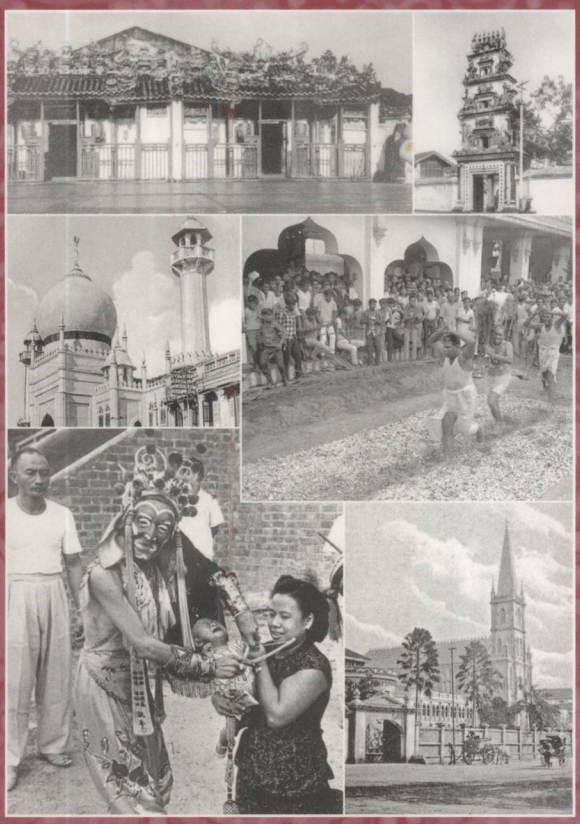
Rationalizing Religion

Religious Conversion, Revivalism and Competition in Singapore Society

Chee Kiong Tong



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by

Chee Kiong Tong

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For My Teachers and Friends
Edwin Thumboo
Ong Jin Hui

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CHAPTER ONE

RATIONALIZING RELIGION

1. Introduction

Singapore, a small nation state with one of the highest population densities in the world, is home to most of the world's major religions. It has a complex ethnic and religious composition; the 2000 Census states 50% of the population as being Chinese religionists, 14.8% Christians, 12% Muslims and 5% Hindus. Other than the major world religions, there are a multitude of other religions, including Sikhism, Soka Gakkai, Sathya Sai Baba, Bahai, etc, sharing the same social space. What happens when there are so many religions co-existing in such close proximity? What is the nature of the interaction among the different religious groups? Are there incidences of conflict? Does a degree of hybridization occur?

In order to answer these questions, it is important to understand the religious situation in Singapore. I begin by detailing the religious situation in Singapore from the 1920s when data was first collected about religion to present day Singapore society. By doing so, it will demonstrate how the religious profile in Singapore has changed dramatically over the years. For example, in 1920, 72.8% of the population in Singapore claimed to practice Chinese religions. By 1980, this had dropped to 56%. It further fell to only 51% by 2000. Concomitantly, Christianity has grown from 5% in 1920, to 10.3% in 1980, and 14.6% in 2000. How do we account for the significant religious shifts in Singapore society? Why do so many young Singaporeans choose to give up their family religion and switch to another religion?

Singapore society has undergone rapid industrialization and modernization over the last thirty years. It has transformed from what is known as "a third world" country, to a developed status. The rapid economic development has had significant effects on the social and cultural life in the city-state. Classical secularization theories suggest that there would be a decline in the social significance of religion. Has this happened? The immense transformations in the

socio-cultural, political, and economic milieu in Singapore society must have necessitated adaptations and modifications in religion. How have religious practices and beliefs changed since the early days? How do we account for these changes?

Finally, any analysis of religion in Singapore must deal with the role of the state in Singapore society. Singapore is physically, and mentally, a small society. The state is present in most areas of everyday life. It attempts to manage, through social policies, every aspect of social life, whether it is encouraging population growth, getting graduates to marry, or keeping Singapore clean. In the area of religion, it institutionalized compulsory religious education in schools in the 1980s, and passed a Bill in Parliament to preserve religious harmony in Singapore society. What have the intended and unintended consequences of state intervention in religious matters been? Despite remaining an avowedly secular country, the Singapore government has wielded significant influence on religious life in Singapore. While the need to separate religion from politics has been stressed repeatedly, politics remains deeply intertwined with religion. How has the state affected the religious situation in Singapore?

1.1. *Religion and Religious Change*

The central issue addressed in the book is religious change. Given its small size, extensive socioeconomic changes, and the religiously diverse structure, Singapore provides an excellent case study for analyzing religion and religious change, as well as to test out key sociological concepts such as the secularization hypothesis and the rational choice theory of religion. Based on quantitative and qualitative data collected over a period of 20 years, from 1980 to the most recent data set collected in 2000, I will trace the major changes that have occurred in the religious scene in Singapore. Several major trends are discernible. Firstly, there has been a growing number of converts to Christianity, especially among the Chinese population. As noted, in 1920, only 2% of the Chinese population identified themselves as Christians. By 1980, this has risen to 10.9%. This has steadily grown to 16.5% in 2000. The growth in the number of Chinese Christians has largely been at the expense of Taoism. For example, in 1920, 98% of the Chinese population considered themselves Chinese religionists. By 1980, the number of Taoists in Singapore had declined to 38.2%. Between 1980 and 2000, the percentage of

Taoists in Singapore showed a dramatic decline to merely 10.8% of the Chinese population. It is not only Christianity that has benefited from the decline in the number of Taoists in Singapore. The data shows that in Singapore, of the Chinese religions, in contrast with Taoism, Buddhism seems to be able to retain its followers, and in fact has been able to attract new converts. For example, in 1980, 34.3% of the Chinese population claimed adherence to Buddhism. This rose to 39.4% in 1990 and to 53.6% in 2000. In fact, between 1990 and 2000, Buddhism was the fastest growing religion in Singapore.[1] How do we account for these religious shifts in Singapore society?

Sng and You (1982) suggest that educational changes in Singapore, particularly the role of the church or mission schools, can in part account for religious shifts. As I will show in Chapter 3, my data supports the correlation between education and conversion. However, as the number of Singaporeans who attend mission schools is quite small, it is not sufficient to account for the massive growth in the number of Christians in Singapore. Taking another tack, Hinton (1985) argues that the growth in Christianity is due to the anomic condition of Singaporeans. He suggests that in Singapore, anomie is on the increase, as people withdraw into their private worlds. My data, however, does not show an increase in anomie in Singapore. Most previous sociological studies have also found that anomie is not an effective indicator of religiosity or religious participation (Carr and Hauser 1976; Photiadis and Johnson, 1963). Tamney and Hassan (1987) argue that religious change is due to intermarriage and cultural crisis in Singapore society. However, the rate of intermarriage in Singapore is low, and like Hinton's claim on anomie in Singapore, there is little data to support the cultural crisis hypothesis. Finally, Goh (1999) argues that religious change in Singapore is due to the ability of Christianity to provide transcendent solutions for individuals. Goh's study, however, focused primarily on charismatic churches in Singapore. Moreover, the growth in charismatic churches in Singapore only occurred in the 1980s and 1990s. Thus, it cannot explain the dramatic growth of Christianity from the 1950s to the

[1] Here, I am sketching out the main trends in religious change. The details of these religious shifts, such as who are the people who are changing religions, why they are converting, as well as correlating religious change with key demographic and social-cultural variables, will be dealt with in Chapter 2.

1980s, before the arrival of Charismatic movements in Singapore. The problem with the transcendent argument is that while it may conceivably explain the growth of Christianity for a small sector of the population at a certain period in time, it cannot account for the growth of the Christian population as a whole. Furthermore, Goh does not really explain why Singaporeans would suddenly experience a need for transcendence, and why only among Chinese Singaporeans.

In Chapters 2 and 3, I will examine the various factors that can account for these religious shifts. I argue that in Singapore, there is a process of the "**intellectualization**" of religion. Conceptually, intellectualization refers to a process where individuals shift from an unthinking and passive acceptance of religion to one where there is a tendency to search for a religion that they regard as systematic, logical and relevant. Such religious switching is mainly due to the perception of traditional religious systems *vis a vis* Christianity and Buddhism. These people have experienced, and are continuing to experience, a movement away from traditional Chinese ritual practices that they consider to be "illogical" and "irrational" to a belief system which they perceive to be more "rational". Partly due to the nature of the educational system, which emphasized systematic and rational thinking process as well as the rise in the educational levels of Singaporeans, there is a search for a religion of the "book". It is this process of **rationalization**, the perception of Christianity as a rational, modern religion that partly explains for its attractiveness to younger Singaporeans who are themselves socialized into an English stream, scientifically oriented educational system. There is a search for a textual religion rather than merely a respect for traditional practices.[2] This idea of rationalization draws, in part, from

[2] I am not suggesting that Taoism is an irrational religion. In a sense, all religions are rational, or at least internally consistent. Rather, it is that, among those who convert to another religion, whether Christianity or Buddhism, the responses given by the informants were that they saw Taoism as an irrational religion based on superstitions and impractical ritual practices. Later, I will show that this, in fact, may have something to do with the nature of Taoism, where there is little socialization or explanations for ritual practices. As Granet (1975) has argued, the motivation for the performance of rituals, for the Chinese, is a profound conviction regarding the value of moral traditions. Rituals are seen as obligatory behavior; belief in them is of little interest, and even their efficaciousness is not significant. What is important is that Chinese life is governed by a sense of sentiment regarding the idea of an active solidarity between man and the world.

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Weber, who suggests that one of the main features of a modern society is the process of rationalization: "One of the most important aspects of the process of rationalization of action is the substitution for the unthinking acceptance of ancient custom for deliberate adaptation to situations in terms of self interests." The conversion process is made easier by the modern social environment, which emphasizes voluntarism in the decision-making processes regarding religious affiliation, exposure to a plurality of religious options, and an educational system that emphasizes scientific and critical thinking.

The crux of the Weberian thesis is that the world we live in is undergoing a continuous process of rationalization. For Weber, traditional and affective action is largely determined by habit and emotion, but as conscious ideas emerge in the orientation of action, society tends towards rational action. For Weber, the concept of rationality is integrally tied to religion. Rationalization involves the clarification, specification, and systematization of the ideas which men have concerning their reason for being. Such ideas imply metaphysical and theological conceptions of the cosmic and world orders as well as man's position in relation to such wider orders.[3] It is important to note that rationalization does not mean the decline of the significance of religion, rather that there are changes in the nature of religion and the role of religion in human lives.

In Singapore, a key part of the intellectualization process relates to the **demystification** of religious beliefs and practices. I will show that one of the key processes taking place is the discarding of what religious practitioners perceive to be the irrationalities of the religions, and attempt to locate what they consider to be orthodox beliefs. To a degree, it involves the filtering out of folk beliefs and practices and the domestication or tidying up of less manageable elements in the religious traditions.[4] In a sense, for those who switch religions, they take a more philosophical, and critical view of religion.

[3] Ritzer's (2000) application of the rationalization model show how it can be used in a variety of institutional contexts, including religion. He suggests that in the modern world, using McDonald's as a case study, that there is a process by which the principles of the fast food restaurant are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society as well as the rest of the world. This process of 'McDonaldization' affects every aspect of society, including education, work, health care, leisure, politics and family life. It is, in a sense, a process of rationalization of the modern world, where there is increasing efficiency, calculability, predictability, and the control of nonhuman technology.

[4] See Michael Hill, (2004), Regulating Religion, pg. 347.

There is a process of questioning or at least, an attempt to locate justifications for the beliefs and rituals of the religion, a search for verifiable truths. A religion that is perceived to be based on sentiments such as Taoism, where a request for an explanation for religious practices is replied with statements of: "it has always been done this way" or "just do it as I do it"; without regard to justifications seems less likely to fit the needs and world views of the younger English educated Chinese Singaporeans.

I examine the process of the intellectualization of religion at two levels. Firstly, at the level of the individual, it relates to the reasons for and the process of conversion. This is examined in detail in Chapter 3. Intellectualization also takes place at the institutional or structural level of the religions themselves. In an environment where there are so many religions existing in close proximity, and where there are significant shifts in religious affiliations, with some religions gaining members at the expense of other religions, it is expected to witness some reactions from the different religious groups. I will show that there are changes in the structures, religious beliefs, and practices of the various religions as they compete for adherents. Several significant trends will be enunciated. For example, there is a process of intellectualization of Taoism in Singapore society.

As a group, Taoists have tried to systematize the religion, and to explain the philosophy of the religion to Singaporeans. As mentioned earlier, there is a perception among young Singaporeans that Taoism is an illogical and superstitious religion. The Taoist Federation, itself a new institutional structure set up to represent the interests of Taoists in Singapore, has been publishing tracts and giving talks to educate Singaporeans regarding the rationality and logic of Taoist beliefs. Thus, religions that are primarily oral in tradition, such as folk Taoism, attempt to create a canonical context in order to raise its social status. In addition, a national level committee was set up to explain, update, and make the rituals more relevant for modern Singapore society.[5] Similarly, Buddhist organizations in Singapore have begun to hold dharma classes, dharma rallies, and dharma camps, similar to the Christian bible classes, camps, and gospel rallies, in order to enlarge their membership. This can be termed the process

[5] The publication of this book received wide coverage in the media, and over 70,000 copies were sold. The rationale for setting up the committee, its deliberations, and details of the publication will be discussed in detail in Chapter 3.

of the **Christianization of Buddhism**. I will show that the various religious groups are modifying and adapting their religious ideas and rituals to meet the challenges posed by other religions in Singapore. It will be suggested, following Stark and Iannaccone (1994), Finke (1990), and Iannaccone (1998), that the existence of so many religious groups in close proximity, as well as the success of some religions in attracting converts from other religions, have resulted in an environment of **religious competition**. As part of the rationalization of religion, I argue that in a society where different faiths compete for appeal to a relatively modernized society, competing religions are forced to modify and demystify their beliefs and practices, to present themselves in a more rationalized manner.

It will be shown that this element of religious competition in Singapore society may be partly responsible for the revivalism in religion that we observe occurring in Singapore. With the threat of losing adherents to other religions, various religious groups have stepped up their proselytization efforts in order to gain members, and modifying their religious beliefs in order to retain members. In fact, some religions that were primarily non-proselytizing religions, such as Taoism, and Buddhism, have become proselytizing religions to meet the challenge posed by Christianity.

An additional dimension in the intellectualization of religion is the increasing **differentiation** among the various Chinese religions. In the past, Chinese religion has often been viewed as a syncretic mix of various religious traditions, including Taoism, Buddhism, Confucianism, ancestor worship, and folk religions of the Chinese. It has led to difficulty in trying to describe what Chinese religion is. For example, terms such as "shenism" (Elliot, 1964), "bai bai" (Clammer, 1985), and "Chinese religions" (Wee 1977), have been used to try to categorize the syncretic beliefs and ritual systems of the Chinese. Thus, in the past, the distinction between Buddhism and Taoism/Chinese traditional beliefs were not always clear for the Chinese in Singapore. Even today, among older Chinese Singaporeans, especially the less educated, the two are not seen to be mutually exclusive, and many Chinese do not distinguish between the variety of deities, whether Buddhist or Taoist in origin, which they worship. Statues of Buddhist "gods" can be found in most Taoist temples, and many Chinese visit both Taoist and Buddhist temples for religious functions. However, as part of the process of rationalization in Singapore, we are witnessing a greater differentiation of the two

religions, and greater clarity among informants regarding the beliefs and rituals of these two religions.

While there has been a movement towards Christian revivalism, an opposing trend has also emerged. Many young and well-educated Chinese are also proclaiming to have no religious affiliation. Non-religionists are defined as persons who do not believe in any religion. In 2000, about 18 percent of Chinese claim to have no religion. Who are these people who claim to have no religion? What are their reasons for rejecting religion? Like their Christian counterparts, many non-religionists tend to be young, better educated and come from higher socio-economic backgrounds. Many do not believe in any religion because they consider religion to be unscientific. For this group of people, the emphasis on science makes religion implausible because of its apparent success in explaining phenomena previously in the domain of religion. In Singapore, a large number of individuals who claim to be non-religionist actually practice some form of religious rituals, usually traditional Chinese religious rituals. However they usually deny religious affiliations because these may not be totally in congruence with their religious system or they do not like to call themselves Taoist. Many do not participate in rituals because they are too complex and troublesome. Some Chinese who do participate in Buddhist rituals do not consider Buddhism to be a religion and therefore would claim to be free-thinkers. Switching to Christianity is not feasible as many view it as a Western religion and is biased towards the English-educated population. In a sense, the data on the number of non-religionists may not be a true reflection of religious affiliation and religiosity in Singapore.

What is the significance of religion in Singapore? Because of a largely migrant population in the nineteenth century, most of the religious traditions in Singapore are imported, apart from the indigenous pre-colonial Malay belief system. Thus Clammer (1991:33) argues that religion in Singapore was subjected to two important sociological processes. Firstly, they were selective of the original religious tradition because of the social status, conditions of emigration and cultural background of the immigrants. For example, traditional Chinese folk religion was imported mostly by the illiterate or semi-literate population of diverse regional and dialect backgrounds who arrived in Singapore as cheap labour. As such, a degree of syncretism and "do it yourself" attitude characterized the traditional

Chinese religionist, since it was based essentially in practice rather than in any written canonical scriptures.

Each of the imported religions did not enter a theologically empty environment in which it could establish a dominant presence. This promoted a religious pluralism and also brought religions into close proximity with one another, sometimes even rival ones. Given the great variety of religions in Singapore—Islam, Hinduism, Christianity, Taoism, Buddhism—the potential for religious conflict is very real. Currently, some religions show a distinct pattern of decline while others have grown in membership. These changes have serious consequences for inter-religious relations in Singapore, and have resulted, in the past, in religious conflicts among various religious groups. For example, in the mid-19th century, the growth of the Chinese Catholic population was viewed with some displeasure from the non-Catholic population which continued to subscribe to clan associations and secret societies. They viewed conversion to Christianity as a threat to their membership and survival. In 1851, Chinese Christians were attacked in the northern part of the country by secret societies which resulted in massive riots lasting a week.

At the same time, the co-existence of so many religions in close proximity has also resulted in a degree of **hybridization** of religion, with some religions, particularly Chinese religions, acculturating the beliefs of other religions. Similarly, many of the rituals of the religions in Singapore have been transformed over time—modified and adapted to suit the local contexts.

1.2. *Religious Conversion*

One of the more interesting aspects of religion in Singapore is the changing membership in religious groups due to conversion processes. A significant number of Singaporeans were not born into the religion they have, but had converted from another religion. The book examines the data on religious conversion. Who are those that convert? At what age do they convert? What do they convert from and to? Where do conversion experiences take place? Is there a gender difference? Are there ethnic differences? It will be shown that many of these converts are young, English-educated Singaporeans who are from more affluent socio-economic backgrounds. There is also a correlation between the stream of education and religious conversions.

For example, English-educated Singaporeans tend to convert to Christianity, while Chinese-educated Singaporeans have a propensity to become Buddhists.

A window to understanding religious conversion in Singapore comes from this fact that certain socio-demographic factors are correlated with conversion. I will explicate why certain groups of people are predisposed to certain religions. Another interesting feature of religious conversion in Singapore is that it tends to occur only among the Chinese. While there is some conversion among the Malays and Indians, the numbers are insignificant. I will examine the ethnic angle involved in religious conversion as well as why the Chinese have greater propensity for religious conversion in Singapore. I suggest that part of the reason is that religion is not a key marker for ethnic identification for the Chinese in Singapore.[6] Moreover, there is a movement away from obligatoriness and towards voluntarism in the observance of traditional Chinese customs and festivals.

The ethnic angle in religious conversion plays out at another level. As noted earlier, almost all Malays are Muslims. Similarly, almost all adherents of Hinduism are Indians. Thus, in Singapore, religious affiliations are closely tied to ethnicity: Islam is seen as a Malay religion, and Hinduism, an Indian religion. These perceptions have an impact on the nature of religious conversion in Singapore.

In the sociological literature, conversion refers to a change of belief and personal identity (Balch, 1980). Conversion to another religion implies a transformation of identity or orientation in behavioral and cognitive referents. This could include a conscious shift in one's sense of grounding, the displacement of one's universe of discourse by another or the ascendancy of a formerly peripheral universe of discourse to the status of primary authority (Snow and Machalek, 1984). However, most of these studies were conducted in the West. Would the conversion experiences in Singapore be similar? The book argues that a switch in religion does not always necessitate a denial of the previous religious outlook. There is a cultural element involved here. Conversion to another religion does not mean the denial of one's own culture. For example, in Singapore, for many Christian churches, while the ritual of baptism remains important, it is not a central

[6] Such a view of Chinese religion has always been held by intellectuals who feel that the Chinese do not have religions, only ideological systems. See Yang, 1970.

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