

Religious Life in Modern Plural Societies

Roland Chia

This essay is a slightly revised version of an address I gave at an international conference on 'The Future of Faith: Religious Values in a Plural World' on 7 November 2018, organised by MUIS in celebration of its 50th anniversary. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong was the Guest-of-Honour at the event.

On behalf of the National Council of Churches of Singapore (NCCS) and Trinity Theological College (TTC) I would like to congratulate the Maglis Ugama Islam Singapura (MUIS) on its 50th Anniversary. Both NCCS and TTC have had the privilege of working with MUIS over the past twenty years or so, and we have been greatly enriched by your friendship. I would also like to thank MUIS for the invitation to participate in this conference, which is the culmination of its yearlong anniversary celebrations.

The overarching theme of the conference is 'The Future of Faith: Religious Values in a Plural World'. The topic that has been assigned to me for this present session is 'Enhancing Religious Life in Modern Plural Societies'. I've been asked to speak specifically from my own religious tradition, namely, the Christian faith, and also to give special attention to the Singapore context.

In compass of this brief essay, I would like to address the following issues. I begin with a broad sketch of our postmodern society and identify two of its features that in some ways pose a challenge not only to Christians but also to all people of faith. They are secularism, and pluralism. Secondly, I ask the question: How can the Christian, faced with these challenges, keep true to his faith, the faith that was 'once for all delivered to the saints', as the Bible puts it (Jude 3)? My answer is the Church – the community created by God in Jesus Christ, which nurtures and guides God's people. Thirdly, I argue that it is only when Christians are truly grounded in their own faith tradition that they can contribute meaningfully as responsible citizens in our religiously and culturally plural society. And finally, and in similar vein, I maintain that it is only when Christians are firmly established in their own tradition that they can work collaboratively with people from other faith communities for the good of society.

SECULARISM AND PLURALISM

We begin firstly by tracing the contours of the cultural landscape of our late- or post-modern society. Needless to say, ours is a very complex and plural world in which competing worldviews and ideologies jostle for space and attention. The old medieval order with its governing metaphysics that postulates that nature and history are ordered by a Supreme Being – God, the Creator – and therefore are subjected to his sovereign superintendence had collapsed. Enlightenment rationalism and postmodern iconoclasm have shattered all grand or meta- narratives and emancipated humanity from a God-centred universe. This has brought about a new vision of reality, one that celebrates plurality and jettisons any exclusive claims to truth.

Writers like Lesslie Newbigin have pointed out that the modern pluralist vision of society is profoundly wedded to secularism. In his book entitled, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, where he offers an extensive treatment of this issue, Newbigin writes:

Pluralism is conceived to be a proper characteristic of the secular society, a society in which there is no officially approved pattern of belief or conduct. It is therefore also conceived to be a free society, a society not controlled by accepted dogma but characterised rather by the critical spirit which is ready to subject all dogmas to critical (and even skeptical) examination.¹

Secularism and pluralism are therefore interrelated realities that make up the complex tapestry of our modern and late-modern culture. Much can be said about these cultural sensibilities that have become more pervasive in our society and the challenges they present to people of faith, who wish to uphold their cherished traditions and the wisdom they embody. Both ‘secularism’ and ‘pluralism’ are ideologically laden concepts that must be subjected to careful analysis and interrogation. Both are associated with certain myths, which, if left unaddressed, can become serious impediments to the religious lives and freedoms of people of faith.

Let us first consider secularism. In 1967 sociologists like Peter Berger presented the ‘Secularisation Theory’ which made the bold postulation that with the advance of secularism and modernity, the influence of religion will diminish and will eventually dissipate all together.² This ‘prophecy’ obviously did not come to pass. Not only is religion still around, it continues to thrive in many parts of the world. This has led

¹ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1989), 1.

² See Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Anchor, 1990 – Reprint of 1967 edition).

Berger to abandon his earlier hypothesis and to envision instead the re-sacralisation of the world, as the title of his 1999 book makes clear.³

The demise of the secularization theory, however, does not mean that secularism is a spent force. It is at work even in multi-religious societies like Singapore. Secularism is shrouded in its own mythologies, one of which is its claim to neutrality. Secularists have sometimes presented secularism as objective and rational. Unlike religion, which is often divisive and sometimes even dangerous, secularism, they insist, is neutral and tolerant. Secularism is therefore valorized as the best guarantor of social peace.

This view of secularism must be demythologized. Secular neutrality is a fallacy because secularism is a philosophy, an ideology with its own exclusive truth-claims. For instance, secularism promotes a materialistic philosophy that excludes religious concepts of the divine. Secularism also promotes a certain moral vision, shaped by various versions of utilitarian pragmatism. As I've argued elsewhere, it takes a lot of faith to be a secularist! In order for faith to have a future and for religious voices to be given a fair hearing in the public square, 'secular neutrality' must be seen for what it truly is, namely, a myth. To fail to recognise and expose the myth of secular neutrality is to allow secularists of a certain stripe to banish religious voices from public debates and relegate them to a private sphere to which they must be confined. Put differently, in the guise of neutrality secularism can show itself to be both illiberal and undemocratic.⁴ This form of hegemonic secularism not only deems religion to be irrelevant to public life; it also stifles the lives and freedoms of people of faith.

In recent decades, secular philosophers like Jürgen Habermas and others have been calling for public spaces to be more 'inclusive', and thus for the deprivatization of religious identities. Habermas concedes that 'secular citizens or those of other religious persuasions can under certain circumstances learn something from religious contributions.' In addition, although Habermas speaks of the need for religious communities to 'translate' religious language in order to make it accessible to the predominantly secular interlocutors in the public square, he recognises that ideas or values associated with a particular religious tradition are not totally foreign and unintelligible to those who do not belong to that tradition. Habermas therefore concedes that it is possible for secular citizens to sometimes 'recognise in the normative truth content of a religious utterance hidden intuitions of their own'.⁵

³ Peter L. Berger (ed.) *The Re-sacralization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1999).

⁴ See Linda Woodhead, 'Liberal Religion and Illiberal Secularism' in Gavin D'Costa, Malcolm Evans, Tariq Modood and Julian Rivers (Eds.), *Religion in a Liberal State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 93-116.

⁵ Jürgen Habermas, 'Religion in the Public Square', *European Journal of Philosophy*, 14(1), 10.

Space allows us to take only a very cursory glance at pluralism. That we live in a society that is religiously, philosophically and ideologically plural is not a matter of dispute. In fact, cultural and religious diversity is not a modern phenomenon. The earliest Christians in the Greco-Roman world lived in a milieu that was profoundly plural, an emporium of different philosophical schools and religious sects.

However, while religious diversity is not a new phenomenon, what is new is pluralism, a philosophical theory that says that all the major world religions point to the same transcendent reality. Put differently, pluralism *a priori* rules out the possibility that any religion can be said to be normative or superior to the rest. As one theologian describes it, pluralism is ‘deeply suspicious of attempts to privilege one tradition or teaching as normative for all, and ... skeptical of claims that any particular religious tradition has special access to God ...’⁶ The eminent theologian of religion, Gavin D’Costa, has argued that pluralism is a species of Enlightenment modernity that attempts to force the different religions into the procrustean bed of an alien rationality or paradigm. Thus, he observes perceptively that:

Despite their [‘pluralists’] intentions to encourage openness, tolerance, and equality they fail to attain their goals on their own definition, because of the tradition-specific nature of their positions. Their particular shaping tradition is the Enlightenment ... The Enlightenment, in granting a type of equality to all religions, ended up denying public truth to any of them.⁷

D’Costa could therefore justifiably assert that the pluralists’ ‘god is modernity’s god’.⁸ He exposes the disingenuousness of the attempt by pluralists to present themselves as honest ‘brokers to disputing parties’ while concealing the fact that they ‘represent yet another party which invites disputants to leave their parties and join the pluralist one’.⁹ In so doing, pluralists, in an ironical twist, in fact reveal themselves to be ‘absolutists’ and ‘exclusivists’. Pluralism relativises all truth-claims except its own. It subjugates all religious traditions to its grand theory of religion, which alone is normative. In this way, pluralism is scathingly disrespectful of the different religions and their rich histories and heritages. D’Costa is justified in describing the approach of pluralists like John Hick as an instance of ‘liberal intolerance’. Pluralism is a form of imperialism.

⁶ Harold Netland, *Encountering Religious Pluralism: The Challenge to Christian Faith and Mission* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity Press, 2001), 14.

⁷ Gavin D’Costa, *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2000), 1.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 20.

If religious life is to flourish and if faith is to have a future, the fallacies of these two 'isms' – secularism and pluralism – must be clearly understood and robustly addressed.

THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH

How can Christians remain faithful to their own theological and spiritual heritage in the midst of our secular and pluralistic culture, drenched with diverse and conflicting ideologies and truth-claims?

The answer from the Christian tradition is the Church, the community of believers gathered by God's Spirit in the name of Jesus Christ, its Saviour and Lord. It was the great fifth century theologian, Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, who described the Church as 'the mother of Christians'.¹⁰ Augustine stressed that it is through the Church that Christians found the Gospel of life, and it is through her that Christians are nourished by the Word of God and formed as disciples of Jesus Christ. Echoing Augustine, Pope Benedict XVI writes: 'The Church's faith precedes, engenders, supports and nourishes our faith. The Church is the mother of all believers.'¹¹

Central to the Church's ministry of teaching and catechesis is its bishops, theologians, pastors, and leaders. In his epistle to the Ephesians, the Apostle Paul says that God has raised leaders to equip believers and build up the ecclesial community (Ephesians 4:11-14). These leaders, the apostle continues, are to help Christians attain maturity so that 'we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the cunning of men, by their craftiness and deceitful wiles' (4:14).

The churches in Singapore take a very serious view on the training of its pastors and Christian workers. For example, Trinity Theological College (TTC), which celebrates its 70th anniversary this year, is committed to training Christian workers in Singapore and in the region by offering degree programmes that are academically rigorous and yet are also firmly rooted in the rich spiritual tradition of the Church. Following in the footsteps of great theologians like Augustine in the fifth century and John Calvin in the sixteenth, who wedded intellectual rigour with spiritual insight, TTC is resolved to employ the best of Christian scholarship in the teaching of the Faith. It is only when pastors and church leaders are firmly grounded in the Faith that they are able to guide and nurture their congregations.

¹⁰ Augustine, *De moribus ecclesiae catholicae* (Of the Morals of the Catholic Church).

¹¹ Benedict XVI, General Audience, 31 October 2012, https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/audiences/2012/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20121031.html.

In addition, together with the National Council of Churches and the Bible Society, TTC has established the Ethos Institute for Public Christianity, the first Christian think-tank in Singapore. The purpose of Ethos Institute is to help the general Christian public to reflect Christianly on today's most pressing and perplexing issues. The Ethos website contains articles on a wide variety of issues from bioethical issues like mitochondrial replacement technology, euthanasia and social egg freezing to social issues like inter-faith relations, human sexuality and marriage. These resources not only enable Christians to think about these issues from the Christian perspective. They also demonstrate that this ancient Faith has the resources to address these contemporary questions with intellectual integrity as well as with uncommon wisdom and spiritual depth.

In dealing with contemporary culture, which is always changing and in flux, TTC and the Ethos Institute have taken the two complimentary approaches which the Catholic tradition since Vatican II has called *ressourcement* and *aggiornamento*.¹² *Ressourcement* refers to the effort to return to the theological and spiritual traditions of the Church – Scripture, the great ecumenical Creeds, the writings of theologians like Irenaeus, Augustine and Luther – in order to draw from their authentic witness, insights and wisdom. The Church maintains that the Bible (both the Old and New Testaments) is the authoritative basis for both Christian doctrine and conduct because it is the revelation of God. The Magisterial Reformers of the sixteenth century encapsulated the Church's understanding of the primary authority of Scripture in the expression *sola scriptura* ('Scripture alone'). This commitment to Scriptural authority is echoed in the Church's many confessions and catechisms. For example, Article 6 of the Anglican formulary known as the Thirty-Nine Articles states categorically that:

Holy Scripture containth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of Faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation.¹³

But *ressourcement* does not only refer to the acknowledgement of the authority of Scripture. It also calls Christians to recognize and submit to the guidance of the authoritative interpreter of the Bible, namely, the Church. Stressing the important

¹² Italian for 'bringing up to date'.

¹³ The Westminster Confession, the doctrinal standard of the Reformed Churches, echoes this high view of Scripture: 'The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture; to which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men (I, 6).

role of the Church, the second century theologian of Latin Christianity, Tertullian, writes:

... one point should be decided first, namely, who holds the faith to which the Bible belongs, and from whom, through whom, when and to whom was the teaching delivered by which men became Christians? For only where the true Christian teaching and faith are evident, will be the true Scriptures, the true interpretations, and all the true Christian traditions be found.¹⁴

Thus, despite their strong emphasis on the primary authority of Scripture, the sixteenth century Reformers were also careful to underscore the importance of the tradition of the Church that serve as the lens through which Scripture must be read. They understood very well that without the tutelage of the Church our interpretation of the authoritative text can easily be subjected to what Loren Meads has described as the ‘tyranny of the new’,¹⁵ that is, the dictates of the whims and temper of contemporary culture. When this happens, Scripture can no longer speak prophetically and challengingly to our modern culture and contemporary context.

But *ressourcement* must be supplemented by *aggiornamento*, that is, the need to speak clearly and engagingly to the contemporary world, which means that we must first understand the issues that it presents.¹⁶ The Church must therefore take a keen interest in the contemporary society to which she has been called to be God’s witness. She must constantly update herself and keep abreast with developments in every aspect of culture – politics, economics, science, medicine, the arts, technology, media, etc. It must be emphasized that *aggiornamento* is profoundly dependent on *ressourcement*. As Avery Dulles has pointed out, alluding to an important point made in the Vatican II document *Unitatis Redintegratio* (‘Decree on Ecumenism’): ‘Any *aggiornamento* that is accomplished was intrinsically connected with the principle of *ressourcement*’.¹⁷ These two approaches must therefore work hand-in-hand. To be dependent on *ressourcement* alone would mean that the Church risks the condition of antiquarianism. However, to focus only on *aggiornamento* is to put the Church in danger of faddism, which will erode its distinct identity as the set-apart people of God, and make it an indistinguishable part of our modern culture. But together, they will ensure that the faith of the Church is at once orthodox and relevant.

¹⁴ *On Prescription of Heretics*, 19.

¹⁵ Loren Mead, *The Once and Future Church* (New York: The Alban Institute, 1991).

¹⁶ See Lawrence Cunningham, *An Introduction to Catholicism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

¹⁷ Avery Dulles, ‘Nature, Mission, and Structure of the Church’, in Matthew Lamb and Matthew Levering (eds), *Vatican II: Renewal Within Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 26.

FAITHFUL CITIZENSHIP

The great theological and spiritual traditions of the Church will not only produce faithful Christians, but also responsible citizens and contributing members of society. The Church teaches that Christians are to be fully involved in public life, and the influence they may exert in the public realm is tied to their dual capacity as believers and citizens. Writers as diverse as Jacques Maritain¹⁸ and Michael Sanders¹⁹ acknowledge the fact that a person's citizenship in a political society and his membership in a faith community profoundly shape his self-understanding. Even secular states like Singapore recognize that it is impossible to separate religion from civic life all together (including political engagements) and that any such separation must be understood only as a matter of 'convention'.²⁰

Christians thus hold a dual citizenship: on the one hand, they are the citizens of the heavenly kingdom (Philippians 3:20-21), and on the other, they are citizens of their own countries. As citizens of the divine kingdom, Christians must conduct themselves in a way that conforms to the will of God. And as citizens of their own countries, they are to participate in political and social life as God's witnesses, declaring as well as embodying God's love, mercy and justice. In both cases, the supreme concern of Christians is to glorify the God they worship.

It must be pointed out that Christianity's emphasis on God's eschatological kingdom does not mean that engagement in this world is of less importance. As Charles Mathewes has pointed out, for Christians '[p]ublic life is not just a pallid rehearsal for heaven ... or a hollow simulacra of real life ...'²¹ Rather public life is the avenue through which Christians serve God by serving their fellowmen. It is 'in and through our loving public engagement', Mathewes adds, that 'we find ourselves called to serve in the choir of God's glorifying chorus'.²²

The Christian ethic for civic life is not tolerance, although the latter has been elevated as the cardinal virtue in modern liberal societies. The lionization of

¹⁸ Jacques Maritain, *Man and the State* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951).

¹⁹ Michael Sandel, *Democracy and Its Discontents: America in Search of a Public Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996).

²⁰ See *Maintenance of Religious Harmony White Paper*, 26 December 1989, para 24. For a more detailed treatment of the relationship between religion and politics in the Singapore context, see Roland Chia, 'Religion and Politics in Singapore: A Christian Reflection', published at the Ethos Institute for Public Christianity website: https://ethosinstitute.sg/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Religion-and-Politics-in-Singapore_A-Christian-Perspective.pdf

²¹ Charles Mathewes, *A Theology of Public Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 305.

²² Ibid.

tolerance in the West can be traced to John Locke's celebrated *Letter Concerning Tolerance* (1689) that presented tolerance as a panacea to the religious conflicts that had become acute in seventeenth century Europe. Tolerance has to do not so much with ethics or religion, but with the management of difference and the threat that it poses to civic peace. As Wendy Brown has brilliantly and perceptively described it, liberal tolerance is a political strategy for 'regulating aversion', that is, a way of negotiating the middle path between assimilation and rejection.²³ Tolerance is born out of political necessity and thus cannot be properly described as a virtue.

Any critique of tolerance as a modern 'virtue' must not be naïve about its peculiar and subtle relationship with power. As an attitude towards the other, tolerance always underscores the need on the part of those exercising it to suffer something that they would rather not, if they were given a choice. Tolerance thus entails an 'enduring', a 'licensing' or an 'indulgence'. Put differently, tolerance is a kind of political posturing in relation to the other that can never be said to be judgment free or ideologically and morally neutral. Despite its guises of inclusivity and magnanimity, tolerance in fact points to the superiority of the one who tolerates over the one who must be tolerated. Tolerance invariably has to do with something that is conferred by someone who does not require it upon someone else who does. But most significantly, tolerance has to do with an asymmetrical relationship of power where the one showing tolerance is always dominant over the one who is tolerated. As Brown explains:

Tolerance as a political practice is always conferred by the dominant, it is always a certain expression of domination even as it offers protection or incorporation to the less powerful, and tolerance as an individual virtue has a similar asymmetrical structure. The ethical bearing of tolerance is high-minded, while the object of such high-mindedness is inevitably figured as something more lowly.²⁴

Thus, while the practice of tolerance can give the superficial veneer of inclusivity, it in fact excludes, or at the very least pushes to the margins, the people (usually belonging to a minority group) whom the majority deems must be merely tolerated. 'Practices of tolerance', writes Brown, 'are tacit acknowledgements that the Other remains politically outside the norm of citizenship ...'²⁵

The Christian ethic for civic life is not tolerance, but love – a genuine respect for and profound sense of benevolent responsibility towards the other. Christian love cannot

²³ Wendy Brown, *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2008).

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 178

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 75.

be reduced to sentimentalism. As Jacques Maritain explains, to demonstrate Christian love does not mean ‘loving someone in the mere sense of wishing him well; it means loving someone in the sense of becoming one with him, of bearing his burdens, of living a common life with him, of feeling with him and suffering with him’.²⁶ Understood in this way, Christian love can never be instrumentalised or used as a means to some other end than the good of the other. In addition, Christian love is always also a discipline – that is why it can be commanded. It is shaped by immersion into the theological, spiritual and liturgical ethos of the Christian faith, and cultivated through participation in that community of believers called the Church. This is the love that Jesus commanded his disciples to show indiscriminately to their neighbors (Mark 12:30-31), a love that may be described as an attentive and self-giving orientation towards the other. Christian love always seeks the good of its object. But it is at the same time a humble love that allows the one loved to transform the one who loves. As Mathewes explains:

Love orients us towards others by teaching us how we are properly affected by those others – how we properly apprehend their value and how that apprehension helps us come to a better, less self-aggrandizing, assessment of our relative significance.²⁷

The virtue of Christian love is a more solid basis for a genuine culture of inclusivity that must characterise a civil and peaceable society than the politics of tolerance. It is in practicing this sort of love that we are made more and more aware of our interdependence of and solidarity with one another as members of the society to which we all belong and in which we all have a part to play. In his encyclical entitled, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (‘The Concern of the Church for the Social Order’), Pope John Paul II expands on the concept of solidarity – which lies at the very heart of responsible citizenry – thus:

It is above all a question of interdependence ... accepted as a moral category. When interdependence becomes recognized in this way, the correlative response as a moral and social attitude, as a “virtue”, is solidarity. This then is not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far. On the contrary, it is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say, to the good of all and of each individual because we are all responsible for all.²⁸

²⁶ Jacques Maritain, ‘To Exist with the People’, in *The range of Reason* (New York: Scribner, 1952), 122.

²⁷ Mathewes, *A Theology of Public Life*, 286.

²⁸ Pope John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (1987), 38. See http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_30121987_sollicitudo-rei-socialis.html.

FOR THE COMMON GOOD

It is this ethic of love that would compel Christians to serve the common good in deliberate, constructive and imaginative ways. I have already alluded to the command that Jesus gave to his disciples to love their neighbours found in the Gospels. Elsewhere, the New Testament exhorts Christians to pray ‘for all men, for kings and all who are in high positions’, so that all may lead ‘a quiet and peaceable life’ (1 Timothy 2:1-2). But there is a particular passage from the Old Testament that speaks directly to the theme we are now considering. Writing to God’s people in exile, the prophet Jeremiah gave this remarkable injunction that they should ‘seek the welfare of the city ... and pray to the LORD on their behalf’ (Jeremiah 29:7).

In his insightful and challenging book entitled *The Home that We Build Together*, Jonathan Sacks offers a stirring paraphrase of this powerful passage from Jeremiah that every Christian can and should affirm: ‘Take the city’s welfare as your own. Work for it, pray for it, contribute to it, and don’t see yourselves in opposition to it. Keep your faith. Preserve your identity. Stay true to yourself but be a blessing to those among whom you live’.²⁹ In other words, as people of faith (as Christians) we are to seek to serve the common good and to promote the peace and wellbeing (shalom) of all our neighbours, regardless of race, language and religion. Throughout the history of the Church, Christians have always tried to do this wherever they are with varying degrees of success and visibility. They have established schools and hospitals, orphanages and hospices. Christians in Singapore have also played a significant role in serving the common good of our society, and are continuing to do so.

The idea of the common good, whose origin can be traced to the Roman and Greek philosophers, has seen something of a revival in recent decades. Thinkers from both the political left and right have commandeered this concept to construct their respective visions of society. But this idea is also profoundly rooted in the Christian tradition and is developed in the works of the Church’s most eminent theologians like Augustine, Aquinas, Luther and Calvin. Perhaps the most compelling definition of the common good in our time comes from the pen of the Christian theologian and philosopher Jacques Maritain, who was instrumental in the formulation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). According to Maritain, the common good

²⁹ Jonathan Sacks, *The Home that We Build Together* (New York: Continuum, 2007), 178.

involves, as its chief value, the highest possible attainment (that is, the highest compatible with the good of the whole) of persons to their lives as persons, and to their freedom of expansion or autonomy – and to the gifts or goodness which in their turn flow from it.³⁰

The concept of the common good must be of course undergirded by a robust anthropology, an understanding of what it means to be human. Christian anthropology is based upon the Scriptural teaching that human beings are created in the image and likeness of their Creator (Genesis 1:26-27). As bearers of the divine image, every human being regardless of status and circumstance is valuable and must therefore be accorded an inalienable dignity and special worth.

In modern discourse on the common good in modern western societies, it has become quite fashionable to weave the idea of the common good together with the liberal notion of human rights. While the rights of individuals and the common good of society are related in many important ways, how these rights are understood is critical to the way we envision that relationship. According to the Christian understanding, emphasis on rights must never be just about the protection of personal autonomy. Rather, to protect the rights of the individual is to ensure that he or she is not robbed or deprived of the conditions necessary for his or her flourishing. Thus, according to the Christian tradition, the concept of common good has to do fundamentally with our moral responsibility and commitment to each other, and any reference to the rights of the individual must be understood in light of this moral commitment. As Maritain explains:

The notion of right and the notion of moral obligation are correlative. They are both founded on the freedom proper to spiritual agents. If man is morally bound to the things which are necessary to the fulfilment of his destiny, obviously, then, he has the right to fulfil his destiny; and if he has the right to fulfil his destiny then he has the right to the things necessary for this purpose.³¹

The concept of the common good reminds us that we do not exist as isolated individuals, but in a community. We exist with others, and, as Maritain has again perceptively pointed out, ‘*To exist with* is an ethical category’.³² On the basis of all these considerations, the common good may be understood as a web of tacit agreements on how human sociality should be organised based on a shared moral framework or vision. As such there is a profound sense in which the common good can never be legislated or brought into being by government *fiat*.

³⁰ Jacques Maritain, *The Rights of Man and Natural Law*, trans. Doris C. Anson (New York: Scribner, 1943), 94.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 145.

³² Jacques Maritain, ‘To Exist with the People’, in *The Range of Reasons* (New York: Scribner, (1942), 122.

Many scholars have argued that religion in general and faith communities in particular can be important creators of ‘social capital’ in society. Alison Gilchrist has defined social capital broadly as ‘a collective asset made up of social networks based on shared norms and trust and mutuality’.³³ In multi-religious Singapore, religious people and their faith communities can engender relationships of trust and goodwill based on shared moral commitments and a profound sense of mutual responsibility. The different faith communities can work collaboratively towards society’s flourishing. Together, they can provide the social and moral ballast that ensures stability and rootedness in a world whose constant feature is change. The role of religion in serving the common good should therefore never be trivialized or ignored.

The modern secular and pluralist society must therefore allow the various faith communities to flourish and its members to participate in public life for the common good, for that is the only way in which society can build itself up and mature. As Jonathan Sacks has once again so eloquently and perceptively put it:

Society is where we come together to achieve collectively what none of us can do alone. It is our common property. We inhabit it, make it, breathe it. It is the realm in which *all* of us is more important than *any* of us. It is our shared project, and it exists to the extent that we work for it and contribute to it.³⁴

Dr Roland Chia is Chew Hock Hin Professor of Christian Doctrine at Trinity Theological College and Theological and Research Advisor at the Ethos Institute for Public Christianity.

³³ Alison Gilchrist, *The Well-Connected Community: A Networking Approach to Community Development* (Bristol: The Policy Press, 2004), 4.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.