

Christian Witness in the Public Square: Retrospection and Projection

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The editors of this volume have invited me to reflect on my work with the National Council of Churches over the past twelve years in this essay. Constituted on 24th July, 1974, the National Council of Churches aims 'through mutual consultation and action to form Christian public opinion and to bring it to bear on the moral, social, national and international issues of the day, particularly those which affect the life and welfare of the people of Singapore'. The Council also seeks 'to provide an agency through which the Government of the Republic of Singapore may consult on matters of common concern to its members' (NCCS 2008: Art. 4). Under the energetic leadership of men like Bishops Robert Solomon (Methodist) and John Chew (Anglican), among others, the work of the Council has been greatly invigorated in the past decade. Membership has grown significantly during this period, and many independent churches and denominations like the Evangelical Free Church (EFC) are now members. More importantly, during this period, the Council was also able to substantially and effectively carry out its mission as enshrined in Article 4 of its constitution.

The Council's engagement with the government and the general public is diverse. It includes commenting on international issues like the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians in Gaza in 2009 to attending to more domestic concerns like negotiating with the government on the religious use of commercial and industrial buildings. The Council has also made arrangements with Singapore Customs to allow churches here easier custom clearance of goods and equipment coming in and going out of the country. Currently, the Council is addressing copyright issues pertaining to the use of published materials in the church, including religious songs. My contributions pertained to only some aspects of the Council's work. They can be grouped into two broad areas: interfaith relations and biomedical ethics. In this essay, I discuss some of the issues that I have encountered in the work with the Council. I hope that this account will give readers an idea of the range of issues and how the Council has responded to them. I conclude the essay with some reflections on the future of Christian engagement in Singapore.

Interfaith Relations

Following the horrific events of September 11, 2001, the Singapore government launched aggressive operations to counter terrorist activities in the country. In December 2001, the Singapore ISD arrested 15 people of which 13 were believed to be members of the terrorist group, Jemaah Islamiyah (JI). Investigations uncovered their plans to conduct a series of bomb attacks on numerous 'soft targets' in Singapore, including a shuttle-bus that transported US military

personnel and their families, the US and Israeli embassies, the Australian High Commissions, commercial buildings housing US firms, and US naval vessels (MHA 2003:11-13). In August 2002, ISD arrested another 21 people, 19 of whom were JI members. On the presence of JI in Singapore, Dr Rohan Gunaratna, an international terrorist expert and head of terrorism research at the Institute for Defence and Strategic Studies in Singapore, wrote:

JI is a group set up by Osama bin Laden's Al Qaeda network specifically to attack Western targets in Asia and advance its objectives in the region. Many of the terrorists trained in Afghanistan have moved to theatres of conflict in the region and are in the neighbourhood (Quoted in MHA 2003:3).

Terrorism is therefore a clear and present threat in Singapore, and without getting into the argument of *habeas corpus*, ISA does have a role to play in the nation's fight against terrorism.

'On Being a Neighbour'

These events have forcefully brought home the fact that interfaith relations in multi-religious Singapore should never be taken for granted. In 2002, Lim Khay Tham, the General Secretary of the Council invited me to write a paper on interfaith relations that would serve as the basis for further discussions on this important issue. Written mainly for pastors and church leaders, the paper entitled, 'On Being a Neighbour: The Christian and Interfaith Relations' provided a broad theological and ethical framework within which more specific issues could be explored. It was divided into three sections. The first section, 'A Theology of Religion', explored religion from the perspective of a Christian theological anthropology. Because human beings are created for eternal fellowship with their Creator, human religiosity 'reflects that which is intrinsic to human nature and humankind's true destiny as God's image and God's own' (Chia 2002:1). This remains the case despite human sin and rebellion. Thus, although the paper affirmed the uniqueness of Christ and the 'exclusivity of salvation in Jesus' Name' (Chia 2002: 2), it also insisted that 'there is much in the religions that is good and true and holy that should be affirmed by the Church' (Chia 2002:1).

Cognizant of the possibility that not all member churches would readily embrace the idea of interfaith dialogue, the paper nonetheless insisted that 'Christians should not be afraid to dialogue with members of other religions' (Chia 2002: 2). It presented interfaith dialogue as 'an aspect of the larger matrix of social intercourse between persons'. In dialogue, 'we seek to discover one another, understand each other, appreciate our differences, and develop respect for each other even as we cherish our common aspirations and commitments'. Such sincere and open dialogue could expunge the 'prejudices that stem from false perceptions' (Chia 2002: 3). The paper maintained that conversations between people of different faiths should be an ongoing activity, and that it is only on the strength of the friendships forged as a result that conflicts – should they occur – could be quickly and peacefully resolved.

The paper argued that love (*agape*) should be the ethic that shapes the Christian's attitude towards people of other faiths. Drawing from the commandment of Christ to love the neighbour (Matthew 22:39), Paul's great poem of love (1 Corinthians 13), and the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), it briefly discussed the unconditional and indiscriminate nature of Christian love. Although the concept of tolerance, so fashionable in modern discourse on interfaith relations, is useful, love is a far more superior attitude. The paper then discussed the question of evangelism. In a 'multi-religious society, especially one in which there are other proselytising religions, like Islam, Christian evangelism will be met with competition, distrust and conflict' (Chia 2002:5). Although Christians must not for this reason refrain from sharing the Gospel, they must be self-critical of the methods they employ, especially those that are coercive, insensitive and disrespectful.

The final section of the paper dealt with the question of the collaboration between Christians and members of other faith communities for the common good of society. Anticipating that some readers might object to such endeavours, the paper presented at the outset the premises and goals of such collaborations: 'The Christian ethic of love must compel Christians to welcome such collaborations with members of other faiths, as long as the objectives of such co-operations are in keeping with the will and purposes of God for the world' (Chia 2002: 6). Four possible areas of collaboration were highlighted and discussed briefly. The first is nation building: the church can work with other faith communities to contribute to the wellbeing of the nation and the flourishing of its citizens. Christians can also work with people of other faiths to 'bring about civic renewal to Singapore society' and 'multiply the arenas of meaningful and effective civic action' (Chia 2002:7-8). Related to this is the promotion of public welfare: 'The Christian Church can therefore work with other faith-based institutions and communities which affirm the value of human beings and the need for society to care for those who are suffering or disadvantaged' (Chia 2002:8). And finally, different faith communities can work together to achieve inter-racial peace and peace among the different religious groups.

The paper ended with an excursus that dealt directly with Christian-Muslim relations. It noted that recent events have brought 'home the urgency for Singapore citizens to develop strong interfaith and interracial relations, social cohesion and integration, without which the peace of the nation will be threatened' (Chia 2002: 9). While government policies have in some ways prevented the establishment of racial and religious enclaves, interracial and interfaith relations in Singapore still have a long way to go. The paper made three recommendations on how Christian-Muslim relations in Singapore can be strengthened. The first, of course, is dialogue. The second is education because 'very often prejudice is formed because of distorted perceptions of the other' (Chia 2002: 10). And the finally, relationship between the two faith communities can be strengthened through intentional but selective collaboration. It is heartening to note that in the years that followed the writing of this paper these recommendations, especially, dialogue and collaboration have begun to develop between the two communities, although much more could still be done.

'Common Issues' and Code of Religion

I have devoted considerable space to tracing the arguments of the 2002 paper on interfaith relations because it serves as a helpful backdrop for some of the other initiatives taken by the Council. In the wake of the tumultuous events of 2001 and 2002, the Singapore government established the Community Engagement Programme (CEP), the purpose of which is to 'strengthen the understanding and ties between people of different races and religions and build up our society's skills and knowledge in coping with emergencies'. In conjunction with the CEP, the government also set in motion the formation of the Inter-Racial and Religious Confidence Circles (IRCC) aimed at encouraging interracial and interfaith interaction in every constituency. As a result of these developments, member churches requested the Council to publish guidelines on how Christians and churches should responsibly engage with people of other faiths. There was perhaps an unarticulated fear among some members that such close exchanges could lead to unhealthy compromises or even syncretism.

The Council brought together a group of pastors and theologians to work on a number of concrete and practical questions. Questions like how should Christians respond when invited to attend inter-religious community events and whether Christians should give or receive funds from other religious organisations were raised and discussed. About a year and several meetings later, the Council published a pamphlet entitled, *A Guide to Common Issues in Inter-Religious Relations* in FAQ format consisting of 12 questions. I was involved in this project at the beginning and worked together with the Council and its team in identifying the issues, framing the questions and writing the answers to some of them. The final version of the pamphlet was the work of other members of the team. While many of the issues were not controversial, some elicited conflicting viewpoints and very strong responses. An issue that proved quite contentious had to do with the participation of Christians at interfaith religious services. Another issue concerned the Christian's involvement in civic ceremonies where members of different faith communities pray alongside each other. Some members of the team were quite adamant that Christians should not take part in any ceremony or event that involved the active participation of members of other faiths. In response, I pointed out that while there are serious theological issues related to the Christian's involvement in interfaith worship, Christians should be open to participating in civic or memorial ceremonies, especially in the wake of a national tragedy. On such occasions, Christians should have no difficulties with standing in solidarity with the families of the victims of the tragedy and praying silently for them. The issue of religious dialogue also continued to trouble some members of the team not only because of the potential danger of compromise but also because of the fear that it may interfere with or even replace evangelism.

On 14 October 2002, Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong unveiled a draft Code on Religious Harmony and invited views from religious groups and community leaders. Initial discussions raised the possibility of the Code or Declaration being

used in schools and even at religious services. The final version of the Declaration of Religious Harmony reads:

We, the people in Singapore, declare that religious harmony is vital for peace, progress and prosperity in our multi-racial and multi-religious Nation.

We resolve to strengthen religious harmony through mutual tolerance, confidence, respect and understanding.

We shall always (1) recognise the secular nature of our State, (2) promote cohesion within our society, (3) respect each other's freedom of religion, (4) grow our common space while respecting our diversity, and (4) foster inter-religious communications.

I was invited together with others to help the Council work out a response to the Declaration. In my submission to the Council, I questioned if such a Declaration was in fact necessary. There were already in existence two important official documents that underscore the multi-religious nature of our society and the importance of maintaining harmony among the different faith communities for the peace and security of our nation. These documents are the Singapore National Pledge (1966) and the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Bill, which came into force on 31 March 1992. In addition, I pointed out that the introduction of the Declaration at a time like this might be perceived to be too alarmist, and that this in turn might elicit counter-productive responses and unnecessary anxiety. The Council organised a meeting to discuss the matter further before presenting its statement to the government. Apart from some initial media attention, the Declaration very quickly receded into the background and there has been hardly any reference to it since.

Dialogue and Collaboration

Among the different religious groups in Singapore, the Council was able to engage the Muslim community in creative and sustained dialogue and collaboration. This relationship was aided by the fact that Bishop Robert Solomon and Haji Mohammad Alami Musa, the President of Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura (MUIS) were friends and alumni of Raffles Institution. The first collaborative project that I was involved in on behalf of the Council was with the Association for Muslim Professionals (AMP). In 2004, we organised a seminar on the theme, 'Secular State, Moral Society' and invited both Muslims and Christians to reflect together and discuss the various permutations of this topic that affects both our communities. The speaker from the Muslim community was Syed Farid Alatas, the Head of the Department of Malay Studies and Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology at the National University of Singapore. The Council invited Rev Dr Daniel Koh, who is an ordained Elder of the Methodist Church and who teaches ethics at Trinity Theological College to present the Christian perspective. The theme was chosen because of the ongoing debates on homosexuality and the introduction of integrated resorts housing casinos in Singapore at the time.

A series of meetings with the MUIS ensued to discuss different initiatives and concerns, and I had the privilege of representing the Council at many of them. On July 8, 2005, I was invited to give a lecture on 'Biomedical Ethics: A Christian Perspective' at MUIS. The former Mufti, Syed Isa Semait, Alami Musa and about thirty Muslim scientists, medical doctors and lawyers were present at the talk. The most recent collaboration between the Council and MUIS is the Building Bridges Seminar on the theme, 'Postmodernism, Religion and Authority'. Lim Khay Tham, Dr Mark Chan, Elder Richard Chong and I met the representatives from MUIS several times to discuss the goals and format of the seminars. It was decided that there would be three seminars where discussants from both the Council and MUIS will present papers on topics related to the main theme. At this writing, two of the three seminars have already been conducted and the third is scheduled in April 2013. The seminars have generally been well received. It is hoped that the MUIS-NCCS would invite members of other faith communities to participate in future Building Bridges seminars.

Biomedical Research and Society

In December 2000, the Singapore Government formed the Bioethics Advisory Committee (BAC) 'to examine and make recommendations for potential ethical, legal and social issues arising from research in the biomedical sciences in Singapore' (BAC 'Organisation'). The Singapore government sees biomedicine and related fields – pharmaceuticals, medical devices, and healthcare services – as an important investment and is determined to develop a strong public sector infrastructure to support the biomedical sciences. But just as important are the legal, social and ethical implications of the bio- medical and technological advances.

The rational and responsible management of bioethical issues is integral and critical to the national effort to develop biomedical sciences, and decisions regarding the biomedical sciences and research need to be solidly based on good science and high ethical and legal standards. To this end, the BAC actively gathers information and views from the international and local community, and after careful deliberation, makes recommendations to the Singapore Government (BAC 'Organisation').

In the past twelve years, the BAC has conducted a number of consultations on a wide range of biomedical issues, and has invited religious organisations including the Council to participate. I've had the privilege of preparing the responses for all these consultations on behalf of the Council. Some of the responses were distributed to readers for comments, and I would like to especially acknowledge the insightful contributions of Professor Kon Oi Lian and Bishop Solomon. But in most cases, it was not possible for more people to be involved in the process mainly because the BAC gave the Council very little time (usually only a week or two) to submit a written response. Apart from writing

these responses, I also represented the Council at every dialogue session conducted by the BAC.

Stem Cell Research

On 8 November 2001, the BAC sent its first consultation paper on 'Human Stem Cell Research' to the Council (BAC 2001). If my memory serves me correctly, Bishop Robert Solomon, who was then the President of the Council invited me to pen the response on behalf of the Council. Human stem cell research was advancing at an incredible pace, especially in the West. But such researches, especially those involving human embryos, have raised significant ethical issues for which there is no consensus among members of the scientific community and ethicists. Recognising the therapeutic (and economic) potential of such research, the BAC stated that '[t]here is a need to find a proper public policy balance between the opportunities that biomedical science offers to improve human welfare and the limits set by important ethical obligations' (BAC 2001: 5).

Following the standard classifications found in the literature on stem cell research, the BAC made the distinction between human reproductive cloning and therapeutic cloning. Reproductive cloning refers to cloning a human being and allowing the clone to develop to adulthood. Recognising that with reproductive cloning, 'a human being may be brought into existence for a utilitarian purpose' (BAC 2001: 5) the BAC maintained that such cloning should not be permitted. The BAC, however, allowed therapeutic cloning which involves the creation of human embryos by nuclear transfer for research. Following the UK's Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act (HFEA) of 1990, which allows the creation of human embryos up to 14 days for the purpose of research, the BAC argued that such research should not be prohibited because of its therapeutic promise. Thus, the BAC stated that while it recognised 'the special status of an embryo as a potential human being, it accepts that it is justified to use early embryos, not more than 14 days old, for serious research, which may benefit others' (BAC 2001: 5).

The Council's response to the BAC consultation paper began by applauding the BAC's view that reproductive cloning should be prohibited because no human being must be treated merely as a means to an end (BAC 2002a: G-3-65). The Council also made it clear that it encouraged human stem cell research as long as it does not harm or destroy a human being. It therefore encouraged and supported research using adult stem cells and stem cells procured from cord blood. The Council then proceeded to address the main issue surrounding human embryonic stem cell research, namely, the moral status of the human embryo. It maintained that both the Bible and Christian tradition teach that the human embryo is a human person worthy of the respect and protection that is accorded to every human being. The Council's understanding of the status of the embryo was premised on the Christian doctrine of divine providence – that 'every human beginning is part of the divine plan and the result of divine agency' – and from a theological anthropology – that the human embryo is a bearer of the image and likeness of God. In addition, it also argued from the doctrine of the Incarnation, which maintains that at 'conception, the zygote is already the

incarnation of the Eternal Son of God'. The Council then supplemented its theological arguments with scientific and philosophical ones. 'From the standpoint of science', it argued, 'the zygote is already endowed with its own genetic code, and its human nature'. From the standpoint of philosophy, 'it must be argued that the zygote of human parentage cannot articulate itself into another animal. This is because the zygote of human parentage is already a human being sharing in the nature of its parents' (BAC 2001: 2). Thus, the moral ideal proposed by the BAC – that a human being should never be used merely as a means to an end – should be applied to the human embryo as well.

The Council ended with a cautionary note, stating that scientific progress should never be allowed to eclipse the larger concerns about the value of human life:

The refusal to allow scientific progress to overshadow concerns for human life is found not only in the Christian community, but also in the collective wisdom of humankind as a whole, a wisdom born out of immense struggles in history. In the shadow of Nazism, The Nuremberg Code declared that 'no experiment should be conducted where there is an a priori reason to believe that death or disabling injury will occur'. In 1975, the Helsinki Declaration of the World Medical Association maintains that 'concerns for the interest of the subject must always prevail over the interest of science and society (BAC 2002a: G-3-66).

Human Tissue Research

On 27 February 2002, the BAC produced a consultation paper on 'Human Tissue Research', and circulated it to the different groups for comments and feedback (BAC 2002b). 'Research involving the use of human tissue, or the use of information derived from such human tissue', it stated, 'is a fundamental cornerstone of modern medical research and knowledge' (BAC 2002b: 5). The paper also dealt with the practice of tissue banking which although in the past has been the result of 'incidental by-product of diagnostic procedures' (BAC 2002b: 6) was now moving towards 'purpose-assembled research banks' (BAC 2002b: 8). The BAC then delineated the current law and practice for tissue banking, and discussed more specific issues such as informed consent, legacy tissue collections, confidentiality, and governance, all of which require carefully crafted protocols and legislations. In the final section of the paper, the BAC made several recommendations surrounding these issues and procedures. This section also included discussion on broader philosophical and ethical subjects like respect for the human body.

In its response the Council stressed that the issues discussed must be set within the 'larger context of research involving humans' (BAC 2002c: D-201). Accordingly, the Council began with a theology of the body stating that according to the Christian faith, 'the human being, created in the image of God, is a psychosomatic being, comprising both body and spirit'. Exploring the implications of this, the Council stated that 'our bodies are fundamental to our essential humanity and constitutes our identity' (BAC 2002c: D-201). The

Council then addressed the question of human dignity, which should never be violated by treating human beings merely as the means to an end. It critiqued the BAC's definition of 'human tissue' that included 'all kinds of human biological materials derived from living or cadaveric donors, including solid tissues, organs, fetuses, blood and other body fluids and their derivatives, cord blood, embryos, gametes or any part of derivative thereof' (BAC 2002c: 2). Reiterating its position that human life begins at conception and that the embryo is worthy of respect and protection, the Council challenged the view proposed by the BAC that human embryos are nothing more than just tissue (BAC 2002c: 2).

Turning to broader issues, the Council stated that while it appreciated the BAC's emphasis on donor welfare, more should be said about respecting and protecting the vulnerable, especially persons with diminished capacities, children, and prisoners. On the issue of informed consent, the Council affirmed the BAC's commitment that 'no tissue shall be taken, or shall be accepted, unless the full, free, and informed consent of the donor has been obtained'. However, it pointed out that the BAC's statement in another context that consent should be obtained 'when it is practical to do so' is too vague and potentially open to abuse. The Council insisted that consent should be obtained at all times, unless it is impossible to do so, as in the case of a medical emergency. Concerning the ethical review of research, the Council argued that while it is important that national-level committees be formed to review human tissue research, these committees should not only include professionals from the relevant sectors but also people from other disciplines, including the faith communities. This is to ensure that the approval of research proposals is not only governed by 'scientific or economic ambition' but more importantly by the genuine concern for the common good.

Genetic Testing and Genetic Research

On 25 November 2005, the Council received a fifty-five page consultation paper entitled, 'Ethical, Legal and Social Issues in Genetic Testing and Genetic Research' from the BAC for comments. The BAC began by emphasising that it recognised that while 'genetic tests can help in the diagnosis, prevention and treatment of serious genetic disorders ... they also present ethical, legal and social concerns to both individuals and society' (BAC 2005a: 1). While ethical issues arising from genetic testing in Singapore has been addressed in some detail by the National Medical Ethics Committee (NMEC) in its February 2001 document entitled, *Ethical Guidelines for Gene Technology*, the BAC hoped to supplement the guidelines already in place. Thus, the consultation paper had two main objectives: (a) to assess the ethical, legal and social issues arising from genetic testing, and (b) to seek public feedback on its recommendations. In this wide-ranging paper the BAC made 24 recommendations touching on different aspects of genetic testing. The final section of the paper examined specific ethical issues surrounding (1) carrier testing, (2) pre-implantation genetic diagnosis, (3) pre-implantation tissue typing, (4) germline genetic modification, (5) predictive testing, and (6) genetic screening.

The Council, in its response, began by stating that '[g]enetic testing for diagnosis or research is an important advancement in science and medicine whose

promises and perils we are unable to fully appreciate at this point in time' (BAC 2005b: F-111). The Council therefore welcomed the BAC's efforts in providing ethical guidelines to check abuses. Although the Council had no problems with most of the BAC's recommendations in this paper, it however had some major concerns with the different genetic tests discussed in the final section. Due to space constraints, I will only discuss the Council's response to the BAC's discussion of pre-implantation tissue typing (PTT).

While the Council recognised the possible benefits of PTT, it nonetheless did not support this procedure. The main reason for its objection was that PTT encourages society to see the child as a commodity. The Council pointed out that the language that the HFEA used in the statement quoted by the BAC suggested the commodification of the child when it presented PTT as a procedure which 'allows the selection of embryos in order to bring about the birth of a child who can provide a matched tissue donation to an existing sibling ...' The BAC, however, insisted that there is no evidence of commodification in PTT. But the Council argued that evidence may not be forthcoming yet since PTT was approved in the UK only in 2001. The Council also found the arguments of the BAC at some points to be quite puzzling. For instance, the BAC stated: 'It has been argued that parents who conceive a child to save a life may be on a higher moral ground than those who procreate as an unanticipated consequence of sexual pleasure or for some selfish purpose' (BAC 2005a: 24). Finding such arguments not only ludicrous but also quite dangerous, the Council pointed out that:

... from the standpoint of moral argument, this logic is flawed. An act that is morally unacceptable is wrong even if it may not be as repugnant as other morally unacceptable acts. The more fundamental question therefore is whether an act, although in some ways more superior than others, is *in itself* morally unacceptable. We maintain that to bring about the birth of a child with the appropriate genotype in order that he may provide a matched tissue donation to a sick child is morally unacceptable (BAC 2005b: F-112).

Donation of Human Eggs for Research

In order for Singapore to pursue human embryonic stem cell research, a consistent supply of human embryos from which to procure stem cells must be secured. This, however, has proven to be quite difficult to achieve. A viable alternative is to obtain human eggs that can then be used to create embryos to supply stem cells. But there is a worldwide scarcity of eggs, and according to some scientists, this is one of the key factors for limiting and slowing down stem cell research. Since obtaining eggs from other sources – cadavers, foetuses, women undergoing ovarian surgeries, spare eggs from fertility clinics – has been unsuccessful in solving the supply problem, egg donation is seen as the only feasible solution. In November 2007, the BAC sent its consultation paper, 'Donation of Human Eggs for Research' (BAC 2007) to the different groups including the Council for comments and feedback. Apart from the fact that egg donation is a risky procedure, there were also ethical issues related to coercion,

inducement and trading. Recognising the medical and ethical issues surrounding egg donation, the BAC tried to negotiate pragmatic ways to encourage donations and prevent abuses.

The Council began its response by once again reiterating its position concerning human embryonic stem cell research. It stated categorically that such research should be prohibited. It rejected the distinctions between pre-embryo and embryo and between reproductive cloning and therapeutic cloning. It also called for the prohibition of research involving human embryos created through parthenogenesis. The moral basis for the Council's position is clear: 'The primary reason as to why procuring eggs from women for the manufacturing of embryos for research should be prohibited is that such research results in the destruction of human beings' (BAC 2008a: C-29). But besides this objection, the Council also highlighted the risks of such procedures that the BAC paper appeared to have downplayed. One of the risks that egg donors face is developing a condition called Ovarian Hyper-Stimulation Syndrome (OHSS). This condition makes the donor vulnerable to clotting disorders, kidney damage and ovarian twisting. The Council cited an article by Dr Suzanne Parisan, the former Chief Medical Officer at the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) which stated that OHSS carries life-threatening pulmonary conditions including 'thromboembolic events, pulmonary embolism, pulmonary infarction, cerebral vascular accident (stroke) and arterial occlusion with loss of limb or death' (BAC 2008a: C-30).

With regard to the question of payment for 'donated' eggs, the Council supported the position taken by the BAC that the donation of tissues 'should be outright gifts and there should be no financial incentives, although reasonable reimbursement of expenses incurred should be allowed' (BAC 2008a: C-32). At the same time, the Council expressed unease with terms like 'compensation' because they are often 'ambiguous and fluid and must be therefore carefully defined'. The Council described ethically acceptable compensations thus: 'The compensations or payments that a donor might receive must be such that they can never be perceived as financial incentives to donate' (BAC 2008a: C-32). Again, the Council tried to locate the discussion concerning compensation in the broader context so that larger philosophical (theological) and moral questions are not forgotten:

... there is widespread if often inarticulate unease in society about the very idea of offering parts of the human body for sale at the right price. The sense of repugnance, which is firmly rooted in our collective psyche and moral sensibility, must not be taken lightly. This is because it reveals a resistance to the view that the human body is just a natural object that can be used at our disposal. We realise the need to increase the supply of organs for life-saving transplantations, and we know that doing so exact a cost. By insisting that organs must be given freely and must not be bought and sold we are finding a way to live with the cost. We know that by allowing organs to be bought and sold we could possibly increase their supply and save many more lives. But we have resisted this approach because we know that by doing this we would make the body or parts of the body simply into natural objects, at our disposal if the price is right. There is, of course,

nothing degrading about buying and selling, and there is a sense in which commerce can enhance human life. But life itself must never be viewed as a commodity. Our sense of repugnance is therefore rooted in the belief that some things are simply not for sale. In our society, we recognise that public offices and the criminal justice may never be bought or sold. To this list we must add the human body (BAC 2008a: C-31).

Chimera Research

Due to the practical difficulties in getting healthy women to donate their eggs of research, the BAC was tasked to look into other ways of creating more human embryos from which to harvest stem cells. One way is to create cytoplasmic hybrid embryos by combining human and bovine genetic material. Thus, on 8 January 2008, the BAC issued arguably its most controversial consultation paper to date entitled, 'Human-Animal Combinations for Biomedical Research'. The first paragraph of the paper made the impetus behind embarking on this consultation quite clear:

In 2002, the Bioethics Advisory Committee (BAC) published a Report on the ethical, legal and social issues in human cloning and stem cell research (the Stem Cell Report). Since then, significant advances have been made in stem cell science and technology and ethical issues have arisen as a result of the shortage of human eggs and the need to create human-animal combinations to further stem cell research (BAC 2008b: 6).

According to the paper, cytoplasmic hybrid human embryos (or cybrids) are created by SCNT (Somatic Cell Nuclear Transplant), 'in which the nucleus of a human cell is transferred into an animal egg from which the nucleus has been removed'. An embryo created in this way is a hybrid because even though it is 99% human, its genetic material originated from two species, in this case, human and bovine. The paper then discussed the many ethical issues surrounding such research and the objections that have been raised by various quarters.

In its response, the Council clarified that it was not against 'all forms of induced chimeras or biomedical research involving human-animal mixtures' (BAC 2010: C9-2). But the Council categorically opposed the creation of cytoplasmic hybrid embryos to supply stem cells for research because these embryos are human beings and their destruction should never be countenanced. The Council also noted that although the BAC paper was 'well-written and lucid, it suffers from being too sweeping and in some sense abstract' (BAC 2010: C9-3). For instance, there are many different ways in which human and animal materials can be combined, which the consultation paper did not discuss. This gave the impression that once the objections for a certain type of human-animal mixture are defeated, other forms of chimera research should not pose any ethical problems. Another example was the suggestion that chimeras are not uncommon since the recipient of xenotransplantation and even blood transfusion can be considered a chimera. The Council, however, warned that such arguments can be

dangerously misleading because they failed to show that different chimeric creations would raise different ethical concerns: ‘... using a pig’s valve to replace the diseased heart valve of a human patient is different from injecting undifferentiated human stem cells into a nonhuman zygote’ (BAC 2010: C9-3).

In its lengthy response, the Council presented the theological and ethical framework within which to reflect on the implications of chimera research by discussing (1) the idea of human uniqueness (noting that some philosophers who promote such research based their argument on a version of the evolutionary theory that blurs species distinctions); (2) Human dignity (noting that philosophers and ethicists often premise their concepts of human dignity on certain attributes like sentience or rationality instead on mere humanity); (3) the moral status of the human embryo (since the main concern of the BAC document is the creation of human-bovine cytoplasmic embryos); (4) the moral status of the human-animal chimera (since it is theoretically possible to create humanised chimeric creatures); and (5) playing God (a concept that some love while others loathe, but one that is helpful for ethical reflection on the extent to which we should use our scientific and technological prowess). The final section of the Council’s response discussed the ethics of the many different forms of research involving human-animal mixtures (a discussion that was totally absent in the BAC paper). The Council subsequently commissioned me to write a book on this topic to help Christians understand the profound ethical and social issues surrounding inter-species research (Chia 2012a). At the invitation of the Council, I also wrote a more general and introductory book on Bioethics and the Church (Chia 2010).

Other Issues

Organ Transplantation and Trading

In January 2003, MOH sent a copy of the proposed amendments to the Human Organ Transplant Act (HOTA) for comments and feedback. The Council invited me to study the document and respond accordingly on its behalf. In my response, I stated at the outset that the Council acknowledged that organ transplantation is a significant means of helping patients with end stage organ failure and that it therefore ‘firmly supports organ donations’ (Chia 2003: 1). The Council was appreciative of the fact that MOH has given such careful considerations to the ethical issues surrounding organ transplantation, and provided comprehensive guidelines and safeguards. In particular, the Council commended MOH’s ‘clear and uncompromising position against the commercialisation of human organs’ (Chia 2003: 1). On the question of inclusion of organs procured from patients whose deaths have been classified as ‘non-accidental’, the Council cautioned against over confidence on the part of medical science in determining death:

... while the NCCS recognises that the neurological and the circulatory-respiratory criteria are both valid in ascertaining death, it maintains that death is an event that no scientific technique or empirical method can identify directly. As such the criteria employed

by science to ascertain death must not be understood as the scientific and technical determination of the exact moment of death but as a scientifically reliable means of identifying the biological signs which indicate that the person has in fact died (Chia 2003: 2).

Some readers of the above quotation may think that this is nothing but a vain exercise of philosophical hair-splitting. But the qualification, and therefore the caution it raises, has profound significance in checking the omniscience of science, especially its ability to ascertain death. It challenges the reductionist approach and argues that our concept of death cannot be based solely on biological or medical categories, and that philosophical and theological considerations are equally if not more important. The Council then discussed the various issues related to living donor transplantations, living unrelated donor transplantations and informed consent.

Fast forward to 2008: the prosecution of two Indonesian men for selling their kidneys sparked a lively debate in Singapore about the legalisation of organ sale. The then Health Minister Khaw Boon Wan controversially said: 'Let's push within the current regime ... but at the same time, let's not write off an idea just because it sounds radical or controversial ... We may be able to find a compromise which is workable and yet does not offend people's sensibilities' (ST 2008, H1). In the title of their Straits Times article, Jennifer Yeo and Madan Mohan provocatively declared that 'S'pore can take lead in legalising organ trade'. They argued that organ trade is a 'social relationship ... which gives a new lease of life to both stakeholders'. Therefore, they insist that the 'law ought not to step in to criminalise and punish such relationships'. Such statements are morally naïve, socially irresponsible and culturally insensitive in light of the universal prohibition of the sale and trafficking of human organs. The fact that they were made by the journalists of the leading newspaper in Singapore is simply inexcusable!

The Council contacted me to consider writing a statement on its behalf. The Council's statement, which was published on 12 November 2008 and reported by the Straits Times, was unequivocal:

While the National Council of Churches is cognizant of the current shortage of human organs for transplantation and the plight of those who are in need of them, it maintains that the sale of human organs should not be permitted. The National Council of Churches is therefore opposed to the legalisation of the human organ market even if this legalisation would increase the supply of transplantable organs. It maintains that the pragmatic and even humanitarian rationale for organ sale must be critiqued on the basis of more fundamental theological, philosophical and ethical principles (NCCS 2008).

The Council then briefly stated its understanding of the human body from the standpoint of the Christian faith, and rejected the view so prevalent in modern medicine that the 'body and its organs are seen as possessing instrumental value, and therefore as a resource from which others – patients, physicians and

researchers – may benefit’. The Council maintained that it is impossible to allow the buying and selling of the human body without at the same time reducing the human person to an object and that this subtle shift in sensibility would bring about ‘untold damage to society’. But while the Council clearly opposed organ trading, it did not oppose the provision of some form of compensation to the donor as long as the compensation is not used to induce or coerce the donation. The Council also invited me to write a book on the subject for the Christian public here (Chia 2009).

Euthanasia

On 17 October 2008, the Straits Times health correspondent Salma Khalik in an article entitled, ‘New Healthcare Model Needed’, reported that Khaw Boon Wan, who was health minister at the time, ‘surfaced euthanasia as an ethical dilemma that Singapore would have to confront’ (Khalik 2008). ‘Do we allow euthanasia or assisted dying?’ the minister was reported to have asked his audience when he was speaking at the Institute of Engineers dinner and dance. This comment was followed by a bold but rather irresponsibly written editorial in the newspaper that predicted that ‘Euthanasia is looking like a candidate whose time is nearer than most people would imagine’ (ST 2008: A24). Such a statement is irresponsible because it sought to steer readers to a conclusion before the debate on euthanasia had even begun. In an interview conducted by *The Sunday Times*, Dr Chin Jing Jih, the executive director of the Singapore Medical Association’s Centre for Medical Ethics finally introduced some sanity to the discussion when he said, ‘We take the position that the solution to suffering in terminal illness is to continue to further develop and upgrade palliative care rather than legislate euthanasia’ (Ee 2008: H6).

The Council invited me to craft its official statement on euthanasia that was released to the press on 6 November 2008. The statement ‘categorically opposes all forms of euthanasia’ (NCCS 2008a). The Council’s position on euthanasia was premised on the four principles. The first was the sanctity of human life, based on the Christian concept that God is the Creator and therefore the giver of life. As gift from the Creator, ‘Human life is precious, and therefore should always be protected’. The second principle, respect for human life, was based on the sixth commandment in the Decalogue which prohibits murder. Human beings, therefore, do not have the ‘right to die’, that is, they do not have the right to take their own lives or arrange for someone else (a physician) to do this. The fourth principle had to do with the ethos of medical practice and the duty of the physician, which, the Council maintained – following the Hippocratic Oath and Judeo-Christian tradition – is always to care and never to kill. Finally the Council looked at how the legalisation of euthanasia would change the way in which we relate to one another. It will shape society’s outlook in such a way that death is seen as the quick and convenient solution to social ills, resulting in what the Council called the ‘euthanasia mentality’. ‘Such a society, which very subtly impresses upon suffering, aged and vulnerable persons that it is their “duty to die”, the statement insisted, ‘will diminish the value of life itself’. The Council subsequently invited me to write a book on the topic, again for the purpose of

helping the Christian community here become more aware of the issues (Chia 2009).

The Straits Times

In the heady first five years of the last decade, when the Singapore government ventured into so many different forms of research in bio- technology and medicine, the Council noticed that very little attention was given to religious views. Furthermore, bio- technology and medicine were presented in the most positive light, with the media always stressing its potential to cure diseases, alleviate human suffering and make the world a better place. The Council felt that a more critical assessment is needed, one which religion – especially Christianity – is able to provide given its theological and moral traditions. The Council invited me to write an article on biotechnology for the Review pages (as they were called then) of *The Straits Times*. Initially, I was reluctant because I was not sure that the newspaper would be willing to publish a piece by a theologian. But after some thought, I wrote the article, and to my surprise it was published with the title ‘Science under Moral Microscope’ on a full page in the Review section (Chia 2006).

The article began by pointing out that the rapid advances in biotechnology are likely to ‘transform our way of life in fundamental ways’. Although it is true that these advances hold much promise especially in medicine, there are also negative and worrying consequences. The rapid development of bio- technology and medicine is a double-edged sword: ‘While such developments are on the cutting edge of biotechnology, they are also on the leading edge of controversy’. Some of these advances again force society to think about fundamental issues like what does it mean to be human. The article then discussed the importance of moral clarity in assessing biotechnology and its applications. But moral clarity can sometimes be compromised by the pseudo-scientific jargons (such as ‘therapeutic’ and ‘reproductive’ cloning) that are accepted uncritically by scientists, lawyers, and policy makers. Similarly, moral confusion can result because of what I called a ‘technological determinism or fatalism’. Another possible cause of moral confusion is the language of the ‘common good’ or the ‘greatest good for the greatest number of people’. The article issued this important caution:

Science clearly does not exist in a moral vacuum. Ethically responsible genetics entails that we use science and technology in ways that protect us and others from being harmed or manipulated. Research science, bio-medicine and public policy must be underwritten by clear moral reasoning and a robust view of human dignity. They must never bow to the tyranny of technological fatalism (Chia 2006).

I ended the article by quoting a statement by Paul Ramsay, which nicely summarised the main thrust of my arguments: ‘The good things that men do can be made complete only by the things they refuse to do’.

In the November 24, 2007, edition of *The Straits Times* Janadas Devan wrote an article entitled, 'Secularism – not from theory but bloody history' arguing that secularism came about as the result of the bloody conflicts and carnage perpetrated by religious conflicts. Secularism, Devan maintained, emerged out of the Peace of Westphalia that brought to an end the violent clashes between Catholics and Protestants in the 16th and 17th centuries. According to Devan, the casualty rate of the Thirty-Year War and the Eighty-Year War was beyond 'genocidal levels'. 'Hitler, Stalin and Mao were prodigious monster', he wrote, 'but even they never quite came close, in proportionate terms, to inflicting on their societies the kind of destruction that warring Catholics and Protestants visited on theirs in 17th century Europe' (Devan 2007: S11). This argument gave the impression that religion is the cause of untold violence, and that it is incapable of bringing the conflicts it started to any peaceful resolution. Secularism, then, was presented as the saviour that was responsible for civilising religion by neutralising its universal claims and by relegating it to the private sphere where it must be confined if public peace and civic order is to be maintained.

Recognising that such an outrageous thesis has the potential to distort public perception of the role of religion in society, especially that of Christianity, the Council invited me to write a response to Devan's article. Published with the title, 'Christianity's Forgotten Impact' (Chia 2007: S17), my article sought to refute Devan's central arguments (and the evidence he presented) and argue that Christianity has made such invaluable contributions to society that to judge it on the basis of a certain reading of the Catholic-Protestant conflict of the 17th century is simply to misjudge it. Furthermore, it is debatable that the Thirty-Year War and the Eight-Year War – two historical events that anti-religion authors routinely cite – were fought solely or even primarily because of religion. What is not analysed in the often sweeping and superficial discussions of such authors is that these wars were the inevitable outcome of the tectonic shifts in the geo-political realities of post-medieval Europe. Thus, in my article I argued:

While religious motivations were certainly present, it is a mistake to think they were the only or even the main reason for the war. Most historians would argue that the Thirty-Year War came about mainly because the emerging nation states in Europe were jostling for territory and political power. Just as in the Thirty-Year War, many of the current so-called 'religious wars' are not fought over religion.

In this article, I also challenged Devan's argument that although Hitler, Stalin and Mao were 'prodigious monsters' they did not cause as many deaths as the so-called religious wars. This statement was at best misleading. I quoted an authoritative study by Jung Chang and Jon Holliday, *Mao: The Untold Story* that attributed a staggering 70 million deaths to Mao Zedong's regime alone. But most importantly, I pointed out that 'unlike the Thirty-Year War, these mass killings were conducted during peacetime and against their own countrymen'. I also challenged Devan's argument that the Peace of Westphalia (1648) 'gave rise to freedom of religion being enshrined as a human right'. This is Devan's account of the genesis of the secularism that brought peace to the warring religious

factions. But I maintained that this account was too simplistic, and failed to take the complex nature and history of secularism and its philosophical and cultural roots seriously. 'While religious conflicts may have a part to play', I wrote, 'secularism came about not so much because of the so-called bloody religious wars, but the bloodless clash of ideas: atheism, rationalism, scientism and relativism against revealed religion'.

In the rest of the article, I tried to show how Christianity has contributed to some of the most cherished ideas of modern society. While the discussion here is quite varied, I particularly highlighted Devan's suggestion that the freedom of religious beliefs is the invention of the secular state. In response, I quoted the second-century Church Father Tertullian who wrote: 'It is the fundamental right, a privilege of nature, that every man should worship according to his own convictions ... to which free will and not force should lead us'. I pointed out that 'These words were written 1,400 years before Westphalia'. At the end of the essay, I challenged the notion suggested by Devan that secularism is a novel ideal. I argued to the contrary that the ideals of modern secularism are not entirely possible without religion and that they are 'in some sense at least, parasitic to the very world view that it so vehemently rejects and abandons'.

Paternity by Estoppel

On 11 July 2011, I received a document from Bishop Solomon who was the President of the Council at the time. The document, which was prepared by the Ministry of Health (MOH) and the Ministry of Law (MinLaw) and distributed for feedback and comments by the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports (MCYS), concerns the 'Status of Children Bill'. In particular, this document sought to address questions of paternity involving children born through Assisted Reproductive Technology (ART), especially in cases where there is an ART mix-up. In Singapore's Thomson Fertility Centre, a couple that have undergone in-vitro fertilisation (IVF) was handed a baby that did not have their DNA. Fertility doctors were shocked over the case, as this was the first of its kind in Singapore. The Council asked me to look at the document, and to pen a response on its behalf.

I began by presenting briefly the Christian understanding of marriage and the family (Chia 2011: 1). This is important because ART has introduced such radical changes to society's attitude towards these institutions. The paper examined some of these changing sensibilities and how each of these cultural trends can in some ways be connected to ART:

Postmodern iconoclasm, inspired by the dogmas of individualism and egalitarianism, has sought to demolish the institutions of marriage and family. The institutions of marriage and family can be seriously undermined by hostile ideologies (e.g., radical feminism, homosexuality) and practices (no-fault divorce, non-conjugal cohabitation, sexual license) (Chia 2011: 2).

The Council then highlighted what may be described as the symbiotic relationship between the family and society: 'Just as families contribute to the flourishing of human society in so many ways, so society has the obligation to protect and support families' (Chia 2011: 2). It strongly stressed that the Christian faith has always rejected the modern dissociation of marriage and the family. For this reason, it 'does not countenance the practice of cohabitation and the bearing or the raising of children out of wedlock' (Chia 2011:3).

In its wide-ranging paper, the Council then proceeded to discuss the ethical and social implications of ART, with special attention directed at intrauterine insemination, since that was the focus of the MOH paper. Among other issues, the Council argued that ART has opened the door to two related problems in medical ethics, namely, '(1) the medicalisation of procreation, and (2) the commodification of human beings, their bodies and their bodily products' (Chia 2011: 4). Next, the Council addressed the 'Nature versus Nurture' debate, so crucial in discussions on the ethical and social implications of ART. It began by upholding the traditional family: 'The benefits of a stable, functioning two-parent family, where the husband and wife are biologically related to their children remains undisputed' (Chia 2011: 5). However, noting that more and more families are without such ties, and that this problem has become somewhat more acute because of ART, the Council maintained that these new social realities should not be ignored. It therefore set out the following principles:

... the marital relationship between the husband and the wife and their relationship to the child is more important and therefore should be given priority over genetics and biology. This view has several considerations. The first has to do with the institution of marriage, which must be preserved. The second relates to the importance of the functioning family unit. And the third is that the 'best interest of the child' must be given special consideration and priority (Chia 2011: 5).

It was on the basis of these principles that the Council was willing to seriously consider the two legal doctrines of the presumption of paternity and paternity by estoppel. The Council therefore supported the introduction of the paternity by estoppel to Singapore law because (quoting *Barnard v. Anderson*) estoppel generally is a 'doctrine of fundamental fairness designed to preclude a party from depriving another of a reasonable expectation when the party inducing the expectation albeit gratuitously knew or should know that the other would rely upon the conduct to his or her detriment'. In agreement with Jacquelyn West who argued that 'The preservation of the marital unit ... is a worthy endeavour, and courts should do their best to protect it', the Council recommended that 'the presumption of paternity rule should be applied to protect the intact marriage' (Chia 2011:10-11). In this way the protection of the interest of the child is ensured.

Social Egg Freezing

In November 2012, *The Straits Times* reported that the Ministry of Health (MOH) is reviewing its policy on egg freezing and examining some of its 'medical,

scientific and ethical implications'. Egg freezing (mature oocyte cryopreservation or vitrification) is a new technique of preserving the reproductive potential of a woman by freezing and storing her eggs for future use. Currently, in Singapore only young women who have to undergo cancer treatment that will compromise their fertility, like chemotherapy and radiotherapy, are allowed to use this technology. But in recent years, interest in using this technology for delaying childbearing among active career women is growing in Singapore and other countries. In May 2012, a senior correspondent of *The Straits Times*, Andy Ho wrote an opinion piece arguing that women should be allowed to freeze their eggs for social or lifestyle reasons. 'If a well-informed woman willingly and knowingly embraces the health risks the procedure involves', he insisted, 'no one should deny her right to have her eggs harvested and frozen while young' (Ho 2012). The Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE) entered the debate by asserting that it 'upholds a woman's right to choose how and when she will bear children based on informed choices'. After briefly examining the possible abuses of social egg freezing and its consequences to society, AWARE recommends that the government should proceed with caution (AWARE 2012).

The Council invited me to write a response to the issue on its behalf that could serve not only as a statement of its position but also as an advisory to the Christian community here. I began by making the distinction between medical egg freezing that would enable young women undergoing cancer treatment to preserve their fertility and social (or lifestyle) egg freezing that is used mainly to defer motherhood. While the Council 'supports the medical application of egg freezing technology in these exceptional cases', it does not support social egg freezing because of the 'profound ethical and social concerns associated with it', I wrote. One of the main ethical issues surrounding social egg freezing is that this technology is used for non-medical reasons. Social egg freezing is strictly speaking not a treatment because the women who use this technology are not infertile. 'We must for this reason proceed with extreme caution because performing medical procedures on healthy people is an ethically questionable practice' (Chia 2012b:1).

The Council warned that the current hype surrounding egg freezing 'may give women the wrong impression that this technique is a kind of panacea that guarantees them the opportunity to have a family later in life'. It then delineated the current rate of successful pregnancies and birth using this technique. The Council pointed out that the low rate of live birth from this technique is 'not only because older eggs are more likely to have flaws that impede their development into babies, they also do not grow and implant as well as younger eggs'. It warned that 'regarding egg freezing as "fertility insurance" ... creates false hope' (Chia 2012: 2) The Council then briefly described the numerous risks associated with *in vitro fertilisation* (IVF) a procedure employed to fertilise the eggs and then implant them into the woman. These include Ovarian Hyperstimulation Syndrome (OHSS) which in some severe cases may cause kidney failure and even death. Furthermore, older women undergoing IVF would encounter additional risks not just because of their age but also because they are more likely to have acquired chronic illnesses such as diabetes and hypertension (Chia 2012b: 2)

The most disturbing aspects of social egg freezing have to do with its social implications. 'Underlying the often heady rhetoric that champions the autonomy and rights of the contemporary woman', the Council pointed out, 'some commentators have rightly discerned elective egg freezing to be in essence a profoundly selfish act because it sees career as more important than the interest and the welfare of the child' (Chia 2012b: 2). The Council argued that apart from compromising the health of their children, women who choose to become mothers at a later stage in life 'often place on their children the heavy burden of having to take care of their geriatric parents (often burdened with chronic health conditions) when they are just about to start out in life as working adults, amidst all the attendant responsibilities and challenges associated with people at that stage of life (marriage, career, mortgage, starting a family, etc)'. Instead of introducing policies that would allow women to delay motherhood, the Council maintained that as a nation we should 'try to put in place the best policies and introduce reasonable changes in the workplace that would encourage and support childbearing at [the] ideal stage the life of the woman'. But policies and workplace practices are not enough. What is involved here is changing mindsets and views about marriage and family that must be addressed. The Council therefore ended by going to the very heart of the problem:

It is therefore of paramount importance that we should, as a society, address the mindsets that promote self-interest and distort priorities. Allowing elective egg freezing will be perceived as signalling our acquiescence of the very trends that should be subjected to serious critique, resisted and challenged (Chia 2012: 2).

The Future of Engagement

In the past twelve years, the Council has been actively responding to numerous significant issues that have arisen in Singapore. These issues are not only relevant to the church and other religious communities. They directly or indirectly affect every member of our society – people of faith as well as those who do not profess any. The Council's calm and rational approach has not only won the appreciation of the Singapore government, but also its trust. And in a religious milieu like ours, where Christians are a significant and visible minority, it is imperative that an organisation like the Council, which represents a significant segment of Protestant and Orthodox churches here, continue to deepen that trust. As I have already pointed out at the beginning of this essay, the Council's achievements were very much dependent on the leaders who have guided its work in the past decade. These leaders not only knew the churches (and Christianity) in Singapore well, they also had a keen understanding of our multi-religious context and the way in which the government here operates. These are the nonnegotiable requisites for meaningful and constructive Christian engagement in a country like Singapore, with its unique confluence of religious diversity, a vocal and sometimes virulent minority of secularists, and a government that is at once secular and pragmatic, but never totally dismissive of religious views and sentiments.

As I write this essay, the Council is undergoing some significant changes in leadership. Bishop John Chew has retired as Bishop of the Diocese of Singapore, and Bishop Robert Solomon has stepped down after serving for three terms as the head of the Methodist Church. The new leaders – Bishop Rennis Ponniah (Anglican) and Bishop Wee Boon Hup (Methodist) – will have to decide on how to navigate the future work of the Council and build upon the accomplishments of their predecessors. As leaders of the two largest Protestant denominations in Singapore, the responsibility of taking Christian engagement here further will invariably fall on their shoulders even if they would no doubt continue to have the support of the leaders of the other denominations. It is quite clear that a strong and vibrant Council will be of benefit to both the Christian community and society. The cultural and political situation in Singapore is changing so rapidly that the church can no longer exist in cloistered seclusion from what is happening around it. Neither should the church succumb to the secularist rhetoric that religious views must be confined to the private sphere and that they have no place in public debates. The church must resist the temptation of self-ghettoization and self-censorship by allowing secularism to determine the rules of engagement. The church must be confident that she can make a meaningful contribution to questions and issues that affect everyone in society, given the immense wealth of her own theological, liturgical and spiritual heritage. And the church must see this form of engagement as part of her witness, and as part of her mission in society.

In the past decade, the Council has worked very closely with Trinity Theological College (TTC), and this relationship should be strengthened and perhaps even formalised in some ways. That Council and College were able to work so closely and effectively bears wonderful testimony to the unity and collegiality that exist between the two institutions. This synergy would not have been possible without the vision of the principal of TTC, the Rev Dr Ngoei Foong Nghian, who has not only taken a keen interest in developments in society but has also generously made available the College's resources, especially teaching faculty members, to the Council and the church at large. The effectiveness of the work of the Council was due to the collegial bond between the heads of churches and the principal and the collective vision they share concerning the church's witness in society. This bond must not be broken if the Council is to continue to be faithful to its mission (as articulated in Article 4 of its Constitution) and effectively address societal issues in the future. But the Council must also look to its member churches for the relevant resources, as Christian engagement in the public arena invariably requires an inter-disciplinary grasp of issues. Theologians must therefore work with physicians, scientists, artists, journalists, economists, policy makers, politicians, educationists, and lawyers to provide credible and responsible input to the larger conversation. All these resources can be found in our churches, but the Council must be able to creatively harness them for its important work.

There is a sense in which both church and society (perhaps even the Government) in Singapore are new to such public debates. The Council is well aware of the fact that as Christians participate more visibly in these discussions, they will come under public scrutiny not only in the things they say, but also in

the way in which they embody their theological and moral commitments. Christians involved in the public arena must be cognizant of what I have called elsewhere the 'politics of engagement'. This means that Christians must be sensitive to the fact that there are many disparate voices in the public square that yearn to be heard and acknowledged. The public square is therefore teeming with ideologically diverse players, each with their own agendas and goals. Christians must never concede to the rhetoric (which is often employed not just by militant secularists but sometimes also by the State) that the public square must be 'naked', that is, that it must be denuded of all religious concepts and ideas. If public discourse is to genuinely reflect Singapore society, the public square must be pluralistic, not secular, where religious voices and opinions are not only allowed but are also taken seriously. But in this pluralistic context, Christians must learn to communicate their vision of society calmly and clearly, confident in the wisdom of her great theological and moral traditions that received their inspiration from the Gospel of Christ.

This brings us to another important if controversial aspect of the politics of engagement: compromise. Some Christians have a natural aversion to the idea of compromise because for them it cannot mean anything other than selling out on what Christians hold to be true. What is needed, however, is a more nuanced understanding of compromise. In his book, *The New Left and Christian Radicalism* Arthur Gish explains that there are two kinds of compromise:

It is one thing to talk of compromise in the sense of flexibility and cooperation, a willingness to live with the ambiguities of life, to be aware of our questionable motives and imperfect actions, to reject dogmatism; and it is quite another thing to talk of selling out, retreating, being less than faithful, basing decisions on expediency rather than on faithfulness to one's commitment (Gish 1970: 95).

As Richard Mouw has wisely put it, 'Christians must often commit themselves to policies that from the biblical point of view will bring about only fragmentary justice and peace' (Mouw 1973: 97). In public engagement Christians must recognise the wisdom in the adage that we should not let the good become the victim of the perfect. Compromise does not mean that Christians should always be content with the fragmentary appropriations of the ideal. But it does mean that Christians must learn to accept modest gains in the political and social arena in order that they may assert greater influence in the future. Christians must therefore see this step as the beginning and not the end of their witness.

But Christian discourse in the public square must also take seriously the 'spirituality of engagement'. Because Christian participation in public debate is inextricably bound up with the church's witness in society, it must be governed by two attitudes: humility and civility. Christians must be humble because Christian engagement in public discourse is always riddled with great difficulties and challenges. Much wisdom is required if such engagements are to be fruitful. This is because engagement in the public discourse requires that Christians apply the theological insights gleaned from Scripture and tradition to very concrete and specific issues about which there are many differing opinions.

Christians engaged in public discourse must be aware of the fact that ours is a religiously, ideologically and philosophically pluralistic society. Furthermore, there are those who believe that religion is unable to make any positive contribution to issues confronting society, and are determined to keep the public square secular. Because of these complex socio-political and ideological currents, Christians must always proceed with caution. History is littered with examples of how certain approaches taken by well-meaning Christians to apply the biblical principles to today's swirling, confusing political world have not always been wise. Past mistakes, however, should not deter Christians from being involved. We should not be so overwhelmed by the need to be cautious that we become immobilised. But past mistakes should teach Christians to move into social and political engagement only after careful reflection and much prayer.

Christians who wish to be involved in social and political engagement must be realistic. The realism to which I refer is not just practical, but theological. Theological realism informs us that the social and political world to which we are called to bear witness is fallen and sinful. It is a world where something has gone terribly wrong. It is a world that is prone to human greed, attempts at self-aggrandizement, hypocrisy, and unethical means to achieve goals. This is a world that does not always welcome the truth. It is a world that is not always concerned for the common good, regardless how often and eloquently it deploys this rhetoric. But Christians engaged in the public square must also acknowledge their own inadequacies. The Lutheran doctrine that believers are justified sinners (*simul justus et peccator*) helps to bring out this point. Even when Christians participate in public discourse prayerfully and with an unwavering passion to follow their risen Lord, they nonetheless bring with them 'a burden of biased perspectives, incomplete knowledge and their own sinfulness' (Monsma and Rodger 2005: 327) One implication of this is that we may very easily confuse God's will with our own desires. Furthermore, some of the issues in the public square are very complex, and the Bible and Christian tradition may not have directly addressed them. Christians must therefore formulate their views by appropriating the relevant aspects of the tradition and by constructing a theological framework within which these issues can be reflected responsibly. For this reason, Christians engaged in policy development or advocacy sometimes differ on specific proposals. Finally, Christian engagement must be civil. In 1 Peter 3:15 and 16, we read: 'But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give a reason for your hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience so that those who speak maliciously against your good behaviour in Christ may be ashamed of their slander'. Christians in the public square must always take care to always be civil, especially with those with whom we disagree.

In his book, *Community, Church and State* (Barth 1960), the Swiss-German theologian Karl Barth – one of the composers of the Barmen Declaration – maintains that one of the most important forms of Christian social engagements is prayer, the intercessions of the saints for the earthly city. Prayer is never passive, because true prayer always translates into service of God and man. Prayer, in fact, is itself an expression of that service. The activity of prayer is

always also a political activity. The Church is called to pray for those in authority, for the state, the nation and society precisely because none of these things is divine, and therefore none of them is infallible. By praying for these 'powers' Christians de-divinise them, and place them under the lordship of Christ, which is their proper place. But prayer is also an activity that critiques the Church's naive triumphalism. It reminds Christians that their social programmes and political activities – however sincere, effective and wholesome – cannot transfigure this fallen world into the 'new heavens and the new earth'. The renewal of the social and political order is beyond us. We are simply called to faithfully point to the truth and justice of God in what we say and do. Ultimately only God can cause his truth and justice to prevail. Thus as Christians continue to bear witness – as light to this dark world, and as salt to a society that has lost its flavour – we must also pray (for the world and for ourselves). And the most profound prayer that we must utter with every fibre of our being is: 'Thy kingdom come! Thy will be done! On earth as it is in heaven!'

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