

Religion and Politics in Singapore: A Christian Reflection¹

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Introduction

In his 1987 National Day Rally Speech, the then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew memorably described the Singapore government's policy on the relationship between religion and politics thus:

Churchmen, lay preachers, priests, monks, Muslim theologians, all those who claim divine sanctions of holy insights, take off your clerical robes before you take on anything economic or political. Take it off. Come out as a citizen or join a political party and it is your right to belabour the Government. But if you use a church or a religion and your pulpit for these purposes, there will be serious repercussions.²

This speech was made in the wake of the worldwide escalation in religious extremism and activism that began from the early 1980s. But in Singapore, at least two events may be said to be responsible for the strong emphasis in Mr Lee's 1987 speech. In May that year, the government arrested Vincent Cheng,

a Catholic lay worker and alleged Marxist, and his associates for venturing into "social action" and for acting as a political pressure group to fight for workers' rights. The group published a few political booklets criticising the government for politically rendering trade unions ineffective. Prime Minister Lee intervened when a number of Catholic priests, agitated by the arrests, accused the government of attacking the Church. A Catholic mass was held where a priest allegedly declared that the Minister of Home Affairs, judges and ISD (Internal Security Department) officials would all come under the judgement of God if they continued to hold the alleged Marxist conspirators.³ Archbishop Gregory Yong issued a public statement asserting that the arrests have nothing to do with the Church. Archbishop Yong also categorically ordered priests not to mix religion and politics in their sermons.⁴

In the 1970s and 80s, several Muslim preachers delivered provocative political sermons in local mosques inciting Muslims against the government. In 1973, a preacher from Indonesia described local Muslims pejoratively as "stooges" for failing to fulfil their

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obligations. A visiting preacher from South Africa urged Muslims in Singapore to be more militant and also made derogatory remarks about Christianity in his 1984 speech at a local mosque. In the same year, a preacher from Malaysia expressed disappointment over the demolition of mosques in Singapore affected by redevelopment. That preacher also called for Malays here to be united and to stand against the majority race in a 1986 sermon. All three speakers were banned from Singapore.⁵

Lee Kuan Yew's 1987 speech was the catalyst for a robust public debate on religion and politics, that led to the composition in 1989 of the White Paper on Religious Harmony, and that in turn became the basis for the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act (MRHA) in 1990,⁶ the only specific piece of legislation to date addressing interfaith relations. In an interview with *The Straits Times* in July 2009, Professor S. Jayakumar, who was the Home Affairs as well as Law Minister in the 1980s, sheds light on the government's

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concerns which led to the composition of the MRHA, especially how it related to religious harmony in multi-religious Singapore. He said that although religious leaders and their followers have a role to play their "activities must not polarise society".⁷ The best way to prevent such undesirable polarisations is to ensure that the State remains secular and

even handed, and that religion and politics are kept discreetly apart. Wong Kan Seng, the then Deputy Prime Minister, summarised the government's position well when he said: "We are a secular Singapore, in which Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus and others have all to live in peace with one another ... Keeping religion and politics separate is a key of political engagement".⁸

In this essay, I propose to examine and critique the Singapore government's understanding of the relationship between religion and politics from the standpoint of Scripture and Tradition. I will begin firstly by analyzing the government's understanding of secularism in general and the secular State in particular. I will then reflect on how the relationship between Church and State should be understood theologically, and ask if the government's political philosophy concerning the role of religious institutions vis-à-vis the State can be theologically justified. Then, I will discuss the relationship between religion and politics as it is enshrined in the MRHA and expounded by the various government ministers, including Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong. I will ask if it is possible for Christians to endorse the model of the relationship between religion and politics proposed by the Singapore Government.

Different Secularisms

Government ministers have always insisted that the Singapore government or the State is secular. What does the "secular State" mean in the context of Singapore politics? And what kind of secularism is the government advocating? It is very important that these questions are answered with some care and precision before we proceed to examine other

dimensions of the relationship between religion and politics in Singapore. There are at least two different forms of secularism that inspire radically different attitudes towards religion. A failure to see the distinction between them would simply introduce confusion into our discussion.

The first form of secularism is sometimes referred to as the “supersessionist” model where “secular” is defined over against “religious”.⁹ Wilfred McClay describes this “militant” form of secularism as a view that postulates secularism as “an ultimate and alternative faith that rightfully supersedes the tragic blindness and destructive irrationalities of the historical religions, at least as far as activity in the public realm is concerned”.¹⁰ We witness this anti-religion sentiment in some expressions of secularism in the European Enlightenment in the eighteenth-century and also in the writings of the philosophers of the new doctrinaires in the nineteenth-century like Auguste Comte, Karl Marx and Ludwig Feuerbach — to name just a few. These philosophers see secularism defined over the religious in the same way as the Enlightenment is defined over against the thinking of the so-called Dark Ages. As Doug Farrow characterises it, “Darkness gives way to dawn. Priestcraft gives way to science. Religion gives way to reason”.¹¹

In the twentieth century and in ours, there are a number of influential voices that advocate this form of secularism. Militant secularism is the philosophical assumption that undergirds the humanism articulated in documents like the *Humanist Manifesto I* (1933), *Humanist Manifesto II* (1973) and *Humanist Manifesto 2000*. These documents receive support from luminaries like Isaac Asimov, Francis Crick, Edward O. Wilson and Dennis Dennett. A

group of writers called the “new atheists” have also seen the promotion of this militant form of secularism as their special mission. Even a cursory glance at the titles of their books would give us a good idea of their collective agenda: *The God Delusion* by Richard Dawkins, *God is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* by Christopher Hitchens, *Breaking the Spell* by Daniel Dennett and *The End of Faith* by Sam Harris. These thinkers want religion to be expunged from public life, and religious discourse and insights excluded from politics, law and economics. Secular principles alone must operate in public life, without any appeal to or justification from religious beliefs. Indeed, according to these writers, secular principles must be protected from contamination by religious beliefs and justifications.

Thankfully, the secularism espoused by the Singapore government is not a militant secularism that is in essence anti-religion. Rather, the secularism that the government has adopted can be described as “negative” or “modest” secularism. In some literature, adjectives like “accommodative” and even “benign” are used to characterise this form of secularism. This second type of secularism may also be described as anti-theocratic but not anti-religion — that is, it rejects the ideological and political dominance by a religious tradition but acknowledges the value of religion in society. The most important legal document in this regard is the *Singapore Constitution*. Article 15(1) of the *Constitution* protects the religious freedom of Singapore citizens. It states explicitly and categorically that “Every person has the right to profess and practise his religion and to propagate it”. This clause protects the freedom and right of every person to profess or disavow a faith based on his or

her conscience. This right is extended not only to the practice but also the propagation of his or her religion, even though these are subjected to general laws in the interest of “public order, public health or morality” (15(4)), as they must be to check possible abuses. In short, in guaranteeing religious freedom in Singapore, the *Constitution* also tacitly acknowledges the important role of religion in society.

Various government ministers, including Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong have clearly and unequivocally acknowledged the importance of religion in society. They acknowledge and welcome the contribution of religious groups to social welfare services such as “educational, community and social work, running schools, helping the aged and the handicapped, and operating crèches for children”.¹² In a telling statement related to the Integrated Resort, PM Lee emphasised that “religious faith is a powerful force in motivating Singaporeans to help their fellow citizens, not just gambling addicts”. He hoped that “religious groups will continue to work together with the government to help to build families, which are the basic units of a resilient and stable society”.¹³ The benign or accommodative secularism espoused by the Singapore government is concerned with the maintenance of harmony and peace among the various religious communities in Singapore.

As Prof. Jayakumar puts it,

The Government ... ensures that the State is secular and even-handed. The government is not pro- any religion. Nor is it anti- any religion. It believes religion should be a positive factor in society. We want all religions to co-exist peacefully and continue to

do their good work in the communities — running schools, doing social work and helping the aged and the handicapped.¹⁴

The Christian finds this form of secularism, which openly acknowledges the importance of religion in society, more congenial than the supersessionist approach. Modest secularism acknowledges the religious nature of society and in some ways sees this as a positive force in the common life of the nation. It insists that all religions and religious groups must be treated equally and fairly. Equal treatment must also be extended to people who profess no religion and even to those who have a low opinion of religion. In this sense, modest secularism works in concert with the principles enshrined in the Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, which clearly emphasise religious freedom as a basic right. But modest secularism establishes certain ground-rules in terms of political engagement. We shall explore the Singapore version of these ground-rules later in this essay. Speaking broadly and generally at this juncture, modest secularism appeals to instrumental reasons for advocating the qualified separation of politics and religion. In the case of Singapore, these reasons have to do primarily with the maintenance of religious harmony, given the multi-religious nature of our society. Christians with a sense of theological and political realism can understand and broadly support such an approach.

But in doing so, the Christian must also highlight a few significant flaws in this understanding of secularism. Several myths concerning secularism or the virtues or advantages of a secular State must here be brought to light. The first myth has to do

with secularism's claim to neutrality. Simply put, modest secularism presents itself as ideologically, philosophically, and therefore politically neutral in contradistinction to the religions, which it assumes are not. But this idea that secularism is neutral is clearly false. Secularism is an ideology that conceals a series of metaphysical commitments. In short, as Brendan Sweetman has so clearly argued in his book *Why Politics Needs Religion*, secularism is in fact a worldview and a philosophy of life. In addition, secularism also has a morality.¹⁵ Put differently, secularism proposes a certain view of reality, the nature of human beings, and what constitutes political and moral values. Many forms of secularism, for example, promote utilitarianism or pragmatism, which are likewise different ways of understanding and responding to social and political realities. Secularism's championing of neutrality as a desirable virtue must also be called to question. What should be sought here is not neutrality, but justice or fairness. In response to the rhetoric of neutrality, therefore, it must also be

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pointed out that the government need not be philosophically neutral in order to be just. This brings us to the second myth, namely that a secular worldview is not a guarantee of justice or fairness. Put differently, a government is not made necessarily fair because of its secular outlook. Neither is it true that a government is a priori unfair because of its commitment to a particular religious worldview. Such myths

distort. They make no positive contributions to the discussion. And it is important that governments that promote modest secularism do not to perpetuate them.

One more point must be made before we move on. A secular government in a multi-religious society like Singapore must take religious reasoning seriously. There have been frequent appeals to John Rawls' concept of public reason in the discussion of religion and society. The problem with the Rawlsian approach is that it is premised on a superficial view of religious belief and religious reasoning. It forces religious reasoning reductionistically into the procrustean bed of "public reason", which must necessarily be secular. It claims that religious reasoning would otherwise be unintelligible to the secular public. This, in my opinion, is yet another myth. The Frankfurt atheist philosopher Jürgen Habermas, in applauding the institutional separation between religion and politics, has wisely cautioned the secular State against transforming "the necessary institutional separation between religion and politics into an unreasonable mental and psychological burden for its religious citizens".¹⁶ This means that while there is a general expectation for religious citizens to express their viewpoints in language that the secular public can understand, they must be allowed to do so in religious language when so-called secular "translations" for them are not available. The State must therefore entertain religious reasons, not just so-called secular ones in public debate. In so doing, the State achieves three things. Firstly, it is saying that religious traditions and language are not meaningless or irrational. Secondly, it is saying that secular citizens should take the views expressed by their religious fellow citizens

seriously. And thirdly, it is underscoring the fact that “monolingual” citizens (i.e., those who can only express themselves in religious language) are not excluded from the political process. In addition, for a country like Singapore, it is fallacious to think that “public reason” must necessarily be secular. Given the religious nature of our society, it is more natural to conclude that in our context “public reason” is profoundly shaped by religious traditions and sensibilities. These are important topics that merit careful reflection. But it is beyond the scope of this essay to discuss them.

Church and State

We turn our attention now to our second theme that will help us to better understand the relationship between politics and religion in Singapore. I am referring to the classical debate on the relationship between Church and State. Viewed from the perspective of Church-State relations we may say that the Singapore government advocates a strict separation of the State from the Church (or any religious institution). This is a huge topic that merits a separate essay. What I propose to

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do at this point is simply to examine if there is any theological justification for the separation of Church and State. This discussion is an important step towards the analysis of the specifics of the government’s position concerning the relationship between religion and politics.

Church-State relations in the West has a long and complex history that can arguably be traced to the inception of Christianity as a social and political force. Our concern is not the details or the trajectory of this history. Our concern is theological. What, according to the teachings of Scripture, should the relationship between the Church and the State look like? Are there scriptural warrants for envisioning the intimate alliance between the two institutions? Or does Scripture itself provide justification for the distancing of the two institutions, a separation of Church and State? Let me begin by clearly stating at the outset that it is my view that Scripture supports the institutional separation between the Church and the State. The reasons for favouring the separationist view will become clearer as we examine the specific roles and purposes of these institutions.

Let me begin with the State. Perhaps the most comprehensive treatment of the nature and function of the State in the New Testament is found in Romans 13. Paul begins by stating categorically, “everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities”. The reason for this injunction is found in the same verse: “for there is no authority except that which God has established” (v 1). This startling assertion has at least two implications. Firstly, the State is part of God’s providential ordering of human society. And secondly, because it is God who established the State, he is sovereign over it, no matter how powerful the latter may become. As the New Testament scholar C. E. B. Cranfield puts it: “it is God that sets up (and overthrows) rulers, and ... no one actually exercises ruling authority unless God has, at least for a time set him up.”¹⁷ This is the position of the great Reformers of the sixteenth

century. Both Luther and Calvin maintain that the State is an institution provided by God to protect human beings from self-annihilation.

This brings us to God's purpose for the State. According to Romans 13:3-4, the State was set up by God to punish wrongdoers and to commend those who do the right thing. Put differently, the State is responsible for the creation of a legal system and the implementation of earthly justice, without which human civilisation and flourishing would not be possible. We may say that the specific task of the State is to defend and promote the common good of society and the wellbeing of its individual members. The theologian Bernard Zylstra is therefore right to argue that the State is the integrator of the sort of public justice that would "prevent the violation of the internal sphere of one societal structure by another".¹⁸ To this end, the State has the right to wield the sword (Rom. 13:4). As long as the State carries out its duty in ensuring that justice and peace prevail in human society,

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it is God's servant and instrument because it is fulfilling the divine will. Christians are commanded to pray for the State and those in civil authority so that they may be faithful to the

specific role that God has entrusted to them.

The role and mission of the Church is very different from that of the State. The Church is a community of sinners redeemed by the grace of God in Jesus Christ. She is called to proclaim the Good News of God's salvation to the world and to embody in her life and ministry the love of God. Although the Church is the called-out or set-apart people of God commissioned to bear witness to the saving grace of God, she continues to stand in solidarity with the world. To put this in the language of the Apostle John, although the Church is not of the world, she is very much in the world. In fact, she has been sent to the world to fulfil a very specific task and mission. In solidarity with the world, the Church bears witness to God's mercy and grace by sharing in the joys and hopes, the anxieties and distresses of humankind. As the Church carries out her God-given mission in obedience and service, she becomes God's sacrament in the world — the means by which God reveals and manifests his grace. Because the Church is a specific, distinguishable community and institution, she is in a very real sense a political reality or entity. But the Church, because of her specific role and mission, is a very different kind of political entity from the State.

The separation of Church from State that I advocate recognises the radical distinction between the two institutions, which corresponds to their very different natures and roles. Perhaps just a couple of concrete examples will suffice to illustrate this. The State does not have the authority to adjudicate the proper approaches to worship or pontificate upon religious practices just as the Church does not have the authority to write laws that govern the secular lives of the citizens of the

nation. Only the State is given the authority to wield the sword; the Church does not have the authority to pick up the sword. The failure to recognise the essential differences between the two institutions would result either in a confusion of their distinctive roles or in an unhealthy alliance between the throne and the altar.

As the lay Catholic theologian George Weigel sees it, such an alliance would be extremely problematic both theologically and ethically:

... for Christians the first reason for the Church to eschew any excessive reliance on the State is our overriding concern for the integrity of the Church. The Gospel has its own power, and the Church must bear witness to that. Moreover, a Church dependent on the authority of the State is open to forms of manipulation that are incongruent with the Gospel and dangerously narrow the Church's necessary critical distance from all worldly sovereignties.¹⁹

For this reason, the Church can never endorse the aspirations for a theocratic government or the idea of a Christian nation. In a world still marred by human sinfulness, such ideals are not just illusory but also deceptive and dangerous.

The separation of Church and State can be unfriendly or friendly, strong or moderate. In the unfriendly form of separationism, the State takes a hostile stance towards religion. The extreme version of unfriendly separationism is instantiated in most Marxist countries where institutionalised hostility towards religious

communities and institutions is evident. The clearest example of this outlook is expressed in the Constitution of Albania before the end of the Cold War:

The State recognises no religion and supports and develops atheist propaganda for the purpose of implanting the scientific materialist world outlook to people. (Art. 36).

The creation of any type of organisation of a fascist, anti-democratic, religious or anti-socialist character is prohibited. (Art. 54).²⁰

The Singapore version of separationism is happily that of the friendly variety. The State recognises the importance of religion and the role of religious communities in society and their contributions to the common good. In the same way, the Church-State relationship as envisioned in the MRHA may be described as moderate separationism, which, as we shall see, allows and even encourages the collaboration between government bodies and faith communities. In a religiously pluralistic society like Singapore, friendly or moderate separationism is a paradigm that Christians can and should endorse.

According to the Christian faith, however, the separation of the Church and the State does not mean that they are unrelated to each other. Neither does it mean that the one institution does not serve the other, for both are ordained by God to fulfil his one purpose. How, then, are the two related, and how do they serve each other? Let us begin with the State. The State serves the Church by creating an environment that makes the "quiet and peaceable life"

possible (1 Tim. 2:2), so that the Church can fulfil the mission that God has given to her unhindered. By establishing laws that allow for freedom, peace and human flourishing, that is, by fulfilling the role that God has given to it, the State serves the people of God, the Church. The State further serves the Church, simply by allowing the Church to be the Church — to be the community that worships and serves the God and Father of her Lord, Jesus Christ. The Church serves the State also by being nothing more — and certainly nothing less — than the Church. As I said earlier, the Church has no political ambitions. It has no political agenda for the world. The Church only has the Gospel of Christ to proclaim and a hope to point to. And it is in proclaiming and embodying this Gospel and it is in living in the light of this hope that the Church serves as both prophet and sacrament: as prophet because she declares and performs the love and justice of God in the face of prevailing evils and injustices; as sacrament because she is the means by which

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God's salvific grace reaches the world. The Church serves the State by reminding it of its God-given role to uphold justice and to always seek to serve the common good of society. But most importantly, it is the Church's responsibility to pray for the State and those in authority. By praying for the State, the Church underscores the fact that the State is

not infallible and that its authority comes from God. And by praying for the State, the Church wants the State to be a true servant of God by fulfilling the role that God has given to it.

It is, however, important to note that theologically speaking the dichotomy between Church and State in actuality points to a final unity. This is because the Church believes that Jesus Christ is not just the Lord of the Church — he is also the Lord of the secular State. As the Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder has put it, "The explicit paganism of State, art, economics, and learning did not keep the Church from confessing their subordination to him who sits at the right hand of God".²¹ This brings us back once again to Romans 13, and its great assertion that the secular and pagan State is a creation of God. To say that the State is the servant of Christ is to say that it is in some sense also the servant of the Church, his Body. As we have seen, the State serves the Church simply by allowing the Church to be the Church, that is, by allowing the Church to fulfil her proper role and mission in society. Both Church and State are ordained by God — in the mystery of the divine plan, both institutions are servants of the sovereign God.

Religion and Politics

We are now ready to examine in greater detail the Singapore government's policy for the relationship between religion and politics. There are many ways of approaching this analysis. What I propose to do is to examine two important documents. The first is the Maintenance of Religious Harmony White Paper that we have encountered earlier; and the second document is a segment of the important 2009 National Rally Speech by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong where he

addressed this issue directly and clearly. Of course, everything that is discussed here about these two important documents must be premised upon and set against the background of the freedom of religion enshrined in the Singapore Constitution.

In his 2009 NDR Speech, PM Lee used a biblical metaphor to describe multi-religious Singapore. He compared the city-state with the “Garden of Eden” where “we are happy, where things are working”.²² But in the same breath PM Lee warned that “if you leave the Garden of Eden, you cannot get back in again”. PM Lee was concerned that the harmony of this multi-religious country may be disrupted by conflicts between the religious communities on issues pertaining to its political life. Citing America as an example, where 90 percent of the population claim to believe in God, and where religion and politics “are closely inter-tangled together”,²³ PM Lee warned of importing American-style “culture wars” into Singapore. He was referring to the fierce battle between the conservatives and liberals over moral and cultural issues in the US, “with both sides striving to set the agenda, not just for their own followers but for the country”.²⁴

In his wide-ranging speech, PM Lee reiterated the risks identified by the original crafters of the MRHA some 20 years ago. The first has to do with aggressive and insensitive proselytizing that would offend the religious sensibilities of others and disrupt the delicate harmony among the different religious communities. In the words of the MRH White Paper, “[the duty of the government] is to ensure that every citizen is free to choose his own religion, and that no citizen, in exercising his religious or other rights, infringes upon the rights and sensitivities of other citizens”.²⁵ The

second risk is the “intolerance” or “extremism” that refuses to accommodate or respect the religious beliefs and practices of others. And the third relates to the creation of social ghettos where members of one religious community refuse to interact with those of another religious community. The government eschews two models of the relationship between politics and religion, which it deems inappropriate — even dangerous — for Singapore. The first is the Iranian model, which advocates a theocracy. And the second is the US model, where religion and politics enjoy a close relationship within a secular democracy. PM Lee says that the model we adopt must be that which “makes sense for Singapore”.²⁶ What exactly is that model?

According to the MRH White Paper, one of the vital conditions that must be met in order that inter-religious harmony may be maintained is that “religion and politics must be rigorously separated”.²⁷ This separation is then spelt out in various ways, particularly in (1) the involvement of religious groups in politics, and (2) the involvement of religious leaders in politics. The White Paper also discusses the role of religious individuals in public debate, which we will take up at a later point in this essay. Let us now examine each of these issues in turn.

We turn our attention firstly to the involvement of religious groups in politics. The White Paper begins with this fundamental assumption: “The social fabric of Singapore will ... be threatened if religious groups venture into politics, or if political parties use religious sentiments to garner popular support”. The same threat obtains when a religious group gets involved in politics to oppose the Government or to influence it. When this

happens, the White Paper asserts, religious conflicts will invariably ensue, resulting in “political instability and factional strife”.²⁸ In order to prevent this from happening religious groups must observe “mutual abstention from competitive political influence”. This is lauded as “an important aspect of religious tolerance and harmony”.²⁹ The White Paper acknowledges that the government is neither infallible nor incorruptible. But it warns against religious groups *qua* religious groups from taking up the task of challenging or overthrowing the government. Thus, para. 21 states: “It is the duty of the opposition parties and the electorate, not of any religious group, to overthrow the government which has lost the mandate of the people. Any religious group in Singapore which takes upon itself this duty runs the grave risk of making things worse instead of better”.

The second issue has to do with the role of religious leaders *qua* religious leaders in politics. In para. 20 of the White Paper we read that, “religious leaders and members of religious groups should refrain from promoting any political party or cause under the cloak of religion”. It adds that, “The leaders should not incite their faithful to defy, challenge or actively oppose secular Government policies, much less mobilise their followers or their organisations for subversive purposes”. The White Paper acknowledges that a religious leader — an Archbishop, Pastor, Abbot or Mufti — would have his or her view on certain government policies, and is not expected to be always in agreement with them. But because religious leaders are in a “particularly delicate position”, they should express their political views circumspectly. “They should not use their religious authority to sway their

followers, much less actively incite them to oppose the Government”.³⁰ The same principle is also applied to politicians with religious commitments. To prevent politicians from becoming religious entrepreneurs, the PAP (People’s Action Party) has instructed its candidates not to “mobilise your church or temple or your mosque to campaign for you”. They are instead encouraged to garner “a multiracial multi-religious group of supporters” and to represent all constituents, “not just [their] religious group in Parliament”.³¹

Broadly speaking, Christians should not have any difficulties with the positions taken by the government on these issues. As we have seen in our discussion on the relationship between the Church and the State, the Church is a very different sort of political entity. The Church is not a political party and therefore does not involve herself in politics in the way political parties are engaged. The Church therefore has no political ambitions as such. It is also important to reiterate that the separation between religion and politics that the Singapore government is advocating is of the friendly variety, and that the government itself recognises that “this division between religion and politics is a matter of convention”. As paragraph 24 of the MRH White Paper makes perfectly clear, “It is neither possible nor desirable to compartmentalise completely the minds of voters into secular and religious halves, and ensure that only the secular mind influences his voting behaviour”.

This broad agreement, however, does not mean that some proposals of the White Paper are not problematic. Some commentators have pointed out that the separation between “politics” and “religion” here conceived is arbitrary. In her essay, “Between Eden and

Armageddon: Navigating ‘Religion’ and ‘Politics’ in Singapore”, Thio Li-Ann expresses this conundrum thus:

... a range of hypotheticals abound where it is not so easy to stipulate when ‘religion’ and ‘politics’ should be separated, bearing in mind certain world-views reject a sacred-secular divide. Is criticising policies on abortion, organ transplants, euthanasia, sex education, military policy or press freedom forbidden involvement? Does it matter whether this is expressed during a religious sermon or a letter to the press, or whether the view supports or opposes government policy? What if a religious group campaigns for foreign domestic workers to be given a mandatory day off in their employment contracts? Would this differ if a non-religious group ran the campaign?³²

The vagueness of some of the language of the White Paper (which may be strategic and intentional on the part of its crafters) and the possibility of various interpretations that it allows must be pointed out and clarification sought. While the Church has no political ambitions, it is profoundly concerned with issues of justice, equality and peace. Put differently, as part of the larger political community, the Church is profoundly involved in the life of that community. The Church has always spoken out against injustices and the violations of the dignity of the human being. This prophetic act, which is a part of the Church’s witness in society, can be easily construed as politically motivated. Similarly,

archbishops, bishops, theologians and pastors who have no political ambitions or agendas must — as preachers of the Gospel and teachers of the Faith — speak out against injustices for the sake of the common good of society. These actions may likewise be interpreted as motivated by a particular political agenda and as attempts to sway their flock against a particular Government policy or even against the ruling party. They can likewise be construed as garnering for the opposition or inciting social unrest. In this way, the vagueness of the language of the White Paper may impede what must be deemed as the proper and non-negotiable responsibility of the Church and her leaders. Because of this lack of clarity, the simple witness of the Church can very easily be politicised. This means that while the Church can agree with the general thrust of the government’s policy concerning religion and politics, she must seek to address the implications of the imprecise language of the legislation.

Two questions will help us to pull together the various strands explored thus far. The first is: According to the Christian perspective, can religion be separated from politics? The answer is surely “No”. This is because for the Christian — and I dare say that this is true for the Muslim, the Jew and anyone who takes religion seriously — religion can never be privatised.

According to theologians Michael J. Himes and Kenneth R. Himes,

Privatization refers to the tendency to restrict religious faith to the category of the individual while ruling out any engagement of religion with society. Religion then no longer

serves as an integrating element in a person's worldview and identity. Instead, life is fragmented into various compartments with religion being one area alongside others with little interaction among the fragments.³³

The privatisation of religion advocated by some secularists is based on an erroneous understanding of religion itself. It fails to make a distinction between "personal" and "private" and treats the two words as synonyms. A religious decision, although profoundly personal, is never private. A genuinely personal decision is always public because it is an act of a person who is part of a social network, a community. His decisions therefore affect the society to which he belongs. Religion cannot be reduced to the idiosyncratic preferences of private individuals. Religion determines a person's entire outlook to reality, and shapes his way of being in the world.

As we have seen, the White Paper implicitly acknowledges this when it says that it is impossible to divide the minds of voters

Religion cannot be reduced to the idiosyncratic preferences of private individuals. Religion determines a person's entire outlook to reality, and shapes his way of being in the world.

into secular and religious halves, and when it maintains that the separation of religion and politics it advocates is a matter of convention. This leads us to the second question: If religion and politics cannot be separated, can the

Christian, without contradiction, support their *institutional* separation as delineated in the White Paper? The answer to this question is "Yes". And I hope that I have explicated the reasons for this with sufficient clarity here.

Conclusion

I would like to conclude, then, by urging all Christians to take their involvement in public life seriously. Christians are commanded to love their neighbour. Christians obey this command by taking their social responsibilities seriously, and by working towards the common good. Social and political involvement and engagement is part of Christian discipleship. It is also part of the Christian's witness to society. But as Christians engage in civic life and in the affairs of the earthly *polis*, they must also realise that their position in the temporal world is always characterised by paradox. Christians, as we have seen, are in the world but not of it. This paradox of distance and intimacy, the present and the future, the mundane and the transcendent characterises every aspect of Christian existence, including the Christian's social and political engagement. The implications of this paradox are clearly portrayed in the second century by the anonymous writer of the *Letter to Diognetus*, when the young Church was facing severe persecution:

Christians are not distinguished from the rest of humanity by country, language, or custom. From nowhere do they live in cities of their own, nor do they speak some unusual dialect, nor do they practice an eccentric life-style ... But while they live in both Greek and barbarian cities, as each one's lot was cast, and follow the

local customs in dress and food and other aspects of life, at the same time they demonstrate the remarkable and admittedly unusual character of their own citizenship. They live in their own countries, but only as aliens; they participate in everything as citizens, and endure everything as foreigners. Every foreign country is their fatherland, and every fatherland is foreign. They marry like everyone else, and have children, but they do not expose their offspring. They share their food but not their wives. They are 'in the flesh', but they do not live 'according to the flesh'. They live on earth but their citizenship is in heaven. They obey the established laws; indeed in their private lives they transcend the laws.³⁴

The image of the "resident alien" nicely captures the place of Christians in the world. As "resident", the Christian is a citizen of the earthly city and must therefore be fully involved in the civic and political life of society. But as "alien" and "sojourner", the Christian is also a citizen of another city, which the New Testament calls "the city of the Living God, the heavenly Jerusalem" (Heb. 12:22). What are the implications of this dual citizenship? What does it mean for a Christian to live in the profound tensions associated with the paradox? And how does the existential ambivalence of the Christian as a result of this paradox influence his social and political life in the earthly *polis*? That, however, is the subject of another essay. ■

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Endnotes

¹ This essay is a slightly revised version of a lecture delivered at St Andrew's Cathedral Singapore on 4 May 2011.

² Quoted in Zakir Hussain, "Religious Harmony: 20 Years of Keeping the Peace," *The Straits Times*, Friday, July 24, 2009, A20.

³ *Maintenance of Religious Harmony White Paper*, Annex at 15-16, paras. 16-17.

⁴ *The Straits Times*, Saturday, July 25, 2009, A41.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ See: http://statutes.agc.gov.sg/non_version/cgi-bin/cgi_retrieve.pl?&actno=Reved-167A&date=latest&method=part [accessed 9 December 2010].

⁷ "Foolhardy to Take Harmony For Granted," *The Straits Times*, Saturday, July 25, 2009, A41.

⁸ Hussain, "Religious Harmony," A21.

⁹ Doug Farrow, "Three Meanings of Secular," *First Things* 133 (May 2003), 18.

¹⁰ Wilfred M. McClay, "Two Concepts of Secularism," in *Religion Returns to the Public Square: Faith and Policy in America*, ed. Hugh Helco and Wilfred M. McClay (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 46.

¹¹ Farrow, "Three Meanings of Secular," 18.

¹² *MRH White Paper*, para. 6.

¹³ Statement by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong on Integrated Resort (18 April 2005), paras. 62 and 66.

¹⁴ "Foolhardy to Take Harmony For Granted," A41.

¹⁵ Brendan Sweetman, *Why Politics Needs Religion* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2006).

¹⁶ Jürgen Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), 130.

¹⁷ *The Epistle to the Romans, Vol. 2*, The International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1979), 663.

¹⁸ Bernard Zylstra, “The Bible, Politics, and the State,” in *Confessing Christ and Doing Politics*, ed. James W. Silken (Washington, D.C.: Association for Public Justice Education Fund, 1982), 51-52.

¹⁹ George Weigel, *Soul of the World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 24.

²⁰ Quoted in Trevor Beeson, *Discretion and Valour: Religious Conditions in Russia and Eastern Europe* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 322.

²¹ John Howard Yoder, *The Royal Priesthood* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 178.

²² *NDR Speech 2009*.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *MRH White Paper*, para. 5.

²⁶ *NDR Speech 2009*.

²⁷ *MRH White Paper*, para. 14.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, para. 19.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, para 28.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, para 23.

³¹ *NDR Speech 2009*.

³² Thio Li-Ann, “Between Eden and Armageddon: Navigating ‘Religion’ and ‘Politics’ in Singapore,” *Singapore Journal of Legal Studies* (2009): 377.

³³ Michael J. Himes and Kenneth R. Himes, *Fullness of Faith: The Public Significance of Theology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), 2.

³⁴ *Letter to Diognetus* 5.1-10.