



Neofundamentalist Thought, Dakwah, and Religious Pluralism among Muslims in Singapore

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Abstract

Since the mid 1970s, Muslim societies have seen the emergence and spread of a new type of religious orientation, ushered in by various socio-political factors shaping the postcolonial world on the brink of globalisation. This religious orientation, hereby termed 'neo-fundamentalism' (Rahman, 1981; Roy, 2004), has since occupied the religious imagination of many Muslims and dominates discourses and institutions within the Muslim world. At the core of this orientation lies a supremacist, puritanical and exclusivist attitude toward interpretations of Islam. It is this orientation that has been at the forefront of much public attention and controversies worldwide, including in the Malay-Indonesian world. Central to this orientation is the desire to 'Islamise' society through active proselytism (*dakwah*), directed to both Muslims and non-Muslims alike. This desire may range from calls to implement certain codified *shari'a* laws in order to achieve the completion of Islam, to attempts to eliminate diversity of views and opinions, either through persuasion or coercion, physical or otherwise.

This paper seeks to highlight, discuss and critically evaluate the emergence, rise and subsequent dominance of the neo-fundamentalist orientation among Muslims in Singapore. Ever since its emergence in the 1970s, this orientation has shaped the religious imag-

ination of segments of the Muslim religious elite and masses alike. This orientation corresponds to the *dakwah* phenomenon as discussed by several scholars (Muzaffar, 1987; Nagata, 1994). However, because of the minority status of Muslims in Singapore, there are few avenues for neofundamentalist thought to manifest itself in terms of an overt political movement akin to those seen in Muslim-majority countries.

Yet, proponents of neo-fundamentalist thought in Singapore continue to adopt the same mode and frames toward Islam and feed on the discourses pursued and promoted by their counterparts in neighbouring countries and elsewhere. Thus, what is observable in Singapore is a specific adaptation within the context of a Muslim-minority and secular state of Singapore. This paper argues that this adaptation process, otherwise known as 'cultural Islamisation', has taken various forms in different phases. Yet, this process is not without implications for the Muslim community and Singapore society in general. Neo-fundamentalist thought continues to inform lay ideas about Islam, while providing a template for responding to social issues ranging from Muslim laws to interfaith relations.

It is the aim of this paper to highlight that the interaction of neo-fundamentalist thought with state and society continues to have an impact on social relations and public policies, particularly those governing the politics of representation within Singapore.

The latter is critical within the context of this island, nation-state where different religious communities are placed in neat monolithic blocs that often ignore the contestations and diversities within each bloc.

Introduction

“To be in possession of an absolute truth is to have a net of familiarity spread over the whole of eternity. There are no surprises and no unknowns. All questions have already been answered, all decisions made, all eventualities foreseen. The true believer is without wonder and hesitation.”

– Eric Hoffer, *The True Believer*

Religious fundamentalism has been the object of much scrutiny in the last three decades. For sociologists, religious fundamentalism posed a challenge to the once popular view of the ‘secularisation’ thesis, which simply put suggests the following: ‘as society modernises, religion will lose its significance and becomes a matter of private choice or conscience’ (Wilson, 1966). By the 1970s, it had become clear that as society modernises, the division between ‘public’ and ‘private’ is not as clear. Observing the case of American Protestantism in the United States, it soon became clear that ‘God is back’ (Micklethwait & Wooldridge, 2009) The new form of religiosity that emerged ‘do[es] not recognise a division between the “public” and “private”; God is everywhere and thus everything is under scrutiny, nothing is “private”’ (Jones, 2010:2). Such religiosity insists that God and faith should be at the heart of society and embedded within all society’s structures and institutions, paving the way for a conflation of religion and politics in a new unprecedented scale (Bruce, 2008).

But while much of the research on fundamentalism has been focusing on the North American case of Christian Protestantism, after the 1979 Iranian Revolution Western scholars began applying the term ‘fundamentalism’ to a much broader phenomenon. Just as the election of Ronald Reagan to the American presidency in 1980 caught many ‘by surprise’ (Ammerman, 1993:1), so did the rise of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini to power after deposing the Shah

Mohammed Reza Pahlavi’s regime in 1979. At the centre of both events were blocs of fervent believers who insisted that religion should define public issues and shape politics of the new world. Throughout the 1980s and stretching to recent times, these blocs of ‘religio-political activists’ began shaping both the outlook of former traditional religions and new consciousness in defining issues in public, directing new types of religiosity, defining new markers of identity and contesting local and international politics in many societies worldwide.¹

This essay is an attempt to locate religious fundamentalism within segments of the Malay population and trace its dynamics within the state construct of multiracialism and religious pluralism in the island city-state of Singapore. I am aware that the term ‘fundamentalism’ is a highly contested one in the lexicon of academic and non-academic discourses. Alatas, for example, highlights that often ‘the distinction between the fundamentals of religion and fundamentalism as an ideology that is literalist and narrow in orientation is not made, and may convey the understanding that a return to the fundamentals results in a literalist and narrow interpretation of Islam’ (Alatas, 2009:11). The fact that the term emerged in the 1920s to describe Christian movements reacting against the onslaught of historicism and liberalism, may also imply that there is continuity of cultural forms, and thus, ‘misleading’ (Halliday, 1992:92). Nonetheless, Choueri argues that the term can still serve as ‘a linguistic device that could be harnessed to the advantage of generic appellation’ and that we need not subscribe to ‘upholding its incidental appearance in Western discourse as being the yardstick of correct classification’ (Choueri, 1990:xvii). In its generic appellation, fundamentalism is a ‘response to the challenges of modernity which were perceived by the zealous as threats to the integrity and survival of their faith’ (Noorani, 2002:66). This response manifests itself ‘as a strategy, or sets of strategies, by which beleaguered believers attempt to preserve their distinctive identity as a people or group’ through ‘selective retrieval of doctrines, beliefs and practices’, which were ‘refined, modified, and sanctioned in a spirit of shrewd pragmatism’. These selective doctrines, beliefs

and practices serve as 'a bulwark against the encroachment of outsiders who threaten to draw the believers into a syncretistic, *a*religious, or irreligious cultural milieu' (Marty & Appleby, 1991:xii-xiii).

In this essay, I am referring to 'fundamentalism' as an orientation. By this, I mean a specific approach to reality with a set of concepts linked together by a coherent worldview, which tends to influence the method of thinking and the presentation of facts (Mannheim, 1991). An orientation normally manifests itself in actions and approaches to reality. Thus, I am referring also to the style of thinking that is made visible through (1) verbal and written expression, (2) reaction to triggers in society, (3) preoccupation with certain ideas, and (4) absence in thought structures. In short, through adopting the approach of sociology of knowledge, I am primarily analysing the types of discourses and/or actions in public or private life of individuals or groups in society and their implications for societal development process. This inevitably departs from the study of fundamentalism as an organised social movement, although the latter may encompass traits of the fundamentalist orientation. In this sense, fundamentalism, therefore, is distinguishable from overt political acts in the name of Islam, otherwise described by social observers as 'Islamism' or 'political Islam'. An 'Islamist' is a Muslim committed to political action to implement what he/she regards as an Islamic agenda (Piscatori, 2000). In its more extreme form, it is a 'political ideology based on the politicising of religion for sociopolitical and economic goals in the pursuit of establishing a divine order' (Tibi, 2002: 20).

From observation, Islamism or political Islam is conspicuously absent from the religious scene of the Malays in Singapore. Being a minority community with just above 14 per cent of the total population of about 5 million, there is little scope to pursue political acts with the eventual aim of establishing an 'Islamic state'. Coupled with this is the professedly secular foundation of the state, which will bar any attempts to form political parties or pursue political advocacy along religious or communal lines. Race and religion remain sensitive topics, which are heavily subjected to surveillance and control through various legislative

acts such as the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act, the Societies Act, Sedition Act, and the Internal Security Act. Despite 45 years of painstaking efforts at national integration and nation-building, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong reminded fellow Singaporeans in a National Day Rally in 2009 that 'the most visceral and dangerous fault line is (still) race and religion' (U-Wen, 2009). With constant reminders of the racial and religious riots occurring in the early period of independence, the Singapore government adopts an almost Hobbesian logic in positing the need for a strong state to check the tendencies of race and religion to be sources of conflict that can tear Singapore apart.

Given this scenario, it is almost impossible for Islamism or political Islam to take root in Singapore.² However, this does not stop segments of the Malay intelligentsia from adopting and disseminating religious discourses laden with fundamentalist categories and concepts. What becomes obvious in the context of minority-Muslim Singapore is the emergence of 'closed, scripturalist and conservative view of Islam that rejects the national and statist dimension in favour of the *ummah*, the universal community of all Muslims, based on *sharia*' (Roy, 2004:1). Calling this phenomenon 'neo-fundamentalism', Roy contends that 'Islamism (building of an Islamic state) has little appeal for many Muslims who have no desire to be involved in such a project because they are uprooted, migrants and/or living in a minority'. Facing what he termed as 'deterritorialisation of Islam', Roy argues that when they turn to religious revivalism, neofundamentalism 'appeal most strongly to them'. What emerges then is 'a new sectarian communitarian discourse, advocating multiculturalism as a means of rejecting integration into Western [or in Singapore's case, secular] society,' which 'do not identify with any given nation-state, and more concerned with imposing Islamic norms among Muslim societies and minorities and fighting to reconstruct a universal Muslim community, or *ummah*' (Roy, 2004:2).

In tracing neo-fundamentalist orientations among Muslims in Singapore, I have looked through three main sources of information. First is the print media, including local Malay newspaper and magazines,

published works on Islam by local writers, externally published works on Islam imported by local distributors, and books, magazines and journals dominating shelves of public libraries. Second is verbal expression, which involves Islam-related sermons, lectures, forums, seminars and workshops, conducted by religious or non-religious agencies, and involving local or foreign-invited speakers, scholars or religious preachers. Third, I looked at the various 'Islam-related' themes chosen for public consumption, publicised via various public media, including websites and blogs. While the dominant orientation observable through scouring these sources still remain 'traditionalist' (Abdul Rahman, 2008), there are significant traces of neo-fundamentalism in the form of 'floating discourses' and supported by segments of the religious elites, established religious institutions and respected individuals. It is these discourses that are the focus of this paper.

The Dakwah Phenomenon

In the Malay world, fundamentalist thought manifests itself most clearly in what scholars have termed the '*dakwah* phenomenon' (Muzaffar, 1987; Anwar, 1987; Nagata, 1984). Loosely translated, '*dakwah*' means 'a calling to Islam', or otherwise understood as Islamic proselytism. Throughout the last three decades, *dakwah* groups have proliferated in the Malay world. In Malaysia, for instance, *dakwah* groups such as the Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia (ABIM, established in 1971), Darul Arqam (established in 1973), Jamaat Tabligh (established in India but took root in Malaysia in the 1970s), and the Islamic Da'wah Foundation of Malaysia (YADIM, established in 1974), became major players in the Islamisation process of Malaysian society. Against this backdrop, Chandra Muzaffar rightly termed this period as that of 'Islamic resurgence' in which there was a sudden 'endeavour to re-establish Islamic values, Islamic practices, Islamic institutions, Islamic laws, indeed Islam in its entirety, in the lives of Muslims everywhere. It is an attempt to re-create an Islamic ethos, an Islamic social order, at the vortex of which

is the Islamic human being, guided by the Qur'an and the Sunnah' (Muzaffar, 1987:2). Within the *dakwah* framework, these resurgent groups seek two end results: (1) the formation of truly 'Islamic' individuals within society, and (2) the replacement of the present social, political and economic order with 'Islamic' ones. The apparent differences between them are often due to the different levels of intensity of their commitment to these two goals and the varying emphasis they are accorded. Cultural-based resurgent movements, for instance, focus on the cultivation of an 'Islamic' personality and mindset through various cultural and institutional programmes – thus, softening the ground for an eventual transition of society into an 'Islamic' order. Political-based resurgents, on the other hand, believe that a truly 'Islamic' order is only achievable if the Muslims are in power and Islamic law is imposed from top down (as in the case of Islamist party, PAS). Both of these methods had seen consequent effects on society, the most visible impacts manifest on the practical daily lives of ordinary citizens (Muzaffar, 1987:3-5). More significantly, this religious resurgence had invited responses from the State. The State invariably became involved in the upsurge of demands for Islamic visibility in public life. Through its various Islamisation projects, the state became embroiled in the politics of identity. 'Identity', as argued by Chandra Muzaffar, 'is the crucial characteristic of Islam in the era of resurgent. Underlying the differences between present and past attitudes to attire and food, to education and economy, to law and State, is this perception of the importance of an exclusive Islamic identity' (Muzaffar, 1987: 10) The pre-occupation of the resurgents in carving an exclusive Islamic identity undoubtedly creates new tensions in society. For one, polarisation between Muslims and non-Muslims increased, and changing gender dynamics in public spheres created other strains. These, and other consequents of Islamic resurgence, reveal the deep-rootedness of fundamentalist discourse in the Malay world.

Many factors may account for the rise of *dakwah* groups in the 1970s, some external and others internal. External factors refer to events outside Malay society which influenced and shaped, directly or

indirectly, local developments within Islam. Among these were: (1) the defeat of the Arab world (Egypt, Jordan, Syria and Iraq) to Israel in the Six-Day War in June 1967, which led to the rejection of Arab nationalism and leading to a new template of 'Islam as the solution' to the Arab predicament; (2) the fall of the American-sponsored Shah regime in Iran and the rise of a Shi'ite Islamic republic, which gave a boost to the Sunni world's desire to establish a Sunni version of an Islamic state; and (3) the Arab oil embargo in 1973, which sky-rocketed oil prices, giving oil-producing Arab states such as Saudi Arabia gigantic revenues from oil exports and allowing them to use the revenues to spread a certain puritanical version of Islam otherwise known as 'Wahabbism'. This last factor was probably most crucial in fostering fundamentalist thought within the newly emerging *dakwah* groups in Malaysia. Kepel opines that 'the objective [of Wahhabite proselytism] was to bring Islam to the forefront of the international scene, to substitute it for the various discredited nationalist movements, and to refine the multitude of voices within the religion to the single creed of the masters of Mecca' (Kepel, 2003:70). Through Saudi institutions such as the Muslim World League and the World Assembly of Muslim Youths (WAMY), petro-dollars were pumped into Muslim institutions throughout the world, educating a new generation of fundamentalist Muslim activists and leaders. By the 1980s, the Muslim World League had opened new offices around the world in areas where Muslims lived and played significant role in supporting Islamic associations, funding mosque constructions, distributing millions of Qur'an free of charge, sponsoring students to study in Mecca and Medina, and distributing Saudi literatures on Islam with its characteristically rigid, exclusivist and puritanical interpretations on Islam. In 1980, the League, together with the Muslim Welfare Organization of Malaysia (PERKIM), founded the Regional Islamic Da'wah Council of Southeast Asia and the Pacific (RISEAP), which was to become a single-most important umbrella body for *dakwah* groups in the region. A key player in RISEAP and its vice-president since its establishment is a prominent *dakwah* proponent in Singapore, Ridzuan Wu who founded an im-

portant *dakwah* organisation in Singapore in the same year, The Muslim Converts' Association of Singapore (MCAS).

While external factors may have contributed to the rise of religious fundamentalism in the Malay world since the 1970s, it was really the internal factors that remain most crucial in understanding the resurgent phase. These internal factors refer to particular sociopolitical and economic developments within Malay society, including the following: (1) uneven capitalistic development of postcolonial Malaysia that led disgruntled segments of the Malay population to turn to religion to fortify themselves against the perceived corrupt influences of Western lifestyles and to seek a panacea to the unjust social order imposed through imperial structures in postcolonial Malaysia; (2) ethnic dichotomisation as a result of colonial legacy, which exacerbated the search for an exclusive identity that separates one from the Other; (3) migration of huge numbers of village youths to city centres where alienation is bound to happen and religion provides a way of retreating and providing meaning to the atomised existence of urban life; and (4) expansion of the education system where access to global fundamentalist thought are made possible through overseas contact and allowing the new intelligentsia to occupy important institutions in society with access to resources and influence.

In Singapore, the policy turn towards the adoption of English as a medium of instruction in all government schools could have additionally and inadvertently exposed local Malays to a greater repertoire of fundamentalist literature and publications. This is particularly so with the new breed of Malay intelligentsia who were entering universities. One can trace the enthusiasm of Muslim student activists in the 1970s and 1980s in their efforts to introduce and expound the works of fundamentalist writers from the Ikhwanul Muslimin of Egypt and Jamaat-i Islam of Pakistan. The proliferation of *dakwah* literature was yet another factor that led to the entrenchment of neofundamentalist thought among the Malay population. Much of these writings were originally in English, aided by the worldwide dissemination funded through petrodollars. By the 1980s, major translation

industries emerged in Malaysia, publishing in Malay editions of works by Mawdudi, Syed Qutb, Hassan al-Banna, Yusuf Qaradawi, Muhammad Asad, Maryam Jameelah, Fathi Yakan, and others (Roff, 1988:111; Zainah, 1987:13). Today, works by these writers continue to occupy shelves of Muslim bookstores and the Islam section of major bookstores in Singapore and Kuala Lumpur.

Dakwah in Singapore

Similar to Malaysia, the 1970s saw a proliferation of *dakwah* groups across Singapore. Some of these groups may have been established prior to the Islamic resurgent period, but they gradually transformed themselves into *dakwah* bodies as religious revivalism caught on. Among these important groups are Assembly of Muslim Youth (HBI), The Muslim Converts' Association of Singapore (MCAS/Darul Arqam), the Muslim Missionary Society of Singapore (Jamiyah), Muhammadiyah Association, Islamic Theological Association of Singapore (Pertapis), Association of Adults Religious Class Student of Singapore (Perdaus), and Muslim Fellowship of Singapore (Permusi). *Dakwah* became a topmost agenda in these organisations. As observed by Ridzuan Wu, a prominent *dakwah* leader in Singapore, 'everyone is supposed to do *dawa* (sic)', in which *dakwah* is defined as 'introduction of the beliefs and teachings of Islam to Muslims and non-Muslims' and to translate these beliefs and teachings in his 'personal, family, day to day life, as well as his social, political, economic life as a whole' (Sardar & Davies, 1989:90).

It is also important to note that *dakwah* activities in Singapore were also entrenched through the establishment of the Department of Missionary Activities (Jabatan Haiah Dakwah/JHD) under the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS) in April 1974. The JHD was MUIS' attempt to streamline the various *dakwah* groups and coordinate *dakwah* activities throughout the island. Forums, seminars and classes were conducted by the central JHD, among which were aimed to train *da'i* (missionaries), caution Muslim youths on the influence of Christianity and de-

viancy of the Ahmadiyah sect, and improve the Qur'an recital of the Malay heartlanders. JHD's activities were massive and were based in every housing estate across Singapore. Besides conducting talks and running classes, JHD published religious booklets, ran a comprehensive library and resource centre, and made audio-visual presentations. Its public lectures, often organised in stadiums, can draw crowds from 5,000 to 30,000, often inviting popular singers such as Sharifah Aini and Titiek Sandora as crowd-pullers (Mohamed Ali, 1989).

Inadvertently, as was the case in Malaysia, the *dakwah* movement was primarily attractive to, and nurtured and led by students, graduates and young professionals who hailed from secular campuses. As pointed out by Zainah Anwar, 'contrary to stereotypes, most Islamic revivalists are not uneducated, anti-modern, and society misfits, but are in fact well-educated, upwardly mobile and motivated individuals' (Anwar, 1987:2). Evidently, several prominent Muslim religious elites in Singapore were once leaders of *dakwah* youth bodies. A prominent example is Maarof Salleh, chairman of HBI who went on to become a President of MUIS. To-date, *dakwah* remains strong on university campuses, particularly among student activists of Muslim Societies in two leading universities: the National University of Singapore (NUS) and Nanyang Technological University (NTU). In fact, much of the early stages of *dakwah* activism in Singapore emerged from the Muslim Society of NUS (then called University of Singapore). In the 1970s, the USMS played a significant role nurturing new breed of *dakwah* activists. By the early 1980s, several alumni of the Muslim Society found new groups to further their *dakwah* cause. One such group, a key *dakwah* player in the 1980s, is the Muslim Fellowship of Singapore. The fellowship was established in 1983, replacing an earlier youth group, Permusi. In 1995, the fellowship reconstructed itself by forming a new body called the Fellowship of Muslim Students Association (FMSA). This group continues to develop new *dakwah* cadres in institutes of higher learning throughout Singapore till today.

Two important instruments were adopted by *dakwah* groups in the recruitment and training of *dakwah*

cadres: *usrabs* and camps. An *usrab* is a cell group comprising 6 to 10 members who meet regularly to discuss *dakwah* concepts and keep each other motivated to the cause of Islam. The concept was first popularised by the Ikhwanul Muslimin movement in Egypt. Several standard texts were discussed in a typical *usrab* session. Among these works include Fathi Yakan's *To Be A Muslim*, Syed Qutb's *Milestone* and Hassan al-Banna's *al-Mathurat*. Several *usrab* groups were also known to adopt and copy the *usrab* curriculum from the text *Risalah Usrah* by Abu 'Urwah, leader of the Jemaah Islah Malaysia (JIM). *Usrah*, as a method of entrenching the 'dakwah persona' is effective in forming close-knit communities of *dakwah* activists with a mission to proselytise and Islamise society. It acts, as noted by Shamsul, as a 'socialising role in an enclave situation' (Shamsul, 1995:126). But if *usrab* is the sustenance, leadership camps act as a recruitment platform for new *dakwah* candidates. Since 1982, the Leadership Training Camps (LTCs) run by Fellowship (later FMSA) was the single most important platform to recruit new *dakwah* activists. The LTCs were aggressive in their recruitment drive. They were specifically targeted at students from junior colleges and polytechnics, thus providing a fodder for future leaders in universities who would then lead the Muslim Societies in campuses. The LTCs comprised 5 components: (1) introducing Islam as a personal philosophy and conviction in life, (2) introducing Islam as a social ideology in the context of sustaining and maintaining society, (3) focusing on Islam as a missionary and universal religion, thus inculcating the spirit of *dakwah*, (4) introducing and allocating specific areas of articulation and competency in *dakwah*, and (5) producing recommendations for Islamic *dakwah* in Singapore as well as solutions to the problems in the Singapore and Malay society.

For many, attending the LTCs could either lead to a renewed commitment to Islam (akin to being 'born again'), or generate a certain degree of discomfort. Notably, LTCs conducted by Fellowship/FMSA displayed a certain degree of rigidity and their method of *dakwah* remains aggressive. Several people interviewed admitted to being traumatised by the experience, highlighting the strict segregation between

males and females, being cut off from the outside world (no phone calls were allowed, unless in an emergency), long recitations of prayers, individual testing over Qur'anic recitations and memorisations, and many other such instances. Reminding these impressionable teenagers of their 'ungrateful' behaviour (towards God) were also instruments to solicit repentance, enough to make some participants cry and confess of their sins. Several papers were presented in seminar style throughout the camps. Many of the presenters were senior *dakwah* leaders, and the themes may range from devotional topics to arguments for God's existence and methodologies of *dakwah*. But one paper stood out: 'Sholat Sebagai Pembentuk Peribadi Muslim' [Prayers as a Shaper of Muslim Personality], where participants learned that one who neglects his/her obligatory prayers is liable to either be (a) punished by death, (b) tortured, (c) declared an apostate, or (d) declared as a *fasiq* or liar. At the height of the *dakwah* phenomenon, the polarising effect of *dakwah* was clearly seen, driven by the movement's sense of 'superiority' over the ignorant masses. The task of doing *dakwah* thus confers on the individual a sense of being 'God's spokesperson on earth'. He or she is now qualified to speak in the name of Islam: 'Islam says...', 'Islamic position on...', and 'God wants...'. These, invariably, objectify Islam and became a visible manifestation of neo-fundamentalist thought (Roy, 2004:21).

Dakwah invariably is not targeting just Muslims, but non-Muslims as well. The single most important group that took up the task of proselytising to non-Muslims is the Muslim Converts Association of Singapore, otherwise known as Darul Arqam (not to be confused with the Al-Arqam movement in Malaysia). Darul Arqam was established in 1980 and became a major *dakwah* player through its efforts to win converts to Islam. As an organisation, it serves a dual function of providing for the welfare and conversion needs of non-Muslims who enter Islam, as well as doing missionary work targeting non-Muslims. Since the 1980s, it has organised annual 'Islam and Its Challenges Seminar' (IIC) to teach youths on how to deliver Islam effectively to non-Muslims and to convince them of the defective nature of other religions.

The papers presented adopted a 'comparative religion' approach, where Islamic doctrines were compared with those of Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, and other religions, the aim being to prove the superiority of Islam as the only true religion. Putting this in context, the IICs were motivated primarily by anxieties over Christian evangelism to Muslim youths. At the same time, the seminars served as a platform to recruit new *dakwah* activists for the youth wing of Darul Arqam. But the IIC seminars are just one platform of Darul Arqam's proselytism efforts. It is also active in engaging English-speaking preachers from overseas to deliver public lectures on Islam. These lectures were well-attended, particularly by the rising new middle class and young professionals. Several of the speakers had run foul with the authorities for their fire-brand image and antagonistic views, which were deemed unsuitable for multiracial and multireligious Singapore. In 1982, a South African preacher with a huge following, Ahmed Deedat delivered a series of lectures in Singapore and made a remark that the early local Muslim inhabitants were complacent and failed to convert the Chinese immigrants, which led the Chinese to take over power from the Muslims (MRH, 1989:17). In addition, Deedat made several disparaging remarks about Christianity, which eventually culminated in him being banned from speaking in Singapore. Nonetheless, his *dakwah* style remains popular among many Muslims in Singapore. Sensing that the polemical approach to doing *dakwah* to non-Muslims may be counterproductive, Darul Arqam formed a unit called Centre for Research and Training in Da'wah Methodology (CRTDM) in 1999. The task of this unit was to develop what is termed as 'cross-cultural da'wah'. To mark the formation of CRTDM, the first International Da'wah Conference was held in Singapore, the proceedings of which were then published into a book, 'Readings on Cross-Cultural Da'wah' (Wu, 2001). Despite adopting the term 'cross-cultural', much of what constitute this 'new approach' remains familiar, but with a caveat: how to understand other religions better so that Islam can be presented to non-Muslims in a way that they can relate with. 'Cross-cultural da'wah' thus is not a departure from the previous 'comparative religion'

approach, but a refinement of the *dakwah* method of eventually attracting and 'winning people' over to Islam.

Dakwah and State Responses

Given the backdrop of *dakwah* activism that has dominated Muslim life in the last three decades, the government's response was to create greater mechanisms of control and policing, particularly when *dakwah* activism seen to be coupled with fundamentalist leanings. Part of the need to introduce the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act in 1990 was in response to potential religious conflict driven by fundamentalist orientation, not just within Islam, but also particularly among segments of the Christian evangelical groups. The Act led to the establishment of the Presidential Council for Religious Harmony, which advises the President of Singapore on matters affecting religious harmony.

The suspicion of the state toward religious fervour among Muslims could also in part be due to the proliferation of fundamentalist views driven by several *dakwah* bodies. Darul Arqam, for instance, hosted a preacher from Trinidad and Tabago, Imran Nazir Hossein known for his fundamentalist leanings. Hossein, who commands a large following among the English-speaking professionals and middle-class, made several claims such as 'Islam could neither tolerate nor coexist with the modern secular State, the very essence of which...has been the subordination of "God" to the "people" and the "state" (Hossein, 1991:20). In 2002, in a lecture at the Abdul Aleem Siddiqui mosque, Hossein remarked that pledging allegiance to the state and the constitution constitutes a *syirk* (a category of major sin). That was his final lecture series in Singapore since then. Yet, Hossein remains popular and his rhetoric on *riba'*, doomsday prophecies, and the need for a caliphate continues to feed on the religious imagination of many Muslims in Singapore. This can be seen from the continued sales of his books in local bookstores and websites hosted by local Muslims linking to his lectures.

Yet, when the state continuously chooses to relate

to religions in neat blocs of representations, it is bound to confuse fundamentalist expressions of Islam with manifestations of Islam as a religion. The policy of relating to Islam as a monolithic bloc via official representatives of the religion such as MUIS and Pergas, allow the state to circumvent the complexity of having to manage multiple sites of competing influences. The same policy has proven successful in managing ethnic diversity in Singapore via the 'CMIO' (Chinese/Malay/Indian/Other) model. However, it also means that the state will have to continuously add layers of control and disciplining techniques. For example, despite the presence of an earlier Internal Security Act and the Sedition Act, the state deemed it necessary to introduce the 'Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act' in 1990, the 'Shared Values' in 1991 with 'racial and religious harmony' as one of the five national ideologies, and the 'Declaration of Religious Harmony' decree in 2003, supported by the formation of the 'Inter-Religious Harmony Circles'. In the 2003 Declaration, the 'recognition of the secular nature of our state' was introduced, presumably against the backdrop of fundamentalist discourse of 'anti-secularism'. In fundamentalist circles, 'secularism' remains an anathema, owing to the juxtaposition of Islam as a total worldview and way of life with the secular model of keeping religion personal and private while adopting a common 'civic values' in the public sphere. Pergas, in their publication, *Moderation in Islam*, stated their disagreement in principle with the ideology of secularism: 'whatever the form of secularism, whether it be one which totally rejects the role of religion in society, or one which limits it to just the moral aspects of society, or one with the purpose of eliminating religion from society, or one which accepts religion to secure harmonious living, it is, in principle, conflicting with our understanding of religion' (Pergas, 2004:109). Such strong rejection, no doubt influenced by fundamentalist understanding of secularism as opposed to Islamisation, can also be placed against Pergas' vocal disagreement with the government over the latter's refusal to allow the *hijab* in national schools. In a press statement in 2002 over the controversy of 4 schoolgirls who were not allowed to don the *hijab* in their respective schools, Pergas

states that 'the (Islamic ruling) regarding the *aurat* for Muslims...is clear and cannot be refuted' and in the cases of the four school-going children, 'their action stems from their sincere desire to practice and inculcate moral values' and that '*hijab* is not an obstacle to national integration' (Pergas, 2004:343-347). Pergas' position, while appearing to dialogue with the state on the donning of *hijab* in schools, ironically closes the dialogue within the Muslim community by a single sweeping authoritative position on the necessity of wearing *hijab* as a 'moral requirement'.

Conclusion

If fundamentalism is a manifestation of self-determinism in the modern context, then I would argue that fundamentalist Muslims in Singapore have found a mechanism to work within state-imposed constraints and still achieve their goals. This is done through an appeal to exceptionalism and benefiting from the state policy of governing religious communities in neat, homogenous blocs. We can see this pattern clearly in recent public debates over the Asatizah Recognition Scheme (ARS). The scheme was introduced in 2005 to provide a listing of qualified and approved religious teachers in Singapore. In an interview by local Malay newspaper on 25 July 2010, the President of Pergas and member of the Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG) demanded that ARS be given 'fangs' to persecute unqualified religious teachers preaching 'deviant' ideas about Islam. This demand to implement AMLA's Article 139 is a worrying move towards granting the right to custodianship of Islam within a small circle of clerics. Article 139 states that 'Whosoever shall teach or publicly expound any doctrine or perform any ceremony or act relating to the Muslim religion in any manner contrary to the Muslim law shall be guilty of an offence and shall be liable on conviction to a fine not exceeding \$500 or to imprisonment for a term not exceeding 6 months or to both'.

Ustaz Hasbi's call for power to be granted to persecute deviancy is a natural consequent of the fundamentalist project to implement a single, monolithic Islam through using state mechanisms and influence.

It is also a manifestation of a politics of representation where the 'guardians of the faith' seek to promote themselves as the sole authority in defining Islam and thus having the right to represent the faith. This can be seen through Pergas' polemic with the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS), a research institution, over the invitation of two liberal thinkers from Malaysia and Indonesia to speak at a public forum (*The Straits Times*, 17, 18, 25 & 31 Jan, 2003).

In recent times, statements have been made by several influential local Muslim clerics regarding 'deviance.' In an article in *Perdus*' magazine, *Takwim* (issue 1/1995), a cleric wrote that there is a need for a more comprehensive definition of heresy – one that can include adherence to any human ideology that goes against Islamic doctrines. To him, heretical beliefs and practices that were detected and reported thus far in Singapore constitute a mere 0.32% out of the total Muslim population of 407,600. These were regarded by him as isolated cases, whereas a bigger danger was identified as lurking in the form of such ideologies as secularism, materialism, liberalism and movements demanding women's rights. Displaying the characteristically fundamentalist anti-intellectual posture, he also cautioned against academic theories that penetrated the various disciplines and disguised as 'research', which were eventually adopted by Muslims unconsciously. In a *Berita Harian* newspaper article on 23 December 2007, another influential cleric questioned why radical ideologies like those of *Jemaah Islamiyah* were given serious attention by the authorities, but liberal views on Islam which can cause dissonance and destroy the sanctity of Islam, were not similarly scrutinized. In a follow-up article on 30 December 2007, he further commented that several postgraduate courses purposefully provoked the students to think, with an aim of weakening the Muslims' belief in the sources of Islamic law. He also refers to 'unorthodox views (*pendapat janggal*)' that goes against 'definitive views (*pendapat muktamad*) of mainstream Islam'. He targets his criticism squarely at hermeneutical and liberal interpretations of the Qur'an and Hadith, which among others promoted the emancipation and gender equality of women. Further, he asserts that there appears to be a vision

(*gagasan*) to sponsor such deviant beliefs (*fahaman songsang*) and local group agencies were used to promote and mainstreamed such views. He concludes that while we can combat radical and hardline views on Islam, we must also have a stronger political will (*iltizam politik yang lebih tegas*) to overcome deviant and liberal understanding of Islam.

How then does the state deal with the encroachment of fundamentalist views, particularly under the unstated policy of 'non-interference in the religious beliefs its citizens'? In recent times, more demands were made to pressure MUIS and/or the government be it regarding taking legal actions against food stall displaying 'No lard, no pork' signs, which can 'confuse' the masses, or in matters pertaining to being 'insensitive to Muslim sentiments', such as allowing dogs in restaurants. For the state, listening to the vocal voices of fundamentalist Muslims (albeit small in number) remains crucial, for they can swing public opinion given the sympathies accorded by recognised state institutions like the media and quasi-government bodies like MUIS. Additionally, the dilemma lies in the state policy of looking at religions in neat blocs through official institutional representatives. When these institutions do provide representations of Islam and the Muslims, and if the institutions are under the sway of fundamentalist orientation, then the state will have to contend with an accommodationist stance. The other option will be to allow the growth of competing voices in Islam in the form of civil society groups. But this price may be too great for a government bent on maintaining hegemonic control over its population. Either way, fundamentalism will remain a significant force within the politics of Muslim representation in Singapore.

Notes

¹ For a comparative study of fundamentalisms across the various religious traditions, refer to Marty E. Martin & Scott R. Appleby, eds., *Fundamentalisms Observed* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991). This book is part of a 5-volume work documenting various fundamentalist thought and movements worldwide, and a culmination of a 10 year Fundamentalism Project by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

² The exception to this is perhaps the revelation of a fringe group called Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), which states as its main goal the establishment of an Islamic polity (*daulah islamiyyah*) in Southeast Asia. However, given its violent and extremist methods of implementing the goals of the group, the JI should be dealt with separately – as a security issue, rather than a religious orientation.

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