



CS207 Singapore Society

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approximately 77% of the resident population of just over 3 million are Chinese, 15% are Malay, and 7% are Indian¹. According to an official survey, 86% of citizens and residents profess some religious faith or belief. Of this group, slightly more than half (54%) practice Buddhism, Taoism, ancestor worship, or other faiths traditionally associated with ethnic Chinese, approximately 15% are Muslim, 13% are Christian, and 3% are Hindu. Among Christians, the majority of whom are Chinese, mostly Protestants, outnumber Roman Catholics slightly more than two-to-one. There are also small Sikh, Jewish, Zoroastrian, and Jain communities.

Major religious shifts in the last decade are mainly among the Chinese. Despite the growth of Buddhism, there is a distinct shift away from traditional Chinese religions as a whole. Those who practice either Buddhism or Taoism dropped by 9% from 1980 to 2000. As such, Christianity has overtaken Taoism as the second most dominant religion among the Chinese. Christianity has also become the second fastest growing religion in Singapore, deferring only to Buddhism, which grew at the expense of Taoism. Christianity is also popular among the better educated, forming the largest group among graduates. This paper thus attempts to look into the history of the Church in Singapore, its present trends and its future challenges.

Phase I: Christianity from 1819-1900

The early European inhabitants of Singapore were mainly traders or administrators of the British East India Company (EIC). Very few of them came with the purpose of preaching the gospel or serving the community. Robert Morrison was the first missionary sent by the London Missionary Society (LMS) to Singapore in early 17th Century. However he, as with others that followed, met little response from the locals. C. S. Horne gave one reason for this:

'... the natives had learned to suspect every institution that was called Christian, as being designed to accomplish some sinister political end. The first difficulty which missionaries

¹ (2000). *Singapore census of population 2000*. Singapore: Singapore Department of Statistics.



experienced...is to live down the effect produced by... Christians who had preceded them.'

The Roman Catholic Mission began its work in Singapore in 1821. By 1831, the first Catholic chapel was built. As an Anglican, Raffles showed personal interest in the building of the Anglican church. The Presbyterians came in 1839, the Brethren in 1857 and the Methodists in 1885. By the end of the 19th Century, the major denominations - Anglican, Catholic, Presbyterian, Brethren and Methodist - had a presence in Singapore. However, the Anglicans focused mainly on the English, and the Presbyterians, on the Scottish.

Phase II: The Church from 1900-1950

The older denominations were an elitist group who continued to perpetuate the traditions and culture of Western Christianity. They neglected evangelism and spiritual formation as the priority of the Church. Nevertheless, during the early 20th Century, new missionary organisations such as the Assemblies of God and the Lutherans, which emphasized church planting, began to establish themselves, challenging the status quo. Coupled with the shift of interest of western missionaries from China to Southeast Asia, a prime example being the relocation of the China Inland Mission Headquarters to Singapore, there was a fresh impetus to growth. Others have since followed, such as Youth for Christ International

The post-World War II years were a period of political unrest and growing nationalism. In the midst of tumultuous change, the Church became aware of the need to indigenize itself and train local leaders in order to reduce dependence on western missionaries. Thus, the Trinity Theological College and the Singapore Bible College were founded in 1948 and 1952 respectively. As a result of the traumatic experience of the Japanese Occupation, church leaders saw the need to form a federation of churches. So in 1948, the Malayan Christian Council was set up. By 1974, it was renamed as the National Council of Churches of Singapore (NCCS). The aim of NCCS is to encourage understanding and cooperation



between different denominations and individual churches. It also seeks provide a Christian platform to represent views to the Government on various social and moral issues.

Phrase III: Christianity from 1950 to 1970

The most significant development took place after 1950. Several western mission agencies encouraged student organisations such as Campus Crusade for Christ to begin their ministries. These para-church organisations began their ministries of evangelism and lay-leadership training, concentrating on the student population. These voluntary organisations attracted many responsive youths, mostly from the English-educated segment of the school population. Keith Hinton, in his study on the local churches made this observation:

‘ Sometimes groups of students decide in a “multi-individual, mutually interdependent” manner to become Christians...Becoming a Christian in some students circles is seen almost as the enlightened thing to do.’

The number of para-church organisations increased from five in 1950 to over one hundred and fifty by 1990. They have played a positive role in reviving and reactivating the Church. The evolution of Christianity from the past to the present has redefined the role of the Church in the political and socio-cultural spheres of the lives of Singaporeans as well as the impact of the two spheres on the development of the Church.

Political Issues: Inter-Religious Tensions

Between 1984-1989, the Government received many complaints about aggressive evangelisation, mostly carried out by Protestant churches. In 1986, officials of a Hindu temple found posters announcing a Christian seminar pasted at the entrance of their temple. The Hindus also objected when Christian missionaries distributed pamphlets to devotees going into temples along Serangoon Road. Muslims reacted indignantly when some Christian groups distributed pamphlets in Malay that used the word “Allah” for God. They claimed to



be harassed and misled, since to them “Allah” was specific to Islam. They responded by holding talks and sermons in mosques branding Christian evangelists as “dangerous”. 2 000 copies of a book questioning the authenticity of the Bible were also distributed.

While the Government does not prohibit evangelical activities in practice, it discourages activities that might upset the balance of intercommunal relations. Christians are discouraged by the government from “aggressively evangelising among the Malay Muslim community”². In 1986, the ISD called up the leaders of 11 Christian organisations, advising them to avoid activities which could cause social unrest. Some ignored this advice. The senior pastor of the Calvary Charismatic Centre (CCC), Rev. Rick Seaward, later said that the CCC wanted “all Malays to be Christians”. In a fiery sermon in August 1987, Seaward declared that “the greatest threat to Christianity...to all mankind today is not Communism but Islam.”

Political Issues: The Law

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice; however, the Government bans some religious groups. The Government restricts certain religions by application of the Societies Act. Any religion that challenged the government policies will be quickly put down. For instance, the Jehovah’s Witnesses regarded the national anthem and pledge as worship of the state and refused to do military service. As a result, the group was deregistered as a society in 1972 on grounds that its existence was “prejudicial to public welfare and order”³. Possession of the New World Translation of the Bible, used exclusively by Jehovah’s Witnesses, is punishable by a jail sentence⁴. A local branch of the Unification Church was similarly banned in 1982.

Due to the rise of inter-religious tensions, the Government passed the 1990 Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act making illegal what the Government deems to be the inappropriate

² (1989). *Maintenance of religious harmony*. Singapore: Singapore National Printers Ltd.

³ Edwards, N. (1999, Mar. 24). Singapore Jehovah’s Witness unfit to teach –lawyer. *The Straits Times*.

⁴ Lim, S. J. (1988, Nov. 23). But he was carrying them, not I... *The Straits Times*.



involvement of religious groups and officials in political affairs. The act also prohibits judicial review of its enforcement or of any possible denial of rights arising from it. Two churches recently have come to public attention. Catholics were warned about a splinter group that had been excommunicated by the Vatican in 1988, and thus was operating locally without the permission of the Archbishop of Singapore⁵. Previously, Central Christian Church won a 1997 court victory against two newspapers for labelling the church as a cult.⁶

The objective of the Government is to sustain a secular nation where people of different races, religions and languages can co-exist harmoniously. This is “an essential pillar for our stability and nation-building...if any religious group in Singapore seeks to increase the number of its converts drastically..., at the expense of the other faiths or attempts to establish a dominant or exclusive position for itself, it will be strenuously resisted by the other groups.” Thus the strong opposition from both the State as well as the various religious groups curb the evangelical fervour of the Church. Christians are caught in a quandary between the need to respect the sensitivities and rights of others and the need to fulfill the Great Commission: “Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation.” (Mark 16:15). The exclusivity of Christianity – the belief that Jesus is the only Saviour – makes it especially difficult for believers to reconcile the law of the State and the law of God. Contrast Singapore with countries such as the Philippines or the Vatican City where the Church belongs to the State and vice versa. Will the church ever play a major role in the political arena, making “every knee shall bow and every tongue confess”?

Socio-Cultural Issues: The Charismatic Movement

The background of the Charismatic movement is “classical Pentecostalism”, originating from U.S.A. in the early 1900s. Its distinctive teaching was an emphasis on the baptism of the Holy Spirit, which a believer is to experience after conversion. The Pentecostal churches were

⁵ Tan, H. Y. (1999, Feb. 03). Catholics warned of splinter group. *The Straits Times*.



generally more zealous in evangelism. However, many Chinese church leaders could not accept the emphasis on speaking in tongues. Though a majority of the English congregation have embraced the Charismatic Revival, many Chinese churches remained hesitant about the renewal. From 1960 onwards, Singapore went through a time of rapid social and economic change. This was important as a key factor towards church growth. In such a situation people are usually more receptive to the gospel. Manifestations of healing and deliverance attracted many non-Christians in Singapore. Keith Hinton made this observation:

'The fastest growing churches... are all Charismatic and it is notable that it is those

Charismatic churches that have a ministry in healing, exorcism and crisis counseling.'

Christianity has grown from about 10% of the population in the early 1980s to 15% presently. As the Church grew, it developed its own unique style of ministry and national identity, not depending on the West for manpower and financial support. A significant contribution of the local churches is the development and growth of the missionary movement. Missionaries have already gone out from Singapore to other parts of Asia as well as to Australia, Africa, Europe, South America and the Middle East. In a study conducted by the Singapore Centre for Evangelism and Missions, it was reported that about 240 Singaporeans from 85 churches are now serving as missionaries in at least 32 countries. Many of them are engaged in cross-cultural evangelism, church planting, Bible translation and leadership training. The Church here has not only taken root but has also become such a mission-sending centre to surrounding countries.

Socio-Cultural Issues: Education

Local Christians are generally well educated and hold professional, administrative or managerial jobs. Christianity remained strongest among graduates, though figures had dropped from 39.3% in 1990 to 33.5% in 2000. These Christians tend to be English-educated,

⁶ Lim, S. J. (1998, Sep. 01). Church wins appeal in libel case. *The Straits Times*.



and to have attended Christian schools at the primary and secondary levels. Students who attended Christian schools often convert to the religion, about three times more than those who attended secular schools⁷. The religious environment has a lasting influence and has contributed much to the growth of Christianity in Singapore, as argued by Sng and You (1982). However, it is pertinent to note that some parents might have chosen a certain type of school for their children because of their own religious preferences. In such cases, school religious environment has served to reinforce an existing religious affiliation, not involving the conversion of a student from a different religious background to Christianity.

The respondents who have adopted their religion through conversion are mostly Christians (19%), often sharing a similar profile. Clearly, conversion has been a vital factor accounting for the rapid growth of Christianity in Singapore. However, it is also Christians (especially Protestants) who, more likely than followers of other religions, tend to convert to “No Religion”. Moreover, 69% of these persons are below 30 years of age, and the same number had belonged to the former religion for less than four years before dropping out to be non-religionists. Therefore, while Christianity attracts the young, at least some of these young converts are unstable in their faith, finding themselves disillusioned after a brief encounter.

In addition, the findings revealed an inverse correlation between the level of perceived devoutness of the respondents and their educational level: the higher their level of education, the less devout they perceive themselves to be. Devoutness is loosely defined as the frequency of visits to the place of worship, the reading of religious material and the display of religious objects at home. Taking into consideration the demographics of Christians in general, it can be assumed that although there is an increase of believers, there might not be an increase of faith or fervency. Moreover, these characteristics are also related to social prestige and social influence. Christians in Singapore thus exert an influence greater than the

⁷ Kuo, E. C. Y. & Quah, J. S. T. (1988). *Religion in Singapore: report of a national survey*. Singapore: Ministry of Community Development.



proportion they represent. In this sense, Christianity is fast becoming a dominant religion in Singapore. Its future growth depends on the persistence of the body of believers, the stand of the Government and most importantly, the receptivity of the people whom they hope to reach.

The Challenge of Postmodernism

The postmodern age saw the decline of religious authority and decay of spirituality. Religions became “false consciousness”, “opium of the people” (K. Marx) and even “neurosis and illusion” (S. Freud). Globalisation and disillusionment with the Enlightenment dream created a spiritual void, enhanced by the concept of truth being relative and a perceptual shift from word to image. As Derrida pointed out, words (inclusive of the Bible) no longer point to things and meaning is perpetually deferred in the endless chains of signification. Consumer culture created multiplicity of roles, dividing our lives further into isolated areas of efficiency without a central meaning. As the Church struggles to reach postmodern minds, it must also reinforce its Christian identity against identities given to us by advertisers. Pluralisation of thought in the postmodern world eroded commitment to any totalising worldview. This led to confusion within and without the Church, resulting in ideas like “all religions lead to heaven”. To avoid the stigma of being intolerant, sometimes doctrines were being compromised by believers and the congregation. However, the postmodern phenomenon also prepares the world for religious revivals. The Church can provide intimacy and identity, the two things lacking in the light of postmodern alienation. Postmodern skepticism may best be countered with lifestyle evangelism. Truth must also be re-established as objective. The Church is then required to not conform to the world, yet retain its relevance to the masses.

The Challenge of Technology

Technology has impacted different aspects of life, including religion. Many churches have embraced the new technology gladly. The use of computers, PowerPoint presentations and



digital technologies is becoming more common in the churches today. Since the advent of television, churches in other parts of the world have at first resisted the technology, claiming it to be the new “God” of the couch potatoes. The Church then integrated it, bringing forth televangelists preaching the gospel through television. Due to the sensitivity of the issue, it is not possible to have a Christian television station in Singapore. As an alternative, some local churches have resorted to reaching homes with digital recordings through the Internet. This move has great potential, considering Singapore’s trend towards Information Technology (IT). According to Nielsen/NetRatings, there were 1.9 million Internet users in December 2000 alone. Singapore also has the highest Internet-penetration rate in the world⁸. The Church can potentially utilise the infrastructure of Singapore ONE Network and reach this mass audience. However, the Internet is the media of the postmodern generation. As such, the voice of the Church is likely to be drown within the plurality of noises in cyberspace. Simply posting digital sermons is clearly insufficient. If the Church is to strive in the virtual world, it must find a way to draw people to its websites. Alternatively, instead of using the Internet to evangelise, the Church can use it to exhort and edify its current members, thereby improving quality instead of quantity.

The Challenge of Feminism

Feminism, which flourished during the late 1960s, had spread to societies all over the world. The Singapore society is ideally based upon meritocracy, encouraging equal opportunities for both men and women to hold important positions in all sectors. Similarly, the role played by women in church leadership is also growing. More women are responding to full-time ministries and theological schools. The Church then must abandon its traditional patriarchal structure that had endured centuries. This may prove problematic since in addition to the old traditions, various scriptural verses may be interpreted to resist the feministic outlook (e.g.

⁸ Dawson, S. (2001, Mar. 17). Survey ranks Spore's Net penetration No. 1. *The Straits Times*.



Genesis 2:23, Proverbs 12:4, Roman 1:26-27 and 1 Corinthians 11:3-9). Since the Bible is perceived as the actual Word of God, feminism may face large obstacles with respect to women leadership, such as 1 Timothy 2:12 (KJV): “But I *suffer not a woman to teach*, not to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence.” This is an issue that the Church must resolve carefully, without reducing the authority of the Bible and eradicating old traditions.

The Challenge of Charity & Social Responsibility

The general perception of religious compassion favours Buddhism. As the Government encourages religious groups to run charity organisations, the future Church faces a greater need for an outward demonstration of an inward faith. Many churches are concerned about missions, but few are concerned about social issues. The belief that Singapore should not be a welfare state has placed poverty as a personal, rather than social, responsibility. The Protestant Work Ethics, as proposed by Max Weber, further reinforces this idea. Although the Church takes care of its own, charity to the secular world remained lacking. The Christian doctrine places material aids as transient, only spiritual salvation is of paramount importance. Since salvation is a gift, charitable acts will not save one from hellfire. It follows that churches would more motivated to pour resources into evangelism rather than charity. The reasoning being that charity relieves temporal sufferings, while evangelism relieves eternal damnation. The issue complicates further, as people will relate positively to charity, making it easier to accept a gospel that comes from a compassionate heart. Furthermore, worship always comes before social concern (John 12:1-8). Wealth goes first to God (and the Church) before charity. Thus, the problem the Church faced would be to balance its resources. How much should the Church give to worship and how much to social concerns?

The Challenge of Reason

As Singapore advances, the intellectual competency of the people will increase. Already,



Christianity is the most popular religion among university graduates; practically one out of every three graduates is a Christian. However, this number is slowly declining. The graduates embracing Christianity had dropped from 39.3% in 1990 to 33.5% in 2000. Since the Enlightenment, reason had usurped much authority of the Church. This may have led to the perception that Christianity is logically flawed, despite volumes of Christian apologetics. Society is also increasingly becoming organised around rational and empirical forms of thought, called rationalisation of society by Max Weber. The expectations on church leaders will be even more demanding in the future. They must be able to handle both spiritual as well as intellectual aspects of the faith. Training and retraining is required. For this purpose, more and more bible colleges are being set up to prepare for the future.

The Challenge of Unity

With numerous denominations, Christianity may seem like a divided body. The most significant was probably the Protestant Reformation, which divided the Protestants from the Roman Catholics. Despite this history of division, a trend towards unity persists in the present age. The “Love Singapore” vision had drawn 60 000 Christians of different denominations together. Other gathering points include the annual Festival of Praise. Along with para-church organisations like National Council of Churches (NCCS), the Church is expected to follow on this trend, becoming more united to the point that denominational names like “Baptist” or “Methodist” becomes merely nominal. However, such unity is displayed only among Protestants. The split between Protestantism and Roman Catholicism remained. Thus, this becomes an issue that needs to be addressed by the Church, not ignored

Unity also encourages the various churches to share resources. Singapore, being short of space, will see its land prices rising rapidly. As such, many churches in the future will struggle even more to have their own church buildings. A possible solution provided by NCCS is for churches to share buildings. In this case, a possible hindrance will be the concept



of Sabbath, whether it is to be taken literally or symbolically. In a symbolic view, churches need not have services on Sundays, thus reducing congestion and allowing sharing of buildings. Another issue is “poaching” of members when building is shared. This becomes a challenge for the churches to demonstrate the biblical ideal of “trusting thy brother”.

The Challenge of Religious Harmony

Under the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act, religions are distinctively separated from politics to ensure social stability. Aggressive evangelism is also strongly discouraged. This remained problematic since Christianity promotes a holistic view of society; its faith encompasses all aspects of life, including politics. The government wields power that can only be challenged by secular institutions. Attempts to make Singapore a Christian nation would be met with resistance from the State so as to preempt retaliations from other religions. Christianity, by its very doctrinal nature, is exclusive. The in-group and out-group are clearly defined. Christian ideology places all other religions as misguided or given over to the Devil. This becomes problematic when another religion with extrinsic orientation (e.g. Islam) comes into the picture. As such, many churches sought to fulfill the Great Commission through missionary activities in other countries, using Singapore as a base and hub for missions. For this reason, it is likely that instead of making Singapore a Christian nation through aggressive local evangelism, the local Church will expand its missionary activities to other countries in the near future. This circumvents confrontation with the State and the possible disruption of social stability.

Epilogue

The local Church had come far since its early days. It evolved from a stop-point for missionaries to a strong local religion, returning full circle to be a missionary hub. Christianity needs to reposition itself in the new millennium, so as to face the new challenges.

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