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# **RELIGIOUS HARMONY IN SINGAPORE**

A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor  
of Philosophy in Religious Studies at Massey University

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## **ABSTRACT**

The rise in the number of ethnic and religious conflicts in various parts of the world serve to indicate that religion is a volatile issue, more so if the country's population is heterogeneous in its make-up. Although Singapore is a plural society comprising diverse ethnic and religious communities, there have been no major ethnic or religious conflicts in the country since independence, save for the brief spill-over of the 1969 riots from Malaysia. However, events which have unfolded in the country in recent decades provide compelling evidence to suggest that there are strong religious undercurrents within the country which can be easily aroused. Religious harmony is not a natural phenomenon but an achieved state of affairs and this study attempts to examine the factors contributing to religious harmony in Singapore. The government encourages inter-religious toleration in society through its various public policies concerning housing and education for example. The exposure of the population to the diverse religious traditions which abound in the country contributes in part to the relatively smooth coexistence among the various religious groups. Although freedom of religion is constitutionally guaranteed, the government insists that the practice of religion must be tempered with national concerns, such as economic development and success. To this end, there are laws in place such as the recently adopted Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act to regulate the boundaries of religion in the country. In the interest of preserving religious harmony, this Act legislates against aggressive proselytisation practices and the politicizing of religious groups. It is the government's active management of religion in the country which plays a major role in maintaining religious harmony in Singapore.

## GLOSSARY OF TERMS

<i>Adat</i> -	Custom
<i>Bodhisattva</i> -	Buddha-to-be
<i>Bu athins</i> -	Conspiratorial village-based secret organisations in Burma
<i>Buddha Jayanti</i> -	The 2,500 <sup>th</sup> anniversary of Buddhism and according to orthodox tradition, a period during which Maitreya, the next Buddha, will appear
<i>Bumiputeras</i> -	Sons of the soil
<i>Ghallugra</i> -	Genocide
<i>Harijans</i> -	Untouchables
<i>Khalistan</i> -	Land of the Pure
<i>Minlaung</i> -	Prince
<i>Nirvana</i> -	Enlightenment
<i>Pongyis</i> -	Title of a senior Buddhist monk in Burma
<i>Sangha</i> -	The Buddhist monastic community
<i>Satyagraha</i> -	The concept of non-violence as proposed by Mahatma Gandhi
<i>Setkya-Min-</i>	Legendary ideal ruler of the Four Island continents and a future Buddha
<i>Shariah</i> -	Islamic law
<i>Yang Di-Pertuan Agong</i> -	King

## **GLOSSARY OF POLITICAL AND SOCIAL ORGANISATIONS**

<i>AFPFL -</i>	Anti-Facist Peoples Freedom League
<i>AISSF -</i>	All-India Sikh Students Federation
<i>BJP -</i>	Bharatiya Jana Party
<i>CDAC-</i>	Chinese Development Assistance Council
<i>Dobama Asiayone -</i>	We Burmans Society
<i>Dobama Synyetha Asiayone -</i>	Burmese People's Monks Association
<i>Khalsa-</i>	Singapore Bengali Association
<i>MENDAKI-</i>	Council for the Development of Singapore Muslims
<i>PAP -</i>	People's Action Party
<i>RSS -</i>	Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh
<i>SGPC -</i>	Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee
<i>SINDA-</i>	Singapore Indian Development Association
<i>UMNO -</i>	United Malayan National Flag
<i>VHP -</i>	Vishva Hindu Parishad/World Hindu Forum
<i>YMBA -</i>	Young Men's Buddhist Association

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<i>i</i>
<b>Abstract</b>	<i>iii</i>
<b>Glossary of Terms</b>	<i>iv</i>
<b>Introduction</b>	<i>1</i>
▪ Religious Demography	
▪ Constitutional Framework	
<b>Chapter 1:</b>	
<b>An Unholy Union of Religion and Politics: A case study of India, Burma and Malaysia</b>	<b>8</b>
▪ India	
▪ Burma	
▪ Malaysia: Political Parties in Malaysia	
United Malay National Organisation	
Malayan Chinese Association	
Malayan Indian Congress	
Gerakan	
Parti Islam Se-Malaysia	
Alliance/Barisan Nasional	
▪ Effects of Government Policies on Inter-Communal Relations	
▪ Islamic Laws in Malaysia	
▪ The Use of Religion as a Political Tool	
<b>Chapter 2:</b>	
<b>The Maria Hertogh Case</b>	<b>54</b>
▪ Appendix 1	
▪ Appendix 2	
<b>Chapter 3:</b>	
<b>The Role of Muslims and the Administration of Islam in Singapore</b>	<b>88</b>
▪ Historical Background of the Malay Community	
▪ Administration of Islam in Singapore	
▪ Malay Muslims in Singapore - An Issue of Identity	
▪ Malays in the Singapore Armed Forces	
▪ Positive Provisions for Malays	
▪ Conclusion	

<b>Chapter 4:</b> <b>The Herzog Visit :</b> <b>An Insult to Muslims in Singapore?</b>	<b>121</b>
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<b>Chapter 5:</b> <b>Of Church and State: The Marxist Conspiracy</b>	<b>143</b>
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- Involvement of the Catholic Church
- Liberation Theology - Asian Style
- Conclusion
- Appendix

<b>Chapter 6:</b> <b>Legislating Against the Misuse of Religion:</b> <b>The Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act</b>	<b>155</b>
--	------------

- Religious Trends in Singapore
- Religious Demography
- Factors Influencing Religious Affiliation in Singapore
- Marrying Religion and State
- Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act
- Conclusion

<b>Chapter 7:</b> <b>Religious Education in Singapore Schools</b>	<b>174</b>
--	------------

- Religious Knowledge Programme
- Issues Surrounding Moral Education in Singapore
- Conclusion

<b>Chapter 8:</b> <b>Nation-Building and its Contribution</b> <b>to Religious Harmony</b>	<b>191</b>
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- Nation-Building in Singapore
- Public Housing
- National Service
- Education
- The Mass-Media
- National Ideology
- Conclusion

<b>Chapter 9:</b>	
<b>The Inter-Religious Organisation in Singapore</b>	<b>226</b>
▪ History of the IRO	
▪ The Structure of the Organisation	
▪ The Public Role of the IRO	
▪ Problems Faced by the IRO	
▪ Current Challenges Facing the IRO	
▪ Postscript	
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>248</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>254</b>