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*The Advancement of Christ’s “Kingdom” in Two Cities:  
A Comparative Study of State-religion Relations in Singapore and Malaysia*

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*Introduction*

The notion of Christians having “dual citizenship” is not new and has been recognized as a key idea in understanding how Christians negotiate their identity in society. McConnell captures the essence of this dilemma by noting that religious believers have an “allegiance to an authority outside of the commonwealth.”<sup>1</sup> With this in mind, for Christians to “balance his or her religious duty to evangelize on the one hand, and... civic duty to preserve religious harmony on the other,”<sup>2</sup> there is a corresponding need to find ways to allow Christians to evangelize while doing their part to maintain religious harmony. The question at hand then, is “what happens when an evangelistic religion—Christianity—meets a secular state like that of Singapore?” This paper examines the case of The Boys’ Brigade (BB)—a youth Christian organization that operates in schools—in two neighbouring countries, Singapore and Malaysia.

Comparing the cases of the BB in Singapore and Malaysia, this paper aims to tease out important elements that link the state and religions in an increasingly secularized world. Accordingly, this paper argues that the BB—and by extension, religious and religiously-linked

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1. Michael W. McConnell, “Believers as Equal Citizens,” in *Obligations of Citizenship and Demands of Faith: Religious Accommodation in Pluralist Democracies*, ed. N. L. Rosenblum (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 91.
  2. Charlene Tan, “From Moral Values to Citizenship Education: The Teaching of Religion in Singapore Schools,” in *Religious Diversity in Singapore*, ed. Lai Ah Eng (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies jointly with Institute of Policy Studies, 2008), 326.

organizations—adopts secularized methods and measures that place them in a positive light regardless of the state’s policies. This allows the BB to further its Christian agenda while threading the delicate line demarcated by the state. Specifically, this paper contends that in reaction to the secular state’s policies, the BB in Singapore employs methods of circumvention to negotiate state policies prohibiting proselytization. These methods include (1) an emphasis on community service; (2) utilizing rhetoric of character development among students, who make up the majority of its membership. These aspects, highly valued by the state, allow it to further its Christian agenda while threading the delicate line demarcated by the state. In Malaysia’s case, while a similar strategy is employed, there is a crucial difference in that the Christian affiliation has not been deemphasized. This difference is posited to be an effect of a society that is officially recognized as Islamic, thus compelling religious organizations in Malaysia to further emphasize their religious roots in order to distinguish themselves from other groups. It is also the contention of this paper that this differential environment is a result of the politicization of religion by the state historically.

This paper will first consider some works on state-religion relationships in Singapore and Malaysia. Next, it will briefly highlight some important similarities and differences in regime types that had an impact on the way in which religion, as a whole, has adapted and positioned itself in relation to the state. Next, tracing the historical establishment of the BB, this paper will trace how the BB shifts its focus to align itself with the secular state in order to retain its legitimacy and maintain its relevance in both countries.

### *Religion and the State*

Most works on religion in Singapore have dealt with its importance as “cultural ballast”, exercising a huge amount of influence on Singaporeans.<sup>3</sup> In general, its role as a “constructive force in nation-building,” due to its

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3. Eugene Tan, “Keeping God in Place: The Management of Religion in Singapore,” in *Religious Diversity in Singapore*, ed. Lai Ah Eng (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies jointly with Institute of Policy Studies, 2008), 55.

"innate ability" to "inculcate good citizenship" and serving as a "moral anchor" is recognized as vital.<sup>4</sup> Studies on Malaysia have also largely revolved around religion and politics, such as the Malaysian state's management of religion and religious activities.<sup>5</sup> However, little has been done to examine how religion "manages" the state. Mathews provides one such case, arguing that the Church in Singapore adopts an impression management strategy by presenting itself as a community of good citizens, in order to pursue its own religious agenda while avoiding the state's fury.<sup>6</sup> In an earlier work, Mathews argues that the Church employs strategies that leverage on community service to "save the city."<sup>7</sup> However, these strategies operate within the realm of the civil society and tell us little about a restricted and highly politicized space such as the school.

Schools are important sites of social and cultural reproduction. More importantly, schools—in the context of Singapore and Malaysia—are secular institutions closely monitored by the state. The BB's operation in schools means that it comes under the purview of the state through the Ministry of Education. This complicates the issue, as the BB cannot simply emphasize its religious aspect while attempting to reach out to students. This is compounded by the notion that the modern nation-state attempts to regulate all aspects of individual life, including religion.<sup>8</sup> Accordingly, schools as a form of social space becomes politically

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4. Tan, "Keeping God in Place," 70–71.

5. See for instance Raymond L. M. Lee and Susan E. Ackerman, *Sacred Tensions: Modernity and Religious Transformation in Malaysia* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1997); Jean DeBernardi, "The Localization of Christianity among Chinese in Singapore and Malaysia," in *Chinese Populations in Contemporary Interdependence and International Influence*, ed. M. Jocelyn Armstrong, R. Warwick Armstrong and Kent Mulliner (Surrey, England: Curzon Press, 2001), 123–150.

6. Mathew Mathews, "Accommodation Relationships: The Church and State in Singapore," in *Christianity and the State in Asia: Complicity and Conflict*, ed. Julius Bautista and Francis Khek Gee Lim (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), 184–200.

7. Mathew Mathews, "Saving the City through Good Works: The Views of Christian Clergymen," in *Religious Diversity in Singapore*, ed. Lai Ah Eng (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies jointly with Institute of Policy Studies, 2008), 524–553.

8. Talal Asad, "Religion, Nation-State, Secularism," in *Nation and Religion: Perspectives on Europe and Asia*, ed. Peter van der Veer and Hartmut Lehmann (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 178–196.

“defined, ordered and regulated.”<sup>9</sup> This paper, thus, departs from focusing on the domain of civil society, aiming to illustrate how religious organizations adopt a proactive approach to expand their membership instead.

### *Historical Context and the State*

This section will highlight two important historical developments and features that have repercussions on the management of religions in these countries. First, the rapid growth of Christianity in Singapore in the late 1980s had significant impact on state policies with regards to proselytization. This contributed to the state politicization of religion in Singapore. Second, the centralized state apparatus in Singapore allows for a closer watch and management of issues pertaining to religion.

### *Differential Politicization of Religion*

While both states claim to be secular, DeBernardi points out that the Malaysian nation builders chose to promote Malay culture and advocates Islam as the official religion while Singapore adopted multiculturalism—and by extension, multi-religiosity—in response to its large Chinese majority population.<sup>10</sup> This has to be understood in the context of the nation’s history.

The rapid growth of Christianity in the late 1980s due to a disproportionate number of converts led to the view that the religious harmony of the nation was challenged. This disparate growth was regarded as a potential source of inter-religious tension as it was perceived to contribute indirectly to religious intolerance.<sup>11</sup> This trend of conversion was construed as a shift among religious groups from tolerance to zealous faith and prompted the state to intervene through legislative means. As such, the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act (MRHA) implemented in 1990 served to protect this and signaled the separation of state and

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9. Asad, “Religion, Nation-State, Secularism,” 191.

10. DeBernardi, “The Localization of Christianity.”

11. See Michael Hill and Lian Kwen Fee, *The Politics of Nation Building and Citizenship in Singapore* (London: Routledge, 1995).

religion—although it was widely recognized as a response to disconnect religious involvement in the political arena. In the case of Malaysia, the converse is true. Islam is recognized as the nation's official religion and plays a major role in legislation. This not only ensures its legitimacy but also privileges it above other religions. Islam's official status meant that while religion is politicized in Malaysia, it is not left out of the public space altogether.

### *Organization of the State*

The centralized government in Singapore allows it to enjoy tighter control over the various religious organizations. In contrast, Malaysia's decentralized government meant that with each state having its own Islamic council and department, the state has fewer jurisdictions over these councils, making the state control of religious administration more difficult.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, the nature of religious control rests upon the Malaysian state's perception of threats stemming from both secular and theological sources, further complicating the extent and nature of the state's stand on religious activities. The Singapore state's stand is somewhat less complicated in that it advocates the MRHA from a purely secular perspective. Thus, the organization of the State has implications for the politicizing of religion as well.

A centralized state exercises greater control over political space, and the implementation of policies would be easy and closely managed. Hence, when Singapore politicized religion to the extent of separating it from politics, religions have to abide by these rules. Given the context in which religion has been politicized in Singapore, the MRHA serve to demarcate the boundaries for proselytization. Accordingly, religious organizations such as the BB have to adapt to the changing environment and employ measures that would present them in a neutral, if not, secular light.

Thus, this paper draws on the idea of impression management and argues that the politicization of religion by the state determines the extent to which the BB has to present itself in a secular manner. For

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12. Lee and Ackerman, *Sacred Tensions*.

this reason, we must note that the concern surrounding proselytization extends beyond the mere “propagation of religion.”<sup>13</sup> It concerns itself also with the issue of how religious proselytization is defined and, more importantly, by whom. Arguably, it is the state with the largest ability to define this boundary. Hence, it is even more vital that religious organizations, or in this case, the BB, presents itself as a secular organization to avoid needless sanctions from the state.

### *The Boys’ Brigade’s History*

The BB movement started on October 4 1883 by Sir William Alexander Smith in Glasgow, Scotland.<sup>14</sup> Aiming to channel the “tremendous energy of boyhood” and “keeping them in the church after Sunday school,” Smith created a system rooted in the “twin pillars of religion and discipline.”<sup>15</sup> More importantly, he saw an opportunity to “advance the Kingdom of Christ”<sup>16</sup> among these Boys.<sup>17</sup>

It is important to note that the BB started as an organization that sought to discipline and provide Boys with a programme that kept them out of trouble while ensuring that the church played a more active role in shaping their lives. Rev. T. C. Chua, Brigade Chaplain in 1981, sums up

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13. Ah Eng Lai, ed., “The Inter-Religious Organization of Singapore,” in *Religious Diversity in Singapore* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies jointly with Institute of Policy Studies, 2008), 611.

14. John Springhall, *Sure & Steadfast: A History of The Boys’ Brigade, 1883–1983*, ed. John Springhall, B. Fraser and M. Hoare (London: Collins, 1983); B. B Headquarters, *Handbook for Boys* (Singapore: Bible House, 1978); B. B Headquarters, *Handbook for Boys* (Singapore: Bible House, 1984); B. B Headquarters, *Handbook for Boys* (Singapore: BB Campus, 1999); B. B Headquarters, *Seniors Programme Handbook for Boys* (Singapore: Oxford Graphic Printers, 2005).

15. F. P. Gibbon, *William A. Smith of The Boys’ Brigade* (London: Collins, 1934), 171; B. B Headquarters, *Seniors Programme Handbook for Boys*.

16. This laid the foundation for the Object of The Boys’ Brigade—where The Object of the Boys’ Brigade shall be “The advancement of Christ’s Kingdom among Boys, and the promotion of habits of Reverence, Discipline, Self-Respect, and all that tends towards a true Christian Manliness” (Gibbon, *William A. Smith*, 39). The word “obedience” was later added in September 1893 (Gibbon, *William A. Smith*, 40).

17. Gibbon, *William A. Smith*, 35.

the evangelistic positioning of the BB by saying:

...[T]he Boys' Brigade is *not just an organization which provides opportunities for Boys to acquire Bible knowledge and receive disciplinary training. It is a movement which helps Boys to know Jesus Christ and to accept Him as their personal Saviour, Lord and Master...* encourages and guides them to follow Christ's way of life and to experience the transforming power of God's Holy Spirit to enable them to become citizens of Christ's Kingdom....<sup>18</sup>

Thus, the BB started with a Christian orientation that has characterized the organization till this day.

However, with the increasing sanctioning of religious activities by the state, the BB, like other religious groups, has come to position itself under a more secular image, focusing on the importance of community service and downplaying its Christian affiliation and identity.

The BB, which started as a Christian organization, adopts methods of circumvention to negotiate state policies that prohibit proselytization. These methods include an emphasis on community service, coupled with a simultaneous rhetoric of character development among students, who makes up the majority of its membership. These two aspects, which are highly valued by the state allows the BB to further its Christian agenda while threading the delicate line demarcated by the state. Similarly, in the case of Malaysia, strategies of impression management are employed. The key differences, however, lies in how the BB in Malaysia still emphasizes its Christian roots.

I contend that due to the highly politicized nature of religion in Singapore, coupled with the centralized and hence, greater control that the Singapore government has, religious organizations have to not only adopt secular means but an increasingly secular image to be seen as relevant and socially sensitive to both the state and the public. Thus, in an increasingly secularized world, religious organizations have come to employ secular methods to reach out. Let us now turn to these strategies.

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18. The Boys' Brigade, *50 Years On: The Boys' Brigade Golden Jubilee Souvenir Magazine* (Singapore: Bible House, 1981), 7; emphasis added.

### *The BB in Singapore and Malaysia—Micro-Corporatist Strategies*

Schwartzman once noted that under corporatism, “there should be some intragroup autonomy and self-regulation” by interest groups.<sup>19</sup> Thus, I argue that the BB has undergone a series of adaptations to reposition itself in tandem to the secular state and its agenda as a form of negotiation under “micro-corporatism.”

“Micro-corporatism” refers to the idea that “state agencies negotiate policy directly with firms”<sup>20</sup> under the corporatist framework.<sup>21</sup> Cawson highlights that “public policy is implemented through such firms agreeing to modify their actions, that is, they agree to undertake certain tasks in exchange for grants, incentives or other such inducements.”<sup>22</sup> Using this framework, we can appreciate how the BB chooses to present itself to the public and the state.

For the BBHQ to gain favour in the eyes of the public, one way is through its services to the community. This is accompanied by a concurrent shift in emphasis on the Christian aspect of the movement towards community service. These methods are similar to the Church’s attempt to accommodate the state by presenting itself as a good citizen—through service to the community; respecting and supporting the State’s agenda—by downplaying its Christian elements to maintain religious harmony.<sup>23</sup>

19. Simon Schwartzman, “Back to Weber: Corporatism and Patrimonialism in the Seventies,” in *Authoritarianism and Corporatism in Latin America*, ed. James M. Malloy (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1977), 91.

20. Alan Cawson, *Corporatism and Political Theory* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 74.

21. Williamson notes that corporatist theory is concerned with exploring and explaining the relationship between “organized interests and the public authorities”, that is, the state. Others have perceived corporatism as an approach to “organizing state-society relations” (David Collier and Ruth Berins Collier, “Who Does What, to Whom, and How: Toward a Comparative Analysis of Latin American Corporatism,” in *Authoritarianism and Corporatism in Latin America*, ed. James M. Malloy (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1977), 493). Corporatism can also be perceived as “a system of interest representation in which the constituent units are organized into a limited number of...categories, recognized or licensed (if not created) by the state” (Phillipe C. Schmitter, “Still the Century of Corporatism?” in *Trends Toward Corporatist Intermediation*, ed. Phillippe C. Schmitter and Gerhard Lehbruch (London: SAGE Publications, 1979), 93–94).

22. Alan Cawson, *Corporatism*, 74.

23. Mathews, “Accommodation Relationships.”



These methods constitute the "impression management" strategy as introduced by Goffman.<sup>24</sup>

### *Community Service Orientation*

One of the main strategies is the creation of programmes for the BB to get more involved with the community. This is manifested in several major projects at the Brigade—or national—level. This is in line with one of the BB's beliefs to be "committed to serve the community" as evident from its website. Examples of these programmes include the BB Sharity Gift Box (BB SGB) and the BB Community Activities Rallying Everyone to Serve (BB CARES)—an integral part of the annual President's Star Charity event.<sup>25</sup> The rhetoric behind engaging the community is to officially "... help [the Boys] immerse and better understand the community they live in. By interacting and moving out of their comfort zone to help others in need, [the] Boys build a greater sense of belonging and attachment to society. Values of caring and sharing for the less fortunate are also inculcated and reinforced in them." This discourse is in line with the state's orientation of encouraging the populace to share the community's burden. More importantly, it ties in with the "many helping hands" welfare philosophy advocated by the state in the 1990s. In Malaysia, similar programmes that reached out to the community were also introduced, albeit at a much later stage, with the most prominent being the ReachOut Project held in 2004, 2006 and 2008. This project is a joint initiative between the BB in Malaysia, The Malaysian AIDS Council and The Ministry of Health of Malaysia, aiming to create awareness among youth on HIV/AIDS.

### *Semantics and Downplaying of Christian Aspects*

Another aspect of this impression management strategy, particularly in Singapore, involves downplaying the BB's Christian education aspect. This is mainly done through the use of semantics and the removal of

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24. Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Everyday Life in Everyday Life* (New York: Anchor Books, 1959), 132.

25. The Boys' Brigade 2008, <http://www.bb.org.sg> (accessed January 18, 2010).

overtly Christian overtures.

While the BB in Singapore has not totally denounced its Christian roots and values, these values have been placed beneath other, more secular aims. For instance, with an Object of “advanc[ing] Christ’s Kingdom”, its Christian nature has been placed at the bottom of its beliefs.<sup>26</sup> Also, the phrasing of its mission—“to nurture youth, based on Christian values to lead and serve”—suggests an attempt at qualifying the secondary goal of nurturing youth with Christian values.<sup>27</sup> The BB in Malaysia, on the other hand, appears to demonstrate none of this attempt to downplay its Christian affiliation. It is evident from its website that the BB in Malaysia heavily emphasizes its Christian roots, stating clearly that its Mission Statement is “that The Boys’ Brigade become, in partnership with the Christian Church, a vibrant and caring organization providing balanced and quality programmes with the *prime objective of leading and supporting young Malaysians into a growing and personal relationship with Jesus Christ.*”<sup>28</sup>

### *Conclusion*

The intricate context of religion in Singapore and Malaysia present a real challenge to religious groups that requires their followers to reach out yet maintaining religious harmony as citizens. The case of the BB in these countries has shown us how the BB has taken measures to accommodate the state so as to garner support and for the state to “arbitrate matters on its behalf.”<sup>29</sup> By employing strategies—namely, a focus on community service and a rhetorical discourse—that influence the image of the BB in the eyes of the public, the BB thus manages its impression via secular means. This is, as I argued, a consequence of the state’s politicization of religion as well. The employment of secularized efforts is especially consequential in a society with many religious groups that may be dissatisfied

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26. The Boys’ Brigade 2008, <http://www.bb.org.sg> (accessed January 18, 2010).

27. The Boys’ Brigade 2008.

28. Boys’ Brigade Malaysia 2009, <http://www.bbmalaysia.org/> (accessed January 18, 2010); emphasis added.

29. Mathews, “Accommodation Relationships.”

by Christians' evangelistic efforts.<sup>30</sup>

This paper hopes to contribute to the depth of discussion on religion-state relations through a study of a Christian organization that attempts to fulfill both its "heavenly mandate" while managing the state's expectations. This paper also suggests that the secular state, in politicizing religion will have a direct impact on how a religious group adapts and presents itself—the more politicized religion is in society, the more the organization has to be seen as secular in order to stay relevant.

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