
*Religious Managerialism in Singapore:
Analysis of State Management of NRMs*

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1. Introduction

This paper focuses on the interactions between the city state of Singapore and the New Religious Movements (NRMs) that have emerged and engaged with it. It reviews the philosophy of religious managerialism in Singapore and suggests that the state accords preferences to particular forms of religion by analyzing the way in which the state has managed NRMs such as Soka Gakkai, Sai Baba, ISKCON and Jehovah's Witnesses.

The Singapore state through its various institutions, takes an unapologetically interventionist stance over various spheres of the social and private lives of Singaporeans. Regulation of religion in Singapore is chiefly aimed towards the prevention of conflict.¹ The state officially declares itself to be secular and secularism is advocated as a practical approach to manage multi-religiosity in a neutral way.² Singapore does not have a history of being aligned with any particular religion due to its being composed of people from a wide spectrum of religious traditions and who were mainly natives from Malaya, migrants from China and India, and British imperialists. Currently Singapore society continues to be characterised by a high degree of heterogeneity, with the population comprising

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1. T. Ling, *Buddhism, Confucianism and the Secular State in Singapore* (Singapore: National University of Singapore, 1987), 7.
 2. V. Sinha, "Constituting and Re-Constituting the Religious Domain in the Modern Nation State of Singapore," in *Our Place in Time: Exploring Heritage and Memory in Singapore*, ed. Kwok Kian Woon et al. (Singapore: Singapore Heritage Society, 1999), 81.

Buddhists (42.5%), Taoists (8.5%), Christians (14.6%), Muslims (14.9%), Hindus (4.0%), other religions (0.7%) and 14.8% having no religion.³

According to the constitution of Singapore, every person has the right to profess and practise his or her religion and to propagate it. Every religious group has the right to manage its own religious affairs, to establish and maintain institutions for religious or charitable purposes, and to acquire and own property and to hold and administer it in accordance with law. Although the constitution is mostly honoured, state officials have on many occasions explicitly voiced the need to regulate religious movements in a way that renders them complementary to wider national interests.⁴ The state has through hegemonic methods granted itself the legal and political power to exercise control over religion in Singapore.⁵ Therefore religious groups are directly or indirectly accorded preferential social space by the state. Indirect designation occurs because of the existing legal framework which compels religious movements to adjust themselves accordingly without active interference by the state. Direct designation occurs when the state utilises punitive measures to exercise control over particular religious groups or individuals who fail to

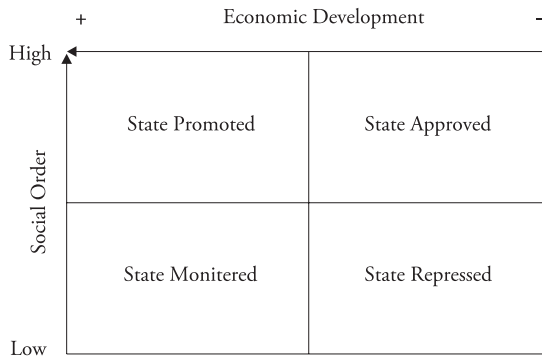


Fig. 1: The state's religion management model

3. Census 2000 Advanced Data Release.
4. V. Wee, "Secular State, Multi-Religious Society: The Pattern of Religion in Singapore" (paper presented at the Department of Sociology Working Paper Series, 1989), 7–9.
5. Wee, "Secular State," 7–20; J. Clammer, *The Sociology of Singapore Religion: Studies in Christianity and Chinese Culture* (Singapore: Chopmen Publishers, 1991), 11–17.

negotiate their position successfully at the first stage. The resultant range of state-religion relationships could be represented by four generic categories shown in Fig. 1.

The horizontal axis represents the degree to which a religious group is perceived by the state to affect economic development, ranging from positive effects on the left to negative effects on the right. For example, Confucian ethics such as frugality, self-discipline and collectivism were thought to be favourable to economic development and were promoted by the state during the 1980s.⁶ Confucianism would therefore occupy a space on the left of the axis. The vertical axis represents the degree to which a religious group(s) is perceived by the state to affect social order, with “high” social order at the top and “low” social order at the bottom of the axis. Religious groups which are critical of other religions or inclined to political engagement would fall in the lower end of the scale. On the other hand, religions which are respectful of other religions, tolerant and accepting of the existing socio-political establishment would occupy the high end. The position which a particular religious group occupies due to the combination of the binary measures set up in this framework is not fixed; rather it is fluid especially in the long run, depending largely on the Singapore government’s perceptions and how the religious group performs. Religious groups are capable of renegotiating and adapting themselves to local sociopolitical conditions. The four quadrants—state promoted, state monitored, state neglected and state repressed—represent broad categories ascribed to religious groups according to their relationship with the state. The experience of NRMs in Singapore, show that a religious group is ascribed a status according to its perceived effects on economic development and social solidarity. This is not to say that other factors are not involved but these stand out in prominence within the socio-political context of Singapore.

The first quadrant “State Promoted” encapsulates the promotion of religious groups or values through policies. Public space is accorded to them in the form of physical-geographical space, media space, educational space, tax benefits for donors and so on. They are given the freedom to

6. S. M. Sai and J. Huang, “The ‘Chinese-Educated’ Political Vanguard: Ong Pang Boon, Lee Khoo Choy and Jek Yuen Thong,” in *Lee’s Lieutenants: Singapore’s Old Guard, St Leonards*, ed. P. E. Lam and K. Y. L. Tan (NSW: Allen and Unwin, 1999), 164.

proselytize, educate and nurture society within the boundaries set out for them. The second quadrant “state approved” refers to a neutral approach by the state towards the groups housed in this category; although they are given approval to exist and expand, there is no indication that the state supports them. Religious movements which are perceived to make little or no contribution to economic development while simultaneously having a positive or at least an innocuous influence on the social order are likely to belong to this category. Often syncretic folk religions which are ritualistic in nature feature in this group. The “State Monitored” category covers religions which are under the watchful eyes of state-run apparatus like the Internal Security Department (ISD) and official religious governing bodies such as MUIS (Islamic Religious Council of Singapore). The appointment of a “Minister in charge of Muslim Affairs” serves to be an example of state monitoring. The state perceives religious movements under this category to be potentially dangerous. Generally, those religions which are exclusivist and actively proselytize fall in this category. The final category of “State Repressed” encompasses religions which are repressed by an arsenal of legislative measures and portrayed to be folk devils to engineer moral panics. Religious groups which are perceived to pose a serious security threat or which are believed to have the potential to break the socio-political foundations which the state had strived to establish fall in this category.

The validity of the religion management model can be adequately tested by the state’s management of NRMs for three reasons. First, NRMs being new to the local environment mostly do not have a large base of external social and political support that older religions enjoy. The state therefore is unlikely to be pressured or influenced to accommodate them because of international pressure. Second, NRMs at their inception generally do not have a sufficient number of local members to exert a substantial influence over civic society and public policy. Consequently, they are likely to be evaluated and accorded social space by virtue of their own “merit” or characteristics. Third, NRMs being “new” are not likely to be as fragmented as older religious traditions, making them easier to research.

2. State Promoted: Soka Gakkai

When Soka Gakkai first established itself in Singapore in the 1970s, it had about five to seven members. Currently, its membership has increased to over forty thousand households.⁷ It has also participated in the National Day Parade and Chingay festival for many years, often putting up the most popular displays. Soka's success was due to it actively adapting to the state's objectives at different times and to its internal belief system.⁸ Soka has a world-affirming orientation which resonated with the state's ideology of pragmatism and preference for rationalized religion.⁹ The strategies it adopted to gain acceptance by the state are noteworthy.

To adapt to the socio-political situation in Singapore, Soka Gakkai altered various aspects of its traditions and practices. First, the traditional method of proselytizing known as *shakubuku* which refers to a "harsh, head-on debate and refutation of another's religion" was replaced by a less aggressive, softer and friendlier method which had also gained ascendancy in Japan.¹⁰ Second, unlike the situation in Japan, where Soka Gakkai is very much integrated with the political scene through its connection to the Komeito political party, the movement assiduously avoided any political involvement in Singapore.¹¹ Instead Soka Gakkai Singapore presented itself as a cultural group, even naming its headquarters the "Cultural Centre."¹² This fit in with Singapore's very own cultural renaissance where the state sought to actively programme its citizens with "cultural software" in the early eighties.¹³ Furthermore Soka Gakkai Japan is often viewed as an exclusivist religion but in Singapore, the

7. C. K. Tong, *Rationalizing Religion: Religious Conversion, Revivalism and Competition in Singapore Society* (Boston: Brill, 2007), 134.

8. H. Y. O. Koh, "'Human Revolution' in Singapore: The Singapore Soka Association and Its Appeal to Youth" (National University of Singapore, 2009), 32.

9. J. Y. L. Teng, "'Buddhism Is Daily Life': Soka Gakkai's Beliefs and Its Impact on the Lives of Individuals" (National University of Singapore, 1997), 24.

10. Teng, "'Buddhism Is Daily Life,'" 43.

11. Tong, "Rationalizing Religion," 154; Teng, "'Buddhism Is Daily Life,'" 44.

12. Tong, "Rationalizing Religion," 154; Teng, "'Buddhism Is Daily Life,'" 32.

13. K. Y. Lee, "Preface," in *Report on the Ministry of Education*, ed. Goh Keng Swee (Singapore: Ministry of Education, 1979).

group emphasized peaceful co-existence with other major religions in Singapore.¹⁴ In March 2008, it hosted a “Youth for Peace Interfaith Symposium” which was attended by Singapore’s Minister of Foreign Affairs. Another feature of Soka Gakkai is that it did not seek to disrupt established rituals. For example, while it does not officially support ancestor worship which is a common practice among Chinese Taoists, the group tolerated the practice among its members.¹⁵ Tong argues that the ability of Soka Gakkai to “indigenize presenting itself not as Japanese religion, but rather as Buddhism, and in the process not be seen as an “alien religion” has contributed to its success in Singapore.”¹⁶

3. State Approved: Sathya Sai Baba movement

The Sathya Sai Baba movement would be categorized under the “state approved” region. It revolves around the worship and teachings of the Hindu godman Sai Baba who claims to be an incarnation of Siva.¹⁷ Widely acclaimed for his miracles, ecumenism and profession of interfaith tolerance,¹⁸ he heads an estimated 1,200 Sathya Sai Baba centers in 130 countries world-wide (www.sathyasai.org). In Singapore, there are 14 centers, 12 of which operate from Hindu temples.¹⁹

Nicholas posits that the Sai Baba movement’s identification with a “state-essentialized form of Hinduism” has allowed it to experience a phenomenal growth of new centers in the period 1993–2006, in contrast to societies without a substantial Indian and Hindu population, where the movement has faced a high degree of anti-cult resistance.²⁰ The acceptance, growth and expansion of the movement in Singapore have been attributed to three reasons: its doctrine, activities and its

14. Tong, “Rationalizing Religion,” 154.

15. Tong, “Rationalizing Religion,” 155.

16. Tong, “Rationalizing Religion,” 155.

17. D. A. Swallow, “Ashes and Powers: Myth, Rite and Miracle in an Indian God-Man’s Cult,” *Modern Asian Studies* 16 (1982): 123–58.

18. A. Kent, *Divinity and Diversity* (Singapore: NIAS Press, 2004).

19. P. S. Nicholas, “A New Religious Movement in Singapore, Syncretism and Variation in the Sai Baba Movement,” (National University of Singapore, 2007), 8.

20. Nicholas, “A New Religious Movement in Singapore,” 3–8.

ecumenical stance. First, the doctrine, particularly the “Ten Principles” and “Nine Codes of Conduct” laid down for Sai Baba devotees are very much aligned with the state’s objectives. The “Ten Principles” exhort devotees to be loyal and obedient citizens and to bring “glory” to the country.²¹ The movement promotes values that contribute to economic development due to its advocacy of *karma yoga* (work done as a form of duty and devotion to God).²² The emphasis on earning money through hard work upholds the government’s disdain towards a welfare-oriented state.²³ Second, the movement’s emphasis on charity and social work supports the kind of functionalist role of religion that the state advocates. The various Sai Baba centers conduct training classes and provide economic aid to needy families, and also organize willing and qualified members to dispense free medical aid, IT services, and financial advice.²⁴ Third, its ecumenicist and encompassing attitude towards various religions aligns the movement with the state’s call for religious tolerance. Sai Baba devotees although predominantly from Hindu backgrounds also include Christians, Buddhists and Taoists. The movement also allows adherents to maintain their religious affiliation and practices of their parent or current religion. In fact, the movement celebrates many of the religious festivities observed in Singapore.²⁵

To Nicholas, the state’s position on the movement appears to be “characterized by benign neglect rather than outright support for the movement, possibly as a result of the perception that the movement’s activities would aid the nation-building effort rather than hinder it.”²⁶ Although the state has allowed the movement to expand, it has not “promoted” it actively through the media or other means. This is possibly due to the controversy surrounding the personality of Sai Baba. This is a significant implication when comparing NRMs to established religions. The presence of a living charismatic leader who is ascribed divine powers by his or her followers hinders the movement’s acceptance by the state,

21. S. Santhosh, “The Sai Baba Movement in Singapore,” (National University of Singapore, 1997), 41.

22. Kent, *Divinity and Diversity*, 11.

23. Santhosh, “The Sai Baba Movement in Singapore,” 41.

24. Nicholas, “A New Religious Movement in Singapore.”

25. Santhosh, “The Sai Baba Movement in Singapore,” 41.

26. Nicholas, “A New Religious Movement in Singapore,” 20.

even if it promotes values which are parallel to the state's objectives. One reason for that is that the state may be apprehensive of the leader's influence over his or her followers. Nevertheless, the Sai Baba movement in Singapore can be said to be relatively successful due to its alignment with Hinduism, ecumenism and the promotion of "positive" values which support social order and economic development.

4. State Monitored: ISKCON

Although many of ISKCON's early recruits were from the hippie communities in New York and San Francisco²⁷ and it was considered by scholars to be a "world-rejecting" religion, over the years, it has shifted from a communal culture to one that is congregationally based.²⁸ In Singapore, most members presently hold regular jobs and simply attend devotional programmes during the weekends. In fact, a large number of devotees are professionals from India and labourers from Bangladesh. These characteristics have located them towards the left side of the religion management model, denoting positive economic contribution. However, the vivid image of the Hare Krishnas as a world rejecting saffron clad "cult" which specifically targets youth remains entrenched in the local milieu, resulting in the perception that ISKCON is a threat to social order. Thus under the religion management model it would be classified as a "state monitored" movement. ISKCON in Singapore is not allowed to be officially registered. In fact, it is one of the only countries in the world which bars foreign ISKCON monks from entry.²⁹ However, Singaporean ISKCON members have been allowed to register societies under different names and conduct religious programmes in Hindu temples, thus suggesting that the movement is allowed to operate but within the boundaries set up by the state and under its supervision.

27. F. J. Daner, *The American Children of Krsna: A Study of the Hare Krsna Movement* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1976).

28. B. E. Rochford, *Hare Krishna Transformed* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 70.

29. R. Sebastian and A. Parameswaran, "Hare Krishnas in Singapore: Agency, State and Hinduism," *SOJOURN* 23, no. 1 (2008): 63–86.

5. *State Repressed: Jehovah's Witnesses*

The Jehovah's Witnesses in Singapore were de-registered as a society in 1972 because their followers refused to undertake the compulsory military service required of male Singaporeans, salute the national flag or swear allegiance to the state due to their belief that Satan is responsible for organized government and religion.³⁰ During the 1990s a total of about seventy members were charged in court for various offences such as possession of banned public materials, attending unlawful meetings and belonging to an unlawful society.³¹ These episodes received wide press coverage.

The Jehovah's Witnesses typify the "state Repressed" category. Considered a social and economic threat because of their refusal to accept the concept of nationhood and their aggressive evangelizing, they have been the subject of state engineered moral panics in the media and legal persecution.

6. *Conclusion*

Based on the above findings, I posit that the state's claim to neutrality is suspect and that the state accords preference to particular forms of religion which contribute to economic development and social stability, although not in an overt manner. The religion management model was used to demonstrate this argument by using examples of NRMs which enjoyed varying degrees of acceptance from the state.

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30. Tong, "Rationalizing Religion," 238.

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