relation to the proposed Muslim Bill in 1957, a Muslim individual told the Select Committee that the Hertogh incident was an example showing that Muslim marriage and divorce law was “not recognised by Christians” and that “the Muslim pen [was] controlled by the Christians”. He was also critical of what he perceived as interference from the “Christian court”,

³³⁸ Aljunied, “British Discourses and Malay Identity in Colonial Singapore,” 13–14.

³³⁹ Gillis, *Singapore Civil Society and British Power*, 166–68; Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied, “The Aftermath of the Maria Hertogh Riots in Colonial Singapore (1950-1953)” (Unpublished PhD Thesis, School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, 2008), 261–62.

which wanted to assert control over Islamic laws and practices through legislation.³⁴⁰ At this juncture, there was some form of power resistance to the civil court's authority over Malay/Muslim marriages; the Malay/Muslim we-group regarded the civil court, an institution under the national habitus, as Western and Christian.

On the surface, Malay resistance to government interference in religion appeared to be a new development that only surfaced after the Hertogh riots; there was seemingly no resistance to increased British interference in Syariah rulings. However, this thesis's study of earlier discourse showed that religion had generally been a tricky issue in state-Muslim interactions. A Muslim reader wrote to the *Straits Times* in 1911, stating that "[t]he Mohamedans ha[d] a great dislike to outside interference with their religious affairs". While the Muslims had permitted the British to enact legislation, "touch their religion and you tamper with their most sensitive feeling".³⁴¹ The earlier exclusion of Malay mosques from the state administration could possibly have stemmed from the state's recognition that religious matters were likely to be an area of contention in state-religion relations. A potential trigger of resistance to the state habitus was the perceived government interference in Malay/Muslim affairs.

Further, our earlier discussion has shown that the Malays had generally been hostile to Christian conversion attempts. The media reporting on Maria's likely conversion to Catholicism had possibly antagonised Malay/Muslims because of the latter's past experiences with Christianity. Thus, Christian-Muslim tensions and the Malay/Muslim distrust of government interference in their religious affairs could be seen as secularity dispositions in the national habitus produced from past and current

³⁴⁰ Select Committee on Muslim Bill (1957), Paper S.C. (Muslims Bill) No. 8,16.

³⁴¹ A Mohamedan, "The Sultan Mosque.," *The Straits Times*, December 2, 1911.

experiences of state-Malay and Christian-Malay interactions. Further, similar responses – to perceived state interference in religious affairs, and to Christian conversion from Islam – showed that Malay/Muslim reactions could be construed as instinctual responses of their *we-habitus* cultivated by past state-religion interactions.

3.1.b Implications on State's Management of Religion

For the state institutions, the outbreak of riots demonstrated the sensitivity of discussing religious issues in the public sphere. Ansari highlights several issues that were learning points for the political elites. Firstly, he notes that sensitive issues with racial or religious overtones should not have been discussed in the public space, either through open court hearings or through extensive media coverage. Ansari suggests that the custody case took on religious overtones because of media portrayals of the case. The media reported that the Muslim organisation Jamiyah had established a Legal Defence Fund to support Aminah's custody battle. In addition, the Malay media featured representatives from several Muslim organisations visiting Aminah to express their support, "transforming a private custody case into one involving two proud religious communities (Muslims and Christians), and setting the stage for a possible confrontation in the future".³⁴² Ansari also notes that an open court was not the "best" way to resolve custody disputes; particularly the Hertogh incident, which carried religious implications. This was because the media's handling of a case involving two different religions might incite inter-religious tensions, whether intentionally or otherwise.

Secondly, Ansari highlights the need for "discreet management" on the part of community groups to prevent private disputes from morphing into a national communal

³⁴² Marican, *The Maria Hertogh (Nadra) Riots*, 19-21.

matter that would result in open group conflicts.³⁴³ These learning points became secularity principles, which the Government organised into structures to prevent future challenges similar to the Hertogh incident. The state disciplined the media through the use of press restrictions, particularly in terms of their future coverage of religious issues. Shortly after the riots, Legislative Councillor C. C. Tan reprimanded the press for “behaving in the most irresponsible manner and with utter disregard of the hatred and passions” that they had helped “inflame” during the riots.³⁴⁴ The newspaper had published an editorial entitled “Attempt to Christianise Nadra”. The article alleged that Maria was subtly compelled to study Christianity and partake in Christian prayers. It also alleged that Maria was forced to eat *haram* (non-permissible by Islam) food.³⁴⁵ The newspaper also portrayed the custody case as a conflict between Christianity and Islam.³⁴⁶ In January 1951, the Government withdrew the printing permit of the Malay newspaper *Melayu Raya*.³⁴⁷ Further, the 1951 Emergency (Newspaper) Regulations were introduced; all newspapers were required to obtain a permit to print and publish from the Colonial Secretary, who had the right to revoke the permit at any time and whose revocation could not be challenged in court.³⁴⁸ The legislative restrictions on the press were state-instituted structures incorporated into Singapore’s habitus to discipline the population to minimise “sensitive” religious discourses in the public sphere. The Hertogh riot and press restrictions served as external constraints to discipline the press and groups in society. Over time, the public/ private dichotomy for religious expression became “second nature”, and it became the norm for the media

³⁴³ Marican, *The Maria Hertogh (Nadra) Riots*, 245.

³⁴⁴ Marican, *The Maria Hertogh (Nadra) Riots*, 204.

³⁴⁵ Marican, *The Maria Hertogh (Nadra) Riots*, 82.

³⁴⁶ Nordin Hussin, “Malay Press and Malay Politics: The Hertogh Riots in Singapore,” *Asia Europe Journal* 3, no. 4 (December 1, 2005): 569–72.

³⁴⁷ Marican, *The Maria Hertogh (Nadra) Riots*, 208.

³⁴⁸ Marican, *The Maria Hertogh (Nadra) Riots*, 208.

to refrain from inflammatory reporting of religious issues; this will be discussed again in the later chapters.

Thirdly, the Hertogh incident reinforced the close correlation between racial and religious identification. Notably, Norman Vasu and Juhi Ahuja assess that the riots “entered [into] the Singapore state’s understanding of inter-racial relations [that] race can be contributory tinder for public disorder”.³⁴⁹ The conflation of racial and religious identities in Singapore affects how religion is construed in society and is significant because academics generally differentiate between racial and religious identities.

Fourthly, the Hertogh incident was one of the factors leading to the creation of a strict jurisdictional divide between the Syariah Court and the Civil Court in independent Singapore. One of the reasons why the custody case aroused controversy was legal pluralism, and the conflict between civil and Islamic law. Christian or civil marriages in Singapore required the written permission of the legal guardian if the female was below the age of 21. Under Christian or civil law, Maria would not have been allowed to marry. However, Singapore *kadi* Ahmad bin Abdul Halim said Maria’s marriage was legal under Syariah law as she was more than 14 years old at the point of marriage; at the point of Maria’s marriage to Mansoor, she was 14 years, five months, and nine days old. Ahmad had also considered Maria to be a “natural-born Muslim” rather than a convert, as she had converted before the age of seven.³⁵⁰ In *Re Maria Hertogh*, it was subsequently ruled that since Maria was a Muslim and the civil court had no power to void the marriage, since it was a marriage between two Muslim parties, celebrated in accordance with the Muslim Law.³⁵¹ The Hertogh case was probably the first documented case involving disputes over the

³⁴⁹ Vasu and Ahuja, *Singapore Chronicles: Multiracialism*, 31.

³⁵⁰ “Maria’s Marriage Sets a Problem,” *The Straits Times*, August 4, 1950.

³⁵¹ Ahmad bin Mohd Ibrahim, *The Legal Status of the Muslims in Singapore*, 1965, 16.

validity of marriage laws for individuals of contested religious backgrounds. Hence, there was no precedent to indicate which law should apply to inter-religious marriages.

After Singapore's independence in 1965, the Supreme Court of Judicature Act Section 17(A) was introduced to address the possibility of a conflict between the High Court and the Syariah Court. Revisionary jurisdiction over the Syariah Court could only be exercised by the President of Singapore, and by the Appeal Board, led by the President of MUIS. The Act stipulated that MUIS could recommend reversal or modification of the Syariah Court's decision; the President of Singapore could then give effect to the recommendation, by means of an order.³⁵² The Hertogh incident thus imposed upon the state the importance of establishing structures to discipline society and minimise conflicts between *we-habitus*.

Finally, the Hertogh incident was significant because it continues to be invoked by political and religious elites, especially in instances where they are reinforcing the necessity of various safeguards to protect social and religious harmony. This shows that the incident continued to structure and restructure dispositions and practices in the national *habitus*. This thesis will revisit, in later chapters, how the Hertogh riots have shaped, and continue to shape the national *habitus*.

3.2 Discussion of Secularity in the Legislative Assembly

A few years after the Hertogh riots, Singapore adopted the Rendel Constitution. The Constitution, negotiated between the British and Singaporeans in 1953 and 1954, brought about an interim phase towards self-governance in Singapore. It provided for a 32-member Legislative Assembly, which included 25 elected officials. Under the Constitution, Singapore would gain authority over all matters except for foreign affairs,

³⁵² Thio, "Law and Administrative State," 279.

internal security, and defence.³⁵³ The first election was held in April 1955, and a left-wing minority government was established. In 1958, the British passed the State of Singapore Act, which facilitated the conversion of Singapore from a colony into a state, with authority over all internal matters. The Legislative Assembly also expanded to 51 members, all of whom were to be elected by Singaporeans.³⁵⁴

Notably, the 1958 Constitution entrenched several secularism principles from the colonial habitus. It went beyond the 1819 treaty's special recognition of Malay laws and customs to define the scope of this special recognition. The constitution agreement, issued in London, stated that:

[i]n particular, it shall be the deliberate and conscious policy of the Government of Singapore at all times to recognise the special position of the Malays, who are the indigenous people of the island and are in the most need of assistance, and accordingly, it shall be the responsibility of the Government of Singapore to protect, safeguard, support, foster and promote their political, educational, religious, economic, social and cultural interests and the Malay language.³⁵⁵

In stating the areas in which Malay interests needed to be protected, supported, and nurtured, the Rendel Constitution also contributed to Malay expectations that the Government would fulfil its obligations. The special status of Malays in the Constitution thus became a part of the colonial legacy that was enshrined in the national habitus. The differentiated positions between Malays vis-à-vis other religious and racial groups created differing power positions between these groups in the habitus. Later discussions will show how the Malay community and the Government had different expectations of what the special position of the Malays translated to, in terms of institutional structures and government policies. In addition, the Constitution

³⁵³ Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore 1819-2005*, 2020, 386–87.

³⁵⁴ Turnbull, 423.

³⁵⁵ "Special Position" of Malays: Lively Debate?, *Singapore Free Press*, July 13, 1959.

also stated that “it shall be the responsibility of the Government of Singapore constantly to care for the interests of racial and religious minorities in Singapore”.³⁵⁶

This section of the thesis will investigate, through examining discussions in the Legislative Assembly, how the status of religions, vis-à-vis the state, evolved from the 1950s to 1965. This section will also discuss religion-related legislation introduced during this period. This thesis’s examination, of the secularity structures from the colonial period which were kept or abolished, and of new structures that were introduced, will provide insights into the shape of the secularity in the developing national habitus.

3.2.a Family Planning, Religious Education in Schools, and the Question of Religion

Discussion of the nature of Singapore’s secularity could be found in a considerable number of Legislative Assembly debates. These debates were the earliest discussions, among the local political elites, on the role of religion in Singapore society, as these elites comprised the first few batches of locally elected officials. The debates were significant, as they marked the earliest occasions where Singaporeans had the autonomy to discuss and collectively decide on governance principles and structures for the state and society and what constituted the national habitus.

In a discussion on government funding for the Family Planning Association, differing opinions emerged on whether religious stances should be given consideration in public policy matters. On the one hand, some Assembly members argued against public funding of family planning because it was not aligned with their religious values. Goh Tong Liang, a Catholic, said that family planning and birth control were “highly controversial” and the Government should not allocate funding to the Family Planning Association as it was “wrong of the Government to do such a thing”. Goh also said

³⁵⁶ “Special Position” of Malays: Lively Debate?.”

that such a policy would be contrary to the people's wishes, especially those of the Muslims and Catholics. Lim Cher Kheng supported Goh because he wanted to "maintain the oriental tradition". Similarly, Jumabhoy was against the proposed funding for family planning. He believed that Singapore was not a secular state, but a religious one, on the basis of its multi-religious nature, and that religion and politics were "inseparable". This group of politicians brought their religious reasoning into the public sphere without translating the reasoning into secular voices, as Habermas had suggested. They tried to impose moralistic notions of right and wrong from their respective habitus (Catholic, Chinese, and Muslim) on the national habitus. We see a power struggle among these habitus to impose their notions of secularity, politics and religion over society.

On the other hand, other Assemblymen argued that religious views should not influence public policies. Chief Minister David Marshall, in response to Goh, said he was "more than a little distressed" that the "question of religion and religious beliefs" would affect the public policy decision of a multi-religious and multiracial Legislative Assembly. He was also critical of Goh's query as he said it introduced "religious intolerance and religious domination". By Goh's logic, the Government would have to cease assistance to pig farmers and veterinarians looking after dogs and ban pigs and dogs on the island "in order to support the theory that public money should not be spent in respect of an item which offends a section of the community". Marshall stressed that his Ministers, some of whom were Catholics, had recognised that "there can be no question of any single religion seeking to dominate the country with its own particular ideology". He also stressed that there should be no mention of "religious aspect[s]" in legislative debates and advised members of the Assembly to "bear in mind the question of religious tolerance to their fellow human beings".

Other Assemblymen voiced their support for Marshall's warning that religious justification should not be invoked in legislative debates. Lee, an Assemblyman at the time, said the "fundamental question" was whether Singapore was "a religious state or a secular state", because this would affect the nature of the debate. He said Singapore was "a multi-religious society, a secular state in which all traditional religions, beliefs, and philosophies are allowed to go their own way and co-exist". Singapore should "start with the assumption that we wish to find a secular state" because this solution was the "only way" for Singapore to leave Malaya and gain independence. He also said that even though the Catholics were opposed to divorce, they did not express any opposition to divorce laws.³⁵⁷ Politicians like Lee and Marshall believed that religious justification should not be considered for secular policies that affected society as a whole, simply because Singapore was a multi-religious country. In the case of the state accommodating a single religious group, it might have to consider other religious demands on the same grounds, giving rise to scenarios where religious justifications could affect decisions behind public policies. Lee and Marshall were thus proposing a strategy for multiculturalism that was different from the colonial habitus.

On an earlier occasion, the Legislative Assembly had also debated what secularity entailed regarding state funding for religious schools and organisations. Assemblyman Yong Nyuk Lin said that the government should discourage religious education in secular schools, though religious education was allowed in the Malay school curriculum due to the special constitutional position of Malays. Jumabhoy was critical of government funding to the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) when

³⁵⁷ Singapore Legislative Assembly, "Budget, Contributions and Charitable Allowances," Parliament No. 0, Session No. 1, Vol No. 1, Sitting No. 20 (November 22, 1955).

the colony had no official religion. He also asked why the Government did not allocate similar grants to other religious missions. Marshall later clarified that the YMCA was seen as a social welfare organisation as it assisted people of all races and religions, so it was eligible for government grants.³⁵⁸ While the budgets on family planning and religious schools and organisations were eventually approved, the debate on Singapore's secularity continued.

This thesis suggests that the underlying issue in these debates on funding and religion lay in conflicting notions of secularity. We see competing actors in power negotiations to impose their notions of the place of religion vis-à-vis politics and the shape of secularity in the national habitus. On the one hand, some politicians like Goh and Jumabhoy said that they were entitled to express their religious beliefs and rationales in political debates, and that the state should respect their religious beliefs in the public sphere. On the other hand, politicians like Marshall and Lee asserted that Singapore was a secular state with a separation of religion and politics. Their version of secularity involved a large amount of religious tolerance and no domination of one particular religious view over policy matters that affected the entire population. There was no consensus among the political elites, at this juncture, on the shape of Singapore's secularity.

3.2.b Proposed Hindu Marriages Legislation

The Hindus lobbied for the legislation of Hindu marriages, on the basis that the civil court had made allowances for Islamic, Christian, and civil marriages in the colonial period, and so, the Hindus should enjoy similar concessions. The idea was first mooted in the early 1950s by the Hindu Advisory Board.³⁵⁹ M. P. D. Nair, a Hindu

³⁵⁸ Singapore Legislative Assembly, "Budget, Contributions and Charitable Allowances," (November 22, 1956).

³⁵⁹ "Move To Legalise Hindu Marriages," *The Straits Times*, January 24, 1950; "New Marriage Law for Hindus Used," *The Straits Times*, October 14, 1952.

Assemblyman, re-mooted the idea a few years later. He proposed an Ordinance that would mandate the compulsory registration of Hindu marriages in Singapore, and “other matters connected therewith in accordance with the Hindu religion, customs and manners acceptable to all Hindus”. Nair said that he had received petitions from Hindu organisations, Hindu Sabhai, Dravagalagam, and the Malayan Tamil Association (as well as from Hindu individuals) to re-introduce the Hindu Monogamous Marriage Bill, which had earlier been shelved. During the discussions, Nair said that the Hindu community would prefer separate legislation, parallel to the Muslim Marriage Ordinance and the Christian Marriage Ordinance, to validate marriages between Hindus. Nair hoped the government would be the arbiter of the complex disagreements that could arise over Hindu marriages, because of the different interpretations of polygamy within the Hindu community. There was no overarching Hindu habitus, and some Hindus were prepared to cede their religious authority to the state to determine the interpretation of Hindu marriages.

However, other political elites opposed the proposed legislation and questioned whether the state should intervene in religious practices. Chief Secretary Goode objected to the proposed piece of legislation, on the basis that such legislation would not receive assent from the majority of the Hindu community because monogamy was not accepted by all Hindus. Goode highlighted that the proposed draft legislation had been shelved previously, in part due to the “great public controversy” it had provoked among Hindus. The Assembly eventually decided that the proposed legislation would arouse “religious controversy” and that it was not the place of the state to decide the “right” religious practice for the Hindus.³⁶⁰ A spokesman also said that the

³⁶⁰ Singapore Legislative Assembly, “Hindu Marriages Legislation,” Parliament No. 0; Session No. 1, Vol No. 1, Sitting No. 27 (March 7, 1956); Singapore Legislative Assembly, “Registration of Hindu Marriages (Introduction of Legislation),” Parliament No. 0, Session 3, Vol No. 6, Sitting No.5 (June 11,

Government was not in favour of the legislation as it did not receive “overwhelming support” among those who would be subjected to it.³⁶¹ Thus, one of the reasons the political elites were unwilling to introduce a Hindu Ordinance was that the legislation did not receive majority consensus from the Hindus. Another reason was that the political elites decided that it was not the place of the state to legitimise religious practices, or to arbitrate over theological differences. However, this second reason was ironic; the state had, after all, codified Syariah law to settle differences in the Muslim community over the religious interpretation of Muslim marriages.

Indeed, Nair’s rationale for legislation on Hindu marriages was similar to that of the Arab Muslims who asked the British to introduce the Mahomedan Marriage Ordinance, for a uniform interpretation of marriage laws across *mazhab*. The British had introduced the Ordinance despite knowing that there were different *mazhabs* governing the interpretation of Islamic law. According to Goode’s reasoning, the state should not have legislated on Muslim marriages if it was not the state’s place to determine the “right” religious practices.

Another possible reason behind the rejection of the Hindu Ordinance was that the state and society were still undecided on the governance alternatives for balancing the demands of a multi-religious and multiracial society. Conceding to Hindu demands, at a juncture when the government and society were still deciding on the shape of Singapore’s secularity, might make legal pluralism a principle of the shared habitus. Other religious groups might make similar demands, and giving in to their demands for specific religious laws would reinforce parallel legal structures catering to different religious groups.

1958). The legislation was not introduced eventually because they considered it necessary to keep in line with the Federal Government of Malaysia, which had only recently appointed a committee to examine the necessity of such a legislation.

³⁶¹ “Marriage Bill Delay Irks Hindus,” *The Singapore Free Press*, April 29, 1959.

Notably, Lee raised the dilemma of enacting separate legislation for different religious traditions, and he anticipated potential problems if the Taoists, Buddhists, and Confucians started making similar demands. He said Singapore would become the “most wonderful crystallisation and mummification of all the various cultures, customs and prejudices of the peoples that ever settle here”. He added that the government must decide if “special legislation for each religion is the answer, or whether omnibus legislation covering all religions, except the Muslim religion which is almost an established church in the Federation” might be a better solution.³⁶² Lee laid out two governance alternatives that Singapore could adopt; Singapore could either give in to all religious demands for separate legislation, or introduce uniform legislation for all religious groups except Muslims. At this juncture, the political elites decided that giving in to specific religious demands was not a tenable aspect of Singapore’s secularity. We also see Lee’s subtle criticism of the colonial habitus, something that Bucholtz notes postcolonial elites do to decolonise the habitus.

The Government’s rejection of proposed legislation to regulate Hindu marriages revealed several considerations of secularity. Government interference in religious affairs was conditional upon the preservation of social harmony. Goode rejected the proposed Hindu legislation as it might incur more discontentment from the Hindus. Another notable observation was the differing expectations of secularity among the political and religious elites. The different we-groups were involved in a power struggle to impose their versions of secularity on the national habitus. Nair, and the religious elites he represented, probably saw legal pluralism as a governance approach to multi-religiosity. This perspective could be seen as a response from the colonial habitus, in which they had been conditioned to recognise and accept that religious laws were

³⁶² Singapore Legislative Assembly, “Hindu Marriages Legislation.”

recognised in civil courts. Other political elites and the Government appeared to be inclined towards a decolonised habitus with secular governance and uniform legislation across all racial and religious groups except for the Muslims. On the surface, the discussion was about the legislation of Hindu marriages. However, the debate was really about which secularity structures and principles to maintain in Singapore. The rejection of the Hindu request was significant in the habitus' decolonising process in its rejection of pluralistic legal structures.

3.2.c *The Muslim Ordinance 1957 and the Establishment of a Syariah Court*

While the state shelved the debate on Hindu marriages, it continued to amend legislation affecting Muslims. In 1951, with the support of several Muslim organisations (such as the Young Women's Muslim Association), the Muslim Advisory Board proposed the establishment of *kadi's* courts to address the "unsatisfactory state of affairs" of Muslim marriages and divorces. The proposed legislation also sought to address the conflict in jurisdiction between the *kadis* and the Registrar of Muslim Marriages. Any of the 12 *kadis* appointed by the state had the authority to register a marriage or divorce, for any Muslim who had been residing in Singapore for more than four months.³⁶³ However, appeals against the *kadi's* decisions were lodged with the Registrar of Muslim Marriages, who was a senior government official, a non-Muslim at that time, with no authority on Muslim law and custom, and merely a record-keeper of marriages and divorces. The Bill was first read in Parliament in November 1955.³⁶⁴ A Select Committee was established to examine the proposal as some Muslims objected to the proposed legislation. The Muslim Ordinance was passed in 1957, establishing

³⁶³ Muslim Correspondent, "Mohamedan Marriages," *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser (Weekly)*, January 23, 1929.

³⁶⁴ Muslim Correspondent, "Malay Mass Marriages: A Muslim View," *The Straits Times*, June 25, 1948; Singapore Legislative Assembly, "Muslims Bill," Parliament No. 0, Session No. 1, Vol No. 1, Sitting No. 24 (February 2, 1956).

a syariah Court that was given jurisdiction to deal with cases in which the parties were both Muslims, and which involved disputes relating to marriage and divorce.

This thesis suggests that the ensuing discussions within the Legislative Assembly and the Select Committee were significant for several reasons. Firstly, the discussions involved shaping secularity principles in the national habitus as the politicians debated on the state's role in enacting legislation to govern religious practices, and on the form of secularity Singapore would adopt. The discussions revealed that the political elites were still divided on the societal and political significance of religion at this juncture.

Several politicians asserted that Singapore was already a secular state, and asked if a secular state had the right to enforce religious beliefs. Malay Assemblyman Abdul Hamid bin Haji Jumat asked if a secular state had the authority to enact Islamic laws to govern Muslims in their way of life.³⁶⁵ Abdul Hamid also asked if the state would next pass legislation to compel Muslims to observe fasting during Ramadan (fasting month).³⁶⁶ Further, Goode questioned if it was "right" for the state to compel faith believers to follow religious precepts, as Singapore was not a Muslim state and its law allowed for the freedom of religion.³⁶⁷ Marshall also said that in considering the Ordinance, the state had moved, from its commitment to respecting customs and traditions of religious beliefs, to "the principle of policing the enforcement of a religious belief". Marshall warned that this was a "very grave departure", as the proposed religious laws might not be "appropriate" in the social and economic circumstances of the time.³⁶⁸ The main contention among some political elites was over whether

³⁶⁵ Singapore Legislative Assembly, "Administration of Muslim Law Bill," Parliament No. 0, Session No. 2, Vol No. 14, Sitting No. 11 (December 29, 1960).

³⁶⁶ Singapore Legislative Assembly, "Select Committee on Muslims Bill (Consideration of Amendments)" Parliament No. 0, Session No. 2, Vol. No. 2, Sitting No. 7 (November 5, 1956).

³⁶⁷ Singapore Legislative Assembly.

³⁶⁸ Singapore Legislative Assembly.

secularity as a governance principle allowed for state intervention in religious laws and practices. The other concern was that the state, as the object defining and legislating rules and structures for the Muslims, would become the dominant power in the Muslim habitus.

Other citizens who objected to the Muslim Ordinance voiced similar concerns. A group of Muslim businessmen signed a representation made to the Legislative Assembly by N. Mallal which objected to the legislation on the grounds that there should be “no compulsion in religion”. Mallal objected to the Ordinance because it forced all Muslims to follow Islamic laws according to a specific tradition. Since Islamic law mandated that all properties and businesses had to cease and be distributed accordingly to the next of kin, their descendants would not be fully entitled to the businesses they had developed. Thus, some local Muslims had made wills to circumvent the “harshness” of Islamic succession and inheritance laws.³⁶⁹

Similarly, Atkinson, the local Bar Committee’s representative, objected to the Ordinance on the basis that the Assembly “should allow the members of every religious community to do what they freely and voluntarily want to do about their religion, but not force them to do what they do not want to do”. The Singapore Government, as a “secular government” and “legislators for the civil law”, should avoid interfering with religious laws and practices. Atkinson also warned that the Ordinance was the start of a “slippery slope of trying to enforce these matters by legislation”. By the government’s logic, it had to be prepared to imprison a Muslim for eating pork, or a Catholic for not attending mass.³⁷⁰ Atkinson defined his vision of a secular state –

³⁶⁹ “Report from the Select Committee on the Muslims Bill,” Sessional Paper (Singapore Legislative Assembly, March 5, 1957), 9–12. The group of Muslim businessmen later withdrew their signatures as they agreed to the legislation of Islamic inheritance and said they had unknowingly signed the letter without knowing its contents.

³⁷⁰ “Report from the Select Committee on the Muslims Bill,” Appendix IV: Minutes of Evidence, January 14, 1957, 38, 41–44.

a government that dealt with non-religious and civil matters and steered clear of religious issues. Both Mallal and Atkinson argued that a secular state should not compel its citizens to follow religious laws. The Ordinance contradicted the freedom of religious beliefs in Singapore laid out in the Constitution. In addition, it might further hinder freedom of individual choice to practise or not practise certain religious beliefs, as the Ordinance might open the door for future legislation on other Islamic practices.

Separately, political elites like Lee agreed to the Muslim Ordinance not because they agreed that the secular state had the right to interfere in religious matters, but because most Muslim representations appeared to favour the Ordinance.³⁷¹ The Hindu request was denied by the Government because there was no consensus in the Hindu community. The mechanisms of a habitus cannot function without tacit approval from the subjects. Without reciprocal relations, the subject's normalising strategies might be met with resistance from subjects in the habitus, giving rise to drag effects that might destabilise the habitus. The Muslim Ordinance came into force because there was not much controversy surrounding it. Most Muslims agreed with the legislation, unlike the proposed Hindu Marriages legislation. Nonetheless, most political elites agreed that the secular state did not have the right to legislate on religious practices and observances.

Secondly, the state unintentionally shaped religious positions and practices in determining what made a "good" or "bad" believer. The Ordinance shaped and entrenched Islamic religious positions in the Malay habitus. Noor Aisha Abdul Rahman is critical that the Ordinance failed to consider citizens' rights and choices in family law. Another consequence was that the law on inheritance remained "fixed and

³⁷¹ Singapore Legislative Assembly, "Muslims Bill (Report from Select Committee)," Parliament No. 0, Session No. 2, Vol. No. 3, Sitting No. 7 (April 26, 1957).

binding on all Muslims, whatever the repercussions".³⁷² The unintentional consequence of the legislation, in delineating "right" and "wrong" religious beliefs and practices, was probably why Mallal and Goode had objected to the Ordinance. The Ordinance was a marked change from the rules on Islamic marriages during colonial rule, where the jurisdiction of the *kadi* was voluntarily recognised and not imposed on Muslims. As all Muslims in Singapore were subjected to the Ordinance, which covered marriage, divorce, and inheritance matters, Muslims were compelled to marry under the Ordinance, or face complications in related issues of divorce or inheritance.

The Ordinance became a disciplinary structure that enforced compliance to religious practices, creating a policing effect over all Muslims, an outcome which Marshall had initially cautioned against during discussions. The institution of laws that apply only to a particular we-group is problematic because it automatically creates conflicts when this we-group interacts with other we-groups. For instance, the non-Muslim partners of Muslims would have to convert to Islam before marriage or face legal complications on inheritance and divorce matters if they married under the civil law. This was because Shafi'i law, which most local Malay Muslims followed, did not allow non-Muslims to inherit property from deceased Muslims.³⁷³ The special position of Islam thus allowed the secular state a stake in shaping Islamic positions and practices in Singapore. State institutions also became unintentional disciplinary structures obliging Muslims to follow religious practices in various aspects of their lives, thus dictating how Muslims think or act. The Ordinance was an external constraint that would later become part of a "norm" internalised in the local Muslim habitus over time.

³⁷² Noor Aisha Abdul Rahman, "Muslim Personal Law and Citizens' Rights: The Case of Singapore," *Asian Journal of Comparative Law* 7 (2012): 14.

³⁷³ "Report from the Select Committee on the Muslims Bill," Sessional Paper (Legislative Assembly Singapore, March 5, 1957), Appendix IV: Minutes of Evidence, 53.

It was also significant that most of the proposed books that could be used in the Syariah Court for succession and inheritance cases were published by British Indians or civil servants from British India; except for an English translation of *Minhaj Et Talibin*, which was written by Shafi'i thinker Abu Zakaria Yahya Ibn Sharaf An Nawawi. This meant that most of the precedent texts were legal codes interpreted by the British, and were more representative of Anglo-Muhammadan law than Islamic law. The five other legal texts dealt with Islamic law applied by courts in British India, and at least two of the legal texts focused on interpretations from the Hanafi *mazhab*.³⁷⁴ The inclusion of these books reveals the influence of colonial rule in shaping Islamic religious positions in postcolonial societies, particularly in family law, in present-day Singapore.

The Ordinance could be seen as a restructuring of embodied experiences, dispositions and structures from the colonial habitus into the Singapore habitus. The Ordinance was a decision agreed between individuals and political and religious elites to achieve harmony between the Islamic habitus and the shared habitus. Further, the state's acceptance of the Muslim Ordinance, and its rejection of the Hindu request, showed that consensus was an important element in aligning expectations of the shared habitus and the religious habitus. The lack of agreement within any given habitus might result in disharmony and give rise to the drag effect.

³⁷⁴ Neil B. E. Baillie, *Digest of Moohummudan Law* (London: Smith Elder, 1865), vii, <http://indianculture.gov.in/rarebooks/digest-moohummudan-law-subject-which-it-usually-applied-british-courts-justice-india>; Mohd. A. Ashraf, "Review of *Outlines of Muhammadan Law*," by Asaf A.A. Fyzee and Tahir Mahmood, *Journal of the Indian Law Institute* 51, no. 3 (2009): 405–8; "Report from the Select Committee on the Muslims Bill," 37–38. The other five texts are *Mohammedan Law* by Syed Ameer Ali; *Digest of Moohummudan law* by Neil B.E. Baillie; *Anglo-Muhammadan Law* by Sir Roland Knyvet Wilson; *Outlines of Muhammadan Law* by A.A. Fyzee; and *Muhammadan Law* by F.B. Tyabji. Baillie and Fyzee's books were focused on Hanafi doctrines usually applied by British Courts in India.

3.2.d Proposed Muslim Marriage (Amendment) Bill

In 1960, the Muslim Marriage (Amendment) Bill was proposed in the Legislative Assembly. The Bill proposed the establishment of a Council of Religion (Majlis Ugama Islam) with statutory powers to function as the sole authority on Islamic law in Singapore. Under the legislation, Muslims would be legally compelled to pay *zakat* and *fitrah* to the Majlis.³⁷⁵ The Bill would also allow for the appointment of a Mufti, strengthen powers of the Syariah Court, and establish institutions to administer mosques, *kadis* and *wakaf*.³⁷⁶ The proposed Bill was first sent to the Select Committee in 1960, and was subsequently re-introduced to Parliament in 1966, after Singapore's independence.

The first Select Committee on the Bill declined to provide any recommendation as it received only eight written representations from interested individuals and organisations. Some individuals formed a Protest Committee as they saw the Government's legislation on Islamic laws as an infringement of their freedom of religion; particularly when the state, as a non-religious actor with no religious legitimacy, sought to implement Islamic laws. This concern was similarly raised by some Assemblymen during the discussion on the Muslim Ordinance in 1957. The Protest Committee said that "it [wa]s out of place for the Government to bring about this Bill" as there was freedom of religion in Singapore and Islam was not the state's official religion.³⁷⁷ The Committee's sentiments were shared by Abdul Hamid, who asked if a "non-secular state like Singapore" had the right to enact Islamic laws and

³⁷⁵ "Muslim Law," *The Straits Times*, December 8, 1960. *Zakat*, the third pillar of Islam, is an Islamic obligation which mandates that a Muslim has to donate a certain proportion of his or her wealth each year to charitable causes. *Zakat Fitrah* is an obligatory contribution which all Muslims have to make during Ramadan.

³⁷⁶ *Wakaf* is a form of non-obligatory charitable endowment, usually given in the form of cash or property.

³⁷⁷ Memorandum of Committee of Protest Against the Administration of Muslim Law Bill, 1960, A19.

“govern Muslims in their way of life”.³⁷⁸ Although the Bill was similar to Islamic legislation introduced in most Muslim countries, some Muslims had expressed their objections on the basis that Singapore, as a secular state, did not have the right to mandate religious observances.

Some Muslim politicians pushed for the Bill as they saw the proposed legislation as a safeguard for Islam. Yaacob bin Mohamed, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for National Development, said the Bill created “a new chapter in the history of Singapore ... which enunciate[d] the protection and safeguard of the Islamic religion of the Malays and Islamic people of Singapore”. Another Muslim politician, Ahmad Jabri Bin Mohammad Akib, expressed similar sentiments and said the Bill would “guide the people of Islam along the right Islamic path”.³⁷⁹ Both of them said it was legitimate for the secular state to enact legislation that ensured Singaporean Muslims adhered to the “right” Islamic observances.

Political elites also discussed whether state authority over Islamic law could be recognised by local Muslims. State Advocate-General Ahmad bin Ibrahim, for example, said that some Muslim theologians recognised that a country was deemed as a Muslim country if Islamic law was recognised there, and if the government there facilitated for the administration of Islamic law. Therefore, the state had the authority to appoint a *kadi*, who would derive his authority from the state. Ahmad also said that it was an “accepted fact” that *kadis* in Singapore derived their authority from the state.³⁸⁰ Ahmad had determined that the *kadi* derived his religious authority from the secular state. His perspective was contradictory to positions expressed by the Protest

³⁷⁸ Singapore Legislative Assembly, “Administration of Muslim Law Bill,” Parliament No. 0, Session No. 2, Vol No. 15, Sitting No. 11 (29 December, 1960).

³⁷⁹ Singapore Legislative Assembly, “Administration of Muslim Law Bill,” December 29, 1960.

³⁸⁰ “Report of the Select Committee on the Muslims (Amendment) Bill,” (First Legislative Assembly, April 21, 1960), C156-7.

Committee and Abdul Hamid. This showed that even among Muslims, there was no consensus on where the state stood in relation to religion and vice versa.

There was still no consensus, at this juncture, among religious and political elites on what secularity in Singapore involved. Abdul Hamid's view contradicted those of other Assemblymen who asserted that Singapore was a secular state. Similarly, in an earlier debate on the Muslim Ordinance, Jumabhoy argued that Singapore was "not a secular state like India" and that the state religion was Christianity.³⁸¹

As with the state's rejection of the Hindu Marriages legislation, the lack of a consensus among Muslims meant that the state would not introduce proposed amendments to the Muslim Marriage Bill. At this point, the state was probably hesitant to introduce any policy deemed controversial to those affected, since it might destabilise power relations between the newly decolonised state and the local Muslims. The proposal to enact an overarching Majlis was significant, as the Majlis would preside over the power relations in the habitus and determine notions of secularity, religion and politics in society that the Muslim habitus subscribes to. The implication is that since the Majlis is a state institution, the state would become the overarching authority in the religious habitus. The state did not want to be seen as trying to change the Malay habitus, since unexpected changes to the religious habitus would likely meet with resistance.

³⁸¹ Select Committee on Muslims Bill (Consideration of Amendments), Parliament No. 0, Session No. 2, Vol. No. 2, Sitting No. 7, Sitting date November 5, 1956.

3.2.e *Women's Charter 1961 – Standardisation of Customary and Religious Law Under Uniform Legislation*

Separately, the consolidation of various cultural and religious legal systems was achieved with the introduction of the Women's Charter Bill in 1961. The Charter replaced the Christian Marriage Ordinance and the Civil Marriage Ordinance. It also replaced Chinese customary laws, specifically polygamous marriages, which had previously been recognised by the British.³⁸² All marriages, whether civil, Chinese, or otherwise religious in nature (with the exception of Islamic marriages), had to be registered under the Charter.³⁸³

The introduction of the Women's Charter was significant, because it showed that the state had consciously chosen civil law to replace the repertoire of religious rulings it previously recognised. The question of whether to introduce special legislation for each religious group was resolved with the Women's Charter, which introduced uniform rulings for all except the Muslims. In the light of the Government's previous rejection of proposed legislation when there was no consensus, it was unlikely that the Government would have introduced the Women's Charter if it was not accepted by the majority of the population. The state's exception for Muslims revealed the continued state and societal acceptance of a key feature of the colonial habitus, which was transplanted onto the Rendel Constitution. The Women's Charter became an overarching structure of the national habitus that Singaporeans across races and religions (except the Muslims) were subjected to. The Charter also removed institutional differences between we-groups reinforced by legal pluralism in the colonial habitus.

³⁸² M. B. Hooker, *Legal Pluralism: An Introduction to Colonial and Neo-Colonial Laws* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 161.

³⁸³ "Chinese, Hindu Marriages Must Be Registered," *The Straits Times*, March 1, 1960.

Nonetheless, this thesis is not concerned with why Muslims were excluded from the Women's Charter; rather, it is concerned with what this policy decision revealed about state-religion and state-Muslim relations. Given the vocal Muslim opposition to the ban on polygamy that the Charter mandated, it was unlikely that the Government could have extended the Women's Charter to the Muslim community, especially since the role of the Government in the habitus was to minimise and regulate conflicts. Further, the national habitus had made concessions out of respect to the customs and laws of the Malay/Muslims since the beginning of the colonial period. The media reported that "four leading Muslims" in Singapore advocated for polygamy and said, "it was unfortunate that the majority of Muslims had not done so".³⁸⁴ Sanusi bin Mahmud, the President of the Syariah Court, said he was agreeable to restricting polygamy if there were grounds to do so based on Quranic teachings. His comment was in response to a criticism that polygamy was one of the two "ugliest blots" in Singapore.³⁸⁵

However, the exclusion of Muslims from the Women's Charter was not accepted by all Muslims.³⁸⁶ The decision was subjected to criticism from some Malays, such as Ahmad. They argued that the exclusion undermined the secular nature of the state, because it did not offer Muslim women an alternative to Muslim marriages, and because it mandated that they adhered to Islamic marriages under the Muslim Marriage Ordinance. One of the main Muslim objections to the Charter stemmed from the Muslim characterisation of civil law as Christian law; they equated European traditions and law with Christian traditions and law. Ahmad said that the Legislative Assembly should have debated on whether the law was beneficial, rather

³⁸⁴ "Only 1 Wife, but They Back Polygamy," *The Straits Times*, September 23, 1957.

³⁸⁵ "Stick to the Koran, Says Haji Sanusi," *The Straits Times*, November 28, 1963.

³⁸⁶ "That Second Wife," *The Straits Times*, April 30, 1960.

than being preoccupied with whether it complied with the provision of Christianity or Islam. He also found it “absurd” that some individuals had classified the Charter as a “Christian rule” because it restricted polygamy and divorce.³⁸⁷ K. M. Byrne, the Minister for Labour and Law, clarified that some political elites had seen the Charter as a piece of Christian legislation, because the ban on polygamy in Singapore was previously restricted to the Christians under the Christian Marriage Ordinance.³⁸⁸ The Muslim inclination to view civil law as Christian was not something new; the inclination to situate the Christian-Muslim dichotomy in civil and Syariah law was also seen during the Hertogh incident.

Ironically, Ahmad’s point of contention was similar to previous arguments raised by some Muslims who had disagreed with the Muslim Ordinance because it subjected all Muslims to following Syariah law and gave them no recourse under the secular civil law. The lack of an option for Muslims to follow civil law has become one of the contradictory features of Singapore’s secularity – a secular state mandating that its Muslim citizens adhere to Syariah law in specific aspects of their lives. Such collective adherence to Syariah law might create conflicts within the habitus when individuals or smaller groups want to deviate from the norms, creating power struggles between the “norm” and “abnormal” to define the new norm. One question to consider later would be: Would the “norm” of mandating Muslims to follow the Syariah law create new disciplinary strategies to normalise the abnormal? Ahmad’s objection also revealed

³⁸⁷ Ahmad bin Mohd Ibrahim, *The Legal Status of the Muslims in Singapore*, 1965. Nonetheless, as a result of the Women’s Charter Bill, the Government also amended the Muslims Ordinances. The media termed the amended clause as “the Muslim half of the Women’s Charter”. The Chief *kadi* must conduct an inquiry into any request for polygamous marriage in order to reduce the number of such marriages and protect the married Muslim women in the form of the Muslim (Amendment) Ordinance (No. 40) of 1960.

³⁸⁸ Singapore Legislative Assembly, “Women’s Charter Bill,” Parliament No. 0, Session No. 2, Vol. No. 14, Sitting No. 16, March 22, 1961.

that the Muslims were not a homogenous group; they held varying notions of the place of religious influences in state legislation.

3.2.f Change in Governance Structures to Organise Religion and Implications on Secularity in Singapore

Section 3.2 has identified several key discussions which have informed secularity dispositions of the national habitus. These shared dispositions and structures determined the relative positions of the actors in the habitus, who were in constant interaction with each other. The legislative discussions could be viewed as processes of power negotiations through which religious leaders, political elites, and individuals in society worked out their different expectations of secularity to reach a consensus on the secularity dispositions and structures of the shared habitus. We also see how religious opinions on the place of religion interact with the institutional to produce secularity norms and structures in the national habitus.

This thesis's examination of the parallel development of a civil marriage code and Islamic marriage legislation revealed several features of secularity in Singapore. Notably, the norms of the national habitus were formed through the consensus of the majority population. The political elites – including some who were reluctant to interfere with religious laws, as they regarded it as a violation of secular principles – made concessions to Islamic law and integrated the Islamic opinion on the role of religious traditions into state institutions.

State-Malay relations were a product and continuation of the colonial accommodation of Malay privileges. State-Malay relations were also a structural norm of the national habitus, established during British colonial rule, that continued to be structured and restructured by new encounters, within limits defined by the habitus. The state's recognition of Muslim privileges was acknowledged by the Malay/Muslims,

by the state, and by other habitus members. Ironically, this accommodation allowed for more state interference in Islamic religious affairs, whether implicit or otherwise. The Muslim habitus also became a disciplinary structure on local Muslims, compelling them to follow the norms of religious practices. The privileged status of Malay/Muslims in the national habitus also revealed unequal power distribution within the national habitus; the Government rejected Hindu demands for similar concessions as the Muslims.

Furthermore, the Government appeared to have adopted a policy of equality regarding its relationships with religious groups other than the Muslims. The parallel development of the Women's Charter and the Muslim Ordinance showed the resultant overall inequality. The introduction of the Charter was significant as it was a conscious choice made by the Government to consolidate religious marriages under a uniform law. It removed the colonial state's legal pluralism structure, and created a uniform judiciary structure for all Singaporeans (with the exception of the Muslims), in the aspects of marriage, divorce, and inheritance. The legislation was thus a disciplinary tactic enforced by the state; by legislating that Singaporeans be married under civil law rather than religious traditions, the Government changed how religion was practised, further forcing religious adherence in the private sphere. Religious practices thus likely diminished in importance over time. Overarching legislation also linked the we-groups in the national habitus, thus minimising conflicts between them in their future interactions in the public sphere, e.g. inter-religious marriages.

3.3 Federation of Malaya: Merger of Singapore and Malaya in 1963

Singapore's brief merger with Malaysia from 1963 to 1965 was also pivotal in shaping the nation-state's habitus. Turnbull observes that some local politicians were convinced that the merger was a "historical necessity", and that an independent

Singapore would not survive without the newly independent Federation of Malaya as an “economic base”. 71% of the local population voted in September 1962 for a merger with Malaya, and Singapore joined the Federation of Malaysia a year later.³⁸⁹ Singapore and Malaya had different notions of what secularity entailed, and these differences manifested as political differences between Singapore and Malaysia’s politicians. Some historical accounts suggest that these differences culminated in the racial riots of 1964 and Singapore’s eventual separation from the Federation. This thesis, however, is not concerned with what led to the racial riots and the separation, but with how these historical experiences had produced or reinforced Singapore’s secular principles and structures.

The initial hurdle to merger was that it would change the racial composition of the Malaysian and Singaporean societies. Tengku Abdul Rahman, Malaysia’s Prime Minister, had initially rejected the merger because “certain elements among the Chinese [were] China-minded” and not “real Singaporeans”.³⁹⁰ The British had also excluded Singapore from the Federation, because of the predominantly Chinese population.³⁹¹ There appeared to be concerns that new Chinese Singaporeans still identified themselves as Chinese nationals. Further, the incorporation of Singapore would likely tilt the power balance in favour of the Chinese habitus in Malaysia.

Thus, local politicians made policy changes to address the Tengku’s anxieties. Tan Tai Yong suggests that local political elites tried to resolve the Tengku’s fears of Chinese dominance in Singapore through various pro-Malay measures. In 1954, at the start of its establishment, the People’s Action Party (PAP) – then an opposition party in Singapore – created a Malay Affairs Bureau. Tan states that local political

³⁸⁹ Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore 1819-2005*, 2020, 433–34, 447.

³⁹⁰ “The Road to Merger,” *The Straits Times*, February 1, 1961.

³⁹¹ Allington Kennard, “The Year of Merger,” *Straits Times Annual*, January 1, 1963.

elites introduced Malay as Singapore's national language in order to facilitate the integration of the Chinese population into Malaya based on a common language. In addition, a Malay *Yang di-Pertuan Agong* (Head of State) was appointed. The Government also provided free primary school education for all Singaporean Malay citizens. Free secondary and university education was extended to Malay citizens, under certain conditions.³⁹² With the exception of the position of the Head of State, these policies continue in place in Singapore till today, thus altering the shape of the national habitus.³⁹³

The subsequent inclusion of Borneo and Sarawak in the Federation tilted the racial balance towards a majority Malay population, eventually setting Singapore, Malaysia, Borneo, and Sarawak on the path of the merger.³⁹⁴ Notably, Malaysia's definition of being Malay and Muslim differed from Singapore's. The Malay category in Singapore, while closely associated with the Islamic religion, had become a racial category into which one was born. On the other hand, Malays in Malaysia were Muslims, and individuals who converted to Islam were considered as Malays, regardless of race. This was enshrined in Article 160 of the Malaysian Constitution:

“Malay” means a person who professes the religion of Islam, habitually speaks the Malay language, conforms to Malay custom and— (a) was before Merdeka Day born in the Federation or in Singapore or born of parents one of whom was born in the Federation or in Singapore, or is on that day domiciled in the Federation or in Singapore.³⁹⁵

³⁹² Tai Yong Tan, *Creating “Greater Malaysia”: Decolonization and the Politics of Merger* (Singapore: ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, 2008), 42.

³⁹³ Charissa Yong, “Parliament: 2017 Presidential Election Will Be Reserved for Malay Candidates, Says PM Lee,” *The Straits Times*, November 8, 2016. In 2017, the Government introduced the Constitutional Amendment Bill, which stated that an election would be reserved for a specific racial group if no one from that group had been elected President for five consecutive terms. The 2017 Presidential Election was reserved for Malay candidates as there had been no Malay President for five consecutive terms. Candidates who wish to participate in these reserved elections will have to fulfill the same conditions as those participating in the open elections.

³⁹⁴ Kennard, “The Year of Merger.”

³⁹⁵ “Singapore Assembly: Lee Reports on Points of Agreement for Amending Constitution,” *The Straits Times*, April 6, 1963.

This meant that an Indian or a Chinese who converted to Islam, spoke Malay, and adopted Malay customs could be administratively recognised as a Malay. Islam was also the official religion of the Federation. In addition, Malays were given special rights, in employment in public services and in setting up businesses.³⁹⁶ These differentiated privileges gave the Malay habitus more power in Malaysia's national habitus.

The special position of Islam in the Federation, particularly the role of Islam in fostering national belonging, led to concerns among Christians in Singapore that the merger with Malay-dominated Malaysia would lead to curtailment in the practice of their faith. The Malaysian Christian Council, which comprised churches in Singapore and Malaysia, expressed their fears of the merger.³⁹⁷ In response, Lee assured them that "it [was] not the intention of [the] Government to introduce legislation to control or restrict the propagation of any religious doctrine or belief, and that the present position in all matters of religious liberty will continue".³⁹⁸ The Christian fears stemmed from concerns that the Singapore state would no longer treat all religious groups equally under a pro-Malay Federation where the Constitution favoured the Malay/Muslims.

It was significant that Lee negotiated for the position of Malays to remain unchanged in Singapore. Recruitment to the public service in Singapore, and the Government's issue of permits for businesses, would continue to be based on open and equal opportunities for all Singaporeans. This was unlike the situation in the Federation, where a proportion of jobs in the public service, and a proportion of business licences, were reserved for the Malays.³⁹⁹ Singaporean Malays would have to move to other states in the Federation to enjoy these benefits. The preservation of

³⁹⁶ "Singapore Assembly: Lee Reports on Points of Agreement for Amending Constitution."

³⁹⁷ "Protestants Are Worried About Religious Rights After Malaysia," *The Straits Times*, July 7, 1963.

³⁹⁸ "Premier Lee Gives Pledge on Religious Freedom," *The Straits Times*, July 30, 1963.

³⁹⁹ "Singapore Assembly: Lee Reports on Points of Agreement for Amending Constitution."

the status quo could be interpreted as a habitus response to ensure that the state would maintain equal and neutral relations with all religious groups. The Singapore Government was probably reluctant to concede on other matters that might inevitably affect other racial or religious groups if the Malays enjoyed special privileges in shared economic and social spheres. Concession of privileges might inevitably upset the power balance in society, giving rise to conflicts between we-groups.

3.3.a 1964 Race Riots

Several historical accounts suggested that tensions between Malays and the Singapore Government, coupled with Sino-Malay tensions, culminated in the outbreak of racial riots in Singapore in 1964. According to some accounts, in the leadup to the riots, the Singapore branch of the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) had incited, through their speeches and actions, Malay agitation against the Singapore Government. On 13 July 1964, UMNO established the Singapore Malay National Action Committee to advocate for special rights on behalf of the Malays, as the Singapore Government had declined to extend special privileges to the Malay/Muslims beyond education policies. The local Malay-language media also attacked PAP for being anti-Muslim. For instance, *Utusan Melayu* accused Prime Minister Lee of oppressing Singaporean Muslims and attempting to turn Singapore into another Israel. Significantly, Othman suggested that Malaysian UMNO politician Jaafar Albar's speech at a Malay convention in July partially triggered the race riots. Jaffar had said that Malays remained "oppressed", first by the British, then by the Japanese and by the Singapore state. He rallied the Malays by saying that "not even a thousand Lee Kuan Yew's [forces]" could break their unity. Jaafar also led the boycott of a government-sponsored meeting to discuss problems encountered by the Singapore

Malays.⁴⁰⁰ It appeared that the Malay/Muslims' perceived grievances and feelings of unfair treatment by the state led to a rupture of relations with the Singapore state and notably, the Chinese. The state's insistence on neutrality between all racial and religious groups became a point of contention between Malay/Muslims and the state.

On 21 July 1964, racial violence between the Chinese and the Malays erupted after a procession of some 25,000 Malay/Muslims, held in commemoration of Prophet Muhammed's birthday, was reportedly interrupted by some Chinese individuals.⁴⁰¹ Another wave of violence broke out between 2 and 11 September 1964, caused by a group of Chinese men's alleged killing of a Malay trishaw rider. The violence was contained before it could spread further; 13 persons were killed and 106 were injured.⁴⁰²

3.3.b *Competing Visions of Secularity*

In mid-1965, with relations between PM Lee and Malaysian politicians continuing to deteriorate, Lee discussed four options that the Singapore Government could adopt at that juncture. Firstly, Singapore could be annexed into another country other than Malaysia, but Lee said that this would be a "mistake". Secondly, Singapore could have continued to engage in communal politics in Malaysia. However, Lee saw the domination of one race over other races as "painful". A third option was to stay in Malaysia, which Lee predicted would probably result in continuing race riots and further fragmentation between racial groups. The fourth option was to create a Malaysian Malaysia, which was PAP's political option for Malaysia. Should the fourth

⁴⁰⁰ Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore 1819-2005*, 2020, 461; "Only 23 Men Can Speak for the Malays S'pore Meeting Decides," *The Straits Times*, July 13, 1964; Othman Wok, Interview, Interview by Kim Leng Foo, March 7, 1982, National Archives of Singapore, Ascension Number 000133, Reel 14/17.

⁴⁰¹ Sonny Yap, Richard Lim, and Weng Kam Leong, *Men in White: The Untold Story of Singapore's Political Story* (Singapore: Singapore Press Holdings Limited, 2009), 278–79.

⁴⁰² Yap, Lim, and Leong, 281.

option fail, Singapore would have to face the other “three awful alternatives”.⁴⁰³ The fourth option did fail, but Singapore did not pursue the other three alternatives.

The other three alternatives were misaligned with the country’s secularity norms. The other neighbouring countries, Brunei and Indonesia, were both Muslim-majority states; Singapore would be confronted with similar dilemmas should it choose to pursue a merger with them. In addition, communal politics was against the nature of Singapore’s secularity, as it would probably have caused further tensions in society.

The political elites in Malaysia and Singapore had competing visions of secularity. Malaysia practised an unequal secularity, where Malay/Muslims enjoyed socio-economic and political privileges in society. Abdul Rahman disapproved of Lee’s vision, which he felt would make the Chinese think they were entitled to “equal rights” with the Malays.⁴⁰⁴ He said that PAP’s idea of a Malaysian Malaysia “tended to break racial harmony and antagonise one race against the other”. He disapproved of Lee’s vision, which he saw as a threat to Islam’s economic, social, and political positions in society.⁴⁰⁵ Olivier Roy observes that the Malaysian Government had nationalised Islam, appropriating the religion as an identity marker of the Malays and the new state.⁴⁰⁶ Malaysia’s strategy of incorporating the Islamic identity into its national habitus was similar to Cesari’s observation of Muslim-majority post-colonial states that used religion to cultivate national identity and unity. As mentioned in Chapter 2, the British had highlighted the difficulty of creating a shared identity based on language, religion, or race, due to the diversity of Singapore’s population. It was

⁴⁰³ Kuan Yew Lee and other leaders, “Press Conference” (Malaysia Solidarity Convention, Federal Parliament House, June 3, 1965), National Archives Singapore.

⁴⁰⁴ Abdullah Ahmad, *Conversations with Tunku Abdul Rahman* (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Editions, 2016), 101.

⁴⁰⁵ Ahmad, 97.

⁴⁰⁶ Roy Olivier, *Holy Ignorance: When Religion and Culture Part Ways*, trans. Ros Schwartz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 91.

thus unlikely that Malaysia's version of secularity would be compatible with Singapore's secularity. The differentiation system in Malaysia's economy also compounded the power imbalances between groups due to unequal resource distribution.

In contrast, Lee's vision was a Federation that "cut across division lines of race, language, culture, and religion".⁴⁰⁷ Lee saw the Federation as a "secular state" which was "not a state founded upon God", even though Islam is the official religion. He said that the Federation was "founded upon the rights of all Malaysian citizens, one-man-one-vote and government of Malaysians by Malaysians", as enshrined in the Constitution.⁴⁰⁸ Citizenship in Singapore was based on equal rights. It was unlikely that the two competing notions of secularity could be reconciled, especially since they were associated with different historical experiences, dispositions, and structures. The expectations of Malaysian and Singaporean politicians remained incongruent and there was no minimal agreement on their differing visions of secularity.

It appeared that both Malaysian and Singaporean politicians tried to impose their secularity ideals on each other, resulting in a power struggle and what Elias termed as drag effects. According to Elias, drag effects arise from a group's resistance to unplanned social changes.⁴⁰⁹ Abdul Rahman's resistance to Lee's proposed changes to Malaysia's secularity resulted in Singapore's separation from the Federation, which he later admitted was the "correct policy".⁴¹⁰ Malaysia and

⁴⁰⁷ Kuan Yew Lee, "266 Letter from Lee Kuan Yew to Menzies – Historical Documents – Australian Government Department of Foreign Trade and Affairs," April 20, 1965, declassified on November 26, 2015, Australian Government Department of Foreign Trade and Affairs.

⁴⁰⁸ Kuan Yew Lee, "Demography, Geography and History on Our Side: Speech at a Luncheon Rally Held at Fullerton Square (2 July 1965)," in *The Papers of Lee Kuan Yew: Speeches, Interviews and Dialogues*, vol. 2, 1963-1965 (Singapore: Gale Asia, 2012), 638.

⁴⁰⁹ See Section 1.2 for detailed explanation on drag effect.

⁴¹⁰ Ahmad, *Conversations with Tunku Abdul Rahman*, 97.

Singapore's visions of secularity were akin to two particular habitus that did not share much common ground.

Singapore's merger with Malaysia – and the 1964 riots – could be construed as “new” historical experiences that reinforced the importance of protecting Singapore's secularity dispositions. The impact of the two incidents on the habitus could be seen in subsequent comments relating to the incidents made by the political elites. As the habitus operates on a subconscious level, we can only detect the degree of impact through analysis of later discourses. In hindsight, Lee said that if Singapore had been “frightened” and had “given in” after the 1964 racial disturbances by asking them [probably referring to Malay chauvinists] for mercy, Singapore “would have belonged to a single race”. The race riots contributed to the Government's mindset that “a multiracial country is the only way” to success”.⁴¹¹ Further, Lee later acknowledged that the tensions between the different visions – namely Singapore's notion of a multiracial Malaysian nation and Malaysia's Malay supremacy – would likely lead to the recurrence of race riots in Singapore. Such an event would eventually have caused irreconcilable differences between Malays and Chinese.⁴¹² Similarly, Singapore politician Devan Nair Chengara Veetil commented that Singapore's separation from Malaysia was an assertion of “the secular ideals” that Singaporeans have set for themselves. Singaporeans would never surrender “our autonomy to any conception of racial hegemony”.⁴¹³

From the above, we may glean several insights into Singapore's secularity principles. The Government was unwilling to adopt an official religion as it meant

⁴¹¹ Kuan Yew Lee, “Prime Minister's Interview with Members of The Chinese Press in Hokkien” (TV Singapura Studios, September 13, 1965), National Archives of Singapore.

⁴¹² Lee, “Letter from Lee Kuan Yew to Menzies.”

⁴¹³ Devan Nair Chengara Veetil, Interview, August 13, 1982, Reel 26/26, Acc No. 000049/26, National Archives of Singapore.⁵

disrupting its policy of neutral relations with all religious groups. The state thus continued to hold on to its ideals of secularity – guaranteeing its citizens the freedom to practise their religious beliefs and having no state religion. Lee’s response was to resist forces that sought to disrupt or change Singapore’s habitus; he did not yield to the Malay/Muslims’ demands for more privileges. The religious angle to the racial riots again revealed the correlation between race and religion in the habitus. Malaysia’s racial hegemony was also a religious hegemony due to the conflation of racial and religious identities.

Moreover, anti-government and anti-Chinese sentiments arising from Malay chauvinism was probably perceived by the political elites to be a bad outcome of the mix of religion and politics. Years earlier, in 1959, Lee had advised the Muslim community “not [to] commit the tragic error of dragging religion into the political arena or using it as a cloak for political ambitions”.⁴¹⁴ The tragic error manifested as Singapore UMNO’s use of racial and religious rhetoric to discredit the Singapore Government during Singapore’s merger with Malaysia.

Further, as Lee had said, multiracialism, multi-religiosity, and secularity were crucial for Singapore’s social cohesion. The Government’s resistance to pressure to increase Malay privileges, or subscribe to Malaysia’s political ideology, could thus be seen as an instinctual response produced by the Singapore habitus. As previously discussed, earlier experiences had created the instinct that religious agitation could result in riots, and new experiences during the merger reinforced this inclination. The separation thus buttressed existing dispositions and structures of notions of secularity in Singapore’s national habitus.

⁴¹⁴ Kuan Yew Lee, “Spirit of Tolerance: Speech at a Meeting of the Muslim Community of Singapore at Raffles Hotel in Celebration of Prophet Muhammad’s Birthday (17 September 1959),” in *The Papers of Lee Kuan Yew: Speeches, Interviews and Dialogues*, vol. 1, 1950-1962 (Singapore: Gale Asia, 2012), 127.

For the Malay/Muslims, the Federation presented them with a competing vision of secularity, and probably something with which they could more readily identify. At this juncture, the local Malays possibly identified more with Malays in Malaysia than with the other Singaporeans; they shared more common, earliest experiences with the Malaysian Malays than with the Singaporeans, because of similarities in religion, culture, customs, and history. The merger probably created expectations among the Malay/Muslims that they would enjoy a more privileged status in society due to their position as natives of Singapore – which challenged their tacit acceptance of Singapore’s secularity norms, thus giving rise to tensions between the government and Malay/Muslims. The Singapore Government and the majority Chinese population were excluded from the habitus that the Singaporean Malays shared with the Malaysian Malays, hence disrupting the national habitus and the Singapore Government’s overarching authority over the Muslim habitus. This probably gave the state and society the impression that religious affinity and loyalty could surpass loyalty and belonging to the national habitus.

This thesis suggests that the 1964 riots resulted in a change in how local Muslims commemorated Prophet Muhammed’s birthday. In 1965, the *Straits Times* reported that “unlike previous years, there will be no mass procession”. Local celebrations included Quranic recitations, lectures, an indoor rally at the Badminton Hall, and a children’s party at UMNO house.⁴¹⁵ A few articles also noted that the celebrations were held “quietly”.⁴¹⁶ There was no mass procession between 1965 and 1980. In 1966, 25 Muslim organisations formed a celebrations committee and applied

⁴¹⁵ “Lectures on Koran in 4 Languages”, *The Straits Times*, July 10, 1965; “Muslims Pray for Peace on Prophet’s Birthday”, *The Straits Times*, July 11, 1965.

⁴¹⁶ “Muslims Pray for Peace on Prophet’s Birthday”; “Prayers and Functions on Prophet’s Birthday”, *The Straits Times*, June 20, 1967.

for a police permit to hold a public procession. However, their request was denied.⁴¹⁷ Notably, the celebrations in the immediate years following the riots were muted and organised by the PAP Malay Affairs Bureau. Then Minister for Culture and Social Affairs, Inche Othman Wok, denied that the MAB had organised the celebrations for “political ends”.⁴¹⁸ In 1966, the Lembaga Biasiswa Kenangan Maulud (LBKM; Prophet Muhammad’s Birthday Memorial Scholarship Fund) was launched with great publicity. State Advocate General Ahmad bin Mohamed Ibrahim stressed that the scholarships “were open to needy students of all races in Singapore”.⁴¹⁹ This thesis’s search of the newspaper’s archives showed that it was not until 1981 that an outdoor procession, which *New Nation* noted was “the first of its kind”, was organised by MUIS and Jamiyah to commemorate Prophet Muhammad’s birthday.⁴²⁰

Thus, the 1964 riots also influenced the religious practices of local Muslims. The Government’s refusal to allow for a public procession was a strategy to “abnormalise” large-scale public parades to commemorate the Prophet’s Birthday, possibly out of security concerns that there might be a repeat of the 1964 riots. As discussed in Chapter 2, the colonial government had similarly banned public religious processions out of concern that civil order might be disrupted. Over time, the external constraint of not allowing for public processions thus became an internalised norm, especially with the launch of the LBKM to commemorate the Prophet’s birthday and the extension of the celebrations to the non-Muslims by offering scholarships to them.

⁴¹⁷ “Prophet’s Birthday: Muslims Seek Permit for Parade”, *The Straits Times*, June 17, 1966; “Prophet’s Day Rally is Scrapped in S’pore,” *The Straits Times*, June 30, 1966; “Prophet’s Birthday Ceremonies,” *The Straits Times*, May 28, 1969; “Prophet’s Birthday Meeting”, *The Straits Times*, July 8, 1967; “Prophet’s Birthday: Three Days of Joy”, *The Straits Times*, April 22, 1971.

⁴¹⁸ “The Prophet’s Birthday,” *Straits Budget*, June 15, 1966; “Prophet’s Birthday: Wok Denies Charges”, *The Straits Times*, July 25, 1966; “New Muslim Council: Call for Support,” *The Straits Times*, July 3, 1967.

⁴¹⁹ “Fund Drive on the Prophet’s Birthday”, *The Straits Times*, July 1, 1966.

⁴²⁰ Yaakub Rashid, “Mattar Leads Faithful in Parade,” *New Nation*, February 22, 1981.

The involvement of first MAB, then MUIS, in organising the celebrations was a governmentalisation of religious celebrations under government auspices. Here, we see an example of how interactions between religious groups and government institutions led to changes in religious practices.

3.4 An Assessment: Building Blocks of Secularity Dispositions in the National Habitus During the Self-Governance Years, and the Merger with Malaysia

This chapter has examined crucial historical crossroads that have contributed to the production and structures of Singapore's secularity dispositions in the national habitus. The 1950s and 1960s were crucial, as choices made by the state and by society to decide which colonial structures and notions of secularity to dismantle or retain, were reflective of a shared national habitus to which they consciously chose to belong.

The Hertogh riots, the 1964 race riots, and Singapore's short-lived merger with Malaysia were historical experiences that produced the national habitus. These events were significant because the earliest shared experiences of a community bore particular weight on the habitus. Crucial discussions in the Legislative Assembly were negotiations between various stakeholders to agree on their expectations of secularity for Singapore society. The Women's Charter and the Muslim Ordinance were structures produced as a result of habitus dispositions. These pieces of legislation could be interpreted as disciplinary tactics and external constraints that introduced the notions of what was considered "normal" in the respective habitus and the national habitus. Over time, these norms became internalised and actualised through experience. The secularity norms were already formed and entrenched in most Singaporeans by the time Singapore joined the Federation, such that local political elites resisted attempts by Malaysia and some local Malays to change the habitus.

In the months after independence, the political elites continued to reiterate Singapore's secularity to the society at large. Lee consistently stressed that Singapore was a multiracial, multi-religious, and secular society. Singapore's national identity was not built upon coercing every individual "into one race or one language or religion" but on secularism and a multi-religious, multiracial society.⁴²¹ Forcing individuals to assimilate based on race, language, and one religion would only bring "big trouble".⁴²² On another occasion, Lee said that the Singapore identity "defend[ed] the right of [its] people to keep what they consider good in their different pasts so that [Singapore's] future would be more enriched". People were encouraged to "speak in their homes in different tongues", "pray in different forms", and continue with their "different diets" to unite and defend "their collective interest" – the creation of a "tolerant and prosperous society".⁴²³

Local political elites also used instrumental modes like speech to exercise their power and discipline the society into accepting the "norm". In their public messaging, these elites stressed several secularity norms, particularly at public religious-related events that they graced. Lee appeared subtly critical of Malaysia's governance approach and emphasised that Singapore was not Malaysia. In several of his speeches following Singapore's independence, he continued to stress the freedom for religious traditions to thrive in Singapore; Muslims visited mosques for Friday prayers, Hindus celebrated Thaipusam and Deepavali, Seventh Day Adventists were allowed

⁴²¹ Kuan Yew Lee, "A Healthy Singapore Five Months After Independence: New Year Message (1 January 1966)," in *The Papers of Lee Kuan Yew: Speeches, Interviews and Dialogues*, vol. 3, 1965-1966 (Singapore: Gale Asia, 2012), 297.

⁴²² Kuan Yew Lee, "A Sincere Hope for Multireligious, Multi-Ethnic Friendships: Translation of Speech in the National Language at the Anniversary Celebrations of Sree Narayana Mission (12 September 1965)," in *The Papers of Lee Kuan Yew: Speeches, Interviews and Dialogues*, vol. 3, 1965-1966 (Singapore: Gale Asia, 2012), 90.

⁴²³ Lee, "A Healthy Singapore Five Months After Independence: New Year Message (1 January 1966)," 297.

in Singapore, and Buddhists were free to evangelise.⁴²⁴ Lee's emphasis on secularity norms was that individuals in Singapore had the freedom of religious beliefs and could maintain their distinct cultural practices.

Among the politicians, there was a consensus that a secular, multi-religious, and multiracial Singapore was crucial for the nation's survival. This messaging continued to be reinforced in political speeches. At Singapore's first Parliament session in 1965, Edmund Barker, the Minister for Law and National Development, said "one of the cornerstones of the Government [was] a multiracial Singapore", where all citizens were "equal regardless of race, language, culture and religion". Further, Barker said that "a multiracial secular society" [was] a "dire necessity for [Singapore's] survival".⁴²⁵ Singapore's first President, Yusof bin Ishak, reiterated that Singapore's survival "depend[ed] upon rallying and strengthening the forces who [were] for a secular, rational, and multiracial approach to the problems of economic backwardness and the legacy of unbalanced development in the colonial era".⁴²⁶ The above statements showed that secularism was closely tied to the narrative of nation-building in Singapore. Unlike Malaysia, which used religion as a unifying factor, the Singapore government chose secularity and equality of all religious groups in the society to forge the country's national identity.

The same values of secularity – equality of all races, religions and languages – were embodied in the national pledge, which was first drafted under the initiative of the Ministry of Education:

⁴²⁴ Lee, "A Sincere Hope for Multireligious, Multi-Ethnic Friendships: Translation of Speech in the National Language at the Anniversary Celebrations of Sree Narayana Mission (12 September 1965)," 90.

⁴²⁵ "Report of the Constitutional Commission 1966," Command Paper, Papers Presented to Parliament (Singapore Parliament, December 21, 1966), 1; Parliament of Singapore, "Appointment of Constitution Commission (Statement by the Minister for Law and National Development)," Parliament No. 1, Session No. 1, Vol. No. 1, Sitting No. 9 (December 12, 1965).

⁴²⁶ Parliament of Singapore, "Yang Di-Pertuan Negara's Speech," Parliament No. 1, Session No. 1, Vol. No. 1, Sitting No. 1 (December 8, 1965).

We, the citizens of Singapore,
pledge ourselves as one united people,
regardless of race, language or religion,
to build a democratic society
based on justice and equality
so as to achieve happiness, prosperity
and progress for our nation.

Then Minister for Education, Ong Pang Boon, explained that the pledge was “something to gel people together” after Singapore’s separation from Malaysia, and the state had to “inculcate national consciousness”.⁴²⁷ In August 1966, the Ministry of Education had then directed all students studying at national schools to recite the national pledge daily during the national flag-raising ceremony.⁴²⁸ The Ministry intended for the ceremony to “foster, through their daily observance, a sense of discipline, dedication and patriotism among the half million pupils who make up over a quarter of our entire population”.⁴²⁹ As Foucault explains, discipline as repetitive actions create “second nature” or new behaviours; in this case, the repetition in a school setting helped to create and reinforce secularity values and belonging to the national habitus. Foucault has also mentioned education as a tactic of normalisation, which is a “great instrument of power”.⁴³⁰ According to the habitus’ mechanisms, notions can be “actualised through learning and experience”, which is the recurring function of the national pledge and flag-raising ceremony to this day – to reinforce the equality of race and religious habitus and foster belonging to the national habitus.⁴³¹

From the above discussion, we can infer several notions of secularity between the 1950s and 1965. The habitus is fluid and its norms and dispositions can evolve

⁴²⁷ “National Pledge,” National Heritage Board, accessed June 20, 2022, <https://www.nhb.gov.sg/what-we-do/our-work/community-engagement/education/resources/national-symbols/national-pledge>.

⁴²⁸ “Daily Allegiance Pledge in Schools,” *The Straits Times*, August 25, 1966; “STU Supprrt Pledge by Students,” *The Straits Times*, August 31, 1966.

⁴²⁹ “Schools to Start with Flag Ceremony Today,” *The Straits Times*, August 29, 1966.

⁴³⁰ Foucault, *Displine and Punish*, 184.

⁴³¹ Elias, *The Germans*, 32-5.

according to circumstances and shifts in power relations. A secularity principle was the state's policy of keeping religious rhetoric out of the public sphere, reinforcing the Western dichotomy of private and public spheres. The public sphere includes the political sphere and media reporting. The state was wary of the visibility of religious rhetoric in the public sphere, due to historical experiences that revealed that religious and racial group affiliations were highly volatile. Any perceived threat or disruption to the religious or racial habitus could cause public disorder. The Hertogh trial's open court setting, and heated media reporting from religious angles in a manner that agitated the Malay/Muslims, transformed a custody case into a religious dispute between Christians and Muslims. Years later, the UMNO politicians' use of religious rhetoric to stir Malay/Muslim grievances, and the Malay-language media's biased reporting, incited anti-Chinese and anti-government sentiments among the Malay/Muslims. Both episodes ended in riots and public disorder. Following the reasoning of the habitus, these episodes probably highlighted, in the minds of Singaporeans, the danger of religious rhetoric in the public sphere. Therefore, government policies sought to keep religious interests and rhetoric away from the public sphere and behind closed doors.

In addition, a number of political elites agreed that religious agendas should be kept out of political discussions and public policies. The use of religious rhetoric and justification was a contentious issue in the early years of self-governance, in the debates on public funding for family planning, religious education, and mission schools. Thus, political elites decided that religious rhetoric should not be invoked in legislative or parliamentary debates.

Further, secularity entailed a non-interference approach to religious practices and laws. The Singapore state's non-interference approach was different from the

British colonial state's policy of non-interference. Whereas the British retained the customs and laws of different ethnic and religious groups, the Singapore state decided on uniform legislation for all citizens and inhabitants of Singapore, with the exception of the Muslims who were subjected to Syariah law for matters relating to marriage, divorce, and inheritance. The legal institutions created uniformity among various religious habitus, thus subjecting all religious groups except the Muslims to the institutional workings of the national habitus.

Notably, there was an emphasis on Singapore being a secular state precisely because of its multi-religious and multiracial complexion. Secularity was seen as necessary for Singapore's survival. Political elites stressed, on many occasions, that a secular Singapore was the only way out of Malaysia. The close correlation in one's identity between race and religion also made it necessary for Singapore to be a secular nation because religious conflicts could easily also involve racial rhetoric.

Secularity also involved maintaining equal relationships between the state and different religious groups. While the state was obliged to accommodate the privileged position of Malays and their religious interests, it also tried to guarantee that all other religious groups remained equal in the political, social, and economic spheres. The state acted as the regulator of power relations in the national habitus to maintain this equality. During the merger, the Singapore state was unwilling to concede more to Malay/Muslims. Thus, the emphasis on equal opportunities for citizens of all races, languages, religions, and cultures, was another aspect of secularity. This emphasis was also embodied in the national pledge, which was recited daily in schools, hence inculcating and reinforcing this notion of equality in power relations as the "norm" in Singapore society.

Another important feature of the shared secularity was state relations with Malay/Muslims. The state of Singapore retained the British legacy of accommodating native Malay customs and traditions – which also involved, in the Rendel Constitution, protecting the religious position of the Malay/Muslims. The implication was that the state could not claim to maintain a neutral relationship with all religious groups.

Notably, it appeared that the Malay/Muslims and the government had differing expectations on what was entailed by the obligation to protect and safeguard the positions of Malay/Muslims in society. The lack of clarity, and the absence of a consensus on how the state was to protect Malay/Muslims, thus became a source of conflict between the state and some Malay/Muslims. The Malay/Muslims felt that the state was compelled to protect their religious, political, educational, religious, economic, social, and cultural interests, by granting special privileges similar to those enjoyed by the Malaysian Malays. However, the Government had to balance the demands of Malay/Muslims with the rights of other groups in society. The Government had also shown that it was unwilling to grant any more unequal privileges to the Malay/Muslims, beyond free education and the Syariah Court. The lack of resolution, on the position of the state vis-à-vis Islam, became a conflict point between the state and Malay/Muslims, and will continue to evolve as the habitus is fluid.

Thus far, this chapter has identified key events and discussions that led to the production of specific secularity principles and structures. Between 1950 and 1965, Singaporeans built upon the shared habitus from the colonial era. Postcolonial political elites and society faced the challenge of creating a national habitus that could accommodate all the we-habitus and minimise conflicts. Several features of the colonial habitus were problematised and replaced, e.g. structures of legal pluralism. State-Islam relations and structures were maintained and reinforced. Changes and

reiterations to the national habitus and we-habitus reveal that the habitus is fluid, and yet there are underlying dispositions, such as the Government's commitment to equality between religions and the privileged position of Islam in the secularity and national habitus. The habitus can change to cope with the challenges of multiculturalism.

We also see the increased governmentalisation of society and the emergence of the postcolonial state as the highest form of authority above the other religious habitus. The process of governmentalisation was not only about introducing institutions and legislation, but also about directing the actions of individuals and groups in society.⁴³² The postcolonial state normalised and reinforced secularity norms in the national habitus through institutional structures like legislation, political speeches and the education system. The use of external constraints would, over time, create self-restraint in the citizens through the mechanisms of the habitus and actualisation through experiences, thus reinforcing secularity norms in the smaller habitus (plural) that recognised the authority of the national habitus. In the following chapters, we will investigate how these secularity norms were reinforced or challenged (and subsequently evolved) in response to challenges.

⁴³² Foucault, "The Subject and Power", 341.

4 STRUCTURES OF SECULARITY IN THE NEWLY INDEPENDENT SINGAPORE

Several days after independence, *Utusan Melayu* published allegations about Catholics enticing young Muslim men to convert to Christianity, by offering them beautiful female Christians, \$500 each, and promises of jobs. Lee convened several meetings with religious leaders and Malay journalists to mitigate possible Christian-Muslim tensions. In his meeting with Malay journalists in Singapore, he warned them against using “religious or other sentiments” to incite tension; he also indicated that he would not hesitate to charge them in court should they do so.⁴³³ Lee also warned Sheikh Abdullah Basmeh, a Singaporean *Utusan Melayu* journalist, that he was liable for prosecution under the Sedition Laws of the Internal Security Act (ISA) if he continued to perpetuate these rumours. Separately, Othman emphasised that the Government would not hesitate to enforce measures against any person or organisation that tried to inflame racial or religious sensitivities in Singapore. Consequently, representatives from *Utusan Melayu* gave their assurances that they would not publish articles provoking religious tension.⁴³⁴ Lee subsequently reassured an official Australian delegation, who was then visiting Singapore, that “religion is also no trouble to us now that we’ve got everybody to understand what the Sedition Ordinance means”.⁴³⁵

On 30 September 1965, Lee convened a private meeting with Christian representatives and the Inter-Religious Organisation (IRO). During the meeting, Lee stressed the secularity of the Singapore state, with the freedom to believe and worship.

⁴³³ Kuan Yew Lee, “Press Conference with Malay Journalists” (Studio of TV Singapura, August 11, 1965), National Archives of Singapore.

⁴³⁴ “Minister Reminds the Utusan Melayu of a Promise,” *The Straits Times*, March 14, 1967.

⁴³⁵ Kuan Yew Lee, “Transcript of A Speech at Reception Given in Honour of the Visiting Australian Labour Party Delegation” (Sri Temasek, October 14, 1965), National Archives of Singapore.

He also emphasised the need for tolerance between groups. Further, he warned that *Utusan Melayu's* purpose was to “create racial and religious conflict” in order to “jeopardise [Singapore’s] future”. Notably, Lee warned the Christian leaders from proselytising to the Muslims. He assured them that “Singapore ha[d] many people with no religious guidance whatsoever, no religious beliefs... more than 70% ... and there is a very wide field of operation”. He saw “no need for going around looking for 12% Muslims to try and convert them” because “there [were] 60 to 70% of people who [were] in need of some form of religious and moral guidance”.⁴³⁶ Lee then gave them 90 minutes to draft a media statement. The next day, Christian leaders and the IRO issued a joint statement to declare that they would “refrain from making converts of Muslims”.⁴³⁷

The above incident showed how the political elites would deal with escalating religious tensions should they arise again in future. As Prime Minister, Lee established a firm stance in dealing with perpetrators who tried to instigate religious and racial tensions. Further, Lee controlled local media narratives by issuing verbal cautions to the press, and by issuing a government-approved media account of the incident. Although the Constitution did not prevent other groups from preaching to Muslims, with this warning, Lee had explicitly laid out the ground rules for Christian evangelisation. These rules act as social constraints imposed by the state to introduce norms of religious behaviour in the public sphere as part of the state’s civilising process. This incident also reinforced the norm of disciplining the media to be sensitive in its reporting to prevent religious-racial conflicts from escalating in the public sphere.

⁴³⁶ Kuan Yew Lee, “Transcript of the Prime Minister’s Statement to Religious Representatives and Members of the Inter-Religious Council” (Prime Minister’s Office, City Hall, September 30, 1965), National Archives of Singapore.

⁴³⁷ “Minister Reminds the Utusan Melayu of a Promise.”

Further, Lee's discourse reflected his notion of religion as a form of moral guidance in society.

At the time of Singapore's independence, the pressing concerns were Malay distrust of the Singapore Government, and Malay hostility against the Chinese. Following the trajectory of Elias' civilising process, the newly formed nation-state had to find ways to regulate group conflicts so that conflict could be limited to non-violent forms of struggle.

Political fears of communal riots were not unfounded. The 1969 Sino-Malay riots were the most significant racial incident since Singapore's independence. The riots resulted from a spillover of racial riots from Malaysia into Singapore, and Sino-Malay clashes occurred sporadically in Singapore in May and June 1969.⁴³⁸ The fear of upsetting the Muslims appeared to weigh heavily on the minds of the political elites. For instance, Lee disclosed that when the Israelis arrived in Singapore to provide military training to the locals, the Government lied that the Israelis were Mexicans to avoid provoking hostile sentiments from Malays in Malaysia and Singapore.⁴³⁹ The political elites were likely concerned that their words or actions might be misconstrued as anti-Malay or anti-Islam, and trigger anti-government sentiments among the Malay/Muslims.

The Malays were likely worried that the local, Chinese-dominated government might oppress their religious beliefs and rights as citizens. Lee said that he sensed the Malays were terrified by the 1969 racial clashes because of their concerns that the local Chinese-majority government might be against them.⁴⁴⁰ Therefore, there was a need for the state and society to decide on special institutions and safeguards to

⁴³⁸ Kuan Yew Lee, *From Third World to First: The Singapore Story 1965-2000* (Singapore: Times Media Private Limited, 2000), 39.

⁴³⁹ Lee, 31.

⁴⁴⁰ Lee, 39. The May 1969 racial riots were a spillover of Sino-Malay riots in Malaysia to Singapore.

resolve the Sino-Malay and state-Malay tensions that had built up over time. Thus, the period between 1965 and the 1970s was significant as the state introduced mechanisms to minimise conflicts over state-religion relations and the role of religion in society. Two important institutions, the Constitution and the AMLA, were enacted in the first years of Singapore's independence.

This chapter will first examine the decision-making process behind the Singapore Constitution and the AMLA. These two sections will also investigate how the habitus produced these state institutions, which in turn restructured the dispositions of the habitus. The third section will examine the differences in state relations vis-à-vis the Muslims and the Hindus, and how unequal forms of state-religion relations were a feature of the national habitus. Such relations are similar to Bhargava's contextual secularism or Stepan's principled distance. The final section will examine Singapore's religious profile changes between the 1960s and 1970s, and highlight several broad implications for the status of religion and state-religion relations in Singapore.

4.1 The Singapore Constitution – Embedding Principles of Secularity

A Select Committee was established to gather opinions from the public and make recommendations about the adopted Malaysian Constitution which would form the basis of the Singapore Constitution. In 1966, several issues on religion, identity, and rights arose during the debate on the Constitution. Lee reiterated that the Constitution was redrawn with "entrenched" and "enforceable" clauses that "no government c[ould] just cancel", and would guarantee that Singapore would be "an equal society" and no one would be discriminated against on the basis of race,

language, or religion.⁴⁴¹ Lee's speech is the reiteration of secularity norms embodied in the national pledge and public political discourses between 1965 and 1966. As Thio notes, "Singapore differs markedly from Malaysia ... in that [Singapore] implicitly endorsed the principle of secularity as a constitutional value".⁴⁴²

A key issue of the debate was the status of Islam in the Constitution. Under the Malaysian Constitution, Islam was the country's official religion. Singaporean Malays could enjoy special privileges accorded to the Malays in Malaysian states outside of Singapore. Singapore UMNO argued that Singaporeans of other races could also be considered as Malay and be guaranteed special rights if they converted to Islam and adopted the Malay culture. UMNO also advocated for Malays to be granted special rights in education, employment, commerce, and industry and for elections. According to UMNO, multiracial harmony could only be achieved if "every citizen" enjoyed "the same level of prosperity in all spheres"; the special privileges for Malays would allow them to "catch up", in terms of socio-economic status, with the other citizens.⁴⁴³ As previously discussed, special rights for Malays was a contentious issue between Malays and the Singapore Government during the merger, and one of the factors leading to the outbreak of the 1964 riots. Therefore, it was notable that UMNO would continue to argue for special Malay rights on the grounds of equality and multiracial harmony.

Others argued against the status of Islam in the Constitution. Reverend Adam Ibrahim, a Malay Christian, objected to a clause in the Malaysian Constitution that defined Malays as those professing the Islamic faith. He said that the clause denied

⁴⁴¹ Kuan Yew Lee, "A Pledge to Protect Against Discrimination, Speech at Sree Narayana Mission in Sembawang on 12 September 1965," in *The Papers of Lee Kuan Yew: Speeches, Interviews and Dialogues*, vol. 3, 1965 to 1966 (Singapore: Gale Asia, 2012), 85-9.

⁴⁴² Thio, "The Constitutional Framework of Powers", in *The Singapore Legal System*, ed. Kevin YL Tan (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1999), 80.

⁴⁴³ "How Other Races Can Also Be Malays: UMNO," *The Straits Times*, March 4, 1966.

Malays the freedom to profess other religions, and deprived non-Muslim Malays of the privileges that other Malay/Muslims enjoyed.⁴⁴⁴ Ibrahim was asking that the state should not interfere in, or dictate, the religious beliefs of its citizens. Ibrahim's argument was similar to earlier arguments that arose during the debates on the Muslim Ordinance in 1957, on whether the state had the right to decide the right religious practices for the Muslims to follow.

Separately, the Law Alumni of Universities in Malaysia (Singapore) rejected Article 11, which prohibited others from propagating another religion to the Muslim community.⁴⁴⁵ The Select Committee also recognised the contradiction between Article 11 and Singapore's secularity. The Committee later recommended that Article 11 be revoked as it was said to be "inappropriate and indeed inconsistent" that the Constitution of a "democratic secular state like Singapore" would single out a particular religion for special treatment. Article 11 was amended to allow for the freedom of all individuals to profess, practise and propagate religion.⁴⁴⁶ Nonetheless, Lee had earlier given a verbal warning to the Christians not to preach to the Muslims. The neutrality of the state vis-à-vis all religious groups, and equality of all religious beliefs, remained as a key pairing of principles of secularity in Singapore, a conviction that the political elites had voiced in public addresses, as examined in Chapter 3.

The Select Committee also stressed the importance of a secular state for the survival of a multiracial and multireligious society. The Select Committee stated that a multiracial secular Singapore was "one of the cornerstones" of the Government as it was "a dire necessity" for the nation's survival. It stated that for a multiracial society to build a nation on communalism, i.e., "one race, one language, and one religion"

⁴⁴⁴ "The Right to Choose One's Religion —by a Padre," *The Straits Times*, March 9, 1966.

⁴⁴⁵ "The Right to Choose One's Religion —by a Padre."

⁴⁴⁶ "Report of the Constitutional Commission 1966," 9.

meant it would be “doomed for destruction”.⁴⁴⁷ According to the habitus’ mechanisms, past experiences would produce dispositions among members of the habitus. Here, it is clear that the Hertogh riots and the merger had influenced the nation’s notions of secularity, especially in terms of the repercussions of religion and race creating fault lines in society. The national discourse thus asserted that a secular Singapore built on a multilingual, multiracial, and multi-religious society, was necessary for nation-building and expedient for the state’s survival.

Further, the Select Committee highlighted the lack of national identity among Singaporeans due to the multiracial complexion of society. Therefore, the “best and most appropriate” safeguard for minorities was to ensure the fundamental and equal rights of all citizens, and that no one would be discriminated against on the grounds of “race, descent, place of origin, or religion”.⁴⁴⁸ Thus, Article 8 in the Malaysian Constitution, which guaranteed equal rights to all persons, with the caveat of special privileges for Malays and aborigines in the Malay Peninsula, was removed. It was replaced by a clause guaranteeing the equality of all persons before the law. The Committee stated that the new clause would “form an impregnable shield against religious communalism and bigotry”, ease minorities’ fears of discrimination, and form a “firm and lasting foundation” upon which a democratic, equal, just, and multiracial society could be built.⁴⁴⁹ The state thus saw that secularity, and the equality of all

⁴⁴⁷ “Report of the Constitutional Commission 1966,” 1.

⁴⁴⁸ “Report of the Constitutional Commission 1966,” 2-3,5.

⁴⁴⁹ While Article 8 of the Malaysian Constitution guaranteed equality of all before the law, Article 8(5) stated that the clause does not invalidate or prohibit the following:

- (a) any provision regulating personal law;
- (b) any provision or practice restricting office or employment connected with the affairs of any religion, or of an institution managed by a group professing any religion, to persons professing that religion;
- (c) any provision for the protection, wellbeing or advancement of the aboriginal peoples of the Malay Peninsula (including the reservation of land) or the reservation to aborigines of a reasonable proportion of suitable positions in the public service;

religious and non-religious citizens, were essential for nation-building and the formation of a cohesive national identity. The clause was significant, as it exemplified Lee's conviction that the government would not cave into communal demands, and that this principle should come to be enshrined in the Singapore Constitution. It can thus be seen that the equality of all racial and religious groups vis-à-vis the state became a key principle of the national habitus enshrined in the Constitution.

4.2 Further Formalisation of State-Islam Relations through the Administration of Muslim Law Act: A Paradox of Singapore's Secularity

Besides the Constitution, another matter of urgency was the AMLA, which was passed in August 1966. It replaced the Muslim Ordinance of 1957, which was a colonial legacy from the British. The first draft of the AMLA was published in 1960, with plans to establish MUIS and bolster the Syariah court's powers. After the merger, these plans were shelved, as the Malaysian Constitution provided for a Council of Muslim Religion in Singapore and recognised Malaysia's *Yang di-Pertuan Agong* as the Head of Islam in Singapore.⁴⁵⁰

The AMLA could be seen as a special institution to regulate and resolve the most important group conflicts in the shared habitus. The most crucial group conflicts in Singapore then were Malay hostility towards the government and Sino-Malay tensions. It could be argued that the colonial habitus and the Rendel Constitution had

(d) any provision prescribing residence in a State or part of a State as a qualification for election or appointment to any authority having jurisdiction only in that State or part, or for voting in such an election;

(e) any provision of a Constitution of a State, being or corresponding to a provision in force immediately before Merdeka Day;

(f) any provision restricting enlistment in the Malay Regiment to Malays.

i.e. "Report of the Constitutional Commission 1966," 7.

⁴⁵⁰ Sharon Siddique, "The Administration of Islam in Singapore," in *Islam and Society in Southeast Asia*, ed. Sharon Siddique and Taufik Abdullah (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1986), 315; Anthony Green and Muslim Religious Council of Singapore, *Honouring the Past, Shaping the Future: The MUIS Story: 40 Years of Building a Singapore Muslim Community of Excellence* (Singapore: Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura, 2009), 19.

created expectations among the Malays that did not align with what the local political elites had envisioned for the national habitus, thus giving rise to Sino-Malay and state-Islam tensions. Therefore, the AMLA was a necessary institution to mitigate violent group clashes to non-violent tussles. Similarly, Sharon Siddique observes that, given the volatile state of Islam-state relations, it was unsurprising for the government to prioritise the institutionalisation of Islam. The Muslim community was a “politically significant community”, and the 1964 riots, which had occurred during celebrations of Prophet Muhammad’s birthday, “emphasised the need to defuse a politically volatile situation”.⁴⁵¹ Thus, the political elites and society likely saw the AMLA as expedient for civil order, and as a crucial aspect of the national habitus.

This thesis suggests that the AMLA was a significant part of the state-formation process that left its mark on the Muslim and nation-state habitus for several reasons. Firstly, the AMLA institutionalised Islamic practices by extending the jurisdiction of the Muslim Ordinance (1957), thus affecting the religious habitus. The law mandated the establishment of MUIS as a corporate entity that would advise the President of Singapore on matters relating to Islam.⁴⁵² All Muslims and their private matters, such as marriage, divorce, and inheritance, fell under the jurisdiction of MUIS. The AMLA thus expanded the jurisdiction of the previous Muslim Ordinance by centralising control of other Muslim religious affairs, such as the administration of mosques, *wakaf*, *zakat*, and *fitrah* under MUIS.

In addition, the AMLA gave MUIS the powers to criminalise those who did not pay the *zakat* and *fitrah*, thus legally enforcing religious obligations and restricting one’s right to freedom of religious practices. The Muslim Welfare Association criticised

⁴⁵¹ Siddique, “The Administration of Islam in Singapore,” 315.

⁴⁵² Parliament of Singapore, “Report of the Select Committee on the Administration of Muslim Law Bill,” May 31, 1966, A4.

the secular state for criminalising Muslims who had not paid *fitrah* and *zakat* under the AMLA.⁴⁵³ Previously, the individual mosques would independently collect *zakat* and *fitrah* from their followers, and determine the allocation of funds; these practices would be centralised under MUIS. Singapore's first Mufti, Syed Isa Mohd Semait, called the AMLA a "religious act" and a "civil law", because anyone who did not pay the *zakat* could be charged in the Syariah Court.⁴⁵⁴ The AMLA mandated Muslims, through legislation, to perform their religious obligations, and it affected the way religious traditions were followed.

Secondly, the institutionalisation of mainstream Islamic practices marginalised Islamic groups deemed by mainstream Muslims to be deviant. As all religious affairs fell under MUIS, the MUIS Council had the legal prerogative to determine which Islamic beliefs were orthodox or unorthodox. Consequently, the institutionalisation of "orthodox" Islamic practices discriminated against minority Muslim groups and infringed upon their freedom to religious beliefs as guaranteed by the state's secular Constitution.

For instance, the Ahmadi community felt it was unfair that they could be prosecuted under the AMLA, which made provisions for imprisonment or fines for individuals who propagated doctrines or rituals perceived to be contrary to Islam. They surmised that the majority Shafi'i Muslims in Singapore would dominate MUIS. The Ahmadi community, often regarded as deviants by mainstream Muslims, felt that Section 133 of the AMLA was "tantamount to complete encroachment and forfeiture of religious freedom".⁴⁵⁵ The Ahmadi community had initially disagreed with the

⁴⁵³ Parliament of Singapore, B40.

⁴⁵⁴ Green and Muslim Religious Council of Singapore, *Honouring the Past*, 58.

⁴⁵⁵ Parliament of Singapore, "Select Committee on the Administration of Muslim Law Bill," A43, B23. Section 133 stated that those who "teach or publicly expound any doctrine or perform any ceremony or act relating to the Muslim religion in any manner contrary to the Muslim law" are liable to prosecution and charges of imprisonment or fines.

institutionalisation of Islamic practices as there were differences in beliefs and practices among Muslims. Furthermore, they disagreed with MUIS having the final right to disburse *zakat* collections as the Council deemed fit.⁴⁵⁶ Their fears were realised when, in 1969, one of the first *fatawa* (Islamic rulings issued by a recognised authority) issued by MUIS ruled that Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, the founder of the Ahmadi movement, was a *kafir* (non-believer) and *murtad* (apostate from Islam).⁴⁵⁷

The Ahmadis also faced discrimination at the Syariah Court, which refused to solemnise or register marriages involving Ahmadis; MUIS had ruled that the Ahmadis were non-Muslims. This created a legal dilemma where minority Muslim groups who identified themselves as Muslims but were not recognised by MUIS as Muslims could not register their marriages with the Registry of Muslim Marriages (ROMM). The alternative was to register their marriages under civil law, but this was only possible if the Ahmadis declared themselves as non-Muslims.⁴⁵⁸ Presently, the Ahmadi Muslims are not given legal status as Muslims; they cannot register their marriages with ROMM, bury their dead in Muslim graves, or register for *haj*, as all these matters fall under MUIS's purview.⁴⁵⁹

In addition, the Ahmadi community encountered a backlash from local mainstream Muslims, when they established an Ahmadi mosque. In 1986, MUIS and then Minister-in-charge of Muslim Affairs, Ahmad Mattar, castigated the Ahmadi Muslims for their deviant teachings. Mattar also asked MUIS to investigate their "acts of provocation", which included "blatantly" building a mosque and naming it Masjid

⁴⁵⁶ Parliament of Singapore, C70-72. Parliament of Singapore, C70-72.

⁴⁵⁷ Office of the Mufti, "English - Fatwa Ahmadiyah," Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura, accessed June 18, 2021, <https://www.muis.gov.sg/officeofthemufti/Fatwa/English---Fatwa-Ahmadiyah>.

⁴⁵⁸ Parliament of Singapore, "Select Committee on the Administration of Muslim Law Bill," B20-21.

⁴⁵⁹ Nicholas Yong, "Behind the Belief: The Ahmadis of Singapore," *Yahoo! News*, May 2, 2017, <https://sg.news.yahoo.com/behind-belief-ahmadis-singapore-234827643.html>.

Taha. Mattar raised the issue in Parliament, but there was no further debate.⁴⁶⁰ Since all mosques fell under the purview of MUIS, Mattar and Jamiyah (Muslim Missionary Society Singapore) protested against the Ahmadis' use of the word *masjid* (mosque), as this was deemed to violate AMLA Section 75(1).⁴⁶¹ Under this clause, new mosques could only be established in Singapore with the permission of MUIS.

The Ahmadi example revealed that Singapore's secularity did not necessarily guarantee equality for all religious groups in the public sphere. Even though Article 15(1) allows every individual the right to profess, practise, and propagate his religion, these rights were conditional upon "public order, public health or morality" as laid out in Article 15(4). In allowing MUIS and the Sunnis to define the norms of local Islamic practices, Muslims from other sects might inevitably become marginalised by state institutions. These minority Muslims became "abnormalities" that needed to be disciplined and normalised, or excluded from the Muslim habitus. It was significant that a political figure like Mattar would openly castigate the Ahmadi Muslims as deviants. Singapore's secular environment allowed the Ahmadis to survive, but not enjoy equal rights with other Muslims.

Thirdly, the AMLA formalised state-Islam relations by establishing an administrative structure to handle Islamic matters, thus leaving its mark on the national habitus. Notably, Othman was quick to stress that the Government would not imprint

⁴⁶⁰ "Act Now to Tackle Muslim Problems," *The Straits Times*, September 6, 1986; "Combat Deviant Teachings," *The Straits Times*, March 28, 1986; "Stop Sect's False Teachings...", *The Straits Times*, March 28, 1986; Ismail Pantek, "Muis Must Live up to Greater Expectations," *The Straits Times*, May 1, 1986; Parliament of Singapore, "Budget, Ministry of Community Development," Parliament No. 6, Session No. 2, Vol No. 46, Sitting No. 16 (March 27, 1986).

⁴⁶¹ Muslim Missionary Society Singapore (Jamiyah), *Falsehood of Qadianism* (Singapore: Muslim Missionary Society Singapore (Jamiyah), 1988). Section 75 concerns the restriction of new mosque: Muslim Missionary Society Singapore (Jamiyah).

75.—(1) No person shall erect any mosque, or dedicate or otherwise apply any existing building as or for the purposes of a mosque, without the permission in writing of the Majlis.

(2) Such permission shall in no case be given unless the site of the proposed new mosque has been or will, prior to the erection or dedication thereof, be made a wakaf.

its influence on the MUIS Council; the AMLA was only concerned with the administration of Muslim law. Othman clarified that the state was entrusting Muslim affairs to an organisation, and not interfering in how Muslim law was interpreted.⁴⁶² The Select Committee reiterated that the AMLA was a Muslim bill, and that the Government “[would] do everything in its power” to facilitate it since the Muslim community wanted it.⁴⁶³

Fourthly, the state drew the line at funding a religious institution. The Bill was a “Muslim matter”, and the Muslims would “administer it, and they will be responsible for it”, and MUIS would not be funded by the state.⁴⁶⁴ The Government rejected proposals from some Muslim parties, such as UMNO Singapore, which had requested that the Government fund MUIS expenditures, as Singapore was a secular state.⁴⁶⁵ The AMLA was akin to the British provision of Malay vernacular schools as a structure to offer Quranic education without funding religious education.

Nevertheless, despite the state’s emphasis that the Government was not involved in the day-to-day running of MUIS, the allowance for a religious council under the state apparatus contradicted the secular nature of the state. In addition, the President of Singapore, who could be a Muslim or non-Muslim, had the authority to appoint and cancel important appointments in the MUIS Council.⁴⁶⁶ Furthermore, MUIS was a statutory board that fell under the purview of the then Ministry of Social Affairs, and its annual expenditures were discussed in Parliament. MUIS was the only

⁴⁶² “Muslim Law Bill Is Passed in Parliament,” *The Straits Times*, August 18, 1966.

⁴⁶³ Parliament of Singapore, “Select Committee on the Administration of Muslim Law Bill,” C115.

⁴⁶⁴ Parliament of Singapore, “Select Committee on the Administration of Muslim Law Bill,” C115.

⁴⁶⁵ Parliament of Singapore, C59-60.

⁴⁶⁶ Sections 9, 10 and 30 of AMLA give the President of Singapore authority to elect and remove members on the MUIS Council. The President of Singapore will appoint the President of MUIS, who will submit a list of nominees to be elected to the Council to the Singapore President. The President of Singapore will also appoint the Mufti in consultation with the Council. In addition, the Singapore President will elect not more than five members of the MUIS Council on the recommendation of a cabinet minister. Moreover, the President of Singapore maintains the right to cancel the appointment of any Council member with valid reasons.

religious institution that fell under governmental purview, and its employees were considered to be civil servants. Even though the Government insisted that it was setting up an infrastructure for the Muslims to govern themselves, the state remained as the overarching arbiter of power relations within the Muslim habitus. MUIS, as a religious institution embedded within secular bureaucracy, signified a certain degree of state interference in religious affairs, despite the Government's assurance that the AMLA was not an act of governmental interference, nor a mix of religion and politics.

Most Muslims saw MUIS as government interference in religious affairs. In the early days of MUIS, most Muslims did not recognise its function as an Islamic religious council and saw it as a government agency. Former MUIS officer Jaffar Kassim said that Muslims would “blast [MUIS officers] left and right”; they felt that MUIS was implementing policies on behalf of the government.⁴⁶⁷ Syed Isa said that many Muslims saw MUIS as the “government lackey” as they felt that MUIS was siding with the Government on many issues and did not look after the interests of Muslims.⁴⁶⁸ The fact that Malays found MUIS unacceptable could be explained by the habitus. Since the habitus is a learned process, and since MUIS was a relatively new structure of the nation-state habitus imposed on the religious habitus, a number of Muslims could not accept MUIS as their religious authority in the early days.

The AMLA represented a paradox in the Singapore habitus; albeit one that was necessary, given the delicate balance of relations between the Malays and the Government. The habitus demands a mechanism to mitigate conflicts to a level of non-violent confrontation. Thus, the AMLA could be seen as a delicate balancing act, ensuring that giving in to some Malay/Muslim demands did not come at the expense

⁴⁶⁷ Green and Muslim Religious Council of Singapore, *Honouring the Past*, 49, 63.

⁴⁶⁸ Zakir Hussain, “Keeping the Faith, While Looking Forward – Shaikh Syed Isa Semait, Mufti of Singapore from 1972-2010,” in *Majulah!: 50 Years of Malay/Muslim Community in Singapore*, ed. Zainal Abidin Rasheed and Norshahril Saat (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing Co. Ltd, 2016), 76.

of other groups in society. The AMLA showed that the secularity of Singapore was not so much a clear separation of religion and state, but more a case of the state determining what was the best status for a religious group in society in order to maintain civil order.

4.2.a Mosque Building Fund

In the 1970s, the Muslim community was upset about governmental policies resettling Singaporeans into urban flats, as resettlement resulted in the demolishing of their old homes and mosques. In 1975, PM Lee proposed the amendment of the AMLA to include provisions for the Mosque Building Fund (MBF); he mooted the idea in a meeting he had with eight MUIS Council members in December 1974.⁴⁶⁹ The Ministry of Culture issued a press release, stating that the eight leaders acknowledged “[that] with the redevelopment of Singapore, it was inevitable that places of worship, among other buildings, will have to give way to high rise buildings”.⁴⁷⁰ Minister Masagos Zulkifli said in hindsight that while other religious groups could successfully rebuild their places of worship in new urban areas, the Malays encountered difficulties as their economic status was relatively weaker. Such a position was “not politically tenable” for the Government.⁴⁷¹ Masagos was likely implying that the perception of mosques being demolished was not a politically viable position for the Government because the Malay/Muslims already felt marginalised by governmental policies. Such grievances could compound existing state-Islam tensions.

At this juncture, the AMLA had evolved into a mechanism through which state-Muslim conflicts could be peacefully resolved. The formalisation of state-Islam

⁴⁶⁹ Hussain, 216.

⁴⁷⁰ “Singapore Government Press Statement - Collection by CPF for Building of Mosques” (Ministry of Culture, January 29, 1975), National Archives of Singapore.

⁴⁷¹ Masagos Zulkifli Masagos Mohammed, “50 Years On: Singapore’s Malay/Muslim Identity,” in *Majulah.!: 50 Years of Malay/Muslim Community in Singapore*, 54.

relations gave the Government a channel to communicate directly with religious leaders to assuage their concerns. The AMLA also provided a structure whereby the MBF could be introduced to mitigate Muslim concerns. Thus, it became a structure through which tensions could be reduced to peaceful forms of disagreement, and then be resolved.

Notably, the MBF Bill mandated that every employer of a Muslim was obliged to make monthly contributions to the fund, although the employer could choose to recover the amount of the contributions from the employee. MBF was designed as a voluntary opt-out scheme, meaning that Singaporean Muslims had to apply to cease their contribution.⁴⁷² It thus mandated that the employer, whether Muslim or non-Muslim, was obliged to contribute to the fund on behalf of his Muslim employee. Potentially, this could mean extending an Islamic obligation to a non-Muslim employer.

The mosque issue resurfaced in 1987; local Muslims took offence at PM Lee's remark that the Malay community would not have the ability to build new mosques without the Government leasing land at below the market rate. The local Malay media alleged that the Government's land acquisition had infringed on Muslims' rights to *wakaf* land that Muslim philanthropists had donated to the Muslim community. The Malaysian publication *Mingguan Islam* accused Lee of being anti-Islam and anti-Malay. Mattar published a reply to the editor of *Mingguan Islam*, and the PM's office published an official response, stating that the Government "d[id] not discriminate against any race or religion in its land acquisition policy".⁴⁷³

A notable aspect of the AMLA was that it facilitated a two-way accommodation between the Government and MUIS. MUIS issued a *fatwa* permitting mosques to be

⁴⁷² Parliament of Singapore, "Administration of Muslim Law (Amendment) Bill," Parliament No. 3, Session No. 2, Vol. No. 34, Sitting No. 16 (August 19, 1975).

⁴⁷³ "PM's Office Explains Policy on Mosque Land," *Straits Times*, October 10, 1987, Overseas edition.

built on lands with a 99-year lease; traditionally, mosques must be built on *wakaf* land that was granted in perpetuity. Mosques could not be built on lands with permanent leases as land was scarce and expensive in Singapore. The Government had also made concessions and extended land leases for mosques to 99 years, while leases for other religious places of worship were capped at 30 years.⁴⁷⁴ The Government made it clear that Muslims were given more favourable terms than other religious groups. Unlike other religious groups, MUIS did not have to tender for mosque sites in new towns as it was a government policy to build a mosque in every residential town. Other religious groups had to compete for land to build places of worship in new residential towns. The allocated land for mosques was also priced three to four times less than its market value, while other religious groups had to pay for land at market prices.⁴⁷⁵

Two-way accommodation between the mosque and the state is another key secularity norm. The state and religious leaders made concessions to prevent tensions from escalating between the state and the Muslim community. At this point, the religious and nation-state habitus had reached a consensus on the principles, structures, and limits of secularity in the national habitus. The interaction between state policies and religion led to a reinterpretation of religious practices and state concessions. Muslim leaders adjusted their religious expectations and issued a *fatwa* that altered religious guidance on *wakaf* land and mosques. At the same time, the state acknowledged that contentious issues involving the Malays could become inflammatory; probably because of the historical experiences of the Hertogh riots and the 1964 racial riots. The political expediency of granting concessions to the Muslim

⁴⁷⁴ Masagos Mohammed, "50 Years On: Singapore's Malay/Muslim Identity," 55.

⁴⁷⁵ "PM's Office Explains Policy on Mosque Land."

community did not simply arise from the protection that the state was obliged to grant the Malays as laid out in the Constitution. The habitus also informed the state that Malay/Muslim issues were delicate; the Malaysian media could potentially exploit race and religion issues to stir communal and religious tensions.

4.3 Request by Hindus for a Hindu Religious Council Rejected

The Hindu community tried, unsuccessfully, to request concessions similar to those made in favour of the Muslims. They cited the AMLA and the MBF as precedents, stating they should receive the same treatment from the state as the Muslims. MP P. Govindaswamy proposed integrating the Hindu Advisory Board and the Hindu Endowments Board to form a Hindu Religious Council similar to MUIS. Govindaswamy observed that the Hindus also encountered difficulties raising funds to build temples.⁴⁷⁶ The issue had surfaced in letters written to the media and during Hindu religious meetings. Several Hindus wrote to *The Straits Times* urging for a fund, similar to the MBF, to be established for the Hindus. A Hindu individual said temples were essential to the lives of the Hindus. He quoted a Tamil saying – “Don’t stay in towns where there are no temples” – and said his Hindu forefathers built temples in places to which they had migrated.⁴⁷⁷ This was similar to the request for proposed Hindu marriage legislation in the 1950s; the Hindus had then also argued that they were entitled to equal rights as the Muslims as both groups were minorities.

The Hindu Advisory Board refused to comment, as it was a “policy matter”; they stated that the board’s function was strictly to advise the Government on Hindu matters and “nothing more”.⁴⁷⁸ The board’s silence was probably due to self-restraint,

⁴⁷⁶ Parliament of Singapore, “Budget, Ministry of Social Affairs,” Parliament No. 4, Session No. 1, Vol No. 37, Sitting No. 15 (March 22, 1978).

⁴⁷⁷ Marimuthu Sreenivasan, “Up to Hindu Advisory Board to Give Advice,” *The Straits Times*, February 9, 1978.

⁴⁷⁸ Govindram Rane, “Hindu Board Silent Over Calls to Set Up Fund for Temples,” *The Straits Times*, February 16, 1978.

actualised through the social learning process it had undergone as a member of the shared habitus. It was probably the board's view that legislation for a fund to build temples fell under the state's purview, and it did not want to come across as challenging state authority.

Interestingly, Mattar adopted the same arguments that Goode used to reject the Hindu request in the 1950s. Mattar said that it was not feasible for the state to grant similar concessions to the Hindus as they were "not homogenous in theology nor in the system of rituals of worship". There were different sects and a variety of Hindu gods. Further, there was "no specific Hindu law which governs the conduct of its adherents so intimately in their everyday lives as Islamic law does in the conduct of Muslims". To create, for Hindus, legislation similar to the AMLA would result in dissatisfaction among the Hindus; the different sects would compete for positions on an elected Hindu Council. Thus, Mattar's view was that "the administration of such [a] fractious group [would] be poor" and that "this alone [would] be reason enough for advising against its formation".⁴⁷⁹ On both occasions, Hindu requests were rejected, probably because there was no consensus among the Hindus; the sensing was that forming a unified council to mandate religious practices would result in more disharmony. The state largely steered clear of theological issues. It appeared that the smaller we-groups were unwilling to cede their authority to a larger Hindu habitus that would have the authority to standardise practices like marriages, religious practices and the management of Hindu temples.

However, this thesis notes that by the same reasoning, the AMLA should not have been introduced; Islam was not a homogenous religion either. Non-mainstream Muslims had raised similar concerns against the AMLA. However, their concerns were

⁴⁷⁹ Parliament of Singapore, "Budget, Ministry of Social Affairs."

dismissed, because the AMLA was important to the habitus as an institution to mitigate possible conflicts between the Malays and the Government. This shows that the Government's stance, on whether a religious demand was to be granted, likely depended on whether the concession would mitigate potential tensions.

The differences between state-Islam and state-Hindu relations reflected another aspect of the secularity structure in Singapore – unequal, “neutral” relations between the state and religious groups. State-Islam relations were formalised through MUIS and the Syariah court under the AMLA, while the state maintained informal relations with other religious groups. Differences in state-religion status and privileges resulted in unequal power relations within the national habitus. The Government made concessions for the Muslims as a matter of political expediency, because habitus instincts had informed the political elites that communal and religious feelings were easily stirred among the Malay Muslims and could escalate to physical violence. However, while sometimes biased, such concessions – as seen in the tender for land to build religious places of worship – did not directly impinge upon the liberties of other religious groups.

Another probable reason for the Government's reluctance to grant similar concessions to the Hindus was because it might open a floodgate, whereby other religious groups would request similar concessions. This would result in a situation tantamount to the legal pluralism of the colonial period, a governance alternative already rejected by the political elites. This scenario was also not ideal for a secular state; it would be seen as direct governmental interference in religious matters and infringe on state neutrality towards religion. Thus, state interference or non-interference in religious affairs appeared to be dependent on whether those state actions would protect civil order or result in societal tensions and disorder.

4.4 Changes in Singapore's Religious Profile and the Role of Religion in Society in the 1970s

Between the 1950s and 1980, Singapore society underwent a significant change in terms of religious composition; this resulted, for some religious groups, in changes to how they perceive the role of religion in society. This section will briefly examine statistics and secondary sources explaining why and how these changes occurred and investigate how the rapid growth of Christianity among Singaporeans affected power relations in the national habitus.

There was a sharp increase in the number of Christians, as shown in Figure 3. Government-commissioned reports suggested that Christianity's largest gains were among the ethnic Chinese and Indians, while the Malays remained predominantly Muslims. The proportion of Christians among Chinese Singaporeans increased from 2.4% in 1921, and 2.8% in 1931, to 10.6% in 1980. Among the Indian Singaporeans, the Christian proportion grew from 5.6% in 1921, and 6.0% in 1931, to 12.4% in 1980.⁴⁸⁰ In another study conducted by Sng, 41 churches saw a combined congregational growth of 61.1% between 1970 and 1978.⁴⁸¹ Notably, Tong Chee-Kiong noted that changes in religious composition in society during the colonial period was "due more to migration than any major social changes in Singapore society".⁴⁸² It can be inferred, given that the Chinese were initially resistant to Christian efforts to convert them during the colonial period, the increase in the number of Chinese Christians hinted at changes in social norms between generations.

⁴⁸⁰ Kuo, *Religion in Singapore: An Analysis of the 1980s Census Data*, 6, 10.

⁴⁸¹ Bobby Sng, "The Church Moving into the Eighties," *Impetus*, July 1980, 6.

⁴⁸² Chee-Kiong Tong, "Religious Trends and Issues in Singapore," in *Religious Diversity in Singapore*, 33.

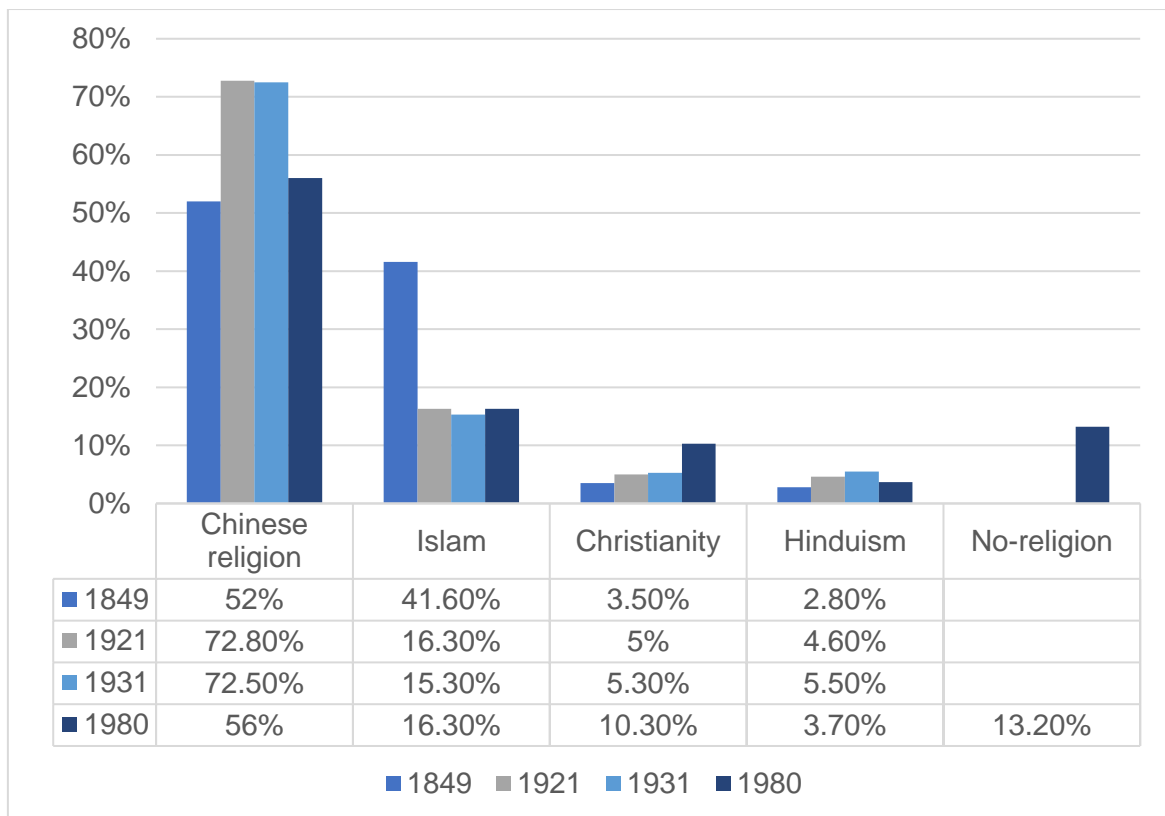


Figure 3 Profile of Religions in Singapore⁴⁸³

There appears to be a significant shift in the relevance of Christianity in society in the 1970s. In December 1971, *New Nation* claimed that some Singaporeans felt that the church had no relevance in society. Some lapsed Catholics reportedly felt that the institution was outdated in its views on divorce and birth control. Other Singaporeans felt that religion had “no place in a society that need[ed] to be materialistic” to keep up with the rapid pace of modernisation and development. Some Christians also felt that “problems [were] best left to the government to solve” as the government was “better equipped and [knew] best”.⁴⁸⁴ Thus, it appears that

⁴⁸³ The data from 1849, 1921 and 1931 is obtained from Chee-Kiong Tong, *Rationalizing Religion: Religious Conversion, Revivalism and Competition in Singapore Society* (Boston: Brill, 2007), 57. Tong explained that some of the data might not add up because of inaccuracies in data collection. The first official census on religion was collected in the 1849 census. The first national census in 1970 did not investigate religious affiliation of residents in Singapore. The 1980 data is obtained from the 1980 census in Singapore, see Eddie C Y Kuo, *Religion in Singapore: An Analysis of the 1980s Census Data* (Singapore: Ministry of Community Development, 1989), 4.

⁴⁸⁴ Betty L. Khoo, “Only 170,000 are Christians here,” *New Nation*, December 23, 1971.

Christianity was losing its social significance among its adherents. However, at the end of the decade, the *Straits Times* noted that the “new muscle” of Christians in society was of concern. Journalist Ilsa Sharp observed that “the church in Singapore [was] silently strong, and growing”.⁴⁸⁵ The differences in the two narratives revealed the changing significance of Christianity in society at the beginning and end of the decade.

Several studies, including one from a research team commissioned by the Ministry of Community Development, have examined the reasons for the increased conversion rate to Christianity among the Chinese Singaporeans. The fact that the Government had commissioned scholars to research church growth in Singapore showed that it was concerned about the changes in the religious complexion of society. Sng suggests that the displacement of one’s identity, due to urbanisation and modernisation, had led individuals to turn to religion. He observes that urbanisation had resulted in the uprooting of three-quarters of Singapore’s population from rural areas to urban dwellings between the 1960s and the 1980s, leading people to be more open to receiving the Gospel.⁴⁸⁶ However, Jon Quah disagreed with Sng, saying there was insufficient evidence to substantiate the correlation between relocation and open attitudes to Christianity.⁴⁸⁷ Sng’s observation is different from what the secularisation theory posits – that modernisation will lead to the decline of religion in society. Thus, secularisation has not occurred in Singapore at this juncture.

Similar to Sng, Tham Seong Chee’s study on religion and modernisation in Singapore found that an increasingly materialistic society would see more individuals turn to religion. The stress from everyday pressures, or increased disillusionment and

⁴⁸⁵ Ilsa Sharp, “The Church, the State and You ...,” *The Straits Times*, December 25, 1978.

⁴⁸⁶ Sng, “The Church Moving into the Eighties,” *Impetus*, July 1980, 6.

⁴⁸⁷ Jon S.T. Quah, “Religion and Religious Conversion in Singapore: A Review of the Literature,” Report Prepared for the Ministry of Community Development, December 1987, 49–50.

dissatisfaction with their lives, might lead some to seek comfort and fulfilment in religion.⁴⁸⁸ In an undated interview, Lee said anomie, which he defined as a feeling of disorientation, arose after society changed and individuals lost their bearings. The feeling of anomie led one to search for meaning in life, and for eternal truths, giving rise to increased religiosity in urbanised Asian countries like Japan, Korea, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore.⁴⁸⁹ Likewise, Keith Hinton suggests that urbanisation disrupted existing social relationships, and that people started searching for a sense of belonging and community.⁴⁹⁰ However, Kuo, Quah and Tong disagreed with the anomie factor, stating that their research found no evidence to suggest that the anomie level was high in Singapore society.⁴⁹¹

Another reason for the shift in religious affiliation was the intellectualisation of religion. Tong defines intellectualisation as the process whereby individuals move from “an unthinking and passive acceptance of religion to one where there is a tendency to search for a religion that they regard as systematic, logical”. Some Chinese individuals began to view Chinese ritual practices as “illogical and irrational”. Chee suggests that the shift to rationalisation was due to the nature of Singapore’s education system, which encouraged “systematic and rational” thinking.⁴⁹² Similarly, Tham’s study found that Singaporeans were more driven to learn religious philosophy, rather than to be contented with simply practising religious rituals.⁴⁹³ Notably, the intellectualisation of religion differs from the trajectory of secularisation. Secularisation

⁴⁸⁸ “The Straits Times Says.. It’s Better to Be Informed,” *Straits Times*, October 5, 1982.

⁴⁸⁹ Abhilash Nambiar, *Lee Kuan Yew Links Religious Fervor to Anomie Caused by Rapid Change*, Youtube, 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z_T-Tz5qyHQ.

⁴⁹⁰ Keith Hinton, *Growing Churches Singapore Style* (Singapore: Overseas Missionary Fellowship, 1985), 106–7.

⁴⁹¹ Eddie C Y Kuo, Jon S.T. Quah, and Chee-Kiong Tong, “Religion and Religious Revivalism in Singapore,” Report Prepared for the Ministry of Community Development, October 1988, 18–19.

⁴⁹² Chee-Kiong Tong, *Rationalizing Religion: Religious Conversion, Revivalism and Competition in Singapore Society*, *Rationalizing Religion* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 4.

⁴⁹³ “The Straits Times Says.. It’s Better to Be Informed.”

suggests that modernised societies will see a decline in religiosity. However, the opposite was happening in urbanised Asian societies.

Further, Sng suggests that the younger generation of Singaporeans had grown up distanced from the homelands and traditions of their parents or grandparents who were immigrants, thus resulting in the decline of adherence to Chinese religions.⁴⁹⁴ The kind of openness to Christianity seen among the Chinese in the 1970s and 1980s was different from the hostile attitudes of early Chinese immigrants. Chinese religions might have occupied a more significant role in the lives of the early immigrants due to the social, political, and economic functions of religious groupings. However, as religious groupings declined in social and economic significance, religious affiliations became less associated with the Chinese identity, and individuals became more open to religious conversion.

Correspondingly, Tham's study found that the non-Chinese religions had a more significant influence on Hindu and Malay culture than Chinese religions had on Chinese culture. This was because in Hinduism and Islam, some cultural rituals became embedded as religious obligations. In contrast, Chinese religious rituals were performed as part of customary rites, or "in hope that their material welfare will improve".⁴⁹⁵ Hinton also observes that Buddhism and Taoism "made religion a separate subsystem that could stand on its own". As a result, for the Chinese, religious identity was not inherently tied to family or clan association.⁴⁹⁶ Likewise, Joseph Tamney and Riaz Hassan found that Chinese ethnic identity was independent of religious affiliation.⁴⁹⁷ This was unlike the case for Malay/Muslims, Indian-Muslims, or Indian-Hindus.

⁴⁹⁴ Sng, "The Church Moving into the Eighties," 6.

⁴⁹⁵ "Rituals Aren't Enough for People," *The Straits Times*, October 4, 1982.

⁴⁹⁶ Hinton, *Growing Churches Singapore Style*, 40.

⁴⁹⁷ Quah, "Religion and Religious Conversion in Singapore: A Review of the Literature," 58–59.

Given the close ethnic and linguistic ties associated with Islam and Hinduism in Singapore, Kuo, Quah, and Tong suggest that these two religions were “unacceptable options” and not readily available to the Chinese.⁴⁹⁸ Islamic religious instruction and sermons were mostly in Malay, except for a few Indian Muslim mosques. On the other hand, since Christianity was perceived as “ethnically neutral”, it presented a viable option for Chinese individuals seeking a religion.⁴⁹⁹ This was probably why Christianity presented as a viable and attractive option for the Chinese.

It can be argued that Christian fellowships have taken over the role of the Chinese clan groupings from the colonial period. Hinton’s study found that 37.7% of the respondents felt that church programmes were the most important factor in selecting churches. Another 39.9% were attracted to specific churches because of links to family or friends, and another 8.9% selected churches based on the friendliness of church congregants.⁵⁰⁰ Kuo, Quah, and Tong note that social activities organised by evangelical churches and para-church groups cultivated “a sense of belonging and identity”, especially for the younger individuals.⁵⁰¹ The religious habitus thus became a form of social group identification for the local Christians.

4.4.a Implications of Changes in Christian Societal Profile in the 1970s

The emergence of a large Chinese Christian community resulted in discussions between Christians, the state, and society on continuities and changes in the shared national habitus. Given the interconnectedness of groups in the national habitus, the newly emergent Chinese Christian habitus might result in changes to the shared habitus. Since the increase in the number of Christians was an unplanned social

⁴⁹⁸ Kuo, Quah, and Tong, “Religion and Religious Revivalism in Singapore,” 16–17.

⁴⁹⁹ Kuo, Quah, and Tong, 16–17.

⁵⁰⁰ Quah, “Religion and Religious Conversion in Singapore: A Review of the Literature,” 56. Hinton’s *12 Churches Study* (Singapore: 1982) is an unpublished work that I am unable to locate.

⁵⁰¹ Kuo, Quah, and Tong, “Religion and Religious Revivalism in Singapore,” 17.

change, the state and other groups in society had to decide how to respond to this “new” change.

It can be argued that in the late 1970s, there were indications that collective Christian action could disrupt existing relations in the national habitus. Previously, the state had not encountered religious groups that were political or activist in orientation. John Clammer notes that the state considered religion to be “largely the private concern of the individual”, and that religious ideologies had largely been “apolitical” since 1965.⁵⁰² In 1977, Lee expressed his concerns that religious agendas might influence public policy, noting that 21.75% of the MPs were Christians, a proportion far higher than that of Christians in the population. There were also seven Catholics, constituting 10% of Parliament. Lee said that the party had to take a “closer look” at candidates in the future, and remarked that the Government might be outvoted on abortion and voluntary sterilisation issues.⁵⁰³ It appeared that Lee was concerned about how the considerable number of Christian politicians could affect governance principles.

Thus, this thesis suggests that Singaporean churches and Christians also had to rethink their roles, and their relations with other groups, in society. Firstly, the churches had to contend with the change of their roles in society as some of their social functions during the colonial period were assumed by modern state institutions. Reverend Richard Ong from the Wesley Methodist Church noted that previously, churches had been involved in mission schools and social welfare services, at a time when such services were otherwise non-existent. With increased governmentalisation of society, the state took over the roles of religious groups. Governmentalisation of

⁵⁰² John Clammer, *The Sociology of Singapore Religion* (Singapore: Chopmen Publishers, 1991), 21, 25, 40.

⁵⁰³ Sharp, “The Church, the State and You ...”

led to the establishment of modern state institutions and improved education, healthcare and social welfare infrastructure. The churches had thus “slowed down” in providing these services to avoid duplication of governmental services. Therefore, both Ong and Yap Kim Hao, the Methodist Bishop of Singapore, said churches had to reconceive their roles in society through experiments in new forms of service, in order to continue to play a role in nation-building.⁵⁰⁴ The 1970s was a period during which churches sought to realign their functions in society, especially in terms of how church teachings translated to action in society and nation-building. The religious habitus had to adapt to their place within the national habitus after ceding its authority to the state.

Secondly, churches had to reconfigure their interactions with the state and other religious groups. Ong mentioned that churches had a “new understanding of nation-building” as they had to “stand on equal terms with all the other religions in a secular society”. Previously, churches were under the patronage of the British colonial government.⁵⁰⁵ Ong was possibly referring to the relationship that churches had with the British rulers, due to the English monarchy’s patronage of the Anglican church. The colonial administration had elected a Colonial Chaplain, and the Bishopric Endowment Fund made provisions for his allowance and other expenses. The position of the Colonial Chaplain was removed in 1930, and an annual ecclesiastical grant was instead paid to St Andrew’s Cathedral.⁵⁰⁶ The ecclesiastical grant was likely abolished; the last mention of it was found in a Legislative Assembly discussion in 1958. With the abolition of colonial rule, the Christians were no longer under the state’s patronage, and had to contend with secularity and equality among religious

⁵⁰⁴ Khoo, “Only 170,000 Are Christians Here,” *New Nation*, December 23, 1971; “Singapore Churches’ Important Role in Nationbuilding,” *The Straits Times*, March 19, 1970; “Views of Church Leaders,” *New Nation*, December 23, 1971.

⁵⁰⁵ “Views of Church Leaders.”

⁵⁰⁶ Singapore Legislative Assembly “Ecclesiastical Grants and Grants to Priests of Islam, Buddhism and Other Religions,” Parliament No. 0, Session No. 2, Vol No. 3, Sitting No. 3 (February 13, 1957).

groups. Power relations had shifted because the state had become a neutral party and redistributed power relations between religious groups and between the state and religious groups.

Thirdly, the Christians, most of them being new converts, had to contend with their membership of a new religious habitus. The new religious habitus intersected with their racial habitus, and the national habitus, on levels not previously experienced. Therefore, the Christians had to find new shared connections across these different levels of identification. Two episodes highlighted the churches' attempts to redefine their roles in nation-building, and to expand their activities beyond the traditional domain of religious activities.

The local churches embarked on the short-lived experiment of the Singapore Industrial Mission (SIM), also known as the Jurong Industrial Mission. The SIM was established in June 1967, under the Council of Churches of Malaysia and Singapore. It operated on the premises of the Jurong Christian (Lutheran) Church and obtained most of its funding from local churches. The SIM sought to contribute to nation-building through co-operation with the Jurong Town Council, government agencies, and community groups, to address social problems arising from industrialisation. However, Sng notes that the SIM's leader, Japanese Ronald Fujiyoshi, taught its members to be unafraid of "controversy". Under Fujiyoshi's leadership, the SIM engaged in aggressive tactics to fight for the rights of the industrial workers in Jurong, putting them in direct conflict with civil servants. In July 1971, the Registrar of Society (ROS) issued a warning to the church for allowing the SIM to use its premises, and SIM ceased operations in 1972.⁵⁰⁷

⁵⁰⁷ Bobby E.K. Sng, *In His Good Times: The Story of the Church in Singapore 1819-2002* (Singapore: Bible Society of Singapore and Graduates' Christian Fellowship, 2003), 254–56; ISPY, "Jim: What's That?," *New Nation*, August 25, 1971.

Notably, SIM social workers called themselves “community organisers” – they “awaken[ed] ... the residents from inertia to action” by organising residents into groups to fight for their needs. These organisers worked on various issues, ranging from tackling the mosquito problem on Jurong Industrial Estate, to finding premises for a group of Malay mothers who wanted to organise kindergarten classes for their children. The SIM inspired a similar movement in Bukit Ho Swee estate, which was started jointly by the parish at the Catholic Church of St Bernadette, the Anglican parish at Our Saviour, and the Franciscan Sisters of Mary. The Bukit Ho Swee movement operated from Nazareth Centres run by the Catholic Church and was funded by contributions from Catholic and Protestant Churches, and the Lee Foundation.⁵⁰⁸ The Government later revealed that the SIM was banned after evidence was found that the group had instigated industrial unrest and advised workers to ignore directives from government-recognised unions.⁵⁰⁹

This incident was significant as it was probably the first overt clash in church-state relations since independence. Following the habitus’ mechanisms, ROS’s warning could be seen as an external constraint and disciplinary tactic that showed the Government would not tolerate any form of collective activism that it perceived as anti-government. It was also a form of correction for those who had not adhered to behavioural norms of the national habitus. In particular, the Government probably interpreted social activism with religious roots as a mix of religion and politics, and violated the separation of politics and religion. Thus, the SIM was prohibited from using church premises. By restricting the SIM’s activities, the Government imposed

⁵⁰⁸ Wee Lian Tan, ““CO” Girls at Work,” *The Straits Times*, September 27, 1970.

⁵⁰⁹ “Links to Industrial Disputes of 1970s,” *Business Times*, May 28, 1987; “The Triumvirate,” *The Straits Times*, May 28, 1987.

new limits on the societal role of religion in the habitus to prevent future church-state tensions and discipline religious groups.

Another episode was the church's self-imposed ban on the Justice and Peace News, which presented a dilemma about the "appropriate" Christian response when Christians deemed state policies to be incongruent with religious beliefs. Even though Singaporean Catholics generally refrained from publicly commenting on birth control and the government's sterilisation policy, a group named the Diocesan Committee for Justice and Peace published an article warning that "political regimes may pass away, but the Word of God remains". Archbishop Olcomendy later reportedly banned the publication for its controversial articles on sterilisation and education in Singapore as it was overly critical of the church and the state. However, the media reported that many priests initially disregarded the Archbishop's ban on the publication.⁵¹⁰ Notably, the priests' disobedience could be an indication that there was a lack of consensus among members of the religious habitus, such that they defied corrective efforts by Olcomendy.

This episode raised the question of whether religious groups had the right to criticise state policies, if these policies contradicted their religious beliefs, or if such criticism crossed the threshold between religion and politics. The Justice and Peace News was circulated internally within Catholic churches, which meant their opinions were restricted to a predominantly Catholic audience. Olcomendy's action, which revealed a tacit acceptance and internalisation of the place of religion in society, can

⁵¹⁰ Sharp, "The Church, the State and You ..."; "Priests Defy Catholic Church Stand," *The Straits Times*, August 24, 1976; "Church Newsletter Stops Publishing," *The Straits Times*, October 22, 1976; "J and P News Complies with the Ban," *New Nation*, October 21, 1976; "Abortion on Demand," *The Straits Times*, October 26, 1974; Sian Chin Chua, "Speech" (Opening Ceremony of the Family Planning Campaign, Singapore Conference Hall, July 20, 1972), National Archives of Singapore, MC/Jul/40/72(Health). The Singapore Government introduced the two-child policy in the 1970s. Under the two-child policy, the Government introduced measures to discourage families from having more than two children. In addition, the Government introduced the Voluntary Sterilisation Act and Abortion Act in 1974.

be seen as an act of self-constraint that was actualised through external social controls, e.g. the Government's earlier repression of the SIM. The Government's earlier actions had disciplined the religious habitus into accepting that religion and politics should not mix. Thus, this norm became part of the religious habitus that Olcomendy belonged to, and resulted in internal measures to curb behaviour that deviated from the norm.

4.5 Secularity Norms and Structures in the National Habitus

Chapter 3 has discussed historical experiences that fed into the national habitus and produced certain dispositions presented as secularity principles and structures. This chapter has examined how those dispositions produced policies and laws, like the Constitution, the AMLA, and the MBF, in the early years of state formation and nation-building.

The Hertogh riots, Singapore's short-lived merger with Malaysia, and the race riots reinforced the volatility of religion, particularly Islam, in the consciousness of the political elites. These historical events also revealed specific trigger points at which religious and racial tensions might destabilise society and threaten state power. Thus, the state was willing to create what Elias calls "special institutions" to address and prevent society's most important group conflicts. At this juncture, the most important conflicts were Malay distrust of the Government, and Sino-Malay tensions.

The Constitution and the AMLA can be viewed as special structures instituted by the state and society to maintain secularity and social harmony. They exemplified specific state and societal attitudes towards the status of religion in society. While the political elites saw secularity as crucial for the state's survival, they also had to balance uneven expectations from Malay/Muslims that stemmed from their special status in society as enshrined in the Constitution. In addition, in the initial years of state-

formation, it appeared that these special structures were not regarded as unique exceptions by other religious groups. The Hindus pushed for similar concessions to those enjoyed by the Muslims, perhaps on the basis they were both minority groups protected under the Constitution. The state's rejection of Hindu requests reinforced the AMLA as a unique paradox within Singapore's national habitus and differentiated power relations between the Muslims and the Hindus in the national habitus.

Another secularity principle was the state's neutral relations with all religious groups. This neutrality did not necessarily entail equality in the state's relations with all religious groups. Unequal relations were necessary at times because the state had to balance different religious demands within the national habitus. The Government rejected the Hindu requests because it was cognisant that granting rights to a specific religious group might result in similar demands from other religious groups.

This chapter also examined how the sudden increase in the proportion of Christians in society was an unexpected social change that could result in drag effects from other habitus. As these converts adopted new identities as Christian Singaporeans, they also sought to reconceive their roles in society and such actions would affect existing power relations in the national habitus. The growth of Singapore as a nation-state and increased governmentalisation also meant that government services replaced some of the societal roles previously performed by Christian groups, such as the running of mission schools. Thus, Christians had to find new ways to contribute to nation-building. The disproportionate socio-economic and political power of Christians in society was also something new in the 1970s.

Nonetheless, there was no tangible change to the institutional view of religion in the public sphere and related structures at this juncture. State and religious actions revealed a rebalancing of power relations to maintain consistency in the habitus. In

anticipation of future church-state conflicts, the state imposed limits on the SIM to prevent religious actors from participating in social activism. This act could be interpreted as an external disciplinary constraint. Similarly, Olcomendy, in an act of self-restraint and being cognisant of secularity norms, prevented Catholic churches from publishing socio-political commentary. Religious changes in the 1970s thus did not disrupt the national habitus at this juncture. However, the political elites had expressed their concerns about the significant religious changes in society; these concerns will be examined in the next chapter.

5 RELIGIOUS REVIVALISM AND VISIBILITY IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE IN THE 1980S

In the mid-1970s and the 1980s, religion became more visible in global politics. In the West, particularly in the US, Christian evangelical movements grew in strength and expanded into the Third World. In 1979, the monarchy in Iran was overthrown, and the religious leader Ayatollah Khomeini established the Islamic Republic of Iran, the first Islamic state since the fall of the Ottoman Empire. Hindu-Muslim conflicts in India intensified in the 1980s. In the Philippines, in 1986, the Catholic Church helped rally the masses to overthrow Ferdinand Marcos' corrupt military regime.⁵¹¹

It was thus unsurprising that these global and regional examples featured prominently in Singapore's governmental debates over the proposed MRHA in the late 1980s. The global trend of religious revivalism in the 1970s and 1980s also extended to Singapore. The Iranian Government sponsored members from the local Muslim youth organisation Himpunan Belia Islam (HBI; Muslim Youth Assembly) to visit Iran between December 1981 and February 1982. Local journalist Salim Osman said almost all HBI members (except himself and two other males) converted to Shi'a Islam after visiting Iran.⁵¹² The *White Paper on Maintenance of Religious Harmony* also observed "a definite increase in religious fervour, missionary zeal, and assertiveness" among religious groups in Singapore, interpreting this as "part of a worldwide religious revival affecting many countries, including the US and the Middle East."⁵¹³ The *Paper*

⁵¹¹ Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, 3–5.

⁵¹² Salim Osman, Interview, March 24, 2016, Reel 13/24, Accession Number 004029, National Archives of Singapore; Nurlaila binti Khalid, "Understanding the Sunni-Shiite Transitions Among the First Generation Malay Shiites in Singapore" (Thesis, National University of Singapore, 2017), 122–23. Interestingly, HBI was formed when a group of Muhammadiyah youth members left to form the new group in 1971. Separately, Nurlaila suggests that it was unclear if the Iranian trip was the main reason behind the HBI members' conversion. Through her interviews with HBI members from the 1970s and 1980s, she found that the first seven HBI members adopted Shi'a Islam only after meeting some students from Qom, Iran, who were on transit in Singapore.

⁵¹³ White Paper on Maintenance of Religious Harmony, Cmd. 21 of 1989, Presented to Parliament by Command of The President of the Republic of Singapore, December 26, 1989, 3.

was also concerned that religious sensitivities might lead to violence which would destroy the “good record of religious harmony built up in recent decades” since the Hertogh riots in 1950.⁵¹⁴

As previously mentioned, the state commissioned a series of reports on religion in society in the 1980s. One report observed that many Christians and Muslims displayed “renewed and revitalised interest in religious activities”. It also noted the Government’s concern that shifting trends in religion might “threaten to disrupt the subtle and delicate equilibrium” in Singapore.⁵¹⁵ The state perceived religious revivalism as a sudden social change that will give rise to drag effects from other groups in society and disrupt existing power relations in the national habitus.

This chapter will examine the religious trends and events in the 1970s and the 1980s that led to changes in the public status of religion for local Christians and Muslims. Between the mid-1970s and the 1980s, there was a shift in how religions were practised in society. Sections 5.1 and 5.2 will examine the societal dimension of religion from Muslim and Christian perspectives. These sections will investigate changes and continuities in Muslims and Christians’ anticipation of their roles in society and how these expectations led to shifts in state-religion and interreligious relations. The final section will examine how institutional perspectives of religion evolved in the late 1970s and 1980s, based on the Government’s interaction with religious leaders and groups. In this chapter, we will also examine how secularity

⁵¹⁴ “White Paper on Maintenance of Religious Harmony,” December 26, 1989, 3.

⁵¹⁵ Kuo, Quah, and Tong, “Religion and Religious Revivalism in Singapore,” 1–3. The aims of the project were six-fold. The reports aimed to: identify religious trends in Singapore; identify characteristics of those who were attracted to Christianity, and reasons for and process of their conversion; understand the extent and nature of religious revivalism in Singapore; analyse the present positions and future statuses of persons professing to belong to the categories of Taoism, Buddhism and “No-Religion”; discuss the social and political implications of Singapore’s evolving religious make-up and increased religious revivalism; and propose recommendations for future policy consideration on issues relating to religion in Singapore.

norms that were inculcated in the citizens (as discussed in Chapters 3 and 4) became reinforced or changed through disciplinary strategies at various junctures.

5.1 Islamic Religious Revivalism for the Malay Muslim Community

The Iranian revolution, and the subsequent global competition for influence between Shi'a and Sunni Muslims, influenced local Muslims and resulted in changes in how they perceived the role of Islam in their lives and society. In hindsight, Masagos noted that the Iranian revolution and consequent globalisation of Islamic doctrines affected local Muslim worldviews. The political competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran manifested as an ideological conflict between Wahhabism and Shi'a Islam. Both countries attempted to propagate Wahhabism and Shi'a Islam globally by funding local mosques and deploying Wahhabi or Shi'a scholars in local mosques.⁵¹⁶ Further, Masagos observed that the spread of Islamic doctrines affected local Muslim perspectives, how they practised Islam, and their adoption of Arabic terms into the Malay vocabulary.⁵¹⁷ Likewise, Salim observed that the Iranian revolution was a “watershed” moment that provided the “spark” for global Islamic revivalism.⁵¹⁸ The religious habitus, given that its affinity extends across land borders, could be influenced by external forces.

The Government's non-intervention in religious affairs also provided the space for the propagation of global Islamic ideology. Khairudin suggests that the state's secular policies allowed religious groups to exist so long they did not threaten the state.⁵¹⁹ Consequently, the competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran and the spread of Islamic doctrines from these countries extended to Singapore through

⁵¹⁶ Masagos Mohammed, “50 Years On: Singapore's Malay/Muslim Identity,” 59–60.

⁵¹⁷ Masagos Mohammed, 59–60.

⁵¹⁸ Salim Osman, Interview.

⁵¹⁹ Syed Muhd Khairudin Syed, “Sustaining Islamic Activism in Secular Environments: The Muhammadiyah Movement in Singapore,” SSRN Scholarly Paper (Rochester, NY: Social Science Research Network, August 14, 2009), 13. Sye

Iranian and Saudi funding of local Islamic organisations. The Saudi Government and the Muslim World League, a pan-Islamic organisation based in Saudi Arabia, gave generous donations to help build or renovate local mosques.⁵²⁰ Local Islamic organisations also received monetary donations from the Saudi, Kuwaiti and Libyan Governments. For instance, Persatuan Muhammadiyah Singapura (Muhammadiyah) received funding to build its new headquarters. In addition, some Muhammadiyah members who studied in Saudi Arabia were paid monthly salaries from the World Islamic League.⁵²¹ A local Muhammadiyah member said that the 1980s and 1990s were a “renaissance period of Islam” in Singapore, especially for Muhammadiyah which saw a large increase in membership numbers.⁵²² Both Muhammadiyah and HBI also organised *usrah* (study circles), classes and workshops, further perpetuating Salafism and Shi’a Islam in Singapore, thus contributing to heightened Islamic consciousness among some Muslims.⁵²³ During this period, identification among Malay/Muslims with their racial-religious habitus likely became stronger due to the increased links between members of the we-habitus through membership in Islamic organisations and exclusive social activities restricted to the we-group. This change would affect the power relations between the Malay/Muslims and the national habitus, as we will examine in this section.

⁵²⁰ “\$89,000 Saudi Gift,” *The Straits Times*, August 13, 1976; “Muslim Group Gives \$53,000,” *The Straits Times*, October 23, 1988; “Mattar to Council: Promote Missionary Projects,” *The Straits Times*, December 28, 1981.

⁵²¹ “Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied, “The “Other” Muhammadiyah Movement: Singapore 1958—2008,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 42, no. 2 (June 2011): 285-288; 295–96. Muhammadiyah Singapore is not affiliated with Muhammadiyah in Indonesia. Muhammadiyah Singapore was founded by three Indonesian men, Rijal Abdullah, Abdullah Rahman Harun and Amir Esa, who arrived in Singapore after the Indonesian Revolution in 1949 and started conducting religious classes locally. According to Khairudin, there was scant evidence to indicate that they were members of Muhammadiyah in Indonesia. Their local following grew, and students attending their classes rallied together to form Muhammadiyah Singapore in 1958.

⁵²² Aljunied, 296.

⁵²³ Aljunied, 291; Khalid, “Understanding the Sunni-Shiite Transitions,” 122–23. In 1973, several Muhammadiyah youth members split from Muhammadiyah to form HBI.

Nonetheless, the Islamic organisations recognised the need to respect the secular boundaries in society. For instance, Muhammadiyah highlighted in 1974 that they would foster cooperation with the Government as the state would only allow Muhammadiyah the freedom to propagate Islam if both the state and Muhammadiyah leaders “upheld the peace and security of the country”. Muhammadiyah also emphasised that their mission was to “enter into the fold of Islam whilst not neglecting their roles as citizens of their country”.⁵²⁴ It can be surmised that there was a recognition on the part of Muhammadiyah members of their dual belonging to the religious and the national habitus. Muhammadiyah’s rhetoric was also an assurance to the state that they would not seek to challenge state authority and still recognised the state as the highest order of power relations in the country, so as not to affect Muhammadiyah-state relations.

This section will examine how heightened Islamic consciousness among Muslims led to changes in how they conceived state-Islam relations and their relations with other religious groups in society. This section will also address the debates that arose from questions on Islam and the Malay identity. As observed in Chapter 2, reformist Islamic ideas in the early twentieth century were not well-received by local Malay Muslims. This was remarkably different from what unfolded in the 1970s and 1980s, as local Muslims became influenced by Islamic ideology and trends imported from the Middle East, consequently affecting the power dynamics between religious groups. Section 5.1.a will examine debates in the Malay media on the orthodoxy of Shi’a Islam, and concerns in the Malay/Muslim community arising from the conversion of some Malay/Muslims to Shi’a Islam. The HBI members who converted to Shi’a

⁵²⁴ “Sambutan Ulang Tahun Ke 16 Muhammadiyah Singapura, 2-3 February 1974”, Abdul Rahman Harun’s private papers cited in Aljunied, “The “Other” Muhammadiyah Movement: Singapore 1958—2008,” 293–94.

Islam were among the first generation of Malay Shi'a Muslims in Singapore. Section 5.1.b will focus on the development of Islam as a central expression of the local Malay identity. With urbanisation and rapid economic development, the Malay/Muslim community's search for identity and rootedness led to increased identification with Islam. Section 5.1.c will examine how Islam as a rallying point for the Malay/Muslim community and local discussions on Islamic notions of state and identity challenged the secular state. This section will also discuss how the increased focus on Islam for Malay/Muslims affected state-Islam relations.

5.1.a *Shi'a-Sunni Divide*

The conversion of HBI members to Shi'a Islam was an unplanned social process. Some members of the Malay community were resistant to changes in their social habitus, especially when these HBI members were seen as the "first" Malays to convert to Shi'a Islam. In August 1986, leaders from three Islamic organisations, some *asatizah*, and graduates from Madrasah Aljunied, expressed concern over some HBI members' conversions to Shi'a Islam. Several *asatizah* who graduated from Al-Azhar University in Egypt and Madinah University in Saudi Arabia tried to convince HBI members to reconsider their conversions.⁵²⁵ According to this thesis's investigation of media discourses, it appeared that Muhammadiyah was the main Islamic organisation leading the protest against conversions to Shi'a Islam among the Malay/Muslim community. The organisation also distributed copies of anti-Shi'a videos and books, and revoked the memberships of some Muhammadiyah members who had converted to Shi'a Islam.⁵²⁶ Other Shi'a members who remained within Muhammadiyah reportedly tried to "spread doubts" on Sunni Islam.⁵²⁷

⁵²⁵ Salim Osman, "Pengaruh Syiah Dikhuatiri Bawa Pecah-Belah," *Berita Minggu*, August 31, 1986.

⁵²⁶ Osman; Aljunied, "The "Other" Muhammadiyah Movement: Singapore 1958—2008," 291.

⁵²⁷ Aljunied, "The "Other" Muhammadiyah Movement: Singapore 1958—2008," 291.

The mainstream Malay/Muslim habitus response stemmed from a drag effect to the emergence of new we-group – the Shi'a Malays, posing a threat to the Sunni dominant Malay/Muslim habitus. Concerns arose among the Sunni Muslims that the Malay/Muslim identity was under threat from Shi'a Islam. Salim suggested that the Malay community could not accept Shi'a Malays as most Shi'a Muslims in Singapore were of Persian, Indian or Pakistan descent.⁵²⁸ As discussed in Chapter 2, lineage was an important characteristic of the Malay/Muslim habitus. Thus, Shi'a Islam was seen as a threat to the Malay/Muslim-Sunni identity, and regarded by the Malay/Muslims as a group affiliation external to their identity. Ironically, Muhammadiyah was not accepted by the Muslim community either, in the early years after its formation, as some local Muslims did not consider Salafism to be within the fold of Islam.⁵²⁹ The Malay/Muslim community's slow acceptance of Muhammadiyah and similar hostile attitudes to Shi'a Islam thus suggested that they were initially resistant to changes to what they regarded as religious norms for organisations.

Moreover, some Muslims and non-Muslims were concerned that the Malay Shi'as would import Iranian political influence into Singapore. Ironically, Muhammadiyah was concerned that the local Shi'as would import foreign polemics (between Shi'as and Sunnis) into Singapore and cause division within the Malay society.⁵³⁰ By publicly bringing up the issue and distributing anti-Shi'a propaganda, it could be argued that Muhammadiyah was importing global differences between Iran and Saudi Arabia into Singapore.

Interestingly, some local *asatizah* advised Wahhabi and Shi'a Muslims to resolve their tensions and unite over other salient issues, such as the threats posed

⁵²⁸ Salim Osman, "Antara Sunah Dengan Syiah," *Berita Minggu*, September 7, 1986.

⁵²⁹ Osman.

⁵³⁰ Osman, "Pengaruh Syiah Dikhuatiri Bawa Pecah-Belah."

by the local Ahmadi and Christian communities.⁵³¹ Following the habitus mechanism's reasoning, such an emphasis on the exclusivity of one's religious identity versus other groups in society posed a threat to the stability of the shared habitus. Such exclusivity would likely encourage hostility and power conflicts between religious groups, and might have implications for how the state perceived Islamic revivalism.

5.1.b *Islamic Revivalism and Malay Identity*

Corresponding to the trend of Islamic revivalism was the proliferation of *dakwah* (to invite, call or summon) groups in Singapore. *Dakwah* refers to Islamic missionary work and contains two main elements: to deepen the faith of Muslims; and to spread the Islamic faith to non-Muslims. Osman observed that Muslims in Singapore were influenced by Islamic revivalism in Malaysia and Indonesia. However, the local *dakwah* movement was not targeted at the evangelisation of non-Muslims, but focused on helping nominal Muslims to become better Muslims.⁵³² Osman's observation suggested local *dakwah* movements were initially focused on the interior deepening of one's faith.

Dakwah activities in Singapore were institutionalised in 1974, through the establishment of Jawatankuasa Haiah Dakwah (JHD; Department of Missionary Activities). JHD organised activities on new estates to encourage the Muslim community to deepen their faith. In 1979, MUIS, in co-operation with seven other Muslim organisations, launched a nationwide *dakwah* campaign aimed at deepening the faith of Singaporean Muslims on new housing estates.⁵³³ In the same year, MUIS launched a four-month missionary campaign in several housing estates and mosques. The campaign aimed to educate the Muslim community about Islamic teachings, and

⁵³¹ Salim Osman, "Fahaman Syiah: Tuduh-Menuduh Kurang Disenangi," *Berita Minggu*, September 7, 1986.

⁵³² Salim Osman, Interview.

⁵³³ "Muis To Launch Preaching Campaign," *The Straits Times*, April 4, 1979.

to establish closer relations between the Muslim community and religious leaders.⁵³⁴ According to Mohamed Ali, JHD organised classes to train missionaries; inoculate Muslims against the perceived threats of Christianity and deviant sects like Ahmadiyyah; and improve one's Quranic recitation skills. Further, Mohamed Ali notes that "JHD's activities were massive", and their presence was established in "every housing estate in Singapore". JHD also organised public lectures at stadiums; these attracted audiences of between 5,000 and 30,000.⁵³⁵ In 1984, MUIS announced plans to build a centre where Singaporean Muslims could meet to study and conduct *dakwah* activities.⁵³⁶

Other Islamic organisations, such as Muhammadiyah and HBI also organised workshops, classes, and *usrah*. Khairudin mentions that Muhammadiyah members who were teachers at local schools invited their students to participate in outdoor activities, leadership retreats, forums and talks organised by Muhammadiyah. Muhammadiyah also held large-scale events at public venues. These events included mass prayer sessions on *Hari Raya Puasa* (end of Ramadan) and *Hari Raya Haji* (Islamic festival during which *korban* is performed) in stadiums, open fields, housing estates, and secular schools. At these events, Muhammadiyah also distributed sermons that proposed Islamic solutions to challenges faced by Muslims both locally and globally.⁵³⁷

⁵³⁴ "4-Month Drive by Muis," *New Nation*, May 12, 1979.

⁵³⁵ Mohamed Ali, "Uniformity and Diversity among Muslims in Singapore" (Unpublished Master's Thesis, National University of Singapore, 1989) cited in Mohamed Imran Mohamed Taib, "Neofundamentalist Thought, Dakwah and Religious Pluralism Among Muslims in Singapore," *Dialogosphere* (blog), March 2, 2016, <https://dialogosphere.wordpress.com/2016/03/02/neofundamentalist-thought-dakwah-and-religious-pluralism-among-muslims-in-singapore/>; Hussain, "Keeping the Faith," 85.

⁵³⁶ "Soon – a Religious Centre for Muslims," *Singapore Monitor*, February 8, 1984.

⁵³⁷ Aljunied, "The "Other" Muhammadiyah Movement: Singapore 1958—2008," 298. Hari Raya Haji commemorates Ibrahim's willingness to obey God's command to sacrifice his son. An important ritual practiced on this day is the *korban*, which is the ritual sacrifice of livestock to Allah.

Notably, the *usrah*, whether formally organised by Islamic organisations or held informally among interested Muslims, discussed ideas by Muslim Brotherhood thinkers Syed Qutb and Hassan al-Banna. Such discussions often proposed Islamic alternatives to the secular nation-state. The *usrah* is a discussion circle popularised by the Islamist group Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. According to Imran Taib, the local Fellowship of Muslim Students Association discussed Islamic ideas, and solutions to problems faced by the Malay community in Singapore, in *usrahs* consisting of six to 10 members. Their discussions included several works like Qutb's *Milestone* and al-Banna's *al-Mathurat*.⁵³⁸

Similarly, HBI held classes that prompted its members to look at Islam in social, political, and economic dimensions. Isa bin Kamari, a participant at HBI's sessions, said that such classes expanded his worldview of Islam beyond religious rituals.⁵³⁹ Other HBI members interviewed by Nurlaila mentioned that al-Banna and Qutb were also discussed at HBI *usrah* or informal non-HBI reading groups. One of Nurlaila's interviewees disclosed that he was attracted to the "Ikhwanul Muslimin" (Muslim Brotherhood) movement, which was "very, of course, very political".⁵⁴⁰ Further, two of Nurlaila's interviewees disclosed that they had propagated Shi'a Islam to other Muslims through the *usrah*.⁵⁴¹ Some HBI members revealed that they were attracted to Shi'a Islam, as they viewed the sect as a viable political alternative for any individual who wanted to live under an Islamic system. Others expressed admiration for Ayatollah Khomeini's ability to stand up to Western powers and show that an Islamic

⁵³⁸ Mohamed Taib, "Neofundamentalist Thought, Dakwah and Religious Pluralism Among Muslims in Singapore."

⁵³⁹ Isa bin Kamari, Interview, March 23, 2019, Reel 1/6, Reel 1, Accession Number 004419, National Archives of Singapore.

⁵⁴⁰ Khalid, "Understanding the Sunni-Shiite Transitions," 82.

⁵⁴¹ Khalid, 90–91.

state was a viable way of governance.⁵⁴² From the above disclosures, we could surmise that the *usrah* served as an important channel through which Islamist ideas from the Middle East were transmitted to local Muslims. The *usrah* also facilitated discussions on alternative Islamic ways of governance. We see the emergence of Islamic religious-political authority among local Muslim discourses challenging the Malay/Muslim recognition of the secular state as the highest order in Singapore.

5.1.c State-Islam Relations

This thesis's research suggested that the 1970s and 1980s appeared to be a period of increased tensions between the state and Muslims. An indication of the strain in state-Islam relations was the PAP's loss of votes from the Malay voters in the 1980s. First Deputy Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong observed that Malay support for PAP had declined significantly in the 1984 and 1988 parliamentary elections.⁵⁴³ Goh also said he encountered booing from young Malays at an electoral vote counting centre; he felt the Malays were expressing their unhappiness towards the Government.⁵⁴⁴

From the late 1970s onwards, foreign publications and preachers expressed sentiments critical of the Singapore Government for being anti-Islam. In 1979, the Saudi-based Muslim World League's publication *The Journal* released an article that accused the Singapore Government of "conspiring with the Israelis to annihilate the Muslims in Singapore". The article alleged that MUIS was "another instrument of the non-Islamic government" to make and enforce policies on Muslims even if these policies were contradictory to Islam. Further, the article reported that in response to the Government's new policy on the *azan* (call to prayers), some Muslims had

⁵⁴² Khalid, 83–84.

⁵⁴³ "We Lost More Malay Votes Than We Won, Says Chok Tong," *The Straits Times*, October 1, 1988, Overseas Edition edition.

⁵⁴⁴ "Malays Must Decide Who Can Best Meet Their Needs," *The Straits Times*, September 11, 1988.

purportedly published a pamphlet entitled “Call for a Holy War”. The pamphlet encouraged Muslims to oppose anyone who attempted to oppress Islam with “the last drop of [their] blood”. In addition, the article claimed that the Government “spared no effort to liberally bulldoze the Muslim villages, replacing them with factories or roads”. The article also alleged that the Government’s policy of disallowing Muslims to serve in National Service (there was compulsory military enlistment for Singaporean men aged above 18) had a spillover effect because it affected their future employment opportunities.⁵⁴⁵

Similarly, foreign speakers preaching in Singapore expressed anti-government sentiments and preached inter-religious hostility in their sermons. When Syed Isa reminded foreign preacher Ahmed Deedat of the importance of religious harmony in Singapore, Deedat reportedly knocked on the table and castigated local Muslim leaders for being “too easy to bend and not brave enough to speak up”.⁵⁴⁶ In addition, Deedat told Singaporean Malays that they were too soft compared to South African Muslims. He also chastised them for being complacent, and for failing to convert Chinese Singaporeans to Islam, thus allowing the latter to seize power from them.⁵⁴⁷ In addition, Deedat made derogatory comments about Christianity. Deedat challenged the legitimacy of local religious authorities and sought to incite tensions between religious groups in the national habitus.

During his visit to Singapore in April 1973, Imaduddin Abdul Rahim, an Indonesian preacher, said he saw “church steeples “piercing the skyline” and large non-Muslim prayer houses” in Queenstown and Toa Payoh (newly established

⁵⁴⁵ “The Plight of Muslims in Singapore,” *The Journal, Rabitat Al-Alam Al-Islami*, September 1399, 49–54.

⁵⁴⁶ Hussain, “Keeping the Faith,” 124.

⁵⁴⁷ Mohamed Taib, “Neofundamentalist Thought, Dakwah and Religious Pluralism Among Muslims in Singapore.”

residential estates in Singapore).⁵⁴⁸ The Malaysian preacher Haji Mat Saman Khuti reportedly called upon Singaporean Malays to unite against the Chinese and said that the Malaysian Malays empathised with their predicament. Local politicians responded by openly rebutting these allegations in public statements.⁵⁴⁹

From the above examples, several possible areas of contention between Malay/Muslims and the Government may be observed. Although these claims were expounded by foreign publications and preachers, it was likely that some local Malay/Muslims shared similar sentiments, and that was why these speakers presumably gained traction among the local audience. Firstly, some government policies had affected how Muslims practised their religion, which probably incurred discontentment among Muslims. Separately, Syed Isa observed that the Muslim community viewed the ban on loudspeakers to broadcast the *azan* with hostility, even though the ban also extended to other religious communities.⁵⁵⁰ Secondly, preachers encouraged Christian-Muslim tensions and stoked fears of Christian domination in Singapore. Deedat also mentioned the issue of Chinese domination over Malays in their own land; the Malays were considered the indigenous people of Singapore. Lastly, *The Journal* mentioned another point of growing contention – the exemption of Muslims from compulsory National Service. It appeared that foreign elements had seized on existing local Malay/Muslim dissatisfactions with the Government. The foreign preachers emerged as resistance forces to state authority. The exclusion of Muslims from compulsory military service was also a form of exclusion from the

⁵⁴⁸ “Why Four Muslim Preachers Were Banned from Singapore,” *The Straits Times*, August 17, 1987.

⁵⁴⁹ “Banned Muslim Preacher Hits Back at S’pore Govt,” *The Straits Times*, September 5, 1987; “Mattar Replies to Writer Accusing PM of Being Anti-Malay,” *The Straits Times*, September 20, 1987.

⁵⁵⁰ Hussain, “Keeping the Faith,” 75–76, 84. The Government allowed the *azan* to be broadcasted over the Malay radio station in return for the mosques turning their loudspeakers inwards.

national habitus, given that National Service was akin to a compulsory rite of initiation into adulthood that most young Singaporean males went through.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the state disrupted two clandestine Muslim groups that wanted to usurp the secular Government and install an Islamic state in Singapore. The ISD thwarted the attempts of a local Ikhwan group, a brotherhood movement that sought to establish an Islamic state in Singapore by revolutionary force.⁵⁵¹ The group comprised 21 members, mostly recruited from religious classes conducted by an unnamed Malaysian preacher based in Singapore. The Ikhwan group sought to recruit pre-university students and undergraduates through discussions groups held on campuses and used these groups to propagate revolutionary ideas among the local Muslims. This group aimed at rallying local Muslims to demand that the Government implement Islamic laws (akin to those in Iran or Saudi Arabia), and to threaten an armed uprising should the Government refuse their demands. The group's leading members were arrested under the provisions of the ISA, while the ISD issued warnings to the remaining members.⁵⁵²

Shortly after, in January 1982, the ISD arrested members of a clandestine Muslim group styled Organisasi Pembebasan Rakyat Singapura (Singapore People's Liberation Organisation; SPLO), which had attempted to topple the Government through inciting communal unrest and "pit[ting] the Malays against Chinese". Two SPLO members were arrested before they could proceed with their plans to distribute pamphlets at the National Stadium, where about 24,700 people had gathered to celebrate Prophet Muhammad's birthday. The pamphlets alleged that the

⁵⁵¹ "Why Four Muslim Preachers Were Banned from Singapore."

⁵⁵² "White Paper on Maintenance of Religious Harmony," 19. It is unclear when the Ikhwan group was formed. Imaduddin was likely to be the unnamed Malaysian preacher as another media report mentioned the connection between Imaduddin, Dzulfiqhar and the Ikhwan group. Dzulfiqhar was said to be influenced by Imaduddin after a meeting in 1976.

Government was oppressing the Malays and suppressing the Malay language and culture. The pamphlets also accused MUIS of adversely influencing Islamic thinking and claimed that the Government used Islam to deceive Muslims to achieve its political ends. The pamphlet said that it was the duty of Muslims to “protect the morality of Islam by whatever means” and that they should “imbibe a political spirit among our people to crush the suppressive policies of the PAP fascists”. The MHA’s press release stated that had the pamphlets been distributed, they would have “whipped up the feelings of the crowd which could have led to a civil disorder”. Separately, the ISD commented that the pamphlets could have stirred up communal feelings and led to “riots and bloodshed”.⁵⁵³ The actions of the Ikhwan group and the SPLO sought to destabilise the national habitus and disrupt the relative positions of the state and the religious groups within that habitus. Their actions were also a direct challenge to state authority, given that the state is regarded as the highest order in the power hierarchy that smaller habitus had ceded their power to.

Salim said that upon his return to Singapore after a one-month visit to Iran in 1982, customs officers confiscated magazines, books, and audiotapes that he brought from Iran. Items that were confiscated included material on stirring revolutionary zeal among the Muslim youths, and material on the role of the *ulama* in toppling an un-Islamic government.⁵⁵⁴

Following the habitus’ logic, state actions taken against the Ikhwan group and the SPLO were instances of what Elias calls external social restraints, imposed over others to reinforce and normalise behavioural norms. The state needed to discipline

⁵⁵³ “10 Extremists Arrested in Raids,” *The Straits Times*, January 11, 1982; Leslie Fong and Ahmad Osman, “Inside Story of Terror Plot,” *The Straits Times*, January 23, 1982; Ministry of Home Affairs, “Members of Clandestine Group Arrested,” January 10, 1982, 1–2, Press Release 11-6/82/1/11, National Archives of Singapore.

⁵⁵⁴ Salim Osman, Interview.

the Ikhwan group and SPLO because these groups had deviated from the norms of state-Islam relations. The state appeared was intolerant of Islamic revivalist ideas which advocated for an Islamic state; such notions challenged the foundations of Singapore's secularity and the state's sovereignty. To the Government, the Ikhwan group and the SPLO had exploited religion for their political ends and subversive purposes, and challenged the separation of religion and politics in the public sphere. They had also presented an alternative centre of power to the ruling Government. Their actions were unacceptable as they "pose[d] serious threats to religious and racial harmony and public order". Thus, the Government stated the need to "maintain a rigorous separation between religion and politics", or there might be "religious friction, communal strife and political instability in Singapore".⁵⁵⁵ Such swift state disruption was thus a state-imposed external restraint to correct those who had not adhered to secularity norms, specifically the separation of religious rhetoric from the public sphere.

The state's action could be interpreted as a learned habitus response. The events of the 1950s and 1960s were experiences that actualised habitus norms. The state then did not tackle communal issues quickly enough to prevent similar concerns from escalating into physical violence. It is likely that these past episodes had been actualised as internal self-control of the collective habitus. Thus, upon Singapore's independence, local political leaders had disciplined the society via public speeches that stressed they would not hesitate to use laws to deal with those who sought, in future, to inflame racial or religious sensitivities in Singapore. The habitus' disciplinary response was to use the law to mitigate racial and religious tensions and discipline those who had deviated from and directly challenged the norms, in order to reiterate

⁵⁵⁵ "White Paper on Maintenance of Religious Harmony," 18–19.

the norms and regulate power relations within society. The process of “normalisation” via external constraints and internalisation on the part of the habitus through actualisation and experience re-occurs when a new challenge is presented, giving rise to the state’s use of disciplinary strategies and the reinforcement of habitus norms. The state, being the highest authority in the shared habitus that other we-groups had ceded part of their power to, had to act as the regulator of power relations.

It could also be seen that the state’s external actions had created self-restraint and reinforcement of norms among Singaporeans. State actions sent a clear message to society that the secular state would not tolerate any transgression of religious elements into the political sphere. The state’s message of the necessity of a secular state to preserve peace and harmony in society appeared to be internalised by some Muslim community leaders. When reflecting on the above incidents, Syed Isa said that the Hertogh riots reminded Singaporeans how “religion can aggravate and cause very big problems in a nation”. Therefore, he understood why the Government emphasised that “secular law which respects all religions” was fundamental.⁵⁵⁶ Isa, who was interviewed by the ISD in 1978, said that he became more “subdued” and wary of speaking about things he was unsure of.⁵⁵⁷ Similarly, the Association of Muslim Professionals (AMP) said secularity in Singapore was a “necessity” because “of the belief that racial and religious harmony can only be safeguarded if religion was separated from the affairs of the state”.⁵⁵⁸

Similarly, MUIS Council member Maarof Salleh, who was also interviewed by the authorities in relation to one of the abovementioned incidents, said that he realised

⁵⁵⁶ Hussain, “Keeping the Faith,” 123.

⁵⁵⁷ Kamari, Interview. Isa was probably part of the Ikhwan group as he revealed that he was interviewed in 1978 with a group of 20 for being involved in religious discussions.

⁵⁵⁸ “Malays/Muslims in 21st Century Singapore: Prospects, Challenges & Directions” (National Convention of Singapore Malay/Muslim Professionals, Singapore: Organising Committee, National Convention of Singapore Malay/Muslim Professionals, 1990), 140.

that Singapore was different from other societies; some of the ideas they discussed in the *usrah* might be incompatible with Singapore society. He was aware that Singaporean Muslims were a minority in a “secular, democratic state”. His past experiences reinforced the need to tell Muslims that “it is not their duty ... to really go against secularism”. A secular government was the best outcome for a multi-religious society because “a secular government, being neutral to religion” would protect the rights of the minorities. Therefore, the Muslim minority was “better off in a situation under a secular, democratic government rather than a government who is pro-religion”, or a government with religious bias.⁵⁵⁹

Based on the above statements, these Malay/Muslim leaders appeared supportive of secularity as a means of protecting their right to religious beliefs. Disciplinary constraints of the state led to the actualisation of self-control through experience, creating notions of the place of religion in society. Thus, members of the national habitus instinctually knew what to say or do. The reference to past events also showed how norms produced by historical sequences and past interactions between state and religious actors had a self-reinforcing effect.

Next, this thesis will discuss, from the state perspective, several factors and events accounting for the increase in tensions between Malays and the state during this period. In the late 1980s, there was a series of open discussions on state-Malay relations. One of the main issues was the lower socio-economic status of Malays compared to other racial groups in Singapore. Hussin Mutalib, a local academic, said there was a sense of helplessness among Malay/Muslims, who felt that “if Malays take one step, non-Malays take two or three steps [in the progression of socio-economic

⁵⁵⁹ Maarof Salleh, Interview, October 1, 2004, Reel 10, Accession Number 2818/18, National Archives of Singapore; Maarof Salleh, Interview, October 14, 2004, Reel 12, Accession Number 2818/18, National Archives of Singapore.

status]”.⁵⁶⁰ The general sentiment appeared to be that Malays were grappling with socio-economic problems and identity issues in the early decades of Singapore’s independence.

As mentioned in Section 5.1.b, the notion that an Islamic solution could address local problems specific to the Malay/Muslim community was an attractive proposal discussed openly by some groups in the Malay/Muslim community. Such discussions altered the Malay/Muslims’ view of religion; Islam gained increased social and public significance for the Malay/Muslim community. Thinkers like al-Banna and Qutb, whose works were discussed among Malay/Muslims in *usrahs*, provided justifications for Muslims to fight and establish an Islamic state. Nurlaila said her interviewees disclosed that *usrahs* in Muhammadiyah and HBI discussed the viability of religious alternatives to governance.⁵⁶¹ It appeared that Muslims were attracted to Islamic thinkers who proposed Islamic solutions to the identity and socio-economic crises they were facing in society.

Community elites had a different view of the Malays’ socio-economic problems. It appeared that some elites viewed Islam as a scapegoat for societal problems in political discourses,. Discussions between politicians and academics, dissecting the “Malay problem” and Islam, featured prominently in the media in the 1980s. Politicians often emphasised that Malays lagged behind other racial groups in terms of employment, education, and socioeconomic status. The Malay problem was associated with Islam because of the public tendency to conflate Muslim and Malay identities; this was due to the close correlation between racial and religious identities in Singapore. For instance, a Malay principal said the Malay philosophy of life worked

⁵⁶⁰ “Malays: What More Needs Doing?,” *The Straits Times*, November 5, 1988, Overseas Ed. edition.

⁵⁶¹ Khalid, “Understanding the Sunni-Shiite Transitions,” 96.

against the Malay student's progression in life. The Malays were disadvantaged because they were "more contented in seeking happiness through religion" rather than striving to be the best.⁵⁶² This statement implied that Islam was problematic and incompatible with the national culture; thus, Malays were lagging in socio-economic progression.

Another issue raised by the political elites was the slow pace of Malay/Muslim integration into Singapore society, made even slower, possibly, by Islamic revivalism. In the mid-1980s, politicians and community leaders expressed concerns that Islamic revivalism was likely to widen divisions between Malay/Muslims and other social groups. A politician, in 1983, expressed fears about the increasing influence of Islamic fundamentalism among Malays in Singapore, specifically fearing that the trend might further impede Malay integration into Singapore's multiracial society.⁵⁶³ The AMP expressed concern that "if nothing [was] done" about religious resurgence, the trend was "likely to cause greater polarisation between different religious and ethnic groups". The AMP also said that "since Islam served as a crucial rallying point" for the Malay Muslim community, they might become alienated from the rest of society.⁵⁶⁴ PM Lee also predicted that a similar situation to the Hertogh riot might occur with "even more disastrous" consequences due to the resurgence of Islam.⁵⁶⁵

The debate on Malay/Muslim integration into the Singapore society continued throughout the rest of the 1980s. MP Yatiman Yusof suggested that this was an "emotional problem". The Malays found it "difficult to make adjustments because

⁵⁶² June Tan, "Malay Pupils Caught in a Vicious Cycle," *The Straits Times*, May 29, 1982.

⁵⁶³ Raj K. Vasil, *Governing Singapore: Interviews with the New Leaders* (Singapore: Times Books International, 1988), 98–99. Vasil did not identify the politician.

⁵⁶⁴ "Malays/Muslims in 21st Century Singapore: Prospects, Challenges & Directions" (National Convention of Singapore Malay/Muslim Professionals, Singapore: Organising Committee, National Convention of Singapore Malay/Muslim Professionals, 1990), 135.

⁵⁶⁵ Lee, "Address to the American Society of Newspaper Editors" (Washington D.C., April 14, 1988), National Archives of Singapore.

being a minority, they [were] called to make more adjustments than others” in order to integrate into Singapore society. Hussin similarly said that “there [was] a sense of alienation of the Malay community vis-à-vis both the wider Singaporean polity and the State”, particularly with the political discourse centring on doubting Malay loyalty.⁵⁶⁶ Similarly, MP Wan Hussin Zohri suggested that Singapore’s separation from Malaysia was a “psycho-emotional trauma” for Malay/Muslims. He admitted that “it took some time” before they accepted that “their future and destiny lay with Singapore”. Malay/Muslims had to endure the “same psycho-emotional strain” as a result of public debate over Israeli President Chaim Herzog’s visit to Singapore in November 1986, and similar debates over Malay participation in the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF).⁵⁶⁷ Singaporean diplomat, Chan Heng Chee, also said that the separation “contribute[d] to that problem of the heart”; the Malays suddenly found themselves the minority group in Singapore.⁵⁶⁸

Several observations could be made from the above political discourses. The political elites perceived that Malay/Muslims had not integrated into Singaporean society and was thus not fully part of the national habitus. The elites also assumed that Malay/Muslims continued to share a greater affinity with Malaysia and were uncomfortable with their status as a minority in Singapore society. In addition, the political elites doubted Malay/Muslim loyalty because they felt Malay/Muslims had not recovered from the “psycho-emotional trauma” of separation from Malaysia. Political leaders suggested that the Malay/Muslim habitus conflicted with the national habitus, despite state efforts at various junctures to “discipline” their behaviour and norms. The statements above could be seen as a reflection of habitus dispositions produced from

⁵⁶⁶ “Malays.”

⁵⁶⁷ ““Perception Gap” Between Leaders and the Malays,” *The Straits Times*, March 18, 1987.

⁵⁶⁸ “Malays.”

past experiences. In making the above assumptions about Malay/Muslims, it appears that the political elites also suffered from the trauma of separation as past experiences had produced their current inclinations. Thus, similar assumptions, perceptions and tendencies shaped how they viewed and responded to current events. Later in this section, we will examine two “current” events in the 1980s – Herzog’s visit and the SAF issue, which showed how the way state and the Malay/Muslims responded were habitus responses.⁵⁶⁹

The debate on national cohesion centred around the state’s concern that for Malay/Muslims, religious belonging had assumed a higher priority than national belonging. This debate manifested itself in various forms, with discussions over shared physical spaces, Malay/Muslim dressing and dietary habits and national issues.

For instance, there was a conflict over physical spaces of belonging. The state had built grassroots centres as part of its nation-building, expecting these to be places where citizens of all races, religions, and occupations could “meet on equal terms” and foster social integration, peace and harmony.⁵⁷⁰ PAP intended for these grassroots centres (referred to as Community Centres, Citizens’ Consultative Committees, and Residents’ Committees) to serve as “nerve centres linking the feelings and emotion of the people with ... political leaders” to resolve any issues which citizens might face. In this way, these grassroots centres could help resolve state-society tensions and maintain social stability, which would pave the way for economic growth.⁵⁷¹ The AMP

⁵⁶⁹ “SMNO Criticises BG Lee’s Remarks on Malays,” *The Straits Times*, March 11, 1987; “Do Not Distort Position of Malays in Singapore,” *The Straits Times*, March 15, 1987.

⁵⁷⁰ Teng Cheong Ong, “Speech at Charity Dinner in Aid of Kim Keat Community Centres Building Fund” (Mandarin Hotel Ballroom, March 17, 1989), National Archives of Singapore, Singapore Government Press Release No. 33/Mar 16-0/89/03/17.

⁵⁷¹ Kwei Cheong Wong, “Speech at Cairnhill Constituency National Day Dinner and Variety Show to Celebrate 25 Years of Nation Building and 19th National Day Held in Conjunction with Official Opening of Pek Kio Community Centre” (Pek Kio Community Centre, August 21, 1984), National Archives of Singapore, Singapore Government Press Release No. 67/ Aug 16-2/84/08/21.

expressed its concern that only 8.7% of Malays were involved in grassroots activities organised by the PAP.⁵⁷²

The state expectation for Malay/Muslims to congregate at grassroots centres could be viewed as a departure from Muslim MPs' encouragement for mosques to become centres of community activities and community spirit for Muslims in the new towns.⁵⁷³ Thus, mosques and grassroots centres became competing centres of social congregation, parallel to the competition between the Malay/Muslim and national habitus. It was likely that if Muslims chose to organise their social activities around mosques, they were unlikely to gather at community centres and mingle with the non-Muslims, and more inclined to form religious or racial enclaves at mosques. Further, as previously discussed, some Muslims had encouraged fellow Muslims to unite over threats posed by Ahmadi and Christian communities, thus threatening social cohesion. Belonging to a religious community, both in terms of beliefs and physical belonging, appeared to take precedence over national belonging. Thus, some political elites saw the Malay/Muslim identity as an obstacle to nation-building; it appeared to hinder the integration of Muslims with the rest of society and precluded the formation of the Singaporean identity.

On another occasion, PM Lee expressed concern in the 1980s, that the gap between Malay/Muslims and other Singaporeans had widened, even though the gap had always been "a fact of life". He observed that Malay/Muslims appeared to dress, eat, and behave more like Muslims in the Middle East. The Government also rejected a proposal for female Muslim custom officers to incorporate the *tudung*, long-sleeved blouses and pants into their uniforms. Lee said that while the Government could not

⁵⁷² "Malays/Muslims in 21st Century," 16.

⁵⁷³ Ahmad Mattar, "Speech at Opening Ceremony of the Muhajidin Mosque," National Archives of Singapore, MC/OCT/10/77/(Social Affairs).

prevent local Muslims from “dressing and acting like those in Muslim nations”, they had to consider whether they wanted to be “even more different than non-Muslims” in Singapore.⁵⁷⁴ Presumably, Lee’s concern with embodied religious practices – like the tudung, and Islamic dietary adherence – implied that visible public markers of religious beliefs were unacceptable. Probably, these visible differences were seen as a violation of the neutrality of the secular public space. It is also interesting to note the perspective of politicians drawing links, between visible religion-based differences and the hindrance those differences were deemed to constitute in terms of economic, social, and political integration.

Another important issue was the question of Malay loyalty to the SAF. Lee, then Minister of Trade and Industry, explained that Malay/Muslims were not assigned to certain positions in the SAF, as the Government did not want to “put its soldiers in a position where their emotions for the nation might be in conflict with their emotions for their religion”.⁵⁷⁵ In an interview on the SAF issue with *Berita Harian*, PM Lee said that the possibility of religious loyalty prevailing over nationalism or military discipline could not be discounted.⁵⁷⁶

Separately, a forum on “Malays, Islam and Singaporeans” concluded that the question of religious and national loyalties would take “many more years of nation-building” before it could be resolved. The newspaper editorial stated that, “the stark reality [was] that many Malay Singaporeans [found] it hard not to put Islam first and the country second”, even though some Malays felt that being Muslim and Singaporean were not incompatible. The editorial highlighted that “the dilemma [was]

⁵⁷⁴ “Gap between Malays and Others a Fact of Life,” *The Straits Times*, January 23, 1988.

⁵⁷⁵ “Encouraging to See More Malays Doing Well in SAF, Says Utusan Article,” *The Straits Times*, March 18, 1987.

⁵⁷⁶ Zainal Abidin Rasheed, “PM Lee: Ke Arah Ikatan Yang Lebih Kukuh,” *The Straits Times*, July 6, 1987.

a particularly sharp one for the Malays, as Islam [was] so central to their whole way of life".⁵⁷⁷ Here, it could be seen that some political elites assumed national citizenship and civic duty clashed with Islamic religious obligations; the Islamic identity could, therefore, not be integrated with the Singaporean identity.

The above sentiment could be interpreted as a habitus response. PM Lee later admitted to the AMP and Majlis Pusat (Central Council of Malay Cultural Organisations Singapore) that the Government felt Muslim loyalty to the Government "changed" after the 1964 riots and Singapore's separation from Malaysia. Lee also felt the spillover riots from Malaysia to Singapore in 1969 were an indication that Malay loyalty to the Government was an issue; the Malay/Muslims were very much affected by their shared cultural and religious affinity with the Malaysian habitus. He said the Government could not simply ignore "race tensions", and arrange for young Malay and Chinese Singaporeans to participate in military training under the tutelage of Israeli instructors, considering possible Malay/Muslim hostility against Israel, and the interracial and interreligious tensions in the region.⁵⁷⁸ From Lee's comments, it could be seen that the habitus was self-reinforcing; each historical sequence built upon the last, to produce and reinforce dispositions. Historical episodes in which religious identity took precedence over civic duty resulted in societal disorder thus contributed to the state's concerns over the status of religion in society. The Government's stance on Malay/Muslim participation in the military was not only due to doubts about Malay/Muslim loyalty. Lee was concerned that Sino-Malay tensions could arise between soldiers who were living and training in close quarters, because the Singaporean identity did not appear strong enough to transcend racial and religious

⁵⁷⁷ "Malay Dilemmas," *The Straits Times*, January 23, 1987.

⁵⁷⁸ Kuan Yew Lee, "Speech with AMP and Majlis Pusat" (Parliament House Auditorium, March 2, 2001), National Archives of Singapore.

differences. Sino-Malay tensions had been simmering since the colonial period and had intensified into actual conflicts, such as the 1964 riots.

Another point of contention between the state and the Malay/Muslims was the Malay/Muslim opposition to Herzog's visit to Singapore. Majlis Pusat said that Herzog's visit was an instance of the government's insensitivity towards Singaporean Muslims. Majlis Pusat also objected to Pope John Paul II's visit in the same year. The organisation said both visits "cause[d] restlessness among [local] Muslims".⁵⁷⁹

Consequently, politicians and the English-language media questioned Malay loyalty to Singapore. When discussing Herzog's visit at a dialogue with university students, Lee disclosed that a "private poll" had shown that in some circumstances, "Malay Singaporean[s] reacted with the emphasis on being Malay/Muslim rather than as ... Singaporean[s]". The press reported that Lee had surmised the poll "boiled down in the end to one thing: a question of loyalty". A second poll, conducted after the Malaysian government's vocal objection to the visit, showed that a higher percentage of Muslims disagreed with the visit. Lee opined that the increase in the number of Muslims who disagreed with the visit showed that Malay Singaporeans were still very much influenced by Malaysian politicians.⁵⁸⁰ It appeared that the Malay/Muslim habitus took precedence over national belonging and, at times, to an external sovereign habitus – Malaysia; this constituted a direct challenge to the state's authority.

⁵⁷⁹ "PKMS Against Visit of President Herzog," *The Straits Times*, November 6, 1986; "Muslim MPs Speak Up," *The Straits Times*, December 6, 1986; "Malay Body "Regrets" Visit by Herzog, Pope," *The Straits Times*, November 22, 1986; "Malay Chamber of Commerce "Regrets" Visit," *Business Times*, November 20, 1986.

⁵⁸⁰ "Survey on Malay Loyalty," *The Straits Times*, January 16, 1987; "The Important Lesson: We Have to Work Harder at Unity," *The Straits Times*, April 16, 1987. The first poll showed that 49% of Muslim respondents from the poll reportedly disagreed with the government's decision to invite Herzog, as compared to 76% of non-Muslim respondents who were in favour of the decision. The second poll, conducted after Malaysia's objection to the visit, revealed that 71% of Muslim respondents objected to Herzog's visit, as compared to 77% of non-Muslim respondents who endorsed the visit.

Mattar later held closed-door discussions with leaders from Malay/Muslim organisations. He said that the Malay/Muslims felt they were entitled to voice their unhappiness with Herzog's visit because they disagreed with the Israeli Government's handling of the Palestinian issue. It was, in their view, unfair for the Government to doubt their loyalty to the nation based on their anti-Israeli sentiments.⁵⁸¹ Hussin, an executive council member of MUIS at that time, said that the Muslims' response to Herzog's visit was "carried out in accordance with Islamic principles" and "loyalty to Islam must be the top priority for Muslims". However, if foreign Muslim enemies unjustly attacked Singapore, Muslims should take up arms to defend their country.⁵⁸² While Lee had implied that Malay loyalty was not aligned with national interests, the Malay/Muslims felt that the Government should have been more mindful of their religious viewpoints, in the context of the Arab-Israeli conflicts in the Middle East.

As with the SAF issue, it could be inferred that the uproar over Herzog's visit revealed the state's concern that religious identity – and in this case, religious identity that prioritised transnational loyalty to other Muslims – took precedence over the country's interests. For the Malay/Muslims, public expressions of doubts over their loyalty probably affected their sense of belonging to the national habitus. Both the state and Malay/Muslims had to renegotiate to balance the latter's stronger identification (with Islam and the global Islamic community) with the necessity of secular principles in the public sphere. Tensions between the political order and the Muslim community persisted, probably due to the increased significance of Islam for some segments of the Malay/Muslim community and their different expectations on the public status of Islam.

⁵⁸¹ Salim Osman, "Mattar Meets Muslim Leaders over Herzog Visit," *The Straits Times*, January 16, 1987; "Anti-Herzog Outbursts Genuine, Say Malay MPs," *Business Times*, April 16, 1987.

⁵⁸² "Religious Loyalty "Need Not Be at Odds with Duty to Nation,"" *The Straits Times*, January 18, 1987.

In the late 1980s, there appeared to be a certain impatience on the part of the government leaders in their attitudes towards the Malay/Muslims. This attitude was a change from state-Muslim relations in the 1950s to the 1980s, when there appeared to be a sort of deference to Muslims in granting them certain privileges. This change was probably due to the state's perception that Islam had gained increased significance among the Malay/Muslim community, and had become a threat to nation-building. Minister George Yeo commented that for Malay/Muslims, being Muslim meant belonging to the *ummah* (community of Muslim believers), and being Malay assumed "secondary importance".⁵⁸³ There is, at this point, no qualitative study measuring religiosity among Singaporeans that would reveal whether Malay/Muslims had become more religious. However, as discussed, the increased visibility of Islamic activities and rhetoric in the public sphere was observable.

Notably, the state was firm in taking action on organisations like the Ikhwan group and the SPLO, which combined religion and politics, because they were overt acts of resistance to the state. However, the state did not actively police Islamic revivalist ideas, even though some government leaders said that they were uncomfortable with these ideas. Such different responses suggested that the state's issue with religion was not with religious beliefs, or faith, but with collective and organised religious action deemed to threaten civil order and state authority. In 1966, PM Lee said the state should let the individual embrace his own "solace" and "spiritual salvation", and "let no group organise itself on the basis of religious beliefs to seek temporal power in order to enforce its values on others".⁵⁸⁴ It can be concluded that the state saw faith as

⁵⁸³ George Yong-Boon Yeo, "Speech at Association of Muslim Professionals (AMP) Inauguration Dinner" (Westin Hotel, October 31, 1991), National Archives of Singapore, Press Release 38/Oct 03-1/91/10/31.

⁵⁸⁴ Kuan Yew Lee, "Speech at Presentation Ceremony of Replica of "Sarnath Buddha" Image (Buddhist Temple, 6 January 1966)," in *The Papers of Lee Kuan Yew: Speeches, Interviews and Dialogues*, vol. 3, 1965-1966 (Singapore: Gale Asia, 2012), 308.

private and spiritual, and condemned faith that manifested as collective religious action or shared affinity with similar transnational, religious communities. The collective action of the Malay/Muslim habitus unsettled the power relations among groups within the larger national habitus, requiring the state as the regulator to step in with disciplinary constraints. While Malay/Muslims saw no incongruence in their identification with the Malay/Muslim and national habitus, some government leaders felt that the two habitus were in conflict. This tension probably arose because the two groups had different ideas of faith, secularity, and religion.

5.2 Christian Religious Revivalism

Just as the Malay/Muslims were swept up in a wave of Islamic revivalism, the Christians similarly underwent a period of religious resurgence. As with their activities in the 1970s, it appears that the Christians continued in their attempts to extend their activities beyond what was traditionally defined as religious. Section 5.2 will examine two areas where there were notable shifts in how Christianity was practised – evangelism and social action. We will also examine shifts in religious practices that affected state-Christian and Christian-Muslim relations.

5.2.a Church Growth Movement, Large-scale Crusades and Singapore as the Antioch of Asia

During the colonial years, and the early years of independence, Christian efforts at evangelism in Singapore were spearheaded mainly by foreign missionaries. From the early 1970s, local Christians began to embark on evangelism and discussed strategies to fulfil the Great Commission in Singapore. The Great Commission refers to Jesus Christ's final instructions to his apostles to make "disciples of all the nations" and "baptise them".⁵⁸⁵ This thesis found that a number of the local church publications

⁵⁸⁵ Matthew 28:16-20.

from the 1970s to the early 1990s discussed the necessity of the Great Commission in sustaining the Christian faith. Some churches also advocated for the church growth theory, which stated that Christians “must evangelise at all costs so that [they] would not perish”.⁵⁸⁶ It appeared that a considerable number of churches believed their faith could only be sustained if the churches continued to multiply in numbers. Local Christians regarded evangelism as a crucial aspect of their faith.

In the early 1970s, the Graduates’ Christian Fellowship (GCF) established the Church Growth Study Centre, which organised several conferences and seminars to discuss church growth strategies for Singapore. This thesis suggests that the start of long-term planning for church growth and evangelism in Singapore could be attributed to those conferences.⁵⁸⁷ James Wong, Director of the Church Growth Study Group, designated the 1970s as a decade of Christian outreach. In 1971, he suggested that the percentage of Protestant Christians was around 4% of the local population.⁵⁸⁸

Wong predicted several roles for Christianity in society. He saw that local churches could help address social problems affecting Singaporean society and the long-term consequences of urbanisation on society.⁵⁸⁹ In particular, Wong hoped that as more Singaporeans converted to Christianity, the Christian impact would become more significant and “the potential is present for moral and social reforms in society”.⁵⁹⁰ The Centre also likened Singapore to Antioch, prophesying that Singaporean Christians “[might] take advantage of this freedom of religion to propagate their faith

⁵⁸⁶ Methodist Church in Singapore, “Major Issues,” in *Official Journal of the Sixth Session of the Trinity Annual Conference Held at Wesley Methodist Church, Singapore*, 1981, 26; Patrick Kim Thiam Lau, “Evangelise at All Cost,” *The Singapore Evangel*, September 1984.

⁵⁸⁷ “Recommendations,” in *Urbanisation and Church Growth in Singapore* (Singapore: Graduates Christian Fellowship, 1971), 28.

⁵⁸⁸ James Wong, “Planning for Church Growth in Singapore,” in *Urbanisation and Church Growth in Singapore* (Singapore: Graduates Christian Fellowship, 1971), 2–3.

⁵⁸⁹ Wong, 2–3.

⁵⁹⁰ James Wong, “Evangelism in High-Rise Housing Apartments,” in *Let the Earth Hear His Voice*, ed. J.D. Douglas (Minneapolis: World Wide Publications, 1975), 938–44.

and make disciples” in Singapore and other countries like India, Indonesia, Burma, and Bangladesh.⁵⁹¹ The church growth movement thus envisioned new roles for Christians in Singapore – to plug the gap in social services; push for the Christian agenda in public policies; and spread the faith locally and globally. These Christian goals of religion’s roles in society were incompatible with Singapore’s secularity principles, which discouraged religious motivations from influencing public policies and discouraged Christians from evangelising to the Muslims.

The local church growth movement also appeared to be influenced by the global church growth movement led by evangelical Christians.⁵⁹² At the International Congress on World Evangelisation in 1974, Wong shared Singapore’s model of high-rise building evangelism.⁵⁹³ At the conference, evangelist Waldron Scott said that the “immediate future” of world evangelisation was in Asia; Hindus, Muslims, and Chinese constituted 83% of non-Christians in Asia and Africa.⁵⁹⁴ Another evangelist, Luis Palau, advocated for “citywide crusade evangelisation” because it allowed the city to be “God-conscious”, and it extended the Christian message beyond the borders of local churches to the entire nation. A citywide crusade would compel the government and the political elites to listen to the Gospel, because of the public visibility of such an approach.⁵⁹⁵

The fruits of the church growth movement were the large-scale Christian evangelism campaigns and the door-to-door evangelism efforts in the 1970s and 1980s. While there has thus far been no quantitative study on the direct impact of

⁵⁹¹ David Brougham, “Church Growth in Antioch,” *Church Growth News & Views*, October 1973.

⁵⁹² “The Thailand Statement,” *Fairfield Compass*, December 1980, 7–8. Some church publications reprinted documents from the International Congress on World Evangelisation and other international conferences on evangelisation.

⁵⁹³ Wong, “Evangelism in High-Rise Housing Apartments.”

⁵⁹⁴ Waldron Scott, “The Task Before Us,” in *Let the Earth Hear His Voice*, 20.

⁵⁹⁵ Luis Palau, “Citywide Crusade Evangelisation,” in *Let the Earth Hear His Voice*, 603, 605.

these efforts to gain converts, the scale of the campaigns was noteworthy, because of the united Christian presence and the high visibility of Christianity in the public sphere.

In May 1977, 110 Christian churches launched “Here’s Life, Singapore!”, which was probably the first nationwide evangelistic effort co-ordinated by an exceptional number of local churches. The campaign organisers claimed to be influenced by local organisations like Campus for Christ, the Singapore Bible College, and similar overseas movements.⁵⁹⁶ The first phase of the campaign leveraged the element of mystery, printing the slogan “I Found It” on bumper stickers, campaign panels on buses, posters, and newspapers. For the first two weeks of the campaign, there was no indication that “It” referred to Jesus Christ.⁵⁹⁷ The campaign reported that by mid-June 1977, the call centre had received 43,573 calls; of these, 25,565 respondents requested the “Here’s How” booklet, which provided an introduction to Christianity.⁵⁹⁸

The campaign was significant for several reasons. Local churches realised the “combined potential” of Christians across multiple denominations in Singapore. Christians appeared to be a socio-political and economic force to be reckoned with – when they combined resources. This realisation possibly extended to the other non-Christian Singaporeans. While the tangible impact of the campaign on the number of Christian converts did not appear to be significant in the short run, “Here’s Life” was massive in terms of public visibility.⁵⁹⁹ A survey conducted by the organisers found that 80% of the 25,885 respondents were aware of the campaign.⁶⁰⁰ A united Christian habitus, with its combined financial resources, would inevitably affect the

⁵⁹⁶ “Here’s Life, Singapore Movement,” 1977, 3, 4, 17. “Here’s Life, Singapore!” claimed that it was inspired by similar movements overseas, e.g. the Evangelism-in-Depth project in Latin America in 1960, New Life for All ministry in West Africa in 1963, EXPLOR’74 in South Korea, and “Here’s Life” in North American cities.

⁵⁹⁷ Wong Moh-Keed, “Mystery of the ‘I Found It’ Ad Now Cleared Up,” *The Straits Times*, May 30, 1977.

⁵⁹⁸ “Here’s Life, Singapore Movement,” 1977, 5–6.

⁵⁹⁹ Hinton, *Growing Churches Singapore Style*, 130. Hinton estimated that the campaign attracted 9,104 commitments to Christ.

⁶⁰⁰ “Here’s Life, Singapore Movement,” 1977, 5–6.

distribution of power relations in the national habitus. Significantly, “Here’s Life” was a saturation evangelism campaign deliberately targeting Singaporeans across racial and religious lines. In August 1977, as an extension of the campaign, the Malay-speaking congregation at Bethesda Frankel Estate Church organised four “special Gospel meetings” for their Malay-speaking relatives and friends.⁶⁰¹ The campaign appeared to violate the verbal diktat Lee had issued in 1965, that Christians should refrain from evangelising to the Malays.

Between 1978 and 1986, western evangelists headlined three large-scale crusades. Local churches also organised small-scale crusades. They were likely inspired by similar movements in North America; as mentioned earlier, Palau had suggested citywide evangelism crusades. In December 1978, a group of local churches and Christian organisations invited American evangelist Billy Graham for a five-day crusade in Singapore. The Graham Evangelistic Association said that the crusade was a “concerted effort” to spread the gospel to “every person in that community or area”.⁶⁰² The crusade provided translations to Chinese dialects, Hokkien and Cantonese, Malay, and Tamil.⁶⁰³ The media reported that an estimated 320,000 to 337,000 people attended the five-day crusade, and 11,000 Singaporeans reportedly declared, during the crusade, their need for Christ.⁶⁰⁴ Notably, Graham

⁶⁰¹ Ernest Chew, “Retrospect and Prospect,” *Scope*, August 1977, 8. Not all Malay-speaking Singaporeans are Malay/Muslims. At this point, some of them were probably of Peranakan (mixed Chinese-Malay) heritage.

⁶⁰² “Who Asked Billy to Hold a Crusade in S”pore?” *The Straits Times*, December 10, 1978.

⁶⁰³ Paul Jansen, “Graham Gets a Greater Response on Second Night,” *The Straits Times*, December 8, 1978.

⁶⁰⁴ “Graham Packs Them In on Final Night,” *The Straits Times*, December 11, 1978; Melody Zaccheus, “Christians in Singapore Pay Tribute to Billy Graham,” *The Straits Times*, February 23, 2018; Sharp, “The Church, the State and You ...”; Joey Lam, “Singapore Billy Graham Crusade 1978: A Picture of Supernatural Unity,” *Salt&Light*, June 19, 2018, <https://saltandlight.sg/leadership/singapore-billy-graham-crusade-1978-a-picture-of-supernatural-unity/>; Hinton, *Growing Churches Singapore Style*, 152. In more recent reporting, Lam states that more than 19,600 people surrendered their lives to Jesus. Separately, Hinton reported that 20,000 individuals committed themselves to God during the Crusade.

prophesied that “Singapore would be like Antioch in the New Testament, sending missionaries to all of Asia”.⁶⁰⁵

From the late 1970s, there appeared to be a discernible shift in mood among local Christians; this was reflected by a visible increase in Christian outreach activities. After the Graham crusade, the crusade committee established the Evangelical Fellowship of Singapore (EFOS), and the Singapore Centre for Evangelism and Missions. Thirty years later, organisers continued to view the crusade as the turning point for Christian evangelism in Singapore. Benjamin Chew, chairman of the Graham crusade and EFOS, said that Singapore witnessed “a steady evangelical shift” after a “pretty bad” period in the early 1970s. Chew said that the Graham crusade was “really the peak”; he observed a “greater evangelical influence” on Christian churches in Singapore in the 1980s. Wong, who had invited Graham to Singapore, said that the crusade occurred “at the height of the charismatic renewal in the 1970s”. Many felt that the crusade “revitalised” the church in Singapore.⁶⁰⁶ By 1990, Every Home Crusade, which established its regional headquarters in Singapore in 1972, claimed to have distributed Christian tracts to every home in Singapore in five nationwide saturation attempts.⁶⁰⁷ In the 1980s, it appeared that some Christian leaders believed that God was using Singapore as He did in the historical Antioch, particularly given the rising numbers of Christians.⁶⁰⁸ From the above, it appears that the 1980s was a decade where there was widespread Christian presence in the public sphere and even

⁶⁰⁵ Lemuel Teo, “Singapore: Generations on Fire - Interview with James Wong and Timothy Wong,” SELAH, August 6, 2017, <https://www.selah.sg/singapore-generations-on-fire/>.

⁶⁰⁶ Teo.

⁶⁰⁷ Guenther Keng Taim Kao, “Why EHC Began in Singapore,” *Every Home Crusade Prayer Bulletin*, 1972, 4; “Six Saturation of Literature of Every Home in Singapore,” *Prayer Times*, June 1990, 2. Kao, “Why EHC Began in Singapore,” 4; “Six Saturation of Literature of Every Home in Singapore,” 2.

⁶⁰⁸ Stanley Ow, “Harvest-Time Crusade 1986,” *Bethel Assembly*, February 1986, 3.

at the steps of the private confines of one's home, through the crusades and saturation attempts.

Riding on the tide of evangelism, local churches discussed strategies for reaching out to local Muslims. In 1979, Sng said that "much thought and prayer will have to be put into the matter of the conspicuous absence of Malays in our churches".⁶⁰⁹ *Prayer Times* said it felt "burdened" to see Malays and Tamils remaining in spiritual ignorance.⁶¹⁰ It was possibly referring to Muslims and Hindus, given the conflation of race and religion in Singapore society. In 1980, the Fellowship of Evangelical Students (FES) and the GCF disagreed with the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) that dialogue, not evangelism, should be the means of interaction with Muslims. Some churches had reportedly felt that Muslims should not be excluded from their evangelism and proceeded to distribute Christian tracts to every household in Singapore.⁶¹¹ Calvary Charismatic Centre also published features on Muslim converts to Christianity in its magazines. The centre's pastor, Rick Seaward, said that he wanted "all Malays to be Christian" and declared Islam the greatest threat to Christianity.⁶¹² Clearly, the Christian evangelists were explicit in their aims of converting local Muslims. Following the patterns of the Malay/Muslim habitus, such declarations were likely to incur a certain degree of alarm among local Muslims, given past hostile responses to attempts at Christian conversion.

Global evangelists also saw Singapore as a strategic centre, much like Antioch, from which to expand their evangelisation efforts into neighbouring Muslim countries,

⁶⁰⁹ Sng, "Christian Churches in Singapore 1979," *Impetus*, November 1979, 3.

⁶¹⁰ "Tamil and Malay BBC," *Prayer Times*, August 1, 1977, 4.

⁶¹¹ Balakrishnan G.D., interview by Hai Tan, Su Chien Hoe, and Min Fui Chee, November 4, 2001, Reel 2/2, Accession Number E000279, National Archives of Singapore.

⁶¹² "Are the Muslims Reachable?," *Charismatic Times*, July 1983, 7; "One-Fifth of the World's Population," *Charismatic Times*, July 1983, 6; "The Muslim World," *Charismatic Times*, April 1985, 7; "Testimony from New Delhi: Former Muslim Finds Christ," *Charismatic Times*, March 1985, 9; "Former Muslim Finds Christ," *Charismatic Times*, April 1985, 9; "White Paper on Maintenance of Religious Harmony," 14.

such as Indonesia and Malaysia. Several American evangelists noted that Singapore and its model of evangelisation was an “ideal testing ground for this kind of ministry to Muslims”.⁶¹³ William Wan said that the Great Commission must extend to Islamic countries, and suggested that Singaporean Christians migrate to Islamic countries to spread the gospel. Wan said that God was “breaking through the armour of Islam even when it [was] on the march” in Africa.⁶¹⁴ The vision of Singapore as a regional and global centre of Christian evangelism was likely to upset the power balance in the Malay Archipelago, given that Malaysia and Indonesia are Muslim-majority states.

Two separate crusades in 1982 and 1986, as well as other evangelisation activities, continued to increase the public visibility of Christian groups. In June 1982, charismatic Korean leader Paul Yonggi Cho conducted a five-day rally in Singapore at the invitation of the local charismatic churches; the crusade was sponsored by Full Gospel Business Men’s Fellowship International Singapore. The organisers hoped that the rally would result in “greater revival” of local churches”, and prepare Singapore for her role as the Antioch of Asia.⁶¹⁵ Before the rally, local Christians aimed to visit at least 500,000 homes to distribute tracts and invite households to attend the rally.⁶¹⁶ Cho said that “it [was] clear God’s mighty hand [was] upon this nation”. He added that Singapore was “in a wondrously strategic position both geographically and spiritually

⁶¹³ Frank L. Cooley et al., “The Comparative Status of Christianity and Islam in Southeast Asia,” in *The Gospel and Islam: A 1978 Compendium*, ed. Don McCurry (Monrovia: Missions Advanced Research and Communication Center, 1979), 334.

⁶¹⁴ William Wan, “The Muslim Revival Today,” *Impetus*, July 1980; Lawson Lau, “The Evangelical Fellowship of Singapore (EFOS),” *Scope*, December 1980, 5–6. Wan, “The Muslim Revival Today”; Lau, “The Evangelical Fellowship of Singapore (EFOS),” 5–6. There was an international split between the evangelicals and the World Council of Churches (WCC). There were also disagreements between the National Council of Churches Singapore (NCCS), which was affiliated to WCC and Christian Conference of Asia, and the local evangelical Christians. The local evangelical churches declined to join NCCS because of the latter’s ties to WCC, and they established the EFOS for local evangelical churches and movements.

⁶¹⁵ “Top Korean Pastor Will Speak at Rally: Gospel Rally to Be Held at National Stadium,” *Gospel Times*, 1981, 1.

⁶¹⁶ “Rally’s Aim to Reach 500,000 Homes,” *Gospel Times*, March 1982, 2; “Churches Taking Part in Rally,” *Gospel Times*, March 1982, 2; “What’s Happening to the World - Singapore,” *Gethsamane*, May 1982.

to serve God as a centre for evangelism in Southeast Asia and other parts of the world".⁶¹⁷ The media reported that parts of the rally were translated into Hokkien, Cantonese, Tamil, and Bahasa Indonesia. An average of 40,000 people attended each night of the rally, and 5,000 committed themselves to Jesus Christ.⁶¹⁸ In June 1986, 330 local churches co-organised a week-long campaign led by Palau.⁶¹⁹ Palau's English-language sermons were translated into eight languages, four Chinese dialects and sign language; these languages included Mandarin, Tamil, Thai, Japanese, Korean, Indonesian, Malay, Hokkien, Cantonese, Fuzhou, and Hainanese.⁶²⁰ Given the close correlation between language, race, and religion in Singapore, it could be surmised that the variety of languages were likely indications of the organisations' intentions to reach audiences from other religious backgrounds.

Crusades held by local Pentecostal Christians were couched in rhetoric that could have appeared to other non-Christian groups as combative allegory. At the Reinhard Bonnke Crusade in December 1985, the church publication *Charismatic Times* called the crusade "the beginning of a long-awaited 'spiritual earthquake' that [was] going to shake the people of Singapore out of the bondage of unbelief".⁶²¹ It was reported that, in a neighbourhood crusade in 1984, Seaward directed "Christians on the stands to face in four directions in a mighty prayer thrust to pull down strongholds in the town of Toa Payoh and take the whole of it for Jesus Christ".⁶²² The imagery of residential estates overcome by Christian conversion would likely appear alarming in a religiously diverse society.

⁶¹⁷ "Churches Plan Nation-Wide Gospel Rally in June," *Methodist Message*, March 1982.

⁶¹⁸ "Average of 40,000 Attended Rally Each Night," *The Straits Times*, June 7, 1982, 40; "Rally Draws 40,000 to Stadium," *The Straits Times*, June 3, 1982.

⁶¹⁹ "40,000 At Stadium to Hear Dr Palau's Message," *The Straits Times*, June 2, 1986.

⁶²⁰ Valerie Lee, "100,000 To Hear Argentine Evangelist Speak," *The Straits Times*, May 29, 1986; Beng Choo Goh, "Mission to Bridge Language Gap," *The Straits Times*, June 4, 1986.

⁶²¹ "Reinhard Bonnke Crusade," *Charismatic Times*, January 1986.

⁶²² "Harvest-Time Crusade 1984," *Bethel News*, October 1984.

Other groups in society viewed Christian revivalism and evangelism with concern. In 1978, the IRO addressed a letter entitled “An Appeal for Tolerance in the Propagation of Religious Beliefs” to the Methodist Church, the Seventh Day Adventists and the local organisers of the Graham crusade.⁶²³ The IRO criticised the “overenthusiasm” of Christians engaged in door-to-door evangelism; the content of Christian tracts was deemed “a somewhat insensitive approach to adherents of different religions. The IRO said such action was likely to be “counter-productive” and “arouse an opposition which would threaten the religious harmony of Singapore”.⁶²⁴ The statement reflected the concerns of the IRO and its members that the Christian competition for converts might lead to tensions between religious groups.

Similarly, not all local churches were supportive of such massive outreach efforts. The CCA was critical of the “one-dimension[al] understanding of evangelism that western Christianity produced”; it felt that evangelism had done “more damage to the spread of the Gospel than all the active opposition to it”.⁶²⁵ Sng said that terms like “Antioch of the East” sent the “wrong kind of message” to others in society, since Singapore was geographically situated “in the midst of a Muslim environment” and some community leaders had “beg[u]n to make comments”.⁶²⁶ While the Christians saw evangelism as necessary for their faith to thrive, other religious groups regarded it as a threat to their religious, cultural and racial identities. According to Roy, religion is universalising and could adapt to societies in ways that could eradicate existing

⁶²³ Ah Eng Lai, “The Inter-Religious Organization of Singapore,” in *Religious Diversity in Singapore*, ed. Lai (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008), 605–41.

⁶²⁴ “An Appeal to the Christian Community,” *CCA News*, December 15, 1978; Inter-Religious Organisation Singapore, “History – Inter-Religious Organisation, Singapore,” accessed September 4, 2021, <https://iro.sg/history/>. The IRO was formed in 1949. Its first members included Muslims, Protestant Christians, Catholics, Buddhists, Hindus, Confucianists, Sikhs and Jews. The Zoroastrians joined IRO in 1991. The Taoists and Bahai’is followed in 1996. The Jains joined IRO in 2006.

⁶²⁵ GRK, “Let Us Think Again,” *CCA News*, September 1986.

⁶²⁶ Sng, Interview, April 29, 2008, Reel 11/12, Accession Number 003299, National Archives of Singapore.

cultures and traditions, thus threatening existing religious and national identities.⁶²⁷ Given those religious, racial, and cultural identities or affiliations overlapped in Singapore, significant religious conversion among a particular racial or religious group might be viewed as a threat to the original group's identity. This could incur discontentment within the original group and affect inter-group relations.

5.2.b *Christian-Muslim Tensions Over Christian Evangelisation*

This thesis notes that a significant shift in how local Christians practised their faith in society led to increased tensions between Christians and Muslims. While Singaporean Muslims did not directly comment on the crusades, MUIS and some Malay/Muslims expressed their concern about individual instances of aggressive Christian evangelisation, which were first reported in the Malay-language press. The English-language media subsequently picked up on the issue in their coverage. Christian-Muslim tensions over Christian evangelism featured prominently in the news in the mid-1980s. As previously mentioned, the Malay/Muslim community had earmarked Christian evangelism as one of the main threats to their community.⁶²⁸

The Malay/Muslim response to Christian evangelism could be seen as a drag effect, and a habitus response to the changing social context. Several factors contributed to this changing social context. Firstly, there was a significant increase in the number of Christians in society. Secondly, Islam and Christianity had become more visible in the public sphere and both religions strived to make themselves politically and socially relevant in the society. Thirdly, the Christians attempted to change the Malay/Muslim habitus. Several Muslims noted that Christian evangelism

⁶²⁷ Olivier, *Holy Ignorance*, 33. Roy proposes that religion can eradicate, acculturate, inculturate or exculturate in host societies. Religion deculturates when it attempts to eradicate an existing culture or religion; it "acculturates when it adapts to mainstream culture"; it inculturates when it tries to place itself at the core of the host culture; and it exculturates when it distances itself from the mainstream culture which it had previously belonged to.

⁶²⁸ "Membimbangkan Tapi Perlu Berwaspada," *Berita Harian*, September 5, 1986.

in the 1970s and 1980s was a new phenomenon they had not previously seen.⁶²⁹ The manner in which religion became visible in public for the Christians, and their conviction to win converts to Christianity, thus gave rise to tensions between religious groups; targeted groups sought to oppose Christian efforts, in order to protect their own religious habitus.

While the Malay/Muslims were not the only targets of Christian evangelism, this thesis's investigations of archival sources revealed that the tensions appeared to be more visible between Christians and Malay/Muslims. This was probably because Islam was both a racial and religious identity marker for the Malay/Muslims. Previous attempts by Christian missionaries to convert Muslims, during the colonial period and in the 1960s, had also been confronted with hostility from the Malay/Muslim community. Buddhism, which was the majority religious group in Singapore, also faced similar challenges from Christians. However, in the research conducted as part of this thesis, it was not evident whether there was any public display of anger or grievances from the Buddhist community in response to Christian evangelism. Nonetheless, the Buddhists did respond to religious competition from the Christians by adopting similar "Christian" structures; this will be elaborated upon in Chapter 6.

5.2.b.1 *Media Reporting of Aggressive Christian Proselytisation*⁶³⁰

The first reporting of Christian proselytisation to Muslims appeared in *Berita Harian* in July 1985. In a front-page article, Syed Isa cautioned local Muslims to avoid

⁶²⁹ "Sebar Kristian: Haji Ya"acob Gesa Muis Tulis Kepada Permdfingah," *Berita Harian*, September 8, 1986; "Usaha Bersama Umat Islam Diperlukan," *Berita Harian*, July 24, 1986; "Mufti: Henti Edar Risalah. Diterbitkan Dalam Bahasa Melayu," *Berita Harian*, September 5, 1986.

⁶³⁰ Arthur Serratelli, "Pope Francis: Proselytism vs Evangelization," Catholic News Agency, May 11, 2018, <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/column/53899/pope-francis-proselytism-vs-evangelisation>. I use the term "proselytisation" to refer to evangelisation in this section because I am reporting on Christian evangelism from the perspectives of the Muslims. Generally, Christians object to the use of the term "proselytisation" as it is deemed to be aggressive and insensitive to other religious beliefs.

Malay-language pamphlets used by Christian evangelists. He criticised a Malay pamphlet titled *Langkah bagi Keamanan dengan Allah* (In Search of Peace with Allah), published by Graham's association, which contained bible quotes and referred to the Christian God as Allah. He said that the correct translation should be "*tuhan*" (Malay word for God) as Allah referred exclusively to the Islamic God. He also said that the pamphlet's use of Allah contravened the IRO's agreement that, in order to maintain interreligious harmony in Singapore, no follower of a particular religion should infringe on another's religion.⁶³¹

Two months later, *Berita Harian* said that MUIS had reported the "disturbances" to the Government, particularly given the Christian use of the word "Allah" in a Malay-language bible. The Mufti also disclosed that Bibles and a Christian prayer book titled *Madah Bakti* (devotional service), written in Bahasa Melayu and Bahasa Indonesian (Malay and Indonesian languages), were sold at a book fair in Singapore. The translated Bible reportedly used terms like "*malaikat*" (angel), which MUIS said were exclusive to the Islamic faith. Syed Isa cautioned the Muslim community to be careful and said the sales of such publications should cease to maintain religious harmony in Singapore. He felt that Malay publications were targeted at Muslims as Malays in Singapore were Muslims.⁶³² Syed Isa's objection to the Christian use of specific Malay terms, because they were deemed to be reserved for Islam, showed that Malay/Muslims had absorbed Islam as part of their cultural and linguistic identity. Roy observes that instances of specific terms reserved for a particular religious group show that religion has shifted from its universalist nature to "religion as identity".⁶³³ Further,

⁶³¹ "Awat! Risalah Yang Guna Kalimah "Allah,"" *Berita Harian*, July 2, 1985; "Beware of "Allah" Pamphlets: Mufti," *The Straits Times*, July 3, 1985. *Straits Times* reported on the same news item the following day, but did not publish a photograph of the said pamphlet.

⁶³² "Istilah Dlm Injil Timbulkan Keliru: Muis Akan Buat Aduan," *Berita Harian*, September 5, 1985.

⁶³³ Olivier, *Holy Ignorance*, 93–94.

Foucault has observed that the “appropriation of one’s vocabulary to turn against those who had once used it” is a form of power challenge.⁶³⁴ Thus, Christian proselytisation, particularly the Christian appropriation of Malay-Islamic terminology, was seen by the Malay/Muslims as an attack on their religious habitus and an important aspect of their identity.

Subsequently, the Malay media and some organisations published accounts of forced and deliberate Christian proselytisation among Muslims. Darul Arqam’s *Muslim Reader* published an account from Ida Yezmin Bachtiar, a Muslim student at a Christian school, who claimed her Christian classmates were “overzealous missionaries” trying to convince her that she was “bound for hell without Jesus”. Her teacher had reportedly said that Christianity taught its followers “to turn another cheek to an adversary”, while Islam advocated no such selflessness. Ida said that she and her muslim classmates were explicitly targeted after a Malay Christian student was allowed to “tear apart” Islam while sharing his testimony of conversion.⁶³⁵ Ridzuan Wu, President of Darul Arqam, also said that Christian mission schools “tend[ed] to be sympathetic to the instilling of Christian values” and that Muslim students enrolled in these schools might be ill-prepared and become influenced by “Christian ideas that r[a]n contrary to Islam”.⁶³⁶

In mid-1986, *Berita Harian* featured interviews with Muslims who had had unpleasant experiences with Christian proselytisation. These individuals expressed their shock and concern that Christian pamphlets were published in the Malay language; they felt the language use could potentially confuse other Muslims. Like Syed Isa, these Malay/Muslims felt that the Malay language was reserved exclusively

⁶³⁴ Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy and History”, 381.

⁶³⁵ Ida Yezmin Bachtiar, “My Years in a Mission School,” *Muslim Reader*, December 1985.

⁶³⁶ Ridzuan Wu, *The Call to Islam: A Contemporary Perspective* (Singapore: The Muslim Converts’ Association Singapore, 1990), 348.

for the Islamic faith. Two pamphlets, *Langkah-langkah Keselamatan* (Steps to Salvation) and *Jalan-Jalan Keselamatan* (Path to Salvation), were found to have used “Allah” and “*Anak Allah*” (son of God, referring to Jesus). These pamphlets were found in mailboxes and slipped under the doors of flats in high-rise apartment buildings. Several individuals interviewed by the newspaper were similarly concerned that such pamphlets would cause confusion among Muslims, particularly Muslim children who could not distinguish right from wrong.⁶³⁷ In a separate interview, Salam said that he was misled into signing up for a Christian correspondence course entitled *Pantu Kesehatan* (Guide to Health). After completing the course, he was introduced to a follow-up course titled *Terang Nabi-Nabi* (Sayings of Prophets), which introduced Christian elements like *Jesus Kristus* (Jesus Christ), Yehuda, and Allah.⁶³⁸

The Malay/Muslim organisation Pertapis said that there were discussions between Muslim community leaders and MUIS, about issuing response pamphlets to Christian evangelists due to concerns that Muslim homeowners might not be equipped to respond when visited by Christian evangelists via door-to-door preaching. Pertapis proposed that each Muslim household be issued with ten copies of the response pamphlets explaining Islam and the mistakes in Christianity; these pamphlets could then be distributed to Christian evangelists. Separately, Syed Isa reiterated that the actions of the Christian missionaries could cause anger in the Muslim community. He advised Muslims to take down the personal particulars of Christian missionaries so that appropriate action could be taken.⁶³⁹ He also advised Christian evangelists to

⁶³⁷ “Usaha Bersama Umat Islam Diperlukan.”

⁶³⁸ ““Jarum” Dalam Risalah,” *Berita Harian*, September 5, 1986.

⁶³⁹ “Usaha Bersama Umat Islam Diperlukan.”

avoid houses with Islamic religious items displayed on the outside, as this was an indication that the house occupants already had their own religious beliefs.⁶⁴⁰

Some Muslim readers wrote to the *Straits Times* to express their displeasure about aggressive Christian evangelism. A Muslim reader claimed to have received Christian tracts slipped under his door or into his mailbox, despite outward signs of his faith. He had reportedly displayed a Quranic verse on his door, which he felt was a clear indication of his Islamic faith.⁶⁴¹ Moulavi M.H. Babu Sahib, an Islamic religious teacher, claimed that two Christian girls had knocked on his door while he was teaching religious classes in his flat and attempted to convert him and his students.⁶⁴²

The *Straits Times* published a clarification from the Church of Singapore, which confirmed that the church had Malay pamphlets. However, the Church said that the pamphlets were only meant for distribution to members of Indonesian and Baba origin. The *Straits Times* also interviewed the Bible Society of Singapore, which said that it had stopped printing Malay-language pamphlets in 1974, at the advice of the authorities. However, there was a possibility that some churches might have kept the pamphlets and re-circulated them in public.⁶⁴³

The Mufti rejected clarifications from the English-language press and exhorted Christian organisations to stop the distribution of Christian tracts in Malay. He believed the Christians were deliberately targeting Muslims as the tracts were distributed in residential estates with a higher proportion of Malays than other racial groups. Further, Singaporeans or local residents of Baba or Indonesian origin could speak better English than Malay, and there was no need to evangelise to them in Malay.⁶⁴⁴ The

⁶⁴⁰ "Inform Muis If Approached by Missionaries," *The Straits Times*, July 29, 1986; Chin Chye Chua, "Mufti's Advice to Those Distributing Pamphlets," *The Straits Times*, July 30, 1986.

⁶⁴¹ Hassan bin Ali, "We Must All Strive for Religious Harmony," *The Straits Times*, August 14, 1986.

⁶⁴² "When Does Evangelising Become Harassment?," *The Straits Times*, May 10, 1989.

⁶⁴³ "Inform Muis If Approached by Missionaries."

⁶⁴⁴ "Mufti: Henti Edar Risalah. Diterbitkan Dalam Bahasa Melayu."

Malay/Muslim community's stake in the Malay language as an expression reserved for the Islamic faith showed how intertwined their racial and religious identities were.

The Malay media continued to publish more allegations of aggressive Christian proselytisation. *Berita Harian* reported that some Malay/Muslims had converted to Christianity, but the number remained small. Some reportedly considered the number of converts to be around 100 to 200, while others pegged the figure at between 500 and 1000. The newspaper also interviewed Muslim leaders who claimed to know of Muslims converting to Christianity and said they did not want more conversions to happen. Further, the Malay press reported on an unofficial Malay Christian group known as the Malay Christian Fellowship, which existed from the late 1970s to the early 1980s. Notably, among its leaders were a high-ranking military officer and a therapist working in a government department.⁶⁴⁵ Such an account probably stirred memories of state-Malay debates on Malay/Muslim participation in the SAF. The account of a high-ranking Malay Christian military officer probably confirmed the suspicions of Malay/Muslims; namely, that the state doubted their loyalty because of their religious affiliations, and thus refused to place Malay/Muslims in high-ranking and sensitive government positions. The only reason the Malay officer was placed in a high-ranking position was because of his religious affiliation.

It was noteworthy that the Christian and Muslim leaders appeared to be communicating through the conduit of press reports and journalists. The exchange of words between Christians and Muslims was a power conflict between the Christian and Muslim habitus to maintain their respective power over their members and to attract more members to join their habitus. Due to interlocking relations in the shared habitus, the tactics of one habitus will destabilise the existing power structure, giving

⁶⁴⁵ "Membimbangkan Tapi Perlu Berwaspada."

rise to drag effects. The media had become a public space, for Singaporean Muslims and Christians to air their grievances and respond to each other's allegations. It was also notable that the conflict was limited to non-violent exchanges of words rather than riots. Was this an indication that the habitus structures and mechanisms had fulfilled their functions of mitigating conflicts?

5.2.b.2 Roles of State and Religious Actors in Christian-Muslim Tensions

MUIS's first response was to approach the Government. This shows MUIS's tacit understanding of the state's role as the mediator of inter-religious tensions in the public sphere. The religious groups also appeared to view the state as the arbiter of religious expression in the public sphere, with the Bible Society ceasing the printing of Malay pamphlets upon the Government's advice. According to Foucault, power relationships can only be "articulated on the basis of two elements that are indispensable" and the subject has to recognise the power of the object. State-religion relations have to be reciprocal in their interactions. In recognising the power relationship, "a whole field of responses, reactions, results and possible inventions may open up".⁶⁴⁶

The religious and political elites appeared open to working together to restrict Christian-Muslim conflict to the level of non-physical confrontation. Former Minister Haji Ya'acob encouraged MUIS to write to Christian leaders, urging them to stop such actions as they were causing disturbances to the Muslim community.⁶⁴⁷ Syed Isa later revealed that the Muslims and Christians had a closed-door meeting to discuss the issue of aggressive evangelism.⁶⁴⁸ The closed-door meeting showed that religious leaders were willing to engage in dialogue to minimise interreligious tensions. The

⁶⁴⁶ Foucault, "The Subject and Power", 340.

⁶⁴⁷ "Sebar Kristian: Haji Ya"acob Gesa Muis Tulis Kepada Permdfingah."

⁶⁴⁸ Hussain, "Keeping the Faith," 124.

closed-door setting also reflected the Government's tendency to keep interreligious tensions under a tight lid and away from public visibility. This could be interpreted as a habitus response produced from the collective experience of the Hertogh riots, where society learned that open confrontation on religious issues could possibly lead to increased interreligious tensions.

In addition, some Christians limited their own actions. Here, we see external constraints imposed by criticism at work. Criticism of intrusive evangelical activities voiced in the media reports and other Christians created a disciplinary effect that such action was "abnormal". Every Home Crusade advised its readers that the Government had requested Christians not to distribute gospel tracts to Muslims, both in their letterboxes and homes, "to avoid unnecessary troubles".⁶⁴⁹ In 1986, the EFOS urged local Christian leaders to practice sensitivity while spreading the gospel and minimise door-to-door evangelism. The EFOS also asked Christians to prioritise helping in the activities of Chinese Christian churches in Singapore.⁶⁵⁰ Here, it is clear that the religious elites had abided by the state's tactics to regulate power relations between religious habitus – by minimising cross-evangelisation across habitus (plural). However, the state was not always the object asserting external constraints. The state is "not the only object of power", even though the power must make reference to the state.⁶⁵¹ In this case, the state disciplined by employing speeches by political elites. In turn, the religious groups responded by imposing social constraints on individual Christians or other groups to limit their behaviour in the public sphere. This showed

⁶⁴⁹ "Do Not Distribute Tracts to Muslims," *Prayer Times*, October 1, 1986, 4.

⁶⁵⁰ 吴新慧, "避免引起宗教敏感问题 基督教徒受指示勿向回教徒传教", *联合早报*, October 29, 1986; "Be More Sensitive in Spreading Faith, Christians Told," *The Straits Times*, October 30, 1986.

⁶⁵¹ Foucault, "The Subject and Power", 345.

that the state and religious groups were both actors and passive receivers at various points of their interaction.

The state also intervened through behind-the-scenes measures in cases where the government's advice went unheeded. For instance, ISD prevented the publication of an article by former Muslim (and Christian convert) Paul Satari in a journal by Wesley Methodist Church. Satari was reportedly criticised in many mosques during that period for his conversion to Christianity.⁶⁵² In 1986, the ISD called up leaders from 11 Christian organisations, as they had been evangelising among Muslims, to advise them to stop such activities. Several leaders had reportedly ignored the advice.⁶⁵³ The MHA also allegedly seized books on comparative religion and conversion stories from Christian bookshops.⁶⁵⁴ The state resorted to hard disciplinary actions only when softer tactics failed on those who refused to adhere to the "soft tactics" of speech – either through dialogue between we-groups or norms laid out in political speeches. Since the country's independence, the state had relied more on public expressions via speeches to set and reinforce secularity norms in the national habitus unless in cases where there were overt cases of power resistance to the state. We can see that the state engaged different degrees of disciplinary actions to normalise the abnormal. When religious leaders refused to exercise self-control and soft tactics did not work, the state would impose external constraints through coercion, so that the habitus' members could learn its behavioural norms.

⁶⁵² Interview with Balakrishnan G.D.; "Muis: Waspada Terhadap "Dakwah" Kristian," *Berita Harian*, October 30, 1986; Irene Tan, "Not Ashamed of the Word of Truth: An Interview with Paul and Pauline Satari," *Wesley Tidings*, June 1986. MUIS issued a public statement in response to an earlier article featuring Paul and Pauline Satari in *Wesley Tidings*, a publication of Wesley Methodist Church. MUIS referred to Muslims who had converted to Christianity as *murtad* and was critical of Christian groups who used *murtad* to convert other Muslims to Christianity.

⁶⁵³ "White Paper on Maintenance of Religious Harmony," 14.

⁶⁵⁴ Sng, Interview, April 29, 2008, Reel 10/12, Accession Number 003299, National Archives of Singapore.

Nonetheless, the Government stressed that it did not intend to restrict the Christians' right to freedom of religion and evangelism, nor did it view Christianity as incompatible with the national identity. What the Christians saw as state interference in their religious beliefs, the state saw as setting limits to the nature of evangelism activities to maintain civil order and the structure of power relations in the shared habitus. This was a consistent stance that had been expressed by PM Lee in 1965, when he advised Christians to steer clear of evangelising to the local Muslims.⁶⁵⁵ Other ministers also reiterated that evangelism should not be carried out at the expense of other religious groups and preached tolerance between religious groups.⁶⁵⁶ Thus, there was continued reinforcement that religious practices had to adapt to social norms in the national habitus, for the religious groups to coexist with other groups in the shared space.

Influenced by past experiences of the habitus, political leaders possibly felt religious tensions could arise from Christian evangelism to Muslims and lead to civil disorder, like the Hertogh riots. Minister Lee said that "insensitive proselytisation" by Christians targeting the Muslims was a "sure and swift recipe for disaster". This was especially so as Islam "occupie[d] a central place in the society and culture of Malays in Singapore". Lee added that four decades after the Hertogh riots, "the volcano which erupted than [was] not extinct, only dormant". Any innocuous attempts to evangelise could be misunderstood and could "cause large segments of the Malay Muslim

⁶⁵⁵ Hsien Loong Lee, "Speech at Inauguration Of The Parliament Of Religions Organised by the Ramakrishna Mission In Singapore" (World Trade Centre, April 30, 1989), National Archives of Singapore, Press Release No. 50/Apr/15-1/89/04/30.

⁶⁵⁶ Kan Seng Wong, "Speech at Inauguration of Singapore Buddhist Federation Foundation and Swearing-in of Office-Bearers (22nd Term) of Singapore Buddhist Federation" (Singapore Buddhist Federation, June 17, 1990), National Archives of Singapore, Release No. 43/Jun/04-1/90/06/17; Khoon Choy Lee, "Speech at Singapore Buddhist Joint Vesak Celebrations" (National Theatre, May 18, 1981), National Archives of Singapore, Press Release No. 02-2/81/05/18.

community to become agitated and alienated".⁶⁵⁷ The imprint of the Hertogh riots can be seen in state discourses that discussed the issue of evangelism. Invoking the riots was not merely the government's instrumentalisation of history to control religion, but an instinctual habitus response to place limits on religious behaviour and diminish the possibility of physical conflicts in society.

Some individuals or groups also expressed concerns that Christian evangelism could lead to conflict in society. A Catholic individual had reportedly written to Minister Lee that "it would be suicidal in Singapore's context to have Muslims converted to Christianity" for riots would occur.⁶⁵⁸ Several readers wrote to the *Straits Times* to express their concern that aggressive Christian evangelisation would disrupt social harmony and cause religious conflicts.⁶⁵⁹ Therefore, it can be inferred that historical episodes and the current brouhaha over Christian evangelism had built upon each other to reinforce past and present experiences in the shared habitus.

The societal tensions arising from Christian evangelism showed that each religious community's acceptance of secularity was conditional upon religious groups not actively seeking converts from the other. The Christians argued that freedom of religion meant everyone was free to choose and change their religious affiliation while the state and the rest of the society had different expectations. Other religious groups saw Christian evangelism as an infringement of their religious rights and a disruption of social harmony in Singapore.⁶⁶⁰ Wan Hussin said that democratic principles, together with religious freedom and social tolerance, allowed Singapore to "develop

⁶⁵⁷ Lee, "Speech at Inauguration of The Parliament Of Religions Organised by the Ramakrishna Mission In Singapore," April 30, 1989.

⁶⁵⁸ Lee, "Speech at Inauguration Of The Parliament Of Religions Organised by the Ramakrishna Mission In Singapore," April 30, 1989.

⁶⁵⁹ Chan Hoong Leong, "Leave Well Alone Others' Faiths," *The Straits Times*, January 12, 1989; Eng Kian Tan, "Do Not Make Religion a Factor in Politics," *The Straits Times*, January 4, 1989.

⁶⁶⁰ Rajenthiran R., "Restrict Door-to-Door Preaching," *The Straits Times*, December 10, 1988; bin Ali, "We Must All Strive for Religious Harmony."

and progress in peace and harmony”. He added that one could not practise his religion if “society [was] plagued with social unrest, communal riots and religious feuds”. Therefore, there was a need to balance the “dynamic link between social harmony and religious effervescence”; such links were crucial for society’s “common good and survival”.⁶⁶¹ It can be extrapolated from this that Wan Hussin was proposing that secularity was conditional upon interreligious harmony, mutual respect of religious boundaries, and civil order.

5.2.b.3 Muslim Response to Christian Proselytisation – Movement of *Dakwah* from Internal to External Outreach

In the mid-1980s, some Muslim organisations and individuals criticised MUIS’s approach to *dakwah*. These criticisms emerged after July 1985, when initial reports of Christian evangelism to Muslims surfaced in the English-language and Malay-language media. It was likely that efforts at outward propagation of the Islamic faith was a response to aggressive Christian evangelism. *Muslim Reader* criticised that the meaning of *dakwah* had become “restrictive” and insular, with a focus on improving the conditions of Muslims; the task of spreading Islam to non-Muslims had been “almost forgotten”.⁶⁶² Ustaz Osman Jantan said that Muslim religious teachers were too involved with *dakwah* in mosques, schools, and residential estates, and failed to venture beyond to evangelise.⁶⁶³ There was, therefore, a concerted shift to outward evangelism of the Islamic faith; the outward movement was probably a response to Christian religious practices.

⁶⁶¹ Wan Hussin Zohri, “Speech at National Day Celebration Organised by the Tamil Muslim Associations” (Chong Hock Girls’ School, September 5, 1982), 1–2, National Archives of Singapore, Press Release No. 04-3/83/09/05.

⁶⁶² Zhulkeflee Hj Ismail, “Missionary Islam,” *Muslim Reader*, Vol. 6, No. 3, 12.

⁶⁶³ “Ustaz Berdakwah Di Orchard Rd Dibincang,” *Berita Harian*, September 8, 1986.

Dakwah in Singapore appeared to have shifted from its focus, from deepening the faith of Muslims, to spreading the Islamic faith to non-Muslims and countering conversion attempts from the Christians. Some Muslims adapted their methods of *dakwah* by learning from the Christians. Jantan said that the Muslims should take a leaf out of the Christian book and evangelise in the streets with their guitars. Jantan performed *dakwah* alone in Singapore's shopping belt at Orchard Road.⁶⁶⁴ Separately, Wu revealed that he drew lessons from Christian evangelism to enhance *dakwah* efforts, as the rate of Muslim converts was "unimpressive when compared to the rate of Christian conversion".⁶⁶⁵ He attributed the low rate of Muslim conversion to the lack of *dakwah* activities among non-Muslims. He also criticised Islamic revivalism in Singapore as inward-looking and only focused on deepening the spirituality of the local Malay/Muslims.⁶⁶⁶ Compared to the Christians, Muslims were generally "far less active on an international scale" among non-Muslims, had no evangelical crusades, and were not concerned with "Islamic evangelisation".⁶⁶⁷ Imran said that Darul Arqam began organising an annual "Islam and Its Challenges Seminar" in the 1980s, in response to anxiety arising from Christian evangelisation to Muslim youths.⁶⁶⁸ Christian evangelisation has triggered competition for converts between religious habitus. This was a "new" drag effect not seen during the colonial period. The muslim habitus sought to block Christian conversion of Muslims and embarked on its own conversion drive. Amid religious competition, it appeared that religious groups had appropriated practices from other groups.

⁶⁶⁴"Ustaz Berdakwah Di Orchard Rd Dibincang."

⁶⁶⁵ Wu, *The Call to Islam*, 8.

⁶⁶⁶ Wu, *The Call to Islam*, 10.

⁶⁶⁷ Wu, *The Call to Islam*, 14.

⁶⁶⁸ Mohamed Taib, "Neofundamentalist Thought, *Dakwah* and Religious Pluralism Among Muslims in Singapore."

Similarly, MUIS broadened its outreach in *dakwah* movements. Syed Isa said that Singaporean Muslims needed guidance from Islamic teachers to resist the Christian “threat”, so that the Christian tracts would not mislead them.⁶⁶⁹ In 1987, the local Council of Mosques organised a missionary course in the Malay and English languages with the assistance of experienced overseas missionaries to train Singaporean missionaries. The Council of Mosques fell under the auspices of MUIS, and was sponsored by the Saudi-based World Council of Mosques.⁶⁷⁰ In the same year, the Council of Mosques announced its plans to invite Muslim scholars from Canada, Australia, Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, and Indonesia to deliver public lectures and conduct workshops and seminars.⁶⁷¹ In one such workshop, it was reported that 400 people converted to Islam every year, and there were discussions about the possibility of introducing *dakwah* classes in English and Arabic.⁶⁷² We can infer that classes targeted at an English-speaking audience were intended to attract non-Muslims; most Muslims spoke Malay, and the main barrier to conversion to Islam for non-Malays was language accessibility. The missionary activities appeared to be a response to Christian evangelism targeting Muslims. Aggressive Christian outreach efforts had affected local Islamic practices. Religious competition led local Muslims to emphasise external outreach efforts, whereas initially, they were more focused on interior spirituality. The interactions between religious habitus had consequently affected the respective habitus’ religious practices.

⁶⁶⁹ “Mufti Saran Atur Strategi Bersistem, Perangi Ajaran Sesat,” *Berita Harian*, August 10, 1986.

⁶⁷⁰ “Muis Seeks 3 Ways to Solve 3 Issues,” *The Straits Times*, May 5, 1987; “Muis Director Cites Three “Musts” For Young Muslims,” *The Straits Times*, February 4, 1987.

⁶⁷¹ “Religious Education Programme Planned for Muslims,” *The Straits Times*, May 7, 1987.

⁶⁷² Saini Salleh, “Perlunya Rancangan Dakwah Tersusun,” *Berita Harian*, June 20, 1987.

5.2.c *Social Action, Liberation Theology and the Line Between Religion and Politics*

In May 1987, the MHA disclosed that they had uncovered a Marxist conspiracy, a plot in which local Marxists influenced by liberation theology planned to overthrow the Government and establish a communist state. Vincent Cheng, a Catholic church worker, was allegedly instructed by Tan Wah Piow to establish a network of followers to prepare for Tan's eventual return to Singapore to establish a Marxist state. Tan was a communist who had fled Singapore to evade arrest in 1976. Among other things, the MHA alleged that Cheng's supporters infiltrated church and student groups, and taught Marxist ideas under the guise of Bible study sessions. Cheng and his supporters, who portrayed themselves as social workers fighting against injustices and oppression, were reportedly inspired by the involvement of the Church in the political struggle in the Philippines against Marcos. The MHA noted that liberation theology was a "radical ideology" that originated from Latin America and taught that "the Church must intervene to bring about social and political change".⁶⁷³

The CCA was expelled from Singapore in the same year.⁶⁷⁴ The MHA said that Cheng and Tan had received assistance from the CCA, and that the organisation had used Singapore as a base to support similar liberation movements in other Asian countries. The CCA's publication, *CCA News (CCAM)*, was also said to have urged its readers to "involve themselves in radical political activities" and be involved in matters "which had nothing to do with the Christian faith".⁶⁷⁵

⁶⁷³ "Marxist Plot Uncovered," *The Straits Times*, May 27, 1987.

⁶⁷⁴ Martin Soong, "Protestant Body Shut Down for Engaging in Political Activities," *Business Times*, December 31, 1987. The Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) was headquartered in Singapore until its expulsion from the country in 1987. The CCA is an umbrella organisation of Protestant dominations, which included the Anglicans, Presbyterians, and Baptists in 17 Asian countries. Some member churches of the NCC also belonged to CCA.

⁶⁷⁵ "Singapore Expels Christian Organisation," *The Straits Times*, December 31, 1987.

In most official narratives, the Marxist conspiracy has been framed as a political subversion plot using the cover of a religious group. Rather than concentrating on the various interpretations of the Marxist plot, this thesis is concerned with how liberation theology changed the way some Christians perceived the societal dimension of religion, and transformed the way they lived out their religious beliefs in society.

In the late 1970s, local churches affiliated with the CCA and the World Council of Churches (WCC) discussed the role of Christians and social action in society. In the same period, *Methodist Message* also discussed social action and helping the oppressed in Asian societies. Yap, who was then the CCA's general secretary, stressed that churches in Asia must "facilitate people's involvement within both church and society". Yap also said that Asian societies suffered from authoritarian governments, and that Asian individuals were "victims of powerful economic interest", both in their countries and in other foreign nations, including rich Asian states.⁶⁷⁶ Another article featured the Filipino Cardinal Bishop Julio Labayen, who asserted that Christians had departed from the gospel if they separated religion from politics and did not "opt for the poor as Jesus did".⁶⁷⁷ The development of an Asian theology led Asian churches to reconstrue their relationship with the state and society.

Further, *CCAN* advocated for liberation theology among local churches. *CCAN* articles in the late 1970s and 1980s frequently exhorted churches to be involved in politics in order to fulfil the Great Commission. The articles also asserted that there was no separation of church and state.⁶⁷⁸ Notably, *CCAN* preached several points that conflicted with state secularism in Singapore, which expected the separation of church and state and the private role of religion.

⁶⁷⁶ "Respond to Silenced Asian Voices," *Methodist Message*, August 1977, 4.

⁶⁷⁷ "Ideology a Tool for Witness," *Methodist Message*, August 1977, 2.

⁶⁷⁸ EPS, "Church Belongs in Politics," *CCA News*, July 15, 1984, 3; South China Morning Post, "Church Speaks Up for Its Political Freedom," *CCA News*, March 15, 1987.

As previously discussed, Singapore's secularity principles – religious freedom, and the neutrality of the state vis-à-vis religions – were conditional upon the non-interference of religion in political affairs. In contrast, liberation theologians taught that the church must be involved in politics. Further, liberation theologians urged the middle class to enter into a struggle with the majority.⁶⁷⁹ Moreover, *CCAN* stressed that it was more important to obey the church's teachings and help the poor and oppressed fight against Caesar (i.e. social, political and economic structures) that had oppressed the poor. *CCAN* also urged Christians to fight against the state that sought to relegate the church to a private role. Further, *CCAN* anticipated that the definition of Christian mission would evolve in the next few years to involve “the public area: with the affairs of communities, societies, and nations”.⁶⁸⁰ *CCAN* also encouraged “protest ... as a form of proclamation”, preaching to defend political prisoners in Indonesia, and staging protests against corrupt elections in the Philippines.⁶⁸¹ These ideas, which advocated for religious groups to take on a public, activist role and disregard the state's authority, were contrary to Singapore's secularity – religious groups were advised to steer clear of the socio-political sphere, as seen in past state-religious interactions and public discourses. Such advocacy thus presented counterchallenges to state power.

There was a discrepancy in church-state expectations of the role of Christians in society, particularly in their definitions of social action. In the early 1970s, the Christians envisioned themselves as being involved in nation-building by expanding the scope of their services to society and addressing the problems local communities face. Some Christians felt that they were simply carrying out social action, which went

⁶⁷⁹ “Liberation Theology: Whether and How It Is Related to Marxist Thought,” *CCA News*, August 15, 1987, 2.

⁶⁸⁰ GRK, “God and Caesar,” *CCA News*, July 1987, 1, 30.

⁶⁸¹ TKT, “The Protest and the Pulpit,” *CCA News*, May 15, 1978, 1–2.

hand in hand with evangelism. However, the state saw the SIM as anti-government and as religion intruding into the political arena. Similarly, in the Marxist episode, the Government felt that churches should restrict themselves to religion and spirituality, and not be involved in socio-economic issues that fell under then Government's purview. Both the state and Christians had mismanaged expectations of the role of religion in the nation-building process.

One of the MHA's main charges against Cheng and his activists was that they had published their views on socio-economic issues in church publications which "had little to do with religion".⁶⁸² For instance, Cheng wrote an article in the *Catholic News* that accused the Singapore system of being "repressive and exploitative" and alleged that the police had beaten up local workers. The MHA also alleged that the Justice and Peace Commission (J&P), a commission established by the Archdiocese of Singapore to study and propagate the Church's social doctrines, had released publications to "incite disaffection with society and urge for revolutionary change". The J&P had reportedly published articles under *Singapore Highlights and Dossier* that instigated class consciousness in Singapore by exaggerating disparities between lower- and upper-income groups.⁶⁸³ The state regarded socio-economic commentary as part of the political domain; religious groups should refrain from commenting on socio-economic and political issues that were outside the traditional religious domain. Any deviation from the assigned roles in the habitus would be regarded as resistance to the state authority.

⁶⁸² "Marxist Plot Uncovered"; "Religious Publications Used for Subversive Ends," *The Straits Times*, May 29, 1987. These publications included the *Catholic News* and publications by the Justice and Peace Commission. My requests for access to these publications were rejected by the Catholic Archdiocese of Singapore.

⁶⁸³ "Commission Collects and Studies Social Data," *The Straits Times*, June 5, 1987; "How Religious Organisations Were Used," *The Straits Times*, May 27, 1987.

On the other hand, the CCA argued that the Government's actions showed "little understanding of the way the church perceives its role in society". Further, no Government had the right to decide what was relevant to Christianity and "it [was] presumptuous for secular governments to decide which matters [were ... related to] the Christian faith". The CCA also reiterated that "matters of church-state relation belonged to the essence of faith and it was the responsibility of CCA publications to report these events and reflect on their significance."⁶⁸⁴ In other words, the CCA felt the state did not have the right to interfere in religious affairs and dictate which activities were within the religious domain.

Like those involved with the SIM, local Christian organisations probably felt that they were translating Christian social doctrines into action and contributing to nation-building by addressing societal problems. In December 1983, three lay apostolate movements under the Catholic Archdiocese of Singapore – the Young Christian Workers, the Christian Family Social Movement, and the J&P – sent a report to Acting Minister of Labour S. Jayakumar to express their objections to proposed 12-hour shifts for workers.⁶⁸⁵ In March 1986, the Singapore-based French priest Guillaume Arotcarena and two social workers published *The Maid Tangle*, which called for domestic workers in Singapore to be included under protective employment laws since the workers had no recourse against abusive employers.⁶⁸⁶ In a closed-door meeting with government officials, the local Catholic Archbishop Gregory Yong said the *Catholic News* was "a source of feedback to the Government, and not subversive".

⁶⁸⁴ Christian Conference of Asia, "UCAN Document - Christian Conference of Asia Response to Singapore," Union of Catholic Asian News, April 19, 1988, https://www.ucanews.com/story-archive/?post_name=/1988/04/20/ucan-document-christian-conference-of-asia-response-to-singapore&post_id=759#.

⁶⁸⁵ "An Example of Christian Social Caring," *CCA News*, January 15, 1984, 6.

⁶⁸⁶ Stella Danker, "Laws Attacked for Offering Foreign Maids Little Protection," *Straits Times*, March 16, 1986.

Yong also suggested that the Government “left things as they were”.⁶⁸⁷ From the above examples, although some Catholics advocated for socio-economic agendas, there was still a degree of deference to the state in their recognition that only the state could make policy changes. They did not see their actions as antagonistic but as a source of feedback and contribution to society,

Notwithstanding its crackdown on the alleged Marxists, the Government was also anxious to mitigate state-Catholic tensions. Government leaders were worried that the Marxist plot might result in a “confrontation between the Catholic Church and the Government”. PM Lee met representatives from the local Catholic Church to clarify that there was no conflict between the church and the state, and Yong reiterated the same stance.⁶⁸⁸ Lee also sued the Hong Kong weekly *Far Eastern Economic Review* for its allegations that the Government had used the Marxist plot as an opportunity to attack the Catholics; he said the lawsuit was borne out of his “anxi[ety] to mitigate the potential harm to church-government relations in Singapore”.⁶⁸⁹ Minister Lee Boon Yang said the Marxist conspiracy was evidence that “the troubles and turmoils of the past” were not as distant as they appeared to be and “must not be

⁶⁸⁷ “Archbishop Repeatedly Told of Government’s Concern,” *The Straits Times*, September 26, 1989.

⁶⁸⁸ “Priests’ Statements Fuelled Govt-Church Tension,” *The Straits Times*, September 26, 1989; “No Conflict Between Church and State, Says Lay Leader,” *The Straits Times*, June 3, 1987; “Dr Ee Satisfied with Meeting,” *The Straits Times*, June 3, 1987; “How Meeting at the Istana Came About,” *The Straits Times*, June 3, 1987; “Archbishop: What I Intend to Do Next,” *The Straits Times*, June 3, 1987. A number of local Catholics and priests remained unconvinced of the Government’s charges, and several Catholic churches organised services to offer support to the detainees and their family members. Their disbelief remained despite Yong appearing on national television confirming that “the Government had reasons for its actions”.

⁶⁸⁹ “Why Had to Sue,” *New Paper*, September 26, 1989; “Court Awards PM Full Costs,” *Business Times*, December 14, 1989. “Why Had to Sue”; “Court Awards PM Full Costs.” FEER published the article, “New light on detentions: Catholic priest answers Jayakumar’s allegations”, on 17 December 1987, making several insinuations against PM Lee and the Singapore Government in relation to the arrests of the alleged Marxists. In November 1989, the Singapore Court ruled that FEER had libelled PM Lee in the article and awarded PM Lee \$230,000 in damages and a court order restraining the magazine from repeating the libel.

forgotten or ignored”.⁶⁹⁰ From the above instances, it can be surmised that the state was eager to minimise church-state tensions through other strategies like closed-door discussions on the societal role of religion rather than the use of hard laws like the ISA if the church did not mount direct challenges to the state.

This thesis suggests that the Marxist episode ended the churches’ experimentation with social action, readjusting church-state relations, and expectations of the public role of religion. We can observe three notable consequences affecting the habitus and secularity principles. Firstly, the episode had become a historical sequence in the habitus that reinforced the view that religion and politics were a potent mix that would: upset existing state-religion relations; potentially result in civil disorder; and weaken investors’ confidence in the local economy. Political elites were anxious that the Marxist conspiracy was an “amber light” of what would happen in the future. Other religious groups, particularly the charismatic Christians, might follow in the footsteps of the Catholic activists and consequently cause communal tension and chaos.⁶⁹¹ Political elites were also wary of upsetting the government’s neutrality towards religious groups by granting concessions to a specific group; they were concerned not to embark on a slippery slope where other groups would follow suit. Likewise, there was the concern that if the Government did not limit the Marxists, other groups might follow in their footsteps. In this aspect, the state acted as the regulator and enforcer of norms within acceptable boundaries of religion and politics in the national habitus.

⁶⁹⁰ Boon Yang Lee, “Speech at Jalan Besar Youth Group Biennial General Meeting” (Jalan Besar Community Centre, July 19, 1987), National Archives of Singapore, Press Release No. 48/Jul/1102/87/07/19. Lee.

⁶⁹¹ “Archbishop Repeatedly Told of Government’s Concern”; “Church Statement on ISD Arrests “Crafted by D”Souza,”” *The Straits Times*, September 28, 1989.

Secondly, the state redrew the ground rules of secularity in Singapore. After two decades of churches attempting to redefine their public roles, the state – as the highest-ranking unit in the habitus – defined socio-economic issues as external to the religious domain. PM Lee advised religious organisations to “leave the economic-political needs of people to non-religious groups, like political parties”. In the scenario where religious groups embarked on “social action programs” and mobilised religious adherents on socio-economic agendas, “the consequences [would] be bad for all”. Lee also advised Catholic leaders to steer the church back to its traditional non-political activities.⁶⁹² The state thus classified social action and socio-economic agendas as non-religious activities in the national habitus.

Thirdly, the state limited religious commentary on governmental policies. Civil servants advised Yong that religious publications were only allowed to comment on government policies which “had a direct bearing on religious beliefs”, such as the debate on abortion. However, commentary on social issues had to be “infrequent and objective and balanced”. Individuals in religious organisations who wanted to comment on socio-political issues should seek alternative platforms like newspapers or current affairs publications.⁶⁹³ The state discouraged commentary on socio-economic and political issues, as these were not within the purview of traditional religious activities, as defined by the state.

Nonetheless, not all local churches subscribed to social action that crossed into socio-economic commentary and political action. For instance, the EFOS was formed because the evangelical Christians disagreed with “the strong liberal influence” of local

⁶⁹² Kuan Yew Lee, “Speech at First Ritual for the Observance of the Five Precepts cum the Buddhisattva Precepts by Singapore Buddhist Federation” (Manjusri Secondary School, December 13, 1988), National Archives of Singapore, Release No. 34/Dec 02-1/88/12/13; “Govt-Church Talks Were Aimed at Averting Clash,” *Business Times*, September 28, 1989.

⁶⁹³ “Archbishop Repeatedly Told of Government’s Concern.”

churches in the 1950s and 1960s, particularly those belonging to the National Council of Churches Singapore (NCCS) and those with ties to the WCC. Upon its establishment, the EFOS also stated that it would “stay out of politics”, and that its members would find other means of communicating their Christian concerns to the Government.⁶⁹⁴ Separately, the GCF invited Sir Frederick Catherwood to speak at a seminar, during which he advised that the state was a “God-ordained institution”. Any desired changes should be made by “Christians working within and through the system, and not via a violent and destructive overthrow of the regime”.⁶⁹⁵ It appeared that in the 1970s, disagreements emerged among Christians who had different views on Christian participation in society.

In the aftermath of the Marxist arrests, local churches began sanctioning liberation theology. The state’s enforcement actions against the Marxist plot probably acted as an external constraint that created a self-censuring effect among local Christians. A local Catholic nun said that while it was challenging to draw the line between religion and politics, local religious actors should follow the Pope’s advice that priests should not be involved in politics, and that their roles were to provide spiritual guidance to the flock.⁶⁹⁶ Other local Christian voices also echoed sentiments similar to that of the state. Sng criticised liberation theology for politicising the church and for polarising society based on class differences.⁶⁹⁷ The GCF organised a talk by Reverend John Stott, who advised Singaporeans to provide their suggestions through the Government’s Feedback Unit, as unjust social structures could only be reformed through legislation. Stott also drew the line between religion and politics; while it was “absolutely right for a preacher to talk about Christian doctrine ... and the curse of

⁶⁹⁴ Lau, “The Evangelical Fellowship of Singapore (EFOS).”

⁶⁹⁵ “Christian Impact in a Secular World,” *Christian Grad*, March 1978.

⁶⁹⁶ “Now’s the Time to Stand Behind Archbishop,” *The Straits Times*, June 6, 1987.

⁶⁹⁷ Sng, “Liberation Theology – an Evaluation,” *Christian Grad*, September 1988, 5.

unemployment, the preacher would have trespassed into politics by suggesting what the Government can do to mitigate unemployment.⁶⁹⁸ Such voices created pressure on other habitus' members to practise self-restraint and adhere by the national habitus' norms.

Despite their earlier inclination towards liberation theology, Methodist and Anglican churches in Singapore renounced their ties to the CCA. Their actions were shifts to align themselves with the habitus' norms – to distance themselves from the CCA and declare their allegiance to the national habitus. The Methodist Church said that its decision came from the CCA's shift of emphasis, from “a viable programme of witness to a political challenge to any government”, including the local government.⁶⁹⁹ The NCCS also said that it would reconsider its links to CCA.⁷⁰⁰ It can be seen that some Christians made efforts to show the state that they were willing to toe the line between religion and politics. Their actions could be interpreted as self-limiting actions inculcated from external constraints that the state had imposed on the alleged Marxists and the ban on CCA; the fear of similar state repercussions informed other Christians to adhere to the limits of religious actions defined by the national habitus.

Similarly, Yong declared that *Catholic News* must remain a “religious newspaper” and disallowed the publication from commenting on economic or social issues unless ‘spiritual or moral values [we]re at stake’. He also closed the Church's foreign workers' centre, out of concern that the centre could become “a potential source of conflict” between church and state.⁷⁰¹ Yong's actions were similar to those of Olcomendy in the 1970s, when the latter shut down Justice and Peace News for

⁶⁹⁸ Peng Hwa Ang, “The Christian Responsibility,” *Christian Grad*, July 1987, 2–3.

⁶⁹⁹ “Church Pulls Out from Expelled Christian Group,” *The Straits Times*, December 10, 1988, Overseas edition.

⁷⁰⁰ “S”pore Anglican Church Quits Regional Body,” *The Straits Times*, June 25, 1988, Overseas edition.

⁷⁰¹ Weng Kam Leong and Alan John, “Archbishop Intent on Pulling Church Into Line,” *The Straits Times*, June 7, 1987.

being overly critical of the state. Both Yong and Olcomendy were practising self-restraint that was reinforced either through fear or pressure created by the state's disciplinary tactics to regulate the local Marxists' "abnormal" actions. The state probably did not respond to the Justice and Peace News as it did to *Catholic News* because Christian social action and Christian critiques of socio-economic and political issues were a relatively new social change in the 1970s. Thus, there was no ingrained predisposition in the national habitus to act against religious actors in the socio-economic sphere, nor did Christian social changes significantly change the habitus then. It took a series of state-religious confrontations before the political elites assessed the impact of religious-social activism on the habitus, and the political and religious elites acted accordingly to restrict religion's presence in the public sphere.

5.2.d Church-State Relations in the Late 1980s

In the mid-1980s, politicians and government agencies voiced their anxiety about Singapore's growing Christian influence. PM Lee said that the policymakers and general public were concerned about the growing number and influence of Christians in Singapore.⁷⁰² More than half of the conclusions drawn from government-commissioned reports on religion focused on the challenges posed by the growth of Christianity in Singapore. The report noted a "substantial increase" in the proportion of Christians in society – from 10.3% in 1980 to 18.7% in 1988 – and that Christianity was quickly becoming a dominant religion in Singapore.⁷⁰³ The report suggested that the gain in Christianity was achieved at the expense of Taoism, which saw a significant decline in followers from 29.3% in 1980 to 13.4% in 1988.⁷⁰⁴ Christian revivalism also appeared to be more of a concern to the researchers than Islamic revivalism; almost

⁷⁰² Eddie C Y Kuo and Jon S.T. Quah, "Religion in Singapore: Report of a National Survey," Report Prepared for Ministry of Community Development, August 1988, 7–8.

⁷⁰³ Kuo and Quah, 1, 66.

⁷⁰⁴ Kuo and Quah, 4.

a quarter of the 45-page report on religious revivalism in Singapore was on Christianity, while two pages touched on Islam.⁷⁰⁵

Significantly, the report took issue with the nature of Christianity as a proselytising religion. While the report observed no indication that a notable number of Muslims were converting to Christianity, it stated that it was “[un]surprising that community and religious leaders from Malay and Indian communities ha[d] expressed serious concern over the increasing influence of Christianity”. The report assessed that their concerns were “justified and merit[ed] some attention”, as Christianity was a “proselytising religion”.⁷⁰⁶ A corresponding report claimed that one-fifth of its Christian survey respondents were “hardcore Christians”, who “exhibited strong evangelistic zeal” and a “sense of mission” to convert adherents of other religions.⁷⁰⁷

The reports identified two emergent problems associated with the Christians. Firstly, it was observed that the majority of Christians were “of a relatively higher socio-economic status” and exerted “an influence, politically, socially and economically, far greater than the number they represent in the population”. The reports were concerned that overlapping race, social class and religious identification would lead to religious tensions manifesting as class conflicts, due to the unbalanced distribution of financial resources.⁷⁰⁸

Secondly, the reports warned that Christian groups might seek to “extend their interest and activities beyond the domain which has been conventionally defined as religious”; in particular, groups traditionally involved in social welfare and services. The Christian groups might also embark on “politically-oriented social actions to redress perceived social injustice”, which threaded a thin line between religion and

⁷⁰⁵ Kuo, Quah, and Tong, “Religion and Religious Revivalism in Singapore.”

⁷⁰⁶ Kuo and Quah, “Religion in Singapore: Report of a National Survey,” 67, 69.

⁷⁰⁷ Kuo, Quah, and Tong, “Religion and Religious Revivalism in Singapore,” 12–13.

⁷⁰⁸ Kuo, Quah, and Tong, 11, 31, 38–39.

politics. The reports warned that Singapore could become like South America, where the liberation theology movement had caused religion to “encroach upon the political arena”.⁷⁰⁹ The statements above indicated the researchers’ views that religious views did not belong to the public sphere, and religious impetus in the public sphere should remain limited to social welfare and services.

Several observations arise from the reports mentioned above. Given that liberation theology encouraged the middle class to enter into a struggle with the majority to fight against governments, the state’s concern with Christian social activism probably arose from what it perceived as a tangible threat from the Christian middle class. Given their significant financial resources, the Christian attempts to redefine religion’s role in politics would shift the existing distribution of power relations in the national habitus. Local Christians’ unequal socio-economic and political influence could potentially allow them to push for an unbalanced relationship between the state, Christians, and other religious groups. Further, politicians had voiced their conviction that no religious dogma should dominate state policies, given that Singapore’s survival as a multireligious and multiracial society was dependent upon the nation’s secularity; secularism and the separation of religion and politics were closely tied to national identity. The disruption of relative positions in the national habitus could destabilise the habitus and, thus, disrupt social harmony.

Results from the 1990 census revealed the impact of Christian evangelism. The census posed further questions on religious conversion to interviewees who professed a religious affiliation; these interviewees were part of a 10% sampling of Singaporeans. The report found that Christianity had the highest number of converts among all religions, as shown in Figure 4; 65.9% of Protestant Christians, and 34.5%

⁷⁰⁹ Kuo, Quah, and Tong, 31–32.

of Catholics, were converts. Most Christian and Catholic converts came from Buddhist and Taoist backgrounds, with only a small percentage of converts from Muslim backgrounds (as shown in Figures 5 and 6). Further, 99.6% of Singaporean Malay residents were Muslims, while 0.2% professed to be Christians, and the remaining 0.2% stated “no religion”.⁷¹⁰ The number of Christian converts was not as staggering as figures reported by church publications and the mainstream media. In addition, despite Malay/Muslims’ perception of Christian evangelisation as a threat to their community, Christianity did not gain many Malay/Muslim converts.

⁷¹⁰ Eddie C Y Kuo and Chee-Kiong Tong, *Religion in Singapore*, Census of Population 1990, Monograph No. 2 (Singapore: SNP Publishers, 1995), 9, 29–33. Refer to Figure 4 on page 256 and Figures 5 and 6 on page 257.

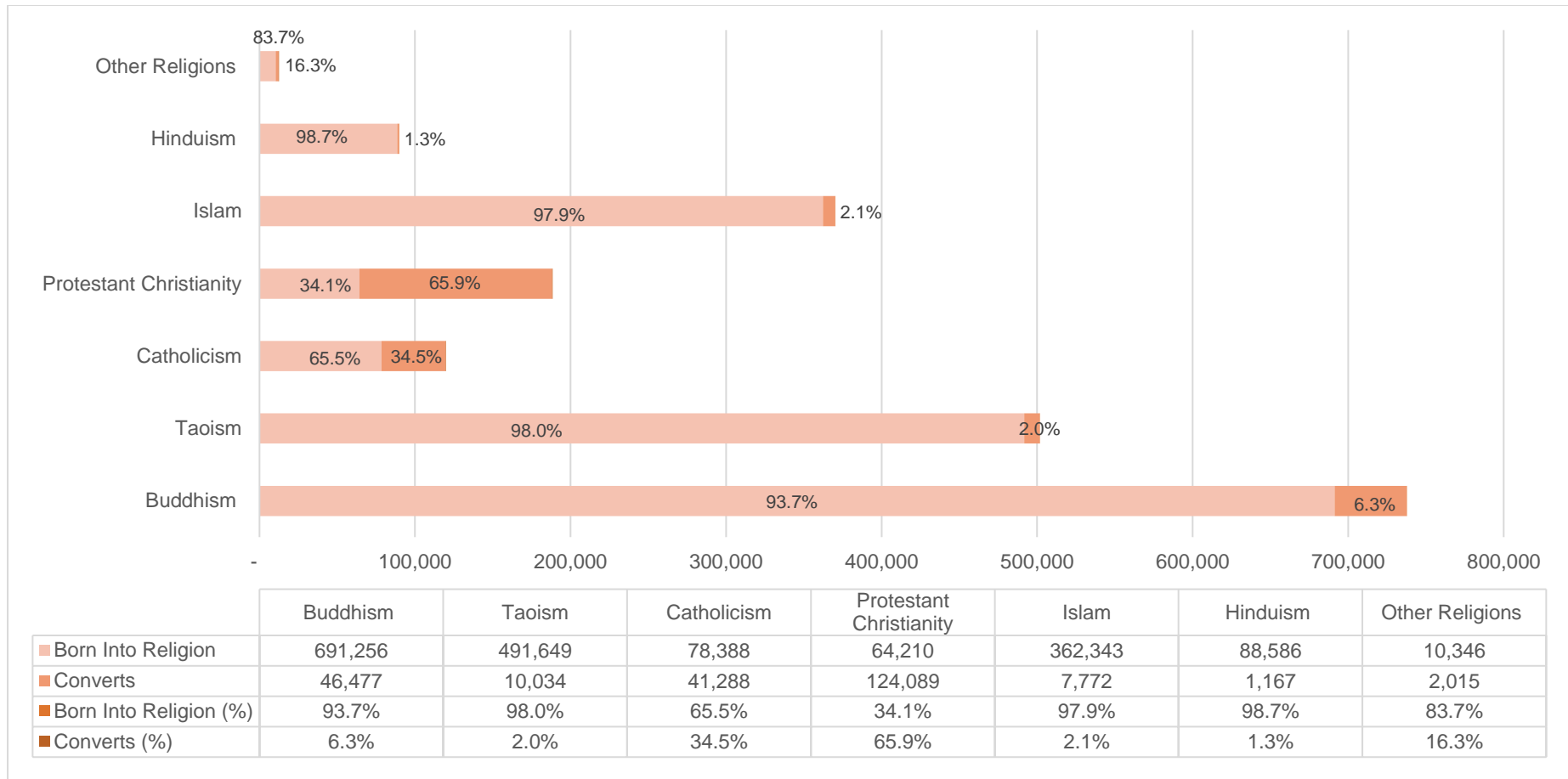


Figure 4 Resident Population Aged Above 10 Years Old⁷¹¹

⁷¹¹ Kuo and Tong, 30.

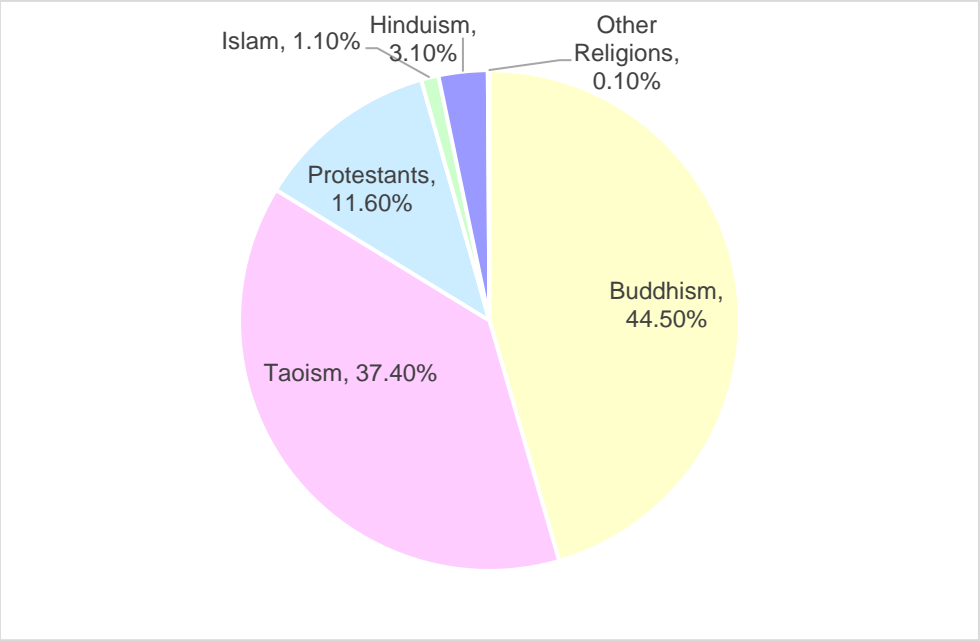


Figure 5 Catholic Converts (19,422) by Previous Religion, 1990⁷¹²

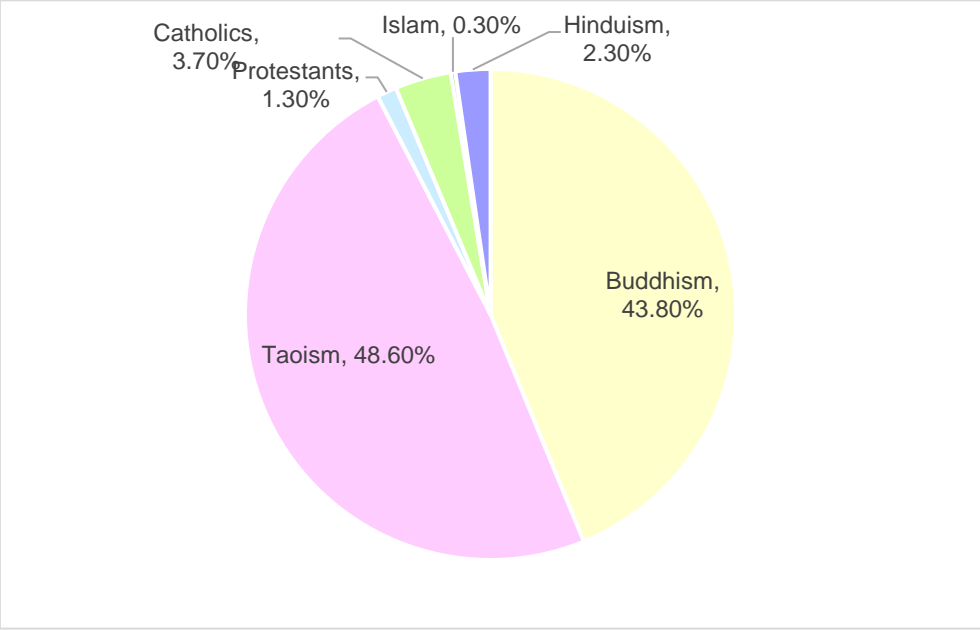


Figure 6 Protestant Converts (55,657) by Previous Religion, 1990⁷¹³

⁷¹² Kuo and Tong, 31. The number of Catholic converts varies from the statistics provided in Figure 4. It could be because some Catholic adherents might not have a previous religious affiliation, or the survey respondents did not respond to this question.

⁷¹³ Kuo and Tong, 31. Similar to the figures for Catholic converts, the number of Protestant converts differ from the statistics presented in Figure 4. Protestants who indicated their conversion from Protestant Christianity were likely to refer to those who had switched from other Christian denominations.

However, some Christian leaders felt that they were unfairly spotlighted by the state and the media.⁷¹⁴ For instance, the GCF found that Buddhist bookshops were still selling books on the Christian faith, even though the authorities had reportedly confiscated books on comparative religion from Christian bookshops. The GCF also disclosed that about 500 individuals, many of whom came from Christian backgrounds, converted to Islam. Sng, then a leader of the GCF, said that the Christians felt they did not have a “level playing field” and were “singled out” and “targeted”. Sng also said that the 1980s was a “difficult period” for the Christians, as they were accused, on many occasions, of imposing their minority views on the majority in society.⁷¹⁵ Further, Sng said some Christians felt that the state had a “hidden agenda” and might be intentionally hampering the growth of Christianity to appease the majority in society, who were Buddhists and Confucianists.⁷¹⁶ The Christians felt that the state, being openly Confucianist in its orientation, was biased against other religious groups.

Nonetheless, the religious leaders were allowed an unofficial channel to voice their views on public policy matters behind closed doors. For instance, while Christians might not have openly voiced their views on abortion and divorce matters, Sng said that the state had probably compromised and taken religious views into consideration in the amendment of divorce and abortion laws in the 1970s and 1980s. It was “not the culture” of Singaporean society to broadcast the fact that religious views were considered during deliberations on public policies.⁷¹⁷ MUIS also sought direct recourse from the state when it encountered problems with

⁷¹⁴ K.S. Koh, “Christians Are By And Large Sane and Safe,” *The Straits Times*, May 5, 1989.

⁷¹⁵ Interview with Bobby Sng, Reel 10/12.

⁷¹⁶ Interview with Bobby Sng, Reel 11/12.

⁷¹⁷ Interview with Bobby Sng, Reel 10/12.

Christian evangelism. Therefore, the secular state was not hostile towards religion, and maintained a co-operative relationship with religious leaders. Both state and religious actors interacted to define the national habitus' notion of the place of religion in habitus structures like legislation and public policies.

5.3 State's View of Religion – Religious Groups, Moral Actors

From the above discussion on Islamic and Christian revivalism, several state expectations of the role of religion in society are derivable. Religion was allowed to thrive so long as faith existed as a private, personal, and apolitical activity, and religious groups did not seek to impose their views on the state or society. In the late 1970s, the state and society expected religion to provide a moral counterbalance to modernisation and westernisation and maintain stability in society. By the mid-1980s, when religious tensions and agitation threatened to disrupt social harmony, the political elites decided to re-state the place of religion in society. This section will examine shifts in state attitudes towards the role of religion in nation-building and society in the late 1970s and 1980s.

5.3.a Role of Religion as Moral Bolster for Good Citizens

This thesis's study of government rhetoric in the 1970s and early 1980s found a notable shift in the state's emphasis on religion as a solution to moral and societal problems. In the early 1980s, the *Straits Times* noted that Singapore was "far from being concerned about religious revivalism". The state was more concerned that modernisation and westernisation were producing "a nation of thieves, a people without moral values".⁷¹⁸ The political elites often discussed problems arising from drug abuse, juvenile delinquency, and hippie culture; all

⁷¹⁸ "The Straits Times Says.. It's Better to Be Informed."

thought to be the harmful influences of westernisation. They posited religious education as a solution to combat social problems.⁷¹⁹ While the political elites had previously acknowledged religion's spiritual role, the emphasis on religion as a moral bolster of the society was new.

The political elites felt that religion could address societal problems, albeit differently from what was proposed by some religious individuals. While some religious individuals proposed theocratic solutions (as previously discussed), the state saw religion as a secular solution to social issues. In 1980, Rahim Ishak, Senior Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, said teaching Islam to the youths could address social problems like drug abuse and juvenile delinquency.⁷²⁰ Similarly, Mattar said that children at Darul Ihsan Libanat, an orphanage run by Muslimin Trust Fund Association, would "grow up to be morally responsible and conscientious members of the community" because they had received Islamic instructions.⁷²¹ Likewise, Minister Lim Chee Onn advised the congregation at Holy Spirit Church to impart values that could address the younger generation's worrying lifestyle trends and values.⁷²² Tay Eng Soon, Minister of State for Education and Communications and Information, also stressed the importance of spirituality in helping Singaporeans cope with society's complexities.⁷²³ Significantly, Jayakumar said that religious values were "values and norms of conduct which all right-thinking citizens should

⁷¹⁹ "The Goh Plan to Save Singapore from Becoming a Nation of Thieves," *The Straits Times*, January 17, 1982; "Chok Tong on Religion and Morals," *The Straits Times*, January 18, 1982; "Three Reasons for Boosting Moral Education in Schools," *The Straits Times*, February 20, 1982.

⁷²⁰ Rahim Ishak, "Speech at Opening of the An-Nur Mosque" (An-Nur Mosque, April 20, 1980), National Archives of Singapore, Press Release No. 09-2/80/04/19.

⁷²¹ Ahmad Mattar, "Speech at Opening of the Darul Ihsan Libanat," National Archives of Singapore, Press Release 16-1/80/12/20.

⁷²² Chee Onn Lim, "Speech" (Holy Spirit Church, May 19, 1983), National Archives of Singapore.

⁷²³ Eng Soon Tay, "Speech at Lawyers' Christian Fellowship Dedication Service in Conjunction With The Opening Of The Legal Year" (St Andrew's Cathedral, January 5, 1985), National Archives of Singapore, Press Release No 07/ Jan 06-2/85/ 01/05.

observe”.⁷²⁴ The political elites saw religion as a moral bolster for a decadent society. Religion could play a constructive role in nation-building by serving as a moral force for citizens.

The state introduced compulsory Religious Knowledge (RK) in the secular schools in 1980; Bible and Islamic Knowledge were offered as Singapore-Cambridge General Certificate of Education Ordinary Level (GCE ‘O’ Level) subjects. In 1984, RK became a compulsory subject in secondary schools; it was offered as Bible Knowledge, Islamic Religious Knowledge, Buddhist Studies, Hindu Studies, Sikh Studies, and Confucian Ethics. The government relied on religious groups such as MUIS, the Singapore Buddhist Federation, the Ramakrishna Mission, the Singapore Pastoral Institute, and Trinity Theological College to instruct and provide RK teachers.⁷²⁵ The introduction of RK can be seen as an institutionalisation of religion’s moral role in society. By making RK compulsory, the state was making it a norm for each student to choose a religion to study. This norm would have implications further down the road.

The media reported that the Government wanted students to understand “the moral principles which have shaped” Singapore society.⁷²⁶ Other politicians said that RK would instil positive moral values in students. Goh expressed his conviction that students who were taught some form of religious knowledge would “leave school believing it’s wrong to lie, cheat and steal”. Goh also said that he and most

⁷²⁴ S Jayakumar, “Speech at Hindu Centre Youth Rally and Cultural Show” (Singapore Conference Hall, February 13, 1982), National Archives of Singapore, Singapore Government Press Release 13-2/11-2/82/02/13.

⁷²⁵ S. Gopinathan, “Religious Education in a Secular State: The Singapore Experience,” *Asian Journal of Political Science* 3, no. 2 (December 1995): 22; Grace Chng, “More Courses in Religion Planned for Teachers,” *The Straits Times*, January 29, 1982.

⁷²⁶ “Religious Studies as Pre-U Entry Subject,” *The Straits Times*, October 25, 1979; Alfred Hedwig, “No Preaching in the Classroom,” *The Straits Times*, December 6, 1983.

of his former classmates at the ACS had received religious education that instilled “good” values in them; none of them ended up in jail for criminal breach of trust.⁷²⁷ On another occasion, Sidek bin Saniff, Parliamentary Secretary for Trade and Industry, said “all major religions” encouraged their followers to “do good” and abstain from evil deeds.⁷²⁸ From the above discourses, it can be seen that the political elites viewed religion as a structuring, moral force in the construction of the Singaporean identity in the 1980s. A good citizen was likely to one who had sound, moral values derived from religious traditions.

Government and religious leaders held contradictory views on the role of religious education. The Ministry of Education stated that religious education helped produce a moral person; religion had served as “the basis of individual and public morality for the past few thousand years” and would help combat society’s social and moral problems.⁷²⁹ On another occasion, Lee said he saw Confucianism as culture rather than religious beliefs; he said that his view of morality “was not all that different between the ideal Confucian gentleman and a Christian gentleman”.⁷³⁰ The political elites saw religion as a general category of “religion” and norm for moral values, and did not differentiate between differences in religious beliefs.

In contrast, the Catholic priest Robert Balhetchet disagreed with introducing RK as he felt the aim of moral education through RK could only be achieved through religious conversion. However, the Government had explicitly warned against

⁷²⁷ “The Goh Plan to Save Singapore from Becoming a Nation of Thieves.” Here, Goh was possibly referring to the increase in white-collar crimes in Singapore during the 1980s.

⁷²⁸ Sidek bin Saniff, “Speech at Kolam Ayer Constituency Chinese New Year Gathering” (Bendemeer Primary School, February 13, 1982), National Archives of Singapore, Press Release No. 15-3/82/02/13.

⁷²⁹ “Yes Says Ministry Of Education Report,” *The Straits Times*, January 17, 1982.

⁷³⁰ Kuan Yew Lee, “Interview with Mr. Trevor Kennedy, Editor-in-Chief, Australian Consolidated Press Ltd (2 May 1986),” in *The Papers of Lee Kuan Yew: Speeches, Interviews and Dialogues*, vol. 9, 1981-1987 (Singapore: Gale Asia, 2012), 515–29.

attempts at religious conversion in classrooms. By Balhetchet's reasoning, RK would not transform the students' behaviour or their mindsets.⁷³¹ Similarly, Ernest Chew, a GCF leader, opined that the basis of moral education could only lie in personal faith and belief.⁷³²

In contrast to the political elites, the religious elites saw religion as personal convictions and doctrines that translated into religious beliefs, practices, and belonging to an exclusive community. Paradoxically, the political elites associated religious values with good moral values, but dissociated moral values from religious beliefs. The contradictory views stemmed from differences in what religion meant for the religious and political elites. The expectations of the political and religious elites, on RK and the societal role of religion, were incongruent.

The compulsory element of RK also ran contrary to the freedom of religious beliefs. RK compelled students to choose a religion to study, even if they did not subscribe to a religion. Schools affiliated with religious groups were also compelled to teach other religions to their students. Some religious elites disagreed with the introduction of RK, given that several secular schools in Singapore were affiliated with Christian or Buddhist organisations.⁷³³

⁷³¹ "No Says Catholic Priest Dr Balhetchet," *The Straits Times*, January 17, 1982.

⁷³² Ernest Chew, "Editorial," *Scope*, October 1979.

⁷³³ "National Council of Churches," in *Official Journal of the Sixth Session of the Trinity Annual Conference* (Singapore: Methodist Church in Singapore, 1981), 137; Gopinathan, "Religious Education in a Secular State," 17–19; Violet Oon, "Govt Acts on Mission School Staff Hiring," *New Nation*, March 2, 1972. According to S. Gopinathan, as of 1995, there were 31 secondary Christian mission schools and one Buddhist secondary school in Singapore. Various Catholic and Protestant missionaries established Christian mission schools during the colonial period. The Buddhist secondary school was established and funded by the Singapore Buddhist Federation in 1982. In the 1970s, the Ministry of Education (MOE) gradually established more control over the mission schools. Journalist Violet Oon reported MOE's directive in 1972 that stated mission schools no longer had a "complete say in the employment of principals and teachers" meant that the schools had "more or less come within the full jurisdiction of the Government".

In 1989, RK was discontinued as a compulsory subject. In the ensuing parliamentary debate, several political elites voiced their concerns that RK was inconsistent with “the secular basis of the Government and the state”. The state did not appear to be neutral towards all religious beliefs as it had selected some religions to be taught and excluded other faiths. Further, the state had compelled its citizens to choose a religion to study, violating its neutrality towards religious and areligious beliefs. Several politicians noted at this point that religious revivalism had resulted in a change in circumstances. MP Ow Chin Hock said that if the Government persisted with the teaching of RK, schools might inevitably become “the cradle for the preaching of religious beliefs”. While Tay maintained that religious education was beneficial in imparting the right moral values to citizens, the mistake was making RK compulsory; religious values should be taught in the confines of one’s home and not in secular schools.⁷³⁴ The political elites continued to believe that religion was crucial for promoting moral values, but also held the view that religion should be confined to the individual, private sphere. We see the reinforced notion of religion as private. The main concern with RK was making religion visible and a norm in secular schools, contradicting state secularity and the freedom of religious beliefs. The discontinuation of RK should also be situated in the local context of Islamic and Christian religious revivalism; the Government was likely reluctant to allow religion more presence in the public sphere.

⁷³⁴ Parliament of Singapore, “Teaching of Religious Knowledge in Schools,” Parliament No. 7, Session No. 1, Vol No. 54, Sitting No. 7 (October 6, 1989).

5.3.b State Expectations on the Role of Religion in the Late 1980s

In speeches at various public events in 1987 and 1988, many politicians characterised religion and politics as a bad mix. These speeches could be seen in light of the events of the 1980s. From the late 1970s to 1987, the official political discourse on religion mainly focused on how religion could serve as a positive moral force in society. The political discourse in the late 1980s revealed a discernible shift in state attitudes towards religion. This thesis argues that this shift was a drag effect in response to changes in the societal significance of religion for some religious groups. The speeches made by politicians in secular and religious settings had disciplinary effects on educating society on secularity norms. There were four main features of the state expectations on the role of religion in the late 1980s.

Firstly, the state insisted on the separation of religion and politics. The state's view on the separation of religion and politics was made clear at the start of the country's independence. In 1966, PM Lee urged religious leaders to "stay out of active participation in politics" and not "confuse" religion and religious beliefs with "the secular sector of human lives". He said that he represented "temporal power which [was] absolute in the present" and encouraged Singaporeans to leave the temporal estate to those who were not prejudiced, biased, or antipathic towards any faith. Lee's summarised the state's view towards religion as "to each his own God, his own forms of prayer and to all an equality of opportunity, freedom of his own worship, his own forms of spirited expression in our nation". With this aim, society could remain in a "relatively happy situation". The Singapore nation was built on the principles of "tolerance and mutual understanding", which most religious beliefs

promoted, and not on the exclusivity of specific religious beliefs or doctrines.⁷³⁵ From the above, we can see that the Singapore state strived to be neutral towards all religious beliefs. Freedom of private and individual religious expressions was introduced so that every individual in society could practise his own religious beliefs. Religion and politics were deemed to be an incompatible and antagonistic blend.

There was, however, a difference between the 1960s and the 1980s, in terms of what the mix of politics and religion meant. When Lee made the speech above, he was referring to Singapore UMNO's literal blend of politics and communalism, which was intended to win political support among the Malay/Muslims. New experiences had expanded the state's definition of religion and politics in the 1980s, showing the fluidity of the habitus. The Marxists, the Ikhwan group, and the SPLO were politically subversive groups using the cover of religious organisations to conduct their activities. These three groups proposed religious governance alternatives to the secular state and challenged state authority. The meaning of the separation of religion and politics thus expanded in the 1980s to include religious groups with political ideologies and aims. This meaning was reflected in the "Shared Values", which recognised "religious faith [as] a constructive social force, so long as those practising a religion gave full respect to other faiths, and did not use religion to pursue political causes".⁷³⁶ The "Shared Values", introduced in 1991 as part of the Government's plans to develop a "national ideology", showed that the national habitus saw religion as a positive force in society so long as it was not used for political purposes.

⁷³⁵ Lee, "Speech at Presentation Ceremony of Replica of "Sarnath Buddha" Image (Buddhist Temple, 6 January 1966)," 308–10.

⁷³⁶ Prime Minister's Office, "White Paper on Shared Values," January 2, 1991, 8.

Between 1987 and 1989, politicians made several public speeches to explain the need for the religious and political spheres to be defined through governmental interference. Notably, most politicians referenced three historical incidents – the Hertogh riots and the racial riots in 1964 and 1969 – where racial or religious sentiments had resulted in civil disorder. For instance, Minister Lee stressed that racial and religious harmony were closely intertwined due to the close links between racial and religious identification.⁷³⁷ Speaking to grassroots volunteers in 1989, Tay suggested that memories of racial riots in Singapore, and media reports of racial conflicts in other countries, had prompted Singaporeans to realise that “[they] must preserve racial harmony at all cost[s]”, because the alternative was “suffering and bloodshed”.⁷³⁸ The Government drew upon shared experiences of the national habitus to remind its citizens not to cross the boundary between religion and politics.

In a similar vein, PM Lee warned that Singapore’s history was “bespattered with such outbursts [of communal and religious collision]”, and that racial harmony “cannot be taken for granted”.⁷³⁹ Sidek stressed that racial harmony in Singapore was a deliberate governance approach to managing race and religion; “the scars of racial riots in the 1960s would be too painful even to scratch”.⁷⁴⁰ Senior Minister S. Rajaratnam also said that historical precedents showed religion and politics were a “deadly mixture”. The belief that “politics can improve religion”, or vice versa, was

⁷³⁷ Hsien Loong Lee, “Speech at Inauguration Of The Parliament Of Religions Organised by the Ramakrishna Mission In Singapore” (World Trade Centre, April 30, 1989), National Archives of Singapore, Press Release No. 50/Apr/15-1/89/04/30.

⁷³⁸ Eng Soon Tay, “Speech at Eunoz Citizens” Consultative Committee (CCC) Dinner & Dance” (Neptune Theatre Restaurant, February 17, 1989), National Archives of Singapore, Press Release No. 13/Feb/06-2/89/02/17.

⁷³⁹ Kuan Yew Lee, “Speech at Singapore Armed Forces Day Dinner” (Istana, July 2, 1987), National Archives of Singapore, Press Release No. 08/Jul 02-1/87/07/02.

⁷⁴⁰ Sidek bin Saniff, “Speech at Seminar “Focus on Islam” Organised by the Islamic Fellowship Association” (DBS Auditorium, September 19, 1987), National Archives of Singapore, Press Release No. 39/Sep 15-3/87/09/19.

akin to “striking a match in a gas-filled room in the firm belief that it would provide much-needed illumination”.⁷⁴¹ Such references to historical episodes are significant; they show that historical episodes are not merely an instrumentalisation of history for political reasons, but are ingrained in the collective consciousness of the political elites. A critical aspect of Singapore secularism is the maintenance of religious and racial harmony. Past and current experiences have shown that the mix of religion with politics produced bad outcomes, and prioritising religious and racial identities over social harmony and nation-state belonging might result in civil disorder.

Discourse analysis of official rhetoric in the 1980s also revealed that some of the political elites believed that religious beliefs were bad in the public sphere and would lead to civil strife. Notably, politicians referenced the trauma of the European religious wars. Rajaratnam said that “religious wars tend to be extra furious” compared to political or economic wars where a point of compromise could be reached. He suggested that “when what [was] at stake are divine absolute values, compromise and conciliation are seen to be evil”.⁷⁴² Similarly, Minister Lee, Yeo and Wong Kan Seng, the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Community Development, said religion and race were associated with the most primal feelings.⁷⁴³ Lee also

⁷⁴¹ S Rajaratnam, “Speech at Hari Raya Aidilfitri Inner-Cum-Variety Show Organised by the City South District Citizens’ Consultative Committees” (Radin Mas Community Centre, June 26, 1987), Singapore Government Press Release No. 46/Jun/02-2/86/06/26.

⁷⁴² S Rajaratnam, “Speech at Opening of Seminar on “Tamil Language and Tamil Society”” (National University of Singapore, Lecture Theatre 11, July 18, 1987), National Archives of Singapore, Singapore Government Press Release No/ 44/Jul 02-2/ 87/07/18.

⁷⁴³ George Yeo, “English Translation of Speech in Malay,” National Archives of Singapore, Press Release No. 42/ Aug/ 03-1/92/08/23; George Yeo, “Speech at Opening of the Literary Cum Cultural Conference Organised by the United Indian Muslim Association,” National Archives of Singapore, Press Release No. 32/Jul 03-1/92/07/25; Hsien Loong Lee, “Speech at International Maulid Tea Party” (Islamic Centre Jamiyah, October 26, 1991), National Archives of Singapore, Press Release No. 31/Oct/15-1/91/10/26; Wong, “Speech at Inauguration of Singapore Buddhist Federation Foundation and Swearing-in of Office-Bearers (22nd Term) of Singapore Buddhist Federation.”

said that racial instincts would “take generations to overcome”.⁷⁴⁴ Politicians also stressed that monotheistic religions were more intolerant than polytheistic religions like Buddhism or Hinduism; possibly another trope influenced by the religious wars in Europe.⁷⁴⁵ The local elites appeared to be influenced by the Western habitus that religious and racial instincts were primitive feelings detrimental to society; thus, the separation between religion and politics had to be enforced.

Secondly, the state regarded all religious groups as equal, under the summation of the term “religion”. This could be seen in the Government’s introduction of RK. There appeared to be no distinction, on the part of the political elites, between religious beliefs; all religions were deemed to inculcate sound moral values in Singaporeans. In the “Shared Values”, the Government identified common values which can be interpreted accordingly by each Singaporean, within his or her specific cultural or religious background.⁷⁴⁶ It appeared that the Government sought to minimise differences between religious groups by structuring various religions into the generic category of religion.

Academics have observed the generalisation of religions in societies for the purpose of minimising conflicts between religious groups. According to Wilfred Cantwell Smith, religion is interpreted in four ways: private belief; specific systems of beliefs, practices, and values tied to a particular community; historical traditions; and the “summation” of all religions. Smith observes that the second and third understandings of religion differentiate between religious beliefs, while the fourth

⁷⁴⁴ Hsien Loong Lee, “Address” (40th World Congress of Newspaper Publishers, Helsinki, May 26, 1987), National Archives of Singapore, Press Release No. 40/May 15-1/87/05/26.

⁷⁴⁵ Lee, “Speech at First Ritual For The Observance Of The Five Precepts Cum the Buddhisattva Precepts by Singapore Buddhist Federation.”

⁷⁴⁶ Prime Minister’s Office, “White Paper on Shared Values,” 3.

explanation excludes religion from other spheres. The fourth explanation, “generic religion”, was also a “concept primarily formulated and used by men who are weary of the clash [between religions] or suspicious of the whole enterprise”.⁷⁴⁷ The fourth interpretation was how the Government viewed religions and its way of minimising conflicts between religious groups by treating them all as equal. A consequence of the state’s neutral relations with all religions was that religions were classified as “generic religion”. PM Lee had said that the concern with religions was “intensely held beliefs”, exemplified by “resurgent and thrusting Islam” or by Christian charismatics “in a dynamic evangelising phase”; these superseded “tolerant co-existence and “sometimes led to friction in society”.⁷⁴⁸ It was likely that the political elites believed that the reduction of exclusive religious belief systems to the generalisation of religion in the public sphere would reduce conflicts and differences between religious groups.

The Government’s concern was not with religion per se, but with the second understanding of religion, which discriminates between systems of religious beliefs. Minister Lee said the government’s concern was with “fervently held exclusive beliefs” and “evangelical fervour, assertiveness and competition for converts” among religious groups rather than with religion per se.⁷⁴⁹ The Government was concerned with collective religious behaviour, and the risks to civil order posed by collective behaviour when one group defends its beliefs against attacks by another group.

⁷⁴⁷ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (New York: The Macmillian Company, 1964), 43, 47–48.

⁷⁴⁸ Lee, “Speech at First Ritual for the Observance of The Five Precepts Cum the Buddhisattva Precepts by Singapore Buddhist Federation.”

⁷⁴⁹ Lee, “Speech at Inauguration Of The Parliament Of Religions Organised by the Ramakrishna Mission In Singapore,” April 30, 1989.

The generalisation of religions is similar to Roy's "formatting" of religions. Roy explains that "multiculturalism is no more than the expression of the formatting of cultures and religions within a common paradigm of the lowest common denominators".⁷⁵⁰ Formatting is "a process of interaction, reciprocal adjustments and reformulation of norms from very different cultural fields ... into a new set of norms". Formatting helps to achieve agreement between groups, or at least tolerance of distinct customs and beliefs from another tradition. While the state cannot not define religion, it can decide which groups are considered to be religious in nature, and appoint religion a place in the public sphere.⁷⁵¹ The state's generalisation of religions into a single category of "religion" thus stressed similarities in order to promote tolerance between religious groups. It also placed the state in a position of power to define the categories of "religion" and "religious" in the public sphere; in this case, the Government re-defined the boundaries of religious and political activities.

Thirdly, the state stressed the importance of religious beliefs and practices acculturated to the local context by identifying religion as a cultural identity. MP Lee Yiok Seng said that religious practices were "traditions, customs, and even art-forms that characterise[d] a particular community and contribute[d] to the identity of a nation". Therefore, religion was "one of the building blocks" of Singapore society.⁷⁵² The "Shared Values" recognised that "a major part of Singapore's cultural ballast

⁷⁵⁰ Olivier, *Holy Ignorance*, 9.

⁷⁵¹ Olivier, *Holy Ignorance*, 188–89.

⁷⁵² Yiok Seng Lee, "Speech at Variety Show Organised by Sri Siva-Krishna Temple Management Committee" (Kallang Theatre, July 30, 1988), National Archives of Singapore, Press Release No. 56/JUL 14-3/88/07/30.

would be the religious faith of its citizens” as religion was “the source of their morality, social duty, and concern for their fellow men”.⁷⁵³

The Government was cognisant that Christianity and Islam carried Westernising and Arabising influences that were incompatible with the national habitus. In retrospect, Masagos and Lee observed that the nature of Islam in Singapore had changed. Masagos was implying that Islamic revivalism imported Arab language, culture, social habits, and dress from the Middle East.⁷⁵⁴ Similarly, Lee saw the 1970s and 1980s as a critical point of transition, at which the nature of Islam in Southeast Asia had changed due to the influence of Arab culture. Prior to Islamic revivalism, Lee said that Islam in Southeast Asia had acculturated with other religious beliefs and cultures.⁷⁵⁵ Similarly, liberation theology was rejected as it was deemed incompatible with the local context by the political elites. Lee said the Catholics’ “new position” of pursuing justice in social, political, and economic spheres was unacceptable as Singapore was not a Catholic country.⁷⁵⁶

Since the religious habitus transcended national borders, religious belonging could bring about shared affinity with the transnational religious habitus. The state had to introduce local characteristics to the local religious habitus to anchor its belonging to the national habitus. Supporters of liberation theology had urged Christians to stand with people suffering from injustices in Korea, Taiwan, Sri Lanka, South Africa, Latin America, North America, Malaysia, and Indonesia.⁷⁵⁷ It was likely that the political elites were alarmed at the challenges mounted against

⁷⁵³ Prime Minister’s Office, “White Paper on Shared Values,” 8.

⁷⁵⁴ Masagos Mohammed, “50 Years On: Singapore’s Malay/Muslim Identity,” 59–60.

⁷⁵⁵ Kuan Yew Lee, “Speech at The 1st Munich Economic Summit,” <https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/data/pdfdoc/2002060706.htm>.

⁷⁵⁶ “Church Statement on ISD Arrests “Crafted by D”Souza.””

⁷⁵⁷ GRK, “God and Caesar,” 1,30.

various states by churches in Latin America, Korea, and the Philippines, as similar challenges to the state could occur locally if local Christians heeded the call. Likewise, local politicians were concerned with Malay/Muslims' shared affinity with Palestinians, giving rise to doubts about Muslim loyalty to the state. Past experiences like the Sepoy Mutiny and the racial riots had shown that belonging to the Muslim habitus could transcend national belonging. The state's imposition of religion as local culture was probably a means of rejecting some universal aspects of religion, and introducing local aspects that made it less likely for religious followers to identify with overseas religious habitus. Roy asserts that religion loses its universal dimension when a religious group is defined as a cultural group.⁷⁵⁸ By stressing religion as local culture, the state was probably seeking to detach external cultural and political influences from religious beliefs, and acculturate religions to the local habitus.

Fourthly, the political elites emphasised the moral role of religion in producing good citizens. Tay advised religious groups in Singapore to avoid succumbing to influences from foreign religious movements and to focus on the "spiritual and personal needs" of their communities, as religion was "personal" and became divisive when it became a "public issue".⁷⁵⁹ PM Lee stressed his high regard for the Catholic Church as a "strong pillar" of Singapore society, particularly when Singapore was facing the communist threat between 1959 and 1965. He also said that it was "far better to have our people imbued with a belief of the Catholic Church of God, or Buddhism, or Hinduism, than to be aggressively anti-God, like the

⁷⁵⁸ *Conversations with History: Olivier Roy* (The Institute of International Studies, The University of California, Berkeley, 2002), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mqlaNfdKURo>.

⁷⁵⁹ Tay, "Speech at Eunus Citizens' Consultative Committee (CCC) Dinner & Dance."

communists, to be rootless, without compass”.⁷⁶⁰ The political elites viewed religion as an important moral core of the Singapore citizenry, but only if it remained spiritual and private.

The state’s view was that religion was compatible with nation-building, so long as it remained secondary to one’s national identity, as seen in the “Shared Values”. Interestingly, the Government consulted various religious groups to ensure that the “Shared Values” did not conflict with religious beliefs.⁷⁶¹ The political elites recognised and even promoted the importance of religion for one’s moral and spiritual needs. While Lee was surprised at the rapid rate of conversion to Christianity among Singaporeans, he recognised that religion provided spiritual solace and helped Singaporeans cope with rapid economic and societal changes.⁷⁶² Lee identified religion as an element that made “life meaningful and society stable”, as in the history of how the Americans and Europeans built their societies on Christianity.⁷⁶³ The political elites viewed religious affiliation as important when religion fulfilled one’s moral and spiritual needs and did not destabilise the national habitus.

⁷⁶⁰ “PM Stresses His High Regard for The Church,” *The Straits Times*, September 27, 1989.

⁷⁶¹ Prime Minister’s Office, “White Paper on Shared Values,” 3.

⁷⁶² Kuan Yew Lee, “Interview with Mr. Michael Enright, Journalist of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation Radio for the Programme “Pacific Encounters” through a Satellite Linkup between Singapore and Toronto (10 May 1988),” in *The Papers of Lee Kuan Yew: Speeches, Interviews and Dialogues*, vol. 10, 1988-1990 (Singapore: Gale Asia, 2012), 76–77.

⁷⁶³ Kuan Yew Lee, “Interview with Messrs. David Lown, Founder, and Peter Dawson, Associate Producer, of Viewpoint International, at the Istana, Singapore (16 August 1985),” in *The Papers of Lee Kuan Yew: Speeches, Interviews and Dialogues*, vol. 9, 1981-1987 (Singapore: Gale Asia, 2012), 409–14.

5.4 The Late 1970s and the 1980s – Period of Mismanaged Expectations between State and Religion?

This chapter has shown that the late 1970s and the 1980s represented a period of religious revivalism for Muslims and Christians, giving rise to changes in the significance of religion for some religious groups in society. This chapter has also identified several points of tension between the state and religious groups, and between religious groups, which brought about changes to or reiteration of secularity principles and structures in the national habitus. The tension points were religious revivalism, aggressive evangelism, and religiously motivated political plots to subvert the state. The reassertion of Islamic identity among Malay/Muslims led the state to perceive Islamic identity as a challenge to nation-building, particularly when it appeared to the political elites that Muslim identity conflicted with the notion of citizenship. On the contrary, Malay/Muslims felt that being Muslim and being Singaporean were complementary group identities. Local Christians saw evangelism as a renewal of their faith, and socio-political action as their contribution to nation-building. Yet, the state and some groups in society perceived evangelism as threatening to their respective identities, and evangelism affected how other religious groups lived out their faith in society. More significant was the set of religious governance alternatives presented by some Muslims and Christians, which threatened to usurp the secular state's overarching power hierarchy in the shared habitus.

At these junctures, changes in the societal significance of religion affected the shared habitus; the habitus evolved, with changes in the social context and in the interactions between its members. During these episodes, other groups in

society and political leaders intervened to block the power redistribution between state and religious groups, thus ensuring that the national habitus and the existing network of power relations within the main habitus and between smaller habitus (plural) remained consistent. Two notions of religion and politics remained consistent – religion as moral bolster, and the resistance to the mix of religion and politics. However, state-imposed limits on religious groups, with respect to these two predominant traits, did change. This thesis has shown how religion was woven into the national narrative as a set of cultural and moral values crucial for the formation of good citizens. Whereas “religion and politics” previously referred to the politicisation of Islam to rally support among the Malay/Muslim electorate (especially by Malaysia and Singapore UMNO), the meaning broadened to encompass collective religious groups that challenged the state’s authority in the 1980s.

This thesis has also identified that religious beliefs had become public, activist, and political in the 1980s. Religious groups, especially newly emergent Christian groups, challenged the state for more power and roles that religious groups had previously ceded to the state. When religious groups attempted to redefine the status of religion in society, political and religious leaders, and individuals intervened via public censure or enforcement actions. State enforcement actions to curb religiously motivated socio-political actions could be seen as disciplinary actions to reinforce norms of the status of religion in society, and the reinstatement of the state’s political power over religious groups.

Most religious actors accepted the state’s definition of secularity through external constraints imposed by other actors and self-restraint cultivated through learning. Explicit social constraints included police actions taken against religious

groups that took on political aims and challenged the state. These social constraints, in turn, created fears and pressure that cultivated the individual or group's self-restraint. The religious groups then readjusted their expectations of the role of religion in society to realign with the norms of the habitus. Our discussion has shown that several Muslim leaders displayed self-restraint that was cultivated through pressures exerted by the government through state-religion dialogues and police action. Christian leaders were kept in check through pressures exerted by other Christians, Muslim leaders, members of the public, and the Government.

Further, given that the habitus is a "product of history", it can be argued that the secularity ground rules in society were produced through past and present interactions between the religious and political elites.⁷⁶⁴ As shown earlier, Christian and Muslim leaders internalised the state discourse on religion, because shared experiences had shown religion-incited tensions could lead to riots and destabilise society; secularity was thus necessary for the nation's survival and the continued freedom of their religious beliefs. Therefore, the religious leaders accepted the state's definition of religion as moral, spiritual, private, and apolitical.

The events of the 1980s showed mismanaged expectations of the role of religion in society among various groups. As this chapter has shown, the religious and political elites had different ideological and religious positions on the role of religion in society. Religious revivalism, and the events of the 1980s, were factors that led to drag effects from the political and religious elites, who either wanted to change or maintain the status quo of religion in society. The habitus as an analytical framework has allowed this thesis to trace state and societal attitudes on secularity,

⁷⁶⁴ Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 54.

thus showing that religion's status in society was fluid in the respective religious habitus and the national habitus. Notions of secularity, religion and politics were influenced by the constant interactions between state and religious actors in the national habitus, creating resulting norms and institutions.

6 THE MAINTENANCE OF RELIGIOUS HARMONY ACT

The 1980s were characterised by rising local Islamic and Christian religiosity among locals; this led to the competition for converts among religious groups. For instance, Buddhism was “Christianised” as a consequence of Christian evangelism. Chee notes that Buddhism was not an evangelising religion before the 1980s. Even though Buddhism continued to gain converts during the decade, Buddhist groups adapted to the challenges Christianity posed, by embracing similar evangelism and outreach structures. The Christianisation of Buddhism saw Buddhist groups conducting *dharma* (doctrines) classes, rallies, and camps. Buddhist groups also invited foreign Buddhist scholars and monks to speak and lead meditation sessions in Singapore.⁷⁶⁵ Likewise, Taoist groups, which lost the greatest number of adherents among mainstream religions in Singapore, started organising classes on the tenets of Taoism.⁷⁶⁶ It could be argued that Christian and Islamic revivalism heightened religious competition in the public sphere, as these revivalist trends threatened other religious habitus and challenged the existing power distribution among and between religious habitus in society. Religious competition led to revivalist trends in other faiths.

On 26 December 1989, the Government published the *White Paper on Maintenance of Religious Harmony*, which put forth the MRHA as a piece of legislation to maintain religious harmony and tolerance in Singapore. The *Paper* also proposed the establishment of a Presidential Council for Religious Harmony.⁷⁶⁷

⁷⁶⁵ Tong, *Rationalizing Religion*, 2007, 6–7, 129–30, 192.

⁷⁶⁶ Tong, 131–33.

⁷⁶⁷ Fabian Koh, “Members of Presidential Council for Religious Harmony Reappointed for Three-Year Term,” *The Straits Times*, September 15, 2020. Currently, the Presidential Council for Religious Harmony comprise 10 members who are either religious or community leaders. The

President Wee Kim Wee referred to the MRHA as a set of “ground rules”. He stressed that religious harmony was co-dependent on racial harmony as “racial distinction in Singapore accentuates religious [distinctions]”. Further, Wee stressed religion should be strictly separated from politics. Religious groups “must not stray beyond” boundaries of involvement in educational, social, and charitable work. Conversely, political groups must not exploit religious issues or manipulate religious groups to achieve religious or secular objectives. Wee said that should any group violate the line between religion and politics, it would result in “militancy and conflict” in Singapore.⁷⁶⁸ Here, we see recurring tropes of secularity – the state-prescribed role of religion in the public sphere and the strict separation of religion and politics.

The proposed bill was debated for over a year before it was passed in November 1990 and came into force in 1992. Presently, the Government has not invoked the MRHA against any individual or religious group. In 2019, when revisions to the Act were proposed to maintain its relevancy with the changing context, Minister of Home Affairs K Shanmugam said the MRHA contained a set of “working rules” to “keep the good, allow a large measure of freedom and ... keep out negative groups”.⁷⁶⁹ In this light, the MRHA could be seen as an institution in the habitus that emerged from interactions between state and religious actors. It acted as both external constraint and internal restraint to normalise views on the societal roles of religion across groups in the national habitus. As an external constraint, the MRHA presented the possibility of legal repercussions should any

members “advise the Minister for Home Affairs on matters affecting the maintenance of religious harmony in Singapore”.

⁷⁶⁸ “White Paper on Maintenance of Religious Harmony,” 1.

⁷⁶⁹ Parliament of Singapore, “Second Reading Bills - Maintenance of Religious Harmony (Amendment) Bill” Parliament No. 13, Session No. 2, Vol No. 94, Sitting No. 112 (October 7, 2019).

individual or group breach the secularity principles. The rules thus reinforced self-restraint in religious individuals and groups through the fear of legal repercussions.

After the *White Paper* was released, the Government invited written representations from the public. A Select Committee was convened to examine these representations and submit its findings to Parliament.⁷⁷⁰ The ensuing discussions revealed different expectations among citizens of the role of religion in society. The discussions between the state and religious groups were important as power relationships rely on two “indispensable” aspects – the “other” (religious groups) over whom the state acts. “Consent” and “violence” are a series of actions in power relations; thus, the state would not have been able to introduce the normalisation of secularity principles in society without the religious groups’ consent or recognition of the state’s overarching power in the national habitus.⁷⁷¹

This chapter will first examine the expectations of secularity held by different groups in society. Secondly, this chapter will examine how the MRHA was introduced as a strategy to introduce norms and regulate deviant behaviour in the national habitus. The third section will examine if the MRHA achieved its intended effect of “educating” the society to conform to secularity norms introduced by the state. This chapter will largely focus on arguments on the MRHA presented by the political elites, and by Muslim and Christian leaders, in line with the scope of the thesis defined in Chapter 1.

⁷⁷⁰ The Committee received representations from 78 individuals; 41 of them supported the Bill, 19 expressed outright objections and another six expressed reservations, which were tantamount to objections. Not all the written and oral representations were published in the Select Committee Report.

⁷⁷¹ Foucault, “The Subject and Power”, 340-1.

6.1 The Relative Positions of “Caesar” and the Religions

This thesis argues that before the 1980s, the constraint defined by the habitus was to avoid using religious and racial rhetoric, particularly Malay/Muslim rhetoric, to incite communal unrest. When Lee, in 1966, warned religious leaders not to mix religion and politics, his contextual references were the incidents in the 1950s and 1960s, during which Singapore UMNO combined religious and racial rhetoric to instigate anti-PAP sentiments among the Malay/Muslims.⁷⁷² This thesis has shown that the phenomenon of Muslim and Christian groups presenting religious solutions to social problems was new to the habitus. The ensuing discussions revealed the lack of consensus between the political and religious elites on the place of religion in society. The discussions on the MRHA were focused on two issues; the religious groups’ definition of social action, and whether the Government reserved the right to draw the line between religion and politics.

The government defined social action as outside the purview of traditional religious activities. Lee said that Christians should adhere to acceptable aspects of social activities, such as social work. Other acceptable areas included providing community care and counselling services to drug addicts and prisoners, and running childcare centres, kindergartens, senior citizens’ day-care centres, and old folks’ homes.⁷⁷³

Some Christian groups agreed that the state had the authority to define the religious and political spheres. The Trinity Annual Conference (TRAC) Board of Social Concerns and the Singapore Council of Christian Churches (SCCC) believed

⁷⁷² Lee, “Speech at Presentation Ceremony of Replica of “Sarnath Buddha” Image (Buddhist Temple, 6 January 1966).”

⁷⁷³ “Govt Must Defend Its Turf When Religion Intrudes,” *The Straits Times*, August 17, 1987.

that God had ordained all governments, and that Christians should render unto Caesar all things that were Caesar's.⁷⁷⁴ By this interpretation, the TRAC Board and the SCCC saw the temporal, present world as the state's domain, and the hereafter as God's. This was similar to Lee's position that the state "represented temporal power which is absolute in the present".⁷⁷⁵ Since the state was the highest authority in the nation-state, it claimed the power and legitimacy to define the boundaries of religious action in the public sphere.

MUIS was also in support of the MRHA. The Muslims appeared to be more compliant to state policies than the Christians; which was surprising, given that Muslims had reportedly told Lee that the separation of politics and religion was not possible as Islam was "an all-embracing philosophy".⁷⁷⁶ Syed Isa defended the Bill, stating that it did not contradict Islamic teachings because it promoted peace in the country. He also did not foresee the Bill preventing religious teachers from preaching to their congregants.⁷⁷⁷ When opposition politician Chiam See Tong accused Syed Isa of limiting Islam's position in society, the latter said that one could not insist that religion and politics cannot be separated, given the larger picture of the peace and harmony of society.⁷⁷⁸ Syed Isa's position was reflective of self-constraining action, in order to align state and religious expectations of the place of

⁷⁷⁴ Seng Hock Cheong et al., "A Response to the "White Paper" on Maintenance of Religious Harmony," *Methodist Message*, February 1990, 12. According to Romans 13:13: "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. According to Romans 13:13: "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God.

⁷⁷⁵ Lee, "Speech at Presentation Ceremony of Replica of "Sarnath Buddha" Image (Buddhist Temple, 6 January 1966)."

⁷⁷⁶ *LKY at NUS: Change and Continuity -1990, Just Before He Stepped Down as PM*, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YEclsRo-m0A>.

⁷⁷⁷ "Report on the Select Committee on the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Bill," Parl. 7 of 1990 (Parliament of Singapore, October 19, 1990), C74.

⁷⁷⁸ "Select Committee on the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Bill," C77.

religion in society. Religious practices were to be limited for the sake of harmony in the national habitus.

On the contrary, some Christian groups insisted that religion and politics cannot be separated. Christian objections to the MRHA stemmed from a variety of reasons. Firstly, some groups argued that there was no need for new measures, since social harmony had prevailed thus far. The Presbyterian Church said that additional legislation like the MRHA should be a “last resort”; Singapore had enjoyed 25 years of religious harmony without such legislation, which showed that the state had sufficient judiciary powers under existing laws to maintain religious harmony. The Presbyterian Church suggested that the Government’s goals could be better achieved through dialogue with religious leaders, and the use of “persuasion and [an] appeal to mutual tolerance and national interests”.⁷⁷⁹ The Bethesda (Frankel Estate) Church also felt that existing legislation was enough to prevent the abuse of religion.⁷⁸⁰ Some Methodists similarly felt that religious organisations should be encouraged to “discipline and regulate the behaviour of their followers”, rather than the state taking responsibility. They also said that existing legislation was sufficient to maintain religious harmony.⁷⁸¹

The Christian responses were similar to the Eliasian description of the civilising process. Elias suggests that as society becomes more civilised and democratised, the state relies less on policing and more on the individual’s habitus

⁷⁷⁹ “Presbyterian Response to White Paper on Religious Harmony,” *Methodist Message*, June 1990, 16.

⁷⁸⁰ “Bethesda (Frankel Estate) Church Council Announcement,” *Scope*, April 1990.

⁷⁸¹ Cheong et al., “A Response to the “White Paper” on Maintenance of Religious Harmony,” 12; “What Is THE WHITE PAPER/PROPOSED BILL on “Maintenance of Religious Harmony” and Some Christian Responses to It?” *Methodist Message*, March 1990, 6; Kenny Yeo, “Response to White Paper on Maintenance of Religious Harmony,” *Katong Press*, March 1990, 6.

dispositions to restrain themselves. The Presbyterians and Methodists argued that there was no need for additional restraints, because the state had thus far managed to regulate and limit conflicts between groups. Existing laws like the Sedition Act and Penal Code were sufficient to compel others to follow the norms of the national habitus, whether through fear, pressure, mutual reinforcement, or self-constraint inculcated by habitus structures.

Secondly, Christians insisted on their right to social action. The Anglican Bishop said that social concerns encompassed both social service and action.⁷⁸² Similarly, the NCC said that Christians worldwide had historically led movements for social change, such as the abolition of slavery, universal suffrage, and the promotion of human rights. At the same time, the NCC also reiterated its commitment to bring about social change in a non-violent manner through the parliamentary process.⁷⁸³ The Singapore Archdiocese said that the Second Vatican Council's "Constitution on the Church in the Modern World" stated that the Church must be free to "pass moral judgements even in matters relating to politics". The Archdiocese also disputed a political elite's view that Singapore was modelling itself on the American example of keeping church and state separate, as American Catholic Bishops could publicly comment on political issues that had moral implications.⁷⁸⁴

The NCC and the Singapore Archdiocese mentioned Western examples to justify Christian socio-political action, showing that the Western Christian habitus

⁷⁸² "Bishop's Personal Response to the "White Paper"," *Methodist Message*, February 1990, 2.

⁷⁸³ National Council of Churches Representation, "Report on the Select Committee on the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Bill," Parl. 7 of 1990 (Parliament of Singapore, October 19, 1990), B39.

⁷⁸⁴ Archdiocese of Singapore Representation, "Select Committee on the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Bill," B46.

very much influenced local Christians. Lee had also mentioned that the generation of Christian leaders in the 1980s who had graduated from American universities might be influenced by Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority and Christian support for President Reagan. He also reminded local Christians that Singapore society was different from the US.⁷⁸⁵ Christian socio-political activism was something new to the Singapore habitus that local Christians and the Singapore state and society had to contend. The Christians had imported dispositions from the Western habitus that the state deemed incompatible with the local context and which the national habitus resisted.

Thirdly, some Christians disagreed with the separation of politics as they saw themselves as an important element of political communities. The NCC, which included Methodists, Anglicans, Lutherans, evangelical Lutherans, Mar Thomites, and the Salvation Army, said that Christians were obliged to participate in politics, albeit in a sensible and sensitive manner. The NCC said that politics in its wider meaning included social and moral issues; Aristotle had once said, "Man is by nature a political animal". The NCC also quoted DPM Goh, who conceded that it was "impossible" to separate religion from politics but added that "we must try".⁷⁸⁶

⁷⁸⁵ "You Have Some Christians but Not a Christian Nation," *The Straits Times*, August 17, 1987; Susan Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 22–23. According to Susan Harding, Falwell preached that the idea that "religion and politics don't mix" came from the devil to prevent Christians from governing their own country. The Moral Majority was a "rupture in the modern American regime of public religiosity" that had prevented the involvement of white conservative Protestants and fundamentalists in American public life since the Scopes trial in 1915. The Moral Majority thus merged "routine public activism and aggressive Bible-believing Protestantism".

⁷⁸⁶ National Council of Churches Representation, "Report on the Select Committee on the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Bill," Parl. 7 of 1990 (Parliament of Singapore, October 19, 1990), B39.

Similarly, the Catholic Archdiocese maintained its rights to educate its parishioners on teachings with “political overtones”.⁷⁸⁷ The TRAC Board also said that religious institutions had an obligation to safeguard political rights and democratic values and “raise awareness against despotic leaders”. Further, Christians were obliged to raise their concerns on social injustices and problems to political leaders.⁷⁸⁸ Likewise, the Anglican Bishop said that Christian leaders had a “prophetic responsibility” to stand up to social injustice and represent the less privileged. While Jesus was not directly involved in politics, as he did not join a political party or incite political protest, his ministry was “political”; Jesus’ teachings had “political implications” as he presented an alternative to the status quo.⁷⁸⁹ A significant proportion of Christians felt that religious communities had political obligations to fulfil in society and that the line between religion and politics was tenuous. They saw MRHA as the state’s means of circumscribing the religious leaders’ legitimacy in determining the religious habitus’ way of thinking and acting. The Christian discourse of challenging the political status quo and safeguarding political rights did convey a certain degree of challenge to the state’s power, likely alarming the state actors.

Muslims expressed similar sentiments that religion and politics were inseparable. Hussin said that politics and religion were “organically and inextricably intertwined”, and that faith was more than religion, as understood in the Western conception of secularism, politics, and religion. Islam was “a comprehensive, all-encompassing way of life [that] combined belief and law, ... religion and state, ...

⁷⁸⁷ “Strong Christian Representations to Religious Harmony Bill,” *Methodist Message*, December 1990.

⁷⁸⁸ Cheong et al., “A Response to the “White Paper” on Maintenance of Religious Harmony,” 11.

⁷⁸⁹ “Bishop’s Personal Response to the “White Paper”,” 2.

and the spiritual and temporal.”⁷⁹⁰ Likewise, Darul Arqam said Islam preached that “all Muslims within a community are collectively deemed blameworthy by the Almighty if they remain apathetic to blasphemy, gross social injustice and anti-Islamic activities committed with their knowledge”.⁷⁹¹ Both arguments resonated with the Christian arguments that Jesus and his ministry were political, and that man was by nature political. Therefore, it appears that the religious and community leaders felt the MRHA was contrary to their perceptions of the role of religion in politics; it would circumscribe their religious obligations to speak out against political injustices and tyranny.

Moreover, Christians were concerned that the state was interfering by setting limits on religious practices and doctrines.⁷⁹² This was especially so when evangelism was such a crucial part of their religious beliefs. Katong Presbyterian Church’s Reverend Ian Hart said it was the Christian mission to “testify to people of every religious and non-religious persuasion”, and that one should not forsake it.⁷⁹³ Similarly, the Methodists argued that evangelism was an “essential aspect” of their mission.⁷⁹⁴ The Methodists said it was paradoxical that the state deemed Christian social action to be a problematic transgression of religion into politics, since the state had assumed an “ecclesiastical role” in its “attempts to define and set the

⁷⁹⁰ Hussein Mutalib’s Representation, “Select Committee on the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Bill,” B59.

⁷⁹¹ Darul Arqam Singapore’s Representation, “Select Committee on the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Bill,” B78.

⁷⁹² Bishop, “The Evangelistic Mandate,” *Methodist Message*, September 1990, 2.

⁷⁹³ Ian Hart, “Rev Ian Hart’s View on White Paper of “Religious Harmony”,” *Katong Press*, April 1990, 16–18.

⁷⁹⁴ Bishop, “The Evangelistic Mandate,” 2.

limits” for religion.⁷⁹⁵ These Christians likely felt the state was transgressing into their religious habitus.

Notably, some religious leaders said the proposed Bill had no bearing on what they saw as their religious obligation to carry out their social mission, even in instances where the state might deem that religion had transgressed into politics, since the state did not have the legitimacy to determine the scope of religious activities. The Methodist Bishop said that the church might take a public stand on some issues to obey God’s word and “trust [God] with the consequences”.⁷⁹⁶ Similarly, the TRAC Board said, “no human law can curb [their] religious fervour and deep-rooted convictions”, and legislation cannot confine God. In the case where a Christian leader felt compelled to comment on a particular issue that the state deemed a mix of religion and politics, the religious leader would proceed as he “must obey God rather than human authority”. The TRAC Board added, “if God is for us, who can be against us?”⁷⁹⁷ The religious leaders felt they had the overarching authority to determine norms and behaviour in the religious habitus.

Similarly, the Singapore Archdiocese said it was unacceptable that the state had the final right to determine if religious leaders or groups had transgressed the line between religion and politics. Like the SCCC and the Methodists, the Archdiocese raised instances where politics and religion overlap – the introduction of RK in schools, organ transplants, euthanasia, governmental policy on sterilisation, and ironically, the MRHA.⁷⁹⁸ The GCF argued that the Act would grant

⁷⁹⁵ “What Is THE WHITE PAPER/PROPOSED BILL on “Maintenance of Religious Harmony” and Some Christian Responses to It?,” 6.

⁷⁹⁶ “Bishop’s Personal Response to the “White Paper”,” 2.

⁷⁹⁷ Cheong et al., “A Response to the “White Paper” on Maintenance of Religious Harmony,” 11.

⁷⁹⁸ Archdiocese of Singapore Representation, “Select Committee on the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Bill,” B44-45.

excessive powers to the MHA, who had the power to interpret “vague” sections of the Act based on shifting benchmarks; the Minister’s decisions would not be subjected to judiciary review.⁷⁹⁹ The key issue among church leaders appeared to be the fear that the state could prosecute them for expressing religious views in the pulpit that contradicted government policies. They also feared that the MRHA could easily be transformed into a tool of political repression, since the power of definition laid with the state. The religious elites appeared to be concerned with the unbalanced distribution of power in the hands of the state. The Christians also appeared to be concerned that there might be an abuse of political power, the very thing they were obliged to check, but would be prevented from checking by the MRHA. Such views are similar to Casanova’s observation of religion deprivatising to enter the public sphere in the 1980s to oppose an authoritarian state, or the state’s intervention in one’s private life.⁸⁰⁰

Some Muslims expressed similar reservations. Mohd Muzzammil, a MUIS representative, asked if religious leaders speaking openly against government policies that were contrary to Islam constituted as transgression into politics. MUIS was concerned that it would be prevented from issuing *fatawa* that the state deemed political or in conflict with public policies.⁸⁰¹ For instance, even though abortion was legalised in Singapore in 1970, MUIS issued two *fatawa* in 1976 and 1986, ruling that abortion was not permissible for all stages of pregnancy.⁸⁰² MUIS was thus uncertain if such actions would be deemed by the Government as religion’s intrusion

⁷⁹⁹ Bobby Sng, “Time for a Fresh Look,” *GCF Bulletin*, May 1990.

⁸⁰⁰ Casanova, 57–58, 224–29.

⁸⁰¹ “Select Committee on the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Bill,” C66.

⁸⁰² Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura, “Family Planning and Reproductive Technology,” in *Fatwas of Singapore* (Singapore: Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura, 2017), <https://muisfatwa.pressbooks.com/front-matter/note-on-e-book-features/>.

into politics. The MUIS Council wanted clarification from the Government that the Bill would not allow for governmental interference in matters related to Islamic law and the AMLA as guaranteed under the Constitution.⁸⁰³

Similarly, Darul Arqam asked the Government to clarify confusing areas of determining whether a religious group's concern was legitimate. The organisation found it confusing that religious groups were allowed to express their stances on abortion, but were prevented from engaging in "radical social action" or opt-out from compulsory military service because of religious convictions.⁸⁰⁴ From the above instances, it appeared that the Muslims were concerned that the MRHA might seek to manage their religious convictions on specific policy issues that might contradict Islamic beliefs.

A crucial concern of the religious elites was the lack of clarity on what the state deemed to be religion transgressing into politics. Some Methodists were concerned that the division between religion and politics was unclear. There was a sense that the Christians did not know if they were allowed to comment on policy issues, especially those that involved religious, social, and moral dimensions.⁸⁰⁵ The SCCC also said that some leeway should be allowed for religious groups to express their stances, especially in areas of public policies that might overlap with faith, doctrine, and morals. Further, the SCCC asked that the state recognise such

⁸⁰³ MUIS Representation "Select Committee on the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Bill," B54.

⁸⁰⁴ Darul Arqam's Representation, "Select Committee on the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Bill," B78.

⁸⁰⁵ "What Is THE WHITE PAPER/PROPOSED BILL on "Maintenance of Religious Harmony" and Some Christian Responses to It?," 6.

voices were not necessarily “dissent”; they might be “honest, sincere, legitimate and not evil in intention or subversive in nature”.⁸⁰⁶

Notably, some churches erred on the side of caution and chose to avoid collective representation to the Select Committee. The Methodist Church urged its members to write to their respective MPs or submit their views directly to the Select Committee because submitting a consolidated representation would represent “participating ... as a corporate body in the formulation of legislation”.⁸⁰⁷ It was probable that the Methodist Church was worried that the state would misconstrue collective action as religion’s interference in politics. The government’s earlier enforcement actions on the Marxists probably worked as an external constraint that reinforced self-restraint on the part of religious groups and individuals, as seen in their hesitance to come across as challenging the Government directly.

As this thesis has observed, power relations in the national habitus had undergone governmentalisation. State-religious and interreligious relations came under the state’s authority in some form or another. Even if the religious legitimacy of a religious leader is not derived from the state, the religious habitus is still subjected to the state’s overarching authority in the national habitus to which it belongs to, because the state is the distributor of power relations (and not because all forms of power is derived from the state).⁸⁰⁸ In this vein, the religious leaders’

⁸⁰⁶ Singapore Council of Christian Churches Representation, “Report on the Select Committee on the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Bill,” Parl. 7 of 1990 (Parliament of Singapore, October 19, 1990), B5.

⁸⁰⁷ “What Is THE WHITE PAPER/PROPOSED BILL on “Maintenance of Religious Harmony” and Some Christian Responses to It?,” 6; Patrick Kee, “Re: The White Paper on Maintenance of Religious Harmony,” *Methodist Message*, March 1990, 3.

⁸⁰⁸ See Foucault, “The Subject and Power”, 344-5.

reluctance to challenge the state's view of religion might not simply be due to fear or repression, but also because of how power relations operate in a habitus.

The select Committee also acknowledged that the separation between religion and politics was not “well-defined” and that the “area of overlap [was] considerable”. In its final submission to Parliament, the Committee said questions on whether such issues were “purely secular” or suitable for religious groups to comment on, depended on “what [was] necessary to maintain religious harmony” and the interests of society.⁸⁰⁹ Minister Lee said that it all depended on the context and there was “no formulaic definition which can be written down”. Lee also argued that it was not the role of the judiciary to draw the “grey line” between religion and politics as this was a policy decision. For instance, the Government recognised that abortion was both a legitimate public policy and a legitimate religious issue. However, while liberation theology was a legitimate religious issue in some countries because of their social problems, it was forbidden in Singapore. Similarly, Lee said that compulsory military service was strictly a governmental policy even though some religious groups, for various reasons, viewed it as a religious issue.⁸¹⁰ The MRHA granted the executive branch of the Government the power to define the line, which appeared to vary in different situations. Lee's reasoning showed that the habitus is fluid because structures and norms are determined by the constant

⁸⁰⁹ “Select Committee on the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Bill,” vi–vii.

⁸¹⁰ “Select Committee on the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Bill,” C42-3; “Jehovah Witness Who Refused to Enlist Jailed,” *The Straits Times*, December 28, 1972; “Jehovah's Witnesses Fined,” *The Straits Times*, August 15, 1982; “Youth: Why I Didn't Enlist for SAF Service,” *The Straits Times*, October 19, 1972; “Lighter Side of Trial,” *New Nation*, April 1, 1979; “Witnesses Face the Prosecution,” *The Straits Times*, August 15, 1982. Lee was likely referring to Singaporean Jehovah Witnesses (JW) who were charged in court in the 1970s for refusing to enlist for National Service. In January 1972, the Government deregistered JW on the ground “that its continued existence was prejudicial to public order in Singapore”.

interactions between the state and various religious actors; the line between religion and politics might thus shift depending on context.

The state had determined that deciding the limits of political and religious activities was not up to open courts, as the Hertogh incident had shown that the judiciary should not deliberate on sensitive matters like religion. It was, in fact, the judge's decision that had led to the riots then. The *White Paper* also noted that the division between religion and politics was a "political decision" that fell under the "responsibility of the Executive and Parliament".⁸¹¹

While there is apparent ambiguity about the division between the political and religious spheres, this is where the analytical framework of the habitus, as demonstrated by this thesis, comes in useful. Patterns can be established to determine where the line lies by looking at the existing dispositions and structures of the habitus. A significant number of issues involve both political and religious considerations, and the overlapping areas are something specific to the Singapore habitus. Through an examination of secularity dispositions and structures of the habitus, civil order appears to be the benchmark for determining whether religious concerns have crossed over into politics. Comments from religious leaders that did not challenge the Government's authority or incite discontentment between groups (for example, on abortion) were thus acceptable.

Conversely, radical social action and the evasion of military service threatened to upset existing state policies, and in correlation, the civil order that the state sought to protect. As previously discussed, Lee said he saw no congruence between the local context and the social conditions that produced liberation

⁸¹¹ "Select Committee on the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Bill," v–vii, C53.

theology in Latin America; thus, the state decided that the theology was not locally viable. Similarly, compulsory military service stemmed from the country's defence needs and had nothing to do with religious groups. It is likely that religious expressions or actions deemed by either state or society to be disruptive to social harmony or existing habitus structures and limits will be construed as misbehaviour that needed to be normalised.

6.2 The MRHA as Tactic to Normalise Secularity Norms in the National Habitus

This thesis argues that the MRHA was more than a policy introduced by the Government to control and manage religion. For Foucault, connotations of power were not simply about oppression or repression.⁸¹² Similarly, this thesis argues that MRHA did not seek to obliterate religion from the public sphere. MRHA is a piece of legislation used by the state as a strategy to achieve the ends of governance. The "ultimate aim of government" is the "welfare of the population, the improvement of its conditions" and increasing its resources.⁸¹³ In this light, MRHA is a strategy to normalise the abnormal and reinforce norms in the national habitus. Several key continuous secularity dispositions of the habitus may be identified.

The country's historical experiences with the volatile mix of race and religion continued to be a key disposition of the shared habitus. Former politician Bernard Chen revealed that the Government was aware that it had to "work" to maintain racial and religious harmony in Singapore as human beings were fundamentally racist. The conflation of race and religious identities also heightened racial or

⁸¹² Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 219.

⁸¹³ Foucault, "Governmentality," 211, 217.

religious tensions. The Government had to deal with a significant number of race- and religion-related incidents, such as complaints that the *azan* was too loud. Moreover, the shared habitus was affected by events external to the nation-state habitus. For instance, upon the news of Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's assassination, the Government uncovered a case of local Indians planning to attack a Sikh temple. Past experiences have shown that religious habitus comes with transnational affiliations that could potentially transcend national belonging and destabilise state-religious and interreligious relations. Chen also said that the Government was aware that "racial and religious and language angles [were] very very sensitive".⁸¹⁴ Further, Minister Lee acknowledged that the MRHA was the government's attempt to avoid future scenarios when the majority population might become agitated or "religious elements enter into what [had] been political".⁸¹⁵ As a tactic, MRHA's end is to attain social cohesion by reintroducing secularity norms to society.

The *White Paper* and subsequent discussions on the MRHA made a number of references to the Hertogh riots. The Select Committee made no less than seven mentions of the Hertogh riots. Notably, Chiam said that many academic works on the Hertogh riots had shown that it was not religious in nature. However, his claim was disputed by several individuals who made oral representations to the Select Committee. Reverend Quek Kiok Chiang, a former ISD officer, insisted that the Government had intelligence suggesting that the Hertogh riots were "related to religion". He said the riots showed that "it would be good to have such a centralised

⁸¹⁴ Bernard Tien Lap Chen, Interview, interview by Jason Lim, December 27, 2001, Accession Number 002530, Reel 8/16, National Archives of Singapore.

⁸¹⁵ "Select Committee on the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Bill," C73.

legislation to pre-empt or curb such trouble”.⁸¹⁶ Jayakumar also said that open court trials “inflamed the feelings and led to riots” in the Hertogh incident.⁸¹⁷ The MUIS support for the MRHA also stemmed from its officials’ understanding that disputes between Christians and Muslims had “led to riots, to the detriment of the country” in some cases. MUIS saw aggressive Christian evangelism in the same frame of continuity, and suggested that the MRHA could mitigate such tensions.⁸¹⁸ The references to the Hertogh riots, possibly the earliest collective memory of racial and religious riots in Singapore’s habitus, showed how past historical sequences continued to perpetuate itself in the present-day habitus.

Evangelism continued to be seen as an issue that could potentially disrupt social harmony. In the late 1980s, the state’s concern, and society’s, was with the methods of evangelism and not evangelism per se. Tony Tan, a member of the Select Committee, assured Muslim representatives he understood that, for both Muslims and Christians, the duty to evangelise was “sacrosanct”. Both Tan and Jayakumar were concerned that evangelism methods could incur unnecessary ill-feeling between religious groups; the methods had “crossed the unacceptable boundaries into the realm of another religion”.⁸¹⁹ The political elites imposing limits on evangelism was thus not something new. More often than not, evangelism across religious groups would entail one group disputing the doctrines and truths of the other. As Smith has suggested, when believers perceived that their religion was under attack, they would be inclined to “leap to the defense of what is attacked”.⁸²⁰

⁸¹⁶ “Select Committee on the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Bill,” C2, 4.

⁸¹⁷ “Select Committee on the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Bill,” C53.

⁸¹⁸ “Select Committee on the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Bill,” C63-4.

⁸¹⁹ “Select Committee on the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Bill,” C77, 80.

⁸²⁰ Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, 42–43.

Such actions would likely give rise to inter-religious tensions, as each religious group's beliefs and truths were undermined, giving rise to challenges between religious habitus. Thus, as the arbiter of power relations in the national habitus, the government stressed the importance of sensitive and tolerant evangelism.

Notably, the *Paper* set out limits of acceptable roles of religion in society, and the relative positions of the state and religious groups in the national habitus. It declared that the state "must not be antagonistic to the religious beliefs of the population" and that it should maintain neutral relationships with various religious groups. In addition, the *Paper* stressed that while every citizen is entitled to freedom of religious belief, he or she must not impinge on "the rights and sensitivities of other citizens". Further, the state viewed religion as a positive force in specific functions, namely the provision of spiritual support and moral guidance, and as providers of educational, community, and social work.⁸²¹ The *White Paper* spelt out secularity norms which were similar to those discussed in Chapter 5. Thus, the MRHA and ensuing discussions on the legislation could be seen as a process of the normalisation of secularity norms in the national habitus.

6.3 Effectiveness of MRHA as Disciplinary Tactic

According to the civilising process, less external constraints will be needed as society progresses along the trajectory and self-constraint increases. There would also be fewer differences in the distribution of power between groups.⁸²² In the discussions on MRHA, some religious leaders had likewise suggested that there was no need for legislation to govern religious expressions in the public sphere.

⁸²¹ "Select Committee on the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Bill," 2.

⁸²² Elias, *The Germans*, 32-5.

However, Lee said there was a need for “firm” governance to “ride [the] passions” of religious resurgence, as a “soft government trying to persuade everybody, will lead to big mischief”.⁸²³ Lee’s approach was contrary to the “gentle persuasion” approach that some Christians had proposed. This section will briefly discuss whether MRHA achieved the effect of disciplining the population on the norms of religious behaviour in the national habitus. Due to the limited scope of the thesis, this section will examine the perspectives of the state, the Christians, and the Muslims.

Some Christians were convinced that the MRHA was a veiled attempt to curtail the growth of Christianity in Singapore. They felt misunderstood by the Government, which accused them of attempting to “turn Singapore into a Christian nation”.⁸²⁴ Some individuals suggested that the Christian community felt the Government had a “hidden agenda” to impede their growth, possibly to appease the majority of the population who were Buddhists and Confucianists. When probed further on the hidden agenda, Sng said that the Christians had a “hidden fear” that “everything was being engineered”, but he declined to comment further.⁸²⁵ We can infer that Sng was implying that the Government was resisting the rapid growth of Christians in society, which was an unplanned social change in the habitus.

Nonetheless, the MRHA did not appear to have hampered the evangelical efforts of the Christians. At the start of the decade, Assembly of God (AoG) Reverend Naomi Dowdy designated the 1990s as “the decade of harvest”. The AoG Executive Committee believed that God wanted them to double the number of

⁸²³ LKY at NUS: *Change and Continuity -1990, Just Before He Stepped Down as PM.*

⁸²⁴ Bishop, “The Evangelistic Mandate,” 2.

⁸²⁵ Sng, Interview, April 29, 2008.

churches both locally and overseas in the next ten years.⁸²⁶ Local Methodist churches also aimed to double the number of their congregations by the end of the 1990s.⁸²⁷ Some churches moved forward with their involvement in the AD2000 movement, which aimed to see “at least half of humanity profess some allegiance” to the Christian God by 2000. The AD2000 Conference was held in Singapore in January 1989, during which topics like “targeting the giant of Islam” were discussed.⁸²⁸

Notable were the Christian efforts to be more sensitive and tolerant in their preaching to non-Christians. Churches continued holding smaller-scale crusades at the National Stadium, with lesser fanfare.⁸²⁹ More prominent crusades, like a proposed Billy Graham Crusade in 1994, were rejected by previous supporters. Many of them felt that it was not the appropriate time for a mass evangelism campaign in Singapore.⁸³⁰ The Methodist churches also recognised that the introduction of the MRHA would bear new implications for them. While evangelism was “doing what God Himself does”, they also recognised the need to evangelise with “wisdom and sensitivity”.⁸³¹ Likewise, in April 1990, the GCF organised a talk entitled “Understanding Muslims”, hoping that the seminar could become a “hopeful start” to a cordial relationship between Christians and Muslims, “despite the bad memories of the past”.⁸³² Jean DeBernadi’s ethnographic research conducted in

⁸²⁶ Naomi Dowdy, “Decade of Harvest,” *The Singapore Evangel*, March 1990, 6.

⁸²⁷ “The Local Scene,” in *Official Journal of the Fifteenth Session of the Trinity Annual Conference* (Faith Methodist Church, 1990), 59–60.

⁸²⁸ GCOWE Program Planning Task Force, “GCOWE: A Rationale,” in *Countdown to AD 2000: The Official Compendium of the Global Consultation on World Evangelization*, ed. Thomas Wang (AD 2000 and Beyond, California: AD2000 Movement Inc, 1989), 6.

⁸²⁹ Jack Thevathasan, “Crusade Highlights,” *Singapore Evangel*, June 1992, 8.

⁸³⁰ Evangelical Fellowship of Singapore, “RE: Survey Regarding Billy Graham Crusade 1994,” April 24, 1992, National Library Board, Singapore.

⁸³¹ “The Local Scene,” 59–60.

⁸³² “Understanding Muslims,” *GCF Bulletin*, April 1990, 3–4.

Singapore between 1995 and 2005 notes that some Christian groups labelled potentially sensitive materials “For Christians Only”, to prevent misunderstandings about the Christian tracts being meant for non-Christians.⁸³³ It appears that there were, visibly, more efforts on the part of Christians to be more sensitive towards the concerns of others in society in order not to upset interreligious relations.

Due to the absence of quantitative studies on religious dispositions in the 1980s, it cannot be conclusively ascertained whether the MRHA fostered a higher degree of tolerance between religious groups. We could compare two surveys conducted in 1980 (at the height of religious revivalism) and 2018 to discern if religious attitudes towards social cohesion had changed. Tham conducted a small-scale study that surveyed 300 Singaporeans (180 Chinese, 80 Malays, and 40 Indians) between August and October 1980. The study found that 21.7% of the Chinese respondents, 26.3% of the Malays, and 17.5% of the Indians considered tolerance an important cultural value. Similarly, 15% of the Chinese respondents, 61.3% of the Malays, and 17.5% of Indians found respect an important cultural value.⁸³⁴ While it is far from a perfect comparison, a survey in 2018 found that more than 90% of those surveyed felt it was unacceptable or very unacceptable for religious leaders to “incite violence or hatred against other religions, make insensitive comments about another religion, or encourage their members to refrain from mixing with other religious groups”.⁸³⁵ Also, 88% said that it was unacceptable

⁸³³ Jean DeBernadi, “Global Christian Culture and the Antioch of Asia,” in *Religious Diversity in Singapore*, 129.

⁸³⁴ Seong Chee Tham, *Religion & Modernization: A Study of Changing Rituals among Singapore’s Chinese, Malays & Indians* (Singapore: Graham Brash (Pte) Ltd, 1985), 161.

⁸³⁵ Mathew Mathews, Leonard Lim, and Shanthini Selvarajan, “Religion in Singapore: The Private and the Public Spheres,” *Institute of Policy Studies Working Papers* No. 33 (March 2019): 116–17. The findings were drawn from Singapore data obtained from a multi-country survey conducted in late 2018 as part of the International Social Survey Program Study of Religion in 2018. Face-to-face

or very unacceptable for religious leaders to criticise other religions to their followers, even if such comments were made in closed-door settings.⁸³⁶ Notably, only 52% of the respondents felt that it was unacceptable or very unacceptable for religious leaders to encourage their followers to evangelise to strangers in public settings. Of these respondents, 53.2% of the Muslims, 58.8% of the Catholics, and 72.4% of Protestant Christians felt that it was acceptable or very acceptable for religious leaders to urge their followers to evangelise to strangers.⁸³⁷

It could be surmised that the findings in 2018 showed that while a significant number of Muslims and Christians were still likely to evangelise to people of other faiths, they were inclined to do so in a more sensitive manner. Nonetheless, this thesis notes that a direct comparison using statistics from the 1980 and 2018 surveys is imperfect, due to differing methodology, sample size, and nature of the questions. Tolerance and respect were undefined values in the earlier survey. Nonetheless, it could be gauged that there was a general increase in tolerance levels among religious individuals. Respect for the need for religious tolerance had become a norm in the national habitus.

From the 1990s, there was a discernible increase in the number of social services run by religious organisations in Singapore. While it could not be ascertained if this increase was motivated by societal needs, or the result of religious organisations complying with the government's advice to restrict their "good" functions to providing social services, a definite increase could be observed in religiously affiliated social welfare services. A study found that since the 1990s,

surveys were conducted with 1,800 Singapore residents on matters relating to religious beliefs, religiosity, and the role of religion in the private and public spheres.

⁸³⁶ Mathews, Lim, and Selvarajan, 118.

⁸³⁷ Mathews, Lim, and Selvarajan, 123.

Buddhist organisations had established welfare homes for the aged, needy, sick, and destitute. These organisations also provided health and education services to all groups, regardless of race or religion.⁸³⁸

Before the introduction of the MRHA, the Christians were already active in social services catering to people across religious and racial groups; nonetheless, there was a discernible shift towards more Christian involvement in social services. In 1990, several churches preached that evangelism went hand in hand with social responsibility. AoG churches emphasised that evangelism and social responsibilities were “inseparable twins”. The focus on evangelisation had only presented an “ideal form of redemption” without social responsibility. Christians should be involved, both in social services and social actions.⁸³⁹ Similarly, Bethesda (Frankel Estate) Church stressed that they were moving towards administering to the “physical and social needs of ‘the poor’”, like what Jesus did.⁸⁴⁰ The GCF also talked about extending the Christian mission beyond “saving souls” to involvement in social welfare.⁸⁴¹ As of 2008, Mathews observes that Protestant churches comprised the largest coalition in the local social services sector, accounting for 41% of the total number of social service charities.⁸⁴²

A number of Muslim organisations established social welfare homes or services in the early 1990s. Pertapis started managing a halfway house in 1989. It established a centre for women and girls in 1990 and opened a children’s welfare

⁸³⁸ Khun Eng Kuah-Pearce, “Delivering Welfare Services in Singapore: A Strategic Partnership between Buddhism and the State,” in *Religious Diversity in Singapore*, 516–17.

⁸³⁹ Benjamin Cheng, “Christian Social Responsibility,” *Singapore Evangel*, March 1992, 4–5.

⁸⁴⁰ Kok Liang Yeow, “Editorial,” *Scope*, September 1990, 1.

⁸⁴¹ Bobby Sng, “Caring for the Needy (II): Historical Precedents,” *GCF Bulletin*, September 1990, 3.

⁸⁴² Mathew Mathews, “Saving the City Through Good Works: Christian Involvement in Social Services,” in *Religious Diversity in Singapore*, 528.

home in 1991. Jamiyah collaborated with the Government to establish a children's home in 1993. PPIS (Persatuan Pemudi Islam Singapura; the Singapore Muslim Women's Association) and Mendaki (Council for the Development of Singapore Malay/Muslim Community) jointly opened the first Malay/Muslim family centre in 1991.⁸⁴³ While the motivations behind religious groups' contributions to social welfare services were manifold, it can be observed that they were fulfilling their prescribed positions in society as urged by the Government. We see religious groups taking up roles as social service providers, which is another norm of the habitus.

A US State Department Report in 1992 observed that the MRHA had "the effect of causing some religious groups to exercise more self-restraint". The report claimed that the recording of Christian speaker O.S. Guinness' lecture at a bible college was destroyed because he had criticised the lack of genuine religious freedom in Singapore.⁸⁴⁴ We see the US State Department drawing the links between external restraints and self-control. The unnamed Bible college had probably internalised the secularity norms laid out by MRHA and instinctively destroyed the content without the state's intervention to regulate its behaviour. In the short term, we can assess that the MRHA worked as a strategy to cultivate how members of the national habitus think or act according to how religious groups are expected by habitus norms to behave in the public sphere.

⁸⁴³ Enon Mansor and Nur Amali Ibrahim, "Muslim Organisations and Mosques as Social Service Providers," in *Religious Diversity in Singapore*, 463–64.

⁸⁴⁴ "Do Evangelicals Lend Support to Repression," *Christianity Today*, November 8, 1993, 65.

7 A GENEALOGY OF SECULARITY IN SINGAPORE

In Chapter 1, this thesis has stated its aim to investigate the development of secularity – state-religion relations and societal dimension of religion – in order to reveal its genealogy in modern-day Singapore by using the process-sociological approach put forth by Foucault and Elias. This thesis has traced the genealogy of secularity in Singapore through archival research. It has identified key historical sequences of tensions and power changes between religious and state actors that have transformed notions of religion, politics and secularity in the national habitus. These notions, or norms, are redefined or reinforced through historical processes, the interactions between institutions and societal ideas of secularity, and the state's introduction of mechanisms, especially in legislation.

Section 7.1 will identify the mechanisms and processes through which norms and knowledge of secularity, religion and politics were produced, reinforced or transformed through tensions between religious and political actors. This section will also discuss historical sequences where these tensions, or drag effects, had occurred, resulting in changes to or reinforcement of the habitus' norms; identifying these sequences might allow us to predict future trends that could lead to drag effects. Further, this section will discuss some of the secularity norms in the national habitus that are significant for secularity in Singapore. Section 7.2 will discuss how the thesis is situated in the existing research on secularity and contributes to our understanding of secularity. Further, this section will consider the limitations of the thesis and possibilities for future research.

7.1 Genealogy of Secularity – Continuities and Changes in Constant Motion

This thesis has identified historical sequences or junctures where drag effects caused by events or socio-political changes had occurred, resulting in significant shifts in power relations in the national habitus and changes or reiterations of notions of secularity, religion and politics. This thesis has also uncovered processes – governmentalisation and normalisation – and strategies through which secularity norms on religion and politics are introduced as external constraints and later internalised by the various religious habitus. As Foucault observes, the "ultimate end of the government" is the population's welfare, its improvement and increase in resources.⁸⁴⁵ Thus, strategies, or disciplinary tactics, were introduced to manage the population with the specific aim of civil order that facilitates conditions for economic growth.

This thesis reveals that the notion of secularity is closely tied to civil order and the facilitation of conditions ideal for economic growth and the survival of the colonial state and, later, the independent Singapore nation. Notably, disciplinary strategies are usually deployed and enforced by the state due to the governmentalisation of power relations in the shared habitus, which places the state as the highest arbiter and distributor of power relations in society. These strategies are deployed to normalise how smaller habitus (plural) in the shared habitus respond to the actions of other habitus, or to win over resisting or abnormal forces.⁸⁴⁶ Strategies could either be enforcement actions, legislation, public policies and political discourses. This section will identify mechanisms at work at these junctures and highlight observations that are significant for secularism in Singapore.

⁸⁴⁵ Foucault, "Governmentality", 210.

⁸⁴⁶ Foucault, "The Subject and Power", 346.

The first notable historical sequence is the colonial period. Socio-political changes at this juncture led to Singapore's multiracial and multireligious makeup and how racial and religious identities are conceived in the present day. As shown in Chapter 2, the colonial period was critical in forming racial-religious groups in society and the conflation of race and religion. Singapore's role as an entrepôt attracted immigrants from China, India, the Middle East, and the neighbouring Malay Archipelago. These immigrants imported various racial and religious traditions that formed the current diverse makeup of Singapore society. Due to the British policy of divide and rule, these racial-religious groups retained separate administrative and legal structures, reiterating their specific racial-religious habitus, identities and respective differences. Religious belonging evolved in independent Singapore to be closely tied to the national identity, forming identities such as Malay/Muslim, Chinese-Christian, Chinese-Buddhist, or Indian-Hindu.

The special status of Islam vis-à-vis the state was also established as a norm in the colonial habitus. The British made provisions in the 1819 treaty to respect the laws and customs of the Malays, who were the indigenous rulers and natives of pre-colonial Singapore. This entailed respect for Syariah law and Islamic practices as the Malays were mostly Muslims. The special position of Malays in the state was enshrined in the Rendel Constitution of self-governing Singapore, and subsequently in the Singapore Constitution. The special position of Malay/Muslims in the Constitution provided for the enactment of the AMLA, which cultivated religious norms for local Muslims to follow. Local Muslims have to adhere to certain religious practices or laws in areas like *zakat*, marriage, divorce and inheritance because they fall under the legal jurisdiction of AMLA. In present-day Singapore, state

policies affecting Malay/Muslims might pressure minority Malay/Muslims to adhere to certain religious norms. The institutionalisation of Islam has thus transformed how local Muslims live out certain religious practices. When the Government relaxed its policy and allowed Muslim nurses to wear the tudung in August 2021, Minister-in-charge of Muslim Affairs Masagos Zulkifli said Muslim nurses should not feel “pressured” or “judged” by their decision not to wear the *tudung*, and “putting pressure on others is against the teachings of Islam”.⁸⁴⁷ Masagos’ statement was likely made to pre-empt some factions within the Muslim community from pressuring other Muslims to conform to religious norms.

Further, British colonial rule introduced the concept of the nation-state and increased governmentalisation of the state as religion-state and interreligious relations became formalised under the auspices of the state. The anti-Catholic riots, the Sepoy Mutiny, Hindu-Muslim conflicts and conflicts between secret societies led the colonial state to take over the regulation of power relations in the colonial state. At this juncture, the relationship between the colonial state and each habitus was vertical, as the various racial-religious groupings did not share many common state institutions or legislation. Colonial policies like urban planning, divide and rule, and legal pluralism kept religious communities apart to ensure stability and civil order in society, so that the colonial economy could thrive. The colonial state also used disciplinary strategies like the ban on some public processions to prevent interreligious clashes in the public sphere, which continued to the present day.

Modern religion-state institutions were established, and power was centralised in state institutions. As the colonial state developed, religious groups

⁸⁴⁷ Hariz Baharudin, “NDP 2021: Do Not Pressure Nurses to Wear the Tudung, Says Masagos”, *The Straits Times*, Aug 30, 2021.

were compelled to cede their roles as autonomous units to the colonial administration. In the first century of colonial rule, religious or community leaders were in charge of administering to their respective communities. These leaders arbitrated in cases of disputes between members of their communities. Religious or racial groups also took care of their own needs, such as providing social services and education. Gradually, the colonial state took over these administrative functions and limited the power of religious or racial groups through legislation, the use of the police apparatus or public policies. Religion-state relations became formalised under the government apparatus. A significant change was the Mahomedan Marriage Ordinance in 1880, which relinquished the local *kadi's* powers to the civil courts. In addition, the colonial state institutionalised state-religion relations through the establishment of the Mohammedan, Sikh, Hindu, and Chinese Advisory Boards. In having control over those elected to these Boards, the colonial state arbitrated over power relations in these separate racial-religious habitus.

The aforementioned colonial structures continue to exist as part of the national habitus today. The Mohammedan Advisory Board and the Mohammedan section of the Endowments Board merged to form the present-day MUIS. The Hindu Endowments Board is now a statutory board affiliated with the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth, established under the Hindu Endowments Act in 1968. The members of the Board must be both Singaporeans and Hindus, and they are elected by the Minister for Culture, Community and Youth.⁸⁴⁸

⁸⁴⁸ Hindu Endowments Board, "About Us | HEB," accessed August 16, 2021, <https://heb.org.sg/about-us/>.

This thesis's use of the habitus has allowed us to trace the interactions between institutions, state and religious actors. Notably, the religious actors were not passive receivers of state-defined religious positions in society or the Western notion of secularity. Some Muslims had requested the standardisation of Syariah law due to differing interpretations among Muslims of different *mazhab* and races. The British also returned the administration of the Queen Street Gurdwara to the Sikh community after the latter resisted interference from the Mohammedan and Hindu Endowments Board. The colonial state, which appeared to have had tenuous control over the diverse immigrant population, would have been unable to implement changes without the cooperation or consensus of the local religious or community elites.

The next notable shift in power relations is the period of self-governance. Self-governance was significant because most of these inhabitants became Singapore citizens overnight. Partial political power was shifted from the colonial elites to local elites. The postcolonial elites decolonised the habitus and introduced contextualised notions of religion and secularity for the national habitus, thus changing some of the Western-imposed views of secularity. Nation-building led to the subsequent redefinition of the position of religious communities in society as local citizens discussed what form of secularity Singapore should take on. The Government tried as much as possible to maintain neutral relationships with all religious groups. The newly established Legislative Assembly abolished the system of legal pluralism and developed a civil law system for non-Muslims. Postcolonial elites decided that no religion should impose its religious beliefs on society through government policies; granting rights to a specific religious group might lead to a

slippery slope where other religious groups also insisted on their own entitlements. In addition, the local Government chose to retain Islam-state relations by retaining the Syariah law for Muslims in marriage, divorce, and inheritance matters. The dual legal system continues to be a feature in the national habitus.

During this period, several religion-related episodes led to physical violence. The Hertogh riots continue to be invoked in Singapore's nation-building narrative, as seen in *This Land is Mine*, political speeches and public discussions on the place of religion in society. Another significant episode was the 1964 race riots. These two episodes reinforced the volatility of race and religious sentiments and raised doubts about Malay loyalty to the nation-state, since it appeared that the Malays distrusted the majority-Chinese Singapore Government. The Singapore habitus learned that religion could be disruptive to social harmony because religious differences were divisive and could manifest in physical conflicts. To this end, as explained in Chapter 3, the state introduced disciplinary tactics in the form of legal restrictions on the press to direct future media responses to reporting on religious issues. Another structure was the government policy to limit sensitive discussions on racial and religious issues to closed-door sessions with relevant stakeholders.

Secularity norms established during this period through legislation, public policies and shared experiences continue to influence secularism today, especially in the state's regulation of religious discussions or visibility in the public sphere. The habitus shows us how secularity norms and institutions become self-reinforcing among the habitus' members. At the Ministry of Education's launch of the National Education Plan in 1997, PM Lee said, "amnesia is not an option" and it is important for teachers to teach students about the sensitivity of race and religious issues as

“ignorance will pose a real risk of racial conflict happening again one day”.⁸⁴⁹ In the political discussions for revisions to the MRHA in 2019, Shanmugam used historical experiences, especially the Hertogh riots, to show that race and religion could potentially stir emotions and tensions in society.⁸⁵⁰

Restrictions on public processions, which were first enforced during the colonial period and later motivated by the 1964 race riots, led to a ban on religious foot processions except for three Hindu festivals – Thaipusam, Panguni Uthiram and Thimithi – under the Public Order Act. MHA stated that “maintaining public order and stability, in accordance with the rule of law, is important to our economic survival and international standing.”⁸⁵¹ When a politician brought up the *tudung* issue in Parliament in 2019, Masagos said that the Government understood the “complexity and sensitivity of the issue” and adopted the approach of “careful closed-door discussions”.⁸⁵² Press restrictions arising from Hertogh riots continue too; in 2009, PM Lee chastised the media for magnifying the AWARE episode with its extensive press coverage.⁸⁵³ We see how repetitive political discourses and public policies normalise the importance of reducing the visibility of public discourse on religious issues and religious processions, thus reflecting the self-reinforcing

⁸⁴⁹ M Nirmla, Pang Gek Choo and Walter Fernandez, “Race Issues: Handle with Care “But No Glossing Over””, *The Straits Times*, May 18, 1997.

⁸⁵⁰ Lianne Chia, “Shanmugam Warns ‘Serious Consequences Can Follow’ When Countries are Lax About Hate Speech,” *The Straits Times*, April 1, 2019.

⁸⁵¹ “Maintaining Public Order,” Ministry of Home Affairs, accessed July 9, 2022, <https://www.mha.gov.sg/what-we-do/maintaining-law-and-order/maintaining-public-order>.

⁸⁵² Cindy Co, “Government’s Secular Stand On Issue Of Wearing Tudungs With Public Service Uniforms Has Been ‘Consistently Clear’: Masagos,” *Channel NewsAsia*, March 8, 2021. MP Faisal Manap suggested in Parliament that the Government should allow Muslim nurses to wear the *tudung* as the ban had deterred some Muslims from taking up nursing as a profession.

⁸⁵³ “Risks of Religious Fervour; Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong Spoke about the Four Challenges Facing Singapore in His National Day Rally Speech on Sunday. Here Is an Edited Version,” *Straits Times*, August 18, 2009.

mechanisms of the habitus. Another notable observation is the state's role in directing mechanisms to regulate habitus norms.

Another notable historical sequence is Singapore's merger with Malaysia. After Singapore gained independence in 1965, historical episodes, such as the Hertogh incident and racial riots, reinforced the importance of secularity for maintaining social cohesion in a religiously diverse society. Singapore's brief merger with Malaysia ended with the local political elites' rejection of Malaysia's version of secularism. Both the Singapore and Malaysia habitus had different secularity norms. National identity in Malaysia utilised Islam to forge common belonging, while the Singapore Government chose secularity and multireligiosity as the foundations of the country's national identity. The conflicts between local and Malaysian politicians were drag effects of their responses to the challenges they saw the other habitus posed. Both habitus wanted to resist changes by blocking the other entirely, and thus, it was not viable for both habitus to co-exist under a shared national habitus. The Singaporean nation-building narrative stressed that the nation's survival hinged on the country being a secular, multi-religious and multiracial society, built on mutual understanding and tolerance. Secularity has become an enduring feature of the national habitus and is enshrined in the Singapore Constitution upon the country's independence.

The following significant historical sequence is the initial months of the country's independence, when the political elites defined and normalised the limits of secularity in Singapore through the Constitution, various policies and repetition through political speeches. Such normalisation aimed to direct how religious habitus respond or react to other religious habitus. Religious leaders were advised

not to mix religion and politics, as was the case when Singapore UMNO stirred Malay/Muslim grievances to rally political support from the Malay/Muslim community, triggering Sino-Malay clashes. The political elites also advised Christians not to evangelise to Muslims, as religious conversion was a sensitive issue.

The Government continued to formalise Islam-state relations with more institutions. The state formulated the AMLA and the MBF to appease Malay/Muslim demands, possibly to defuse tensions between the Government and the Malay/Muslim community. These pieces of legislation could only be enacted with the consent of those willing to be directed by the norms set by the state. The state was also considerate towards balancing legislation and the religious needs of Singaporean Muslims. For instance, Muslims were excluded from the Human Organ Transplant Act (HOTA) in 1987. The Government waited for consensus from MUIS before the HOTA was revised in 2007 to include the Muslims; this was after MUIS considered changes in medical developments and social context and revised its *fatwa* to permit organ donation.⁸⁵⁴ Nonetheless, during the merger, the Government had shown that it would not cave to demands for Malay/Muslim privileges at the expense of other groups in society. The emphasis on state neutrality (as much as possible) towards all religious groups, and the equality of all religious groups, are key secularity principles of the national habitus. The Singapore Government resisted giving in to Malay chauvinists pushing for similar

⁸⁵⁴ Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura, "Family Planning and Reproductive Technology," 3, 7, 15, 17, 19; "Organ Transplant Act to Take Effect Next Week," *The Straits Times*, July 7, 1987; "23 Patients Gained from Revised HOTA Since July," *Channel NewsAsia*, December 1, 2004; Zakir Hussain, "New Ruling Makes It Easier For Muslims To Be Organ Donors," *The Straits Times*, July 27, 2007. MUIS had issued a *fatwa* in 1973 to prohibit organ donations for both live and dead donors.

privileges to those enjoyed by the Malaysian Malays, setting a norm for how it would respond to such future challenges to the state. The short-lived merger with Malaysia thus further entrenched the necessity of secularity in the national habitus.

Another critical historical sequence is the period between the 1970s and 1980s. This was a period of rapid urbanisation, social changes, and Islamic and Christian revivalism. These social changes brought about tensions between state and religious actors, producing several changes to the secularity norms in the national habitus. In the late 1970s, the state perceived that urbanisation had resulted in the spread of Western societal influences in Singapore and produced a “nation of thieves” without social values.⁸⁵⁵ At this juncture, the political elites stressed the importance of religious values as moral values to produce good, law-abiding citizens as a solution to moral decadence.

A significant change was the change in the definition of the societal role of religion for the religious and political elites. The religious habitus sought to expand its role in society, which the state viewed as a threat to existing power relations in the habitus; a shift in one’s power could destabilise overall social cohesion. In some cases, the religious groups mounted direct challenges to the state’s authority. Islamic revivalism meant Islam gained more significance in the lives of local Malay/Muslims. There was also growing awareness among the local population of global events affecting Muslims overseas, and perhaps an increased affinity between local and overseas Muslims. The Iranian revolution also showed that Islamic theocracy was a viable governance alternative to a secular state, and the formation of Ikhwan and the SPLO challenged state authority. Coupled with the

⁸⁵⁵ “The Straits Times Says.. It’s Better to Be Informed.”

socio-economic problems faced by the Malay/Muslim community, tensions possibly increased between the state and the Malay/Muslims.

Locally, Christianity underwent a resurgence, both in physical numbers and public visibility. Local Christians saw evangelism and social action as essential elements of their faith. The socio-political and economic power of the Christian habitus potentially disturbed existing power relations between various religious habitus. Insensitive and aggressive evangelism placed the Christians in direct conflict with other religious groups, notably the Muslims. This was especially so as the Christians were deemed by the state and some groups in society to have violated the earlier norm stated by the Government to not proselytise to the Muslims. The Christians also envisioned new roles for themselves in socio-economic spheres. The SIM and the alleged Marxists were in direct conflict with the state. The above changes, in turn, triggered responses from religious groups and the state. Christian evangelism led to the intellectualisation of Islam and Buddhism in Singapore. In addition, religious competition pushed Muslims and Buddhists to reinvent their religious and evangelisation practices.

Likewise, the state's view of religion in the national habitus shifted. The challenges mounted by religious groups led to increased state intervention to regulate power relations. The state used various tactics to reinforce old and new secularity norms. Earlier in the 1960s, the state had stressed that religion had a spiritual role in the lives of citizens and that religion should not be mixed with politics. The same tropes were reiterated through the politicians' speeches at various community events and reported in the news, but with more defined boundaries. The state had previously promoted compulsory religious education to inculcate good

moral values in its citizens. By the end of the 1980s, the state decided that religious education and values were private matters. Instead, the Government introduced a set of “Shared Values” that placed belonging to the nation above community, stressing that religious belonging should not precede national loyalty. The “Shared Values” also stressed the importance of tolerance and understanding in society, which is another recurring trope in the national habitus.

A second significant change was the definition of politics. In the 1950s and 1960s, the forbidden mix of religion and politics referred to religious and racial rhetoric being invoked by political parties like Singapore UMNO to gather support from the Malay/Muslims. However, with the advent of social action, liberation theology, and Islamic political thought, the boundary of politics also extended to socio-political matters. The boundaries were laid out in the *White Paper* for the MRHA, and the legislation has since become a critical regulatory mechanism for the national habitus and established acceptable societal roles for religious groups. The state encouraged religious groups to participate in social welfare services to complement existing government services, rather than to be in direct conflict with the Government or critical of government policies. Collective religious participation in socio-political activities was strictly forbidden.

That the MRHA has not been enforced thus far showed that it was more of a strategy to regulate norms in the national habitus. For religious-related offences, the state had relied on other laws the religious groups had previously said it could have used instead of introducing MRHA. For instance, a blogger was charged under the Sedition Act for posting inflammatory comments on Malays and Muslims

in 2005.⁸⁵⁶ It was likely that MRHA was used as a strategy to regulate norms and serve as an external constraint to be internalised by the various religious habitus so that they would self-regulate according to the habitus norms. The responses of Singaporeans to the attempted Christian takeover of AWARE in 2007 revealed that Singaporeans had internalised secularity norms. Singaporeans had spontaneously rejected the Christian takeover of AWARE and the civil society sphere by turning up at the Extraordinary General Meeting to thwart the alleged Christian effort to take over the civil organisation.

We can make several observations from the above discussion. Much of the debate over the MRHA focused on the definition of the line between religion and politics. This thesis's study of the genealogy of secularity in Singapore has shown that institutional and societal definitions of religion and politics are fluid and in constant interaction. The line, being part of the national habitus, shifts in response to social and political contexts, although it is very much defined by historical dispositions and interactions between state and religious actors. Thus, even though dominant tropes of the habitus remain, the relative positions of the state, religious and racial communities are in flux due to fluctuating power relationships.

The social changes, or attempted social changes, studied in this thesis could be interpreted as attempts by religious groups to redefine the role of religion in society. In the 1950s and early 1960s, Malay/Muslims struggled for a more privileged position in the socio-economic sphere. In the 1970s and 1980s, Christians wanted to convert more Singaporeans to the faith and play a more significant role in the socio-political sphere. The discussions on the MRHA were

⁸⁵⁶ "Third Racist Blogger Sentenced to 24 Months Supervised Probation," *Channel NewsAsia*, November 23, 2005.

reflective of power struggles between religious groups and the Government over the right to define the line between religion and politics, showing us the constant interaction between institutions and religious groups and the resulting implications on state institutions regulating religion.

Secularism as a statecraft principle remains an essential condition for the survival of a multi-religious, multiracial, and multi-lingual society like Singapore and the forging of national identity. There is some degree of separation between religion and politics. While the line remains fluid, general dispositions can be discerned, guiding the division of religion and politics. In the 1960s and 1970s, the context was political parties, such as Singapore UMNO, using racial and religious rhetoric to instigate Malay/Muslim discontentment against the government. The state expanded the definition of politics in the late 1980s to include socio-political activism by religiously motivated actors. Since the line between religion and politics shifts due to various factors, the boundary between religion and politics continues to be challenged and redefined. The power to define the line between religion and politics resides with state and societal actors. In this aspect, the habitus structure can be used to study further developments of how interactions between religion and politics affect state institutions and the conceived role of religion in society.

The state's role as the "global overseer, the principle of regulation [and] the distributor of all power relations" in the national habitus is notable.⁸⁵⁷ The role of the Government as the highest power authority in the national habitus stems from habitus' dynamics and the continued governmentalisation of power relations since the colonial period. The emergence of a colonial population and, later, a Singapore

⁸⁵⁷ Foucault, "The Subject and Power", 344.

population led to increased governmentalisation of the state and power relations as the population became the “ultimate end of government”.⁸⁵⁸ The end is the maintenance of civil order to facilitate economic growth, as noted above.

The state oversees the mechanisms normalising the secularity norms and delineates what is appropriate for religion in the public sphere, and the mainstream religious habitus’ consent to the power relations. These mechanisms include the Constitution, enacting legislation, enforcement actions, the local politicians’ addresses to local communities, the introduction of programmes into the national education system and other government policies. Examples include introducing the “Shared Values” into the national school curriculum and reciting the national pledge (which includes secularity norms) every morning in school. Such mechanisms are usually reiterated daily or regularly so that citizens will internalise the external constraints as secularity norms, thus conditioning their thoughts, actions and responses to adhere to habitus’ norms. After the 9/11 terrorist attack, MUIS launched the “Singaporean Muslim Identity” project to show that there is no conflict between being a good Muslim and a good citizen”.⁸⁵⁹ The project highlighted ten attributes of the local Muslim that are “aligned with national priorities”.⁸⁶⁰ Unsurprisingly, local academics like Goh, Ramakrishna and Alami recognise and advocate for the importance of the state in regulating religious action and state-religion relations in the public sphere. In the aftermath of the AWARE episode, PM

⁸⁵⁸ Foucault, “Governmentality”, 220.

⁸⁵⁹ Basma Abdelgafar, *Thriving in a Plural World: Principles and Values of the Singapore Muslim Community* (Singapore: Muis Academy, 2018), 49.

⁸⁶⁰ Prime Minister’s Office Singapore, “PMO | Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong’s Written Interview With Berita Harian,” Text, Prime Minister’s Office Singapore (Prime Minister’s Office Singapore, December 24, 2018), <http://www.pmo.gov.sg/Newsroom/prime-minister-lee-hsien-loongs-written-interview-berita-harian>.

Lee said the Government “hold the ring so that all groups can practise their faiths freely without colliding”.⁸⁶¹ The state recognises itself as the arbiter of power relations in the secularity and national habitus.

In this vein, the state decides what is appropriate or inappropriate behaviour for religious groups as per the secularity norms in the habitus. The state stresses the moral, spiritual, and cultural aspects of religion in society. In turn, religious groups assume moral roles in Singapore society. From the late 1980s, more religious actors assumed their state-defined roles as social service providers. Generally, religious groups recognise the state’s authority in regulating religion’s presence in the public sphere and possible interreligious tensions.

However, because the habitus is fluid, the state does not have precise control over how the religious groups will respond and internalise the norms that state-introduced mechanisms seek to inculcate. For instance, the Christians in the 1980s did not heed the late PM Lee’s verbal diktat to refrain from evangelising the Muslims. The state’s introduction of RK, meant to facilitate the inculcation of moral values, created the unintended consequence of an increased number of students following the religion they were obliged to study under RK.

The religious groups and other citizens, conditioned by the habitus mechanisms, also practise self-regulation within their groups and external constraints over other individuals. We see religious leaders like Olcomendy practising self-restraint over their followers when the latter challenged state policies on several occasions. Other Christian leaders also stepped in to chastise fellow

⁸⁶¹ “Risks of Religious Fervour.”

Christians who had not adhered to secularity norms and continued with their insensitive evangelisation efforts.

The religious groups also approach the state to mediate over intra- and inter-religious relations. For instance, the Government rejected the Hindu request in the 1950s to introduce legislation to address differences in religious customs regarding Hindu marriages because it was not the place of the state to arbitrate over doctrinal differences. In the 1980s, the Muslims approached the Government for recourse over aggressive Christian evangelism. The state tends to remain neutral vis-à-vis all religions. While secularism, by definition, refers to the non-intervention of religion in politics and vice versa, the state will intervene in cases where religious groups threaten to disrupt social harmony or challenge state authority. The gauge of social harmony depends on whether civil order is disrupted or if interreligious or interracial tensions are on the rise. State neutrality towards all religions is sometimes compromised for the sake of civil order; for instance, the Muslims are granted certain privileges by virtue of the constitutional status of the Malay/Muslims.

The privileged position of Muslims in the Constitution is generally recognised by other religious groups, although the Hindus tried requesting similar concessions in the early years of independence. However, the privileged position is a double-edged sword for the Muslim community; some see it as excessive state interference in Islamic affairs. For the Muslims, the AMLA resulted in the standardisation of religious practices like *zakat*, marriage, and inheritance matters, regulated by civil law. Religious elites elected by the state had the right to determine orthodox forms of Islam, which consequently marginalised minority Muslims rejected by

mainstream Muslims. Further, Muslims do not have the choice not to follow Syariah law; such a decision would entail converting out of the faith.

The institutionalised religion-state relations in the national habitus bear implications for minority religions. The state does not have formalised relations with all religious groups and tends only to formally recognise mainstream religious groups. Thus, minority groups rejected by the mainstream religious groups as deviant might not enjoy equal status with other religious groups. For instance, unorthodox Muslim groups might not enjoy the same legal rights as mainstream Muslims, due to the jurisdiction of the AMLA. Individuals are guaranteed the freedom of religious beliefs so long as they do not threaten state authority or incite interreligious or interracial tensions. However, this “freedom” does not extend to equal rights for all, as briefly discussed in Chapter 4.

Joppke invites us to consider secularity for minority and majority religions. Nonetheless, Joppke is referring to Islam as a minority religion and Christianity as a majority faith, without considering the status of minority groups like the Ahmadis or the Shi’as. The Singapore state inevitably ends up “condemning” groups to deviant status in its formal recognition of specific religions. Joppke is also critical of the secular state’s “growing reluctance” to “intervene in religion” and proposes that “choices have to be made between respecting human rights and religious rights”.⁸⁶² A question to consider is the status of minority or deviant Christian and Muslim groups in the Singapore habitus, and the interactions between them and the mainstream religious habitus and the national habitus. Has the Singapore state

⁸⁶² Joppke, *The Secular State Under Siege: Religion and Politics in Europe and America* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015), 182.

done enough to guarantee that they enjoy equal rights as mainstream religious groups?

Institutionalised state-religion relations also foster close relationships between the Government and religious leaders. The secularity norm dictates that no religious agenda shall seek to dominate or influence state policies. However, the Government considers religious agendas in some state policies directly affecting religious individuals. Religious leaders and the government are in constant dialogue, and controversial issues are largely resolved through behind-the-scenes action since public discussions of religious or racial issues are unlikely to be contained to peaceful dialogues. As observed earlier, closed-door dialogues between the Government and local community leaders are part of the habitus mechanisms to reiterate habitus norms.

Further, the genealogy of secularity in Singapore has shown that the definition of religion's role in society is not simply a state-imposed action, due to the interactions between the religious habitus and the secularity and national habitus. The relative power positions of the state and religious groups might shift according to actions by one or more actors in the habitus. While the state is the overall arbiter of power in the shared habitus, not all power is derived from the state. Nonetheless, the religious groups still make reference to the state, hence the formalised state-religion relations. Without consensus from the habitus, it is unlikely that the state can reinforce habitus dispositions or construct habitus structures. While the state is the highest-ranking reference group for the "we-identity", and religious groups have ceded their roles as autonomous units to the state, it can be observed that there must be consent from the governed. The relative positions of religious actors

and the state can be observed to be in constant flux, as with all power relations, though their actions and considerations are guided by dominant secularity dispositions as identified in this thesis.

This thesis's use of genealogy and the Eliasian habitus has allowed us to forecast patterns of behaviour by making sense of seemingly disparate events; this will, in turn, allow us to predict how state and religious actors respond to changes in social and political circumstances, and anticipate possible future tensions between religious and political actors. Drag effects that lead to changes or reinforcement of habitus norms can be caused by either direct power challenges to the state or tensions between religious habitus. Mechanisms that regulate and normalise habitus norms (as identified above) are habitus responses to drag effects. Similar to Nietzsche, we are concerned with looking at the origin and development of the notions of secularity, religion and politics, rather than the "why", "how" and functions of secularity. While there is no significant difference between the secularity norms identified in existing literature (see Chapter 1.1.e) and this thesis, the genealogy of Singapore's secularity has highlighted the underlying power dynamics that impact the meanings of secularity, religion and politics in Singapore.

7.2 Closing Section

7.2.a Contribution to Studies of Religion and Politics

As discussed in Chapter 1, the concept of secularity is contested. Within these contested discourses, one can nonetheless discern institutional or societal interpretations of secularity. The institutional perspectives focus on the process of secularisation and varying degrees of separation of religion and politics. By contrast, the societal perspectives look at the roles of religion in society. A recurrent

theme brought up by Taylor, Asad and Joppke is the influence of Christianity on the development of secularity. Scholars like Bucholc and Cesari examine the impact of colonialism on secularity and the private/ public dichotomy in postcolonial societies. Mavelli and Wilson combine institutional and societal approaches to examine tensions between secular and religious groups. Hurd gives primacy to differing notions of secularity to explain differences in foreign policies among countries. Cesari proposes that the societal, institutional and historical sequences constantly interact to influence societal perceptions of religion and state institutions.

We can situate this thesis's findings and contributions to the field of secularity in the following ways. By studying the interactions between institutional and societal perspectives, which is similar to Cesari's approach, this thesis has shown that the continuous interactions of institutions, ideas and historical events in Singapore society have contributed to a fluid national habitus. The use of the habitus allows us to trace changes to secularity norms that result from struggles between institutions and religious groups to define secularity. The genealogy of secularity in Singapore has revealed that concepts of secularity, religion and politics are related. The habitus explains the mechanisms by which habitus norms are reinforced through institutions like the education system, legislation, enforcement actions and public policies; these external mechanisms create a self-reinforcement effect on the habitus' members who internalise these norms. The process of reinforcement and self-reinforcement occurs continuously at historical sequences where drag effects occur; drag effects are identified as historical events where there are changes in power configurations, i.e. perceived challenges to the state or religious habitus that might threaten the shared national habitus.

This thesis has provided a way of examining sources that allows us to study power struggles between the state and religious groups. This thesis's use of Foucault's archival method of examining the "external and internal" relation of sources allows us to look at different interpretations of events, thus capturing struggles between religious groups and political actors to define the limits of what constitutes the religious and the secular. This thesis's study of varied discourses in relation to an event reveals that various smaller habitus (plural) in the national habitus have their own understandings of secularity. Secularity is thus not simply about the various degrees of separation of religion and politics. It is also about the different degrees of state-religion relations, how religious groups and the state view religion and politics and seek to change the norms of the national habitus. The use of genealogy and the Eliasian habitus allows us to study power tussles between groups in society and the state to determine what secularity entails at each significant juncture identified. Such an approach is similar to Mavelli and Wilson's study, which captures struggles between the secularists and Islamists during the Egyptian revolution. However, this thesis goes beyond Mavelli and Wilson to capture the implications of these struggles for the national habitus – the changes in state-religion institutions and notions of religion and politics in society.

Postcolonial scholars like Abdullah and Saba suggest that the onset of colonialism has transformed notions of religion and state in postcolonial societies. However, they place too much blame on the legacy of colonial rule for religious tensions and strife in postcolonial societies like Egypt and India. At one point, Singapore was under the jurisdiction of British India. Syariah law in colonial Singapore was based heavily on the experiences of colonial officers in British India.

However, despite sharing similar contexts of divide and rule and the codification of religious law, the postcolonial Singapore society managed to move away from the exacerbated role of religion and religious differences seen in Egypt and India's conception of national identity and institutional structures. This thesis's use of the habitus allows us to reveal how local political and religious elites challenged the colonial imposition of state secularism and institutions in the postcolonial years to transform the local habitus. Postcolonial Singaporean elites in Singapore chose to abolish structures of legal pluralism and forge a national identity built on secularism and religious and racial diversity. They also rejected the Malaysian version of secularism and national identity based on belonging to a particular religion, which resulted in the separation of Singapore from Malaysia. Abdullah and Saba's conception of secularism do not return impetus and choice to the postcolonial elites; their conception is similar to Bourdieu's habitus that emphasises predetermination and lack of agency or change.

We can also reconcile the different, and sometimes conflicting, interpretations of secularity in Singapore presented by scholars. For instance, while Zubaidah and Walid describe secularism as top-down and authoritarian in their studies of state-Islam relations, this thesis has shown that the government would not have introduced AMLA without the consensus of local Muslims. The local Muslims' acceptance of AMLA resulted in the normalisation of AMLA and all that the legislation entails in the local Islamic habitus. Some form of consensus between the object-subject is needed for power relationships to be actualised. While disciplinary mechanisms to introduce or normalise habitus norms can sometimes be hard tactics, this thesis has shown that the state uses a combination of

mechanisms to legitimise norms in the national habitus. Power, therefore, is not necessarily repressive or oppressive.

This thesis has revealed the fluidity of the national habitus and the varying views of secularity in specific religious habitus that contributed to the forging of shared secularity norms. Typologies and processes of secularity (secularisation, deprivatisation and post-secularity) may result in a uniform interpretation of state secularity that ignores how institutions, religions and historical sequences intersect to change or reinforce secularity norms. In Singapore, the various religious groups undergo different trajectories and are sometimes influenced by the other. We see the uneven pace of intellectualisation in religions, first Christianity in the 1980s and later followed the “Christianisation” of Buddhism in the early 1990s. Such observations could only be gathered from detailed archival research to identify oscillations and fluctuations rather than locating evidence to match processes.

The Singapore case study challenges existing paradigms of secularity by revealing a viable way to examine secularity in societies by paying specific attention to historical and social contexts. This thesis develops a genealogical understanding of secularity by tracing a series of collective “memories” and processes that feeds into the national habitus. These “memories” corresponds to the country’s nation-building process and are specific to each society. Such a methodology is closer to Asad and Cesari’s approaches to secularity, which capture changes in concepts like secularity and religion by paying close attention to specific historical backgrounds.

This thesis’s emphasis on genealogy and the study of power relations brings it closer to the efforts of Joppke, Taylor and Asad. While Joppke invites us to

consider how the meaning of secularity differs for minority and majority religions in society, this thesis pushes us to think of the minorities within minority religious groups like the Shi'a Muslims and Ahmadis. Further, the Singapore case study is unique in that its minority religions – Islam and Christianity – behave like majority religions. In a commentary on Section 377A in 2018, ambassador-at-large Tommy Koh stated, “it is not the business of the State to enforce the dogmas of those religions. In Singapore, there is a separation between religion and the State. Church leaders and Islamic leaders should respect that separation.”⁸⁶³ Section 377A is an example of how state policies continue to be influenced by religious opinions, perhaps due to the unbalanced distribution of power among religious groups in the national habitus. Islam holds a privileged position in the habitus, while Christianity appears to hold more socio-economic clout than other religions since the 1980s. Further, the Muslims and Christians see themselves as bastions of traditional family and moral values in society; the state's acknowledgement of religion as moral values possibly bolsters religion's perception of their moral role in the national habitus.

Another theme is the influence of the state's secularity norms on foreign policies, as Hurd has illustrated. We see how different notions of secularity led to clashes between the Malaysian and Singaporean national habitus. The Singapore Government remains sensitive to Islam because of the Malay/Muslims' close affinity to Malaysia. Direct local Malay/Muslim opposition to the state that was influenced by neighbouring elements appeared to be less visible after the period of merger and

⁸⁶³ Grace Ho, “Of Faith, Hope, Love and the Law: Should Section 377A Stay or Go?”, *The Straits Times*, July 10, 2022.

initial years of Singapore's independence. Nonetheless, the Government is cautious and remains sensitive to Malay/Muslim issues.

A notable point of discussion is the influence of external religious influences on local religious habitus. The revivalism of religion in Singapore in the 1980s was influenced by deprivatisation trends observed by Casanova. As discussed, Malay/Muslims tend to draw references from the Middle East and Malaysia. The alleged Marxists were inspired by liberation theologians from Latin America and regional countries. Local Christian movements, like the varsity student movements and the Pentecostal Christians, were influenced by Christianity in the US. The state could not direct the spread of global ideas into the local religious habitus, particularly with globalisation and, in recent times, the use of social media. To date, Islamic religious teachers continue to receive their training from Middle Eastern countries. While there are local theological colleges, a number of Christian leaders continue to pursue their theological training overseas, though not much has been researched on the flow of ideas between Western Christianity and local preachers.

7.2.b Limitations of Current Study and Possibilities for Future Studies

This study remains limited as it is largely focused on historical sequences of tensions between the state and Christian and Malay/Muslim actors from the 1950s to the late 1980s. There are language limitations that this thesis is unable to overcome, such as the use of Malay-language oral archives. There is also scope for studies on other religious groups like Indian-Hindus, Indian-Muslims, Chinese-Buddhists, and smaller groups like the Ahmadis, the Seventh Day Adventists, or the Baha'i community. Examining the relative positionings of minority groups, who

possess comparatively lower socio-political capital and financial resources, could reveal another side of the national habitus.

The study of Christian-Buddhist relations and tracing the Christianisation of the Buddhist faith would also be interesting. Even though Buddhists continue to be the largest religious grouping in Singapore, it does not behave like a majority religion in other societies like Christianity in Western Europe and the US and Islam in the Middle East. Does the Buddhist habitus' lack of demands in the political sphere stem from the "apolitical" nature of Buddhism, or is it a matter of habitus dynamics?⁸⁶⁴

The Singapore society's reliance on the state to regulate the habitus and tensions within also bears further examination. An example is the Christian and Muslim exchanges on Christian evangelisation in the press in the 1980s while waiting for the state to mediate. This is contrary to the civilising process; Elias proposes an increase in self-constraint formed through less coercion and more through gentle persuasion in later stages of social development, and the differences in power distribution between groups will decrease.⁸⁶⁵ Will Singapore society be able to rely less on the state to introduce external mechanisms to regulate relations and tensions in the national habitus? Something to consider is whether a religiously diverse society like Singapore requires more social constraints to cultivate self-restraints among members of the habitus. Another possible area of study is whether the MRHA functioned less as a coercive structure, and more as a self-restraining

⁸⁶⁴ Buddhism in regional countries has been politicised and incorporated into the national ideology. We see this in Myanmar, Thailand and Sri Lanka.

⁸⁶⁵ Elias, *The Germans: Power Struggles and the Development of Habitus in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, 335–36.

feature that cultivated self-restraint among the habitus' members, thus limiting the action of religious actors in the public sphere without much state interference.

Postcolonial scholars like Saba and Abdullah have traced the status of religion in pre-colonial societies to show that Western political secularism has changed notions of state and religion. In comparison, this thesis traces the beginnings of secularity to the colonial period. There is scope for retracing the genealogy of secularity in Singapore to the precolonial period, in light of historiography that decolonises Singapore history.⁸⁶⁶ The Eliasian habitus provides a viable methodology for examining different habitus linked to these immigrants' motherlands, cultures and religions, and how they intersect within the shared territorial boundary of the nation-state to create a common national habitus.

There have also been several significant socio-political changes in Singapore society since the 1980s.⁸⁶⁷ The recent census conducted in 2020 shows an increasing number of areligious individuals in the recent decade; will the beliefs and actions of the non-religious trigger responses from religious groups and disrupt social harmony? Given the influence of Western habitus on local groups, can we expect to see areligious individuals use legislation to push for "more" secular common space? Will religious groups mount a similar pushback? In addition, the 9/11 attacks and the global focus on Islamism have led to the prominence of

⁸⁶⁶ Kwa Chong Guan, Derek Heng, Peter Borschberg and Tan Tai Yong, *Singapore, A 700-Year History: From Early Emporium to World City* (Singapore: National Archives of Singapore, 2009).

⁸⁶⁷ Cheryl Lin, "20% of Singapore Residents Have No Religion, an Increase from the Last Population Census," *Channel NewsAsia*, June 16, 2021, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/census-2020-more-residents-no-religion-1966701>. In the 2020 national census released by the Department of Statistics, 20% of Singapore residents professed no religious affiliation. This was an increase from the 17% who professed no religious affiliation in the 2010 census. Buddhists continue to form the largest group at 31.1%. 18.9% of the population were Christians, and 15.6% were Muslims. 8.8% of the population identified as Taoists, while 5% were Hindus. By comparing census results from 2010 and 2020, the media report observed that there were more Christians and Muslims as compared to a decade ago, while there was a slight decline in Taoists and Buddhists.

securitisation theories, as seen in Ramakrishna and Zubaidah's works, and calls for more restraints to limit religious beliefs. It is hoped that this thesis's genealogy of secularity in Singapore will provide a starting point for future studies on the intersection of historical sequences, institutional structures, and state and societal notions of secularism, religion and politics in postcolonial societies.

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