

SRP Distinguished Lecture (Singapore: 19/01/2016)

Religion, Common Space, and the Public Good: How They Can  
Work Together in Plural Societies

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Rajaratnam School of International Studies; Excellencies,  
Distinguished Guests, my Colleagues in the SRP Programme,  
Ladies and Gentlemen:

I thank those who have spoken before me for their  
wise and kind words. Let me begin this lecture by saying  
how privileged I feel at being here among all of you.  
Though my wife cannot be present on this occasion, we are  
getting to know Singapore quite well. We have had many

searching conversations with people from various walks of life in your country during our recent visits, and have on every occasion been received with hospitality and kindness. I think we can say that we are beginning to feel Singaporean, and we look forward to our visits in the future. This means that what I say with the detached voice of the scholar with regard to the role of religion and its potential towards contributing to the common good in the shared, public space of plural societies, will also be energized by a passion for the welfare of Singapore for which this central feature of Singapore's life promises to become even more important in the years ahead, in a global landscape in which Singapore occupies a key geo-political position. In global terms, Singapore may be a small island, but strategically it has the potential to punch well above its size. In the eyes of the world, economically, politically, and socially, Singapore is generally regarded as having developed in an enviably stable and successful manner over the last 50 years. It is now time to look to the future. It is with this additional focus in mind that I embark on the subject of my lecture.

But first, a few pressing observations and statistics. As I hinted earlier, we are living in "a globalized world". This has become a technical

expression. What does it mean? An article some time ago in the journal *Revision* gives us a clue. Here four characteristics of globalization are identified: (i) "it involves a *stretching* of social, political, and economic activities across political frontiers, regions and continents"; (ii) "it suggests the *intensification*, or the growing magnitude, of interconnectedness and flows of trade, investment, finance, migration, culture, and so on"; (iii) it entails an increase in "the *velocity* of the diffusion of ideas, goods, information, capital, and people"; and (iv) this "growing *extent, intensity, and velocity* of global interactions can be associated with their deepening *impact*, such that the effects of even the most local developments may come to have enormous global consequences".<sup>1</sup> In other words, the rapidly increasing extent, intensity, velocity and impact of connectivity between peoples, cultures, and polities of our world are blurring the boundaries between "local", "national", and "international". Given the now familiar phenomenon of 24-hours television news coverage around the globe, of the ubiquity of mobile phones and twitter etc., of the speed of the internet, a terrorist incident at night in a locality of Paris becomes world news within a few

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<sup>1</sup> See D.Held, A.McGrew, D.Goldblatt, and J.Perraton, "Global Transformations: Politics, Economics, and Culture", *Revision*, Fall, 1999.

minutes, and, a few weeks later, almost as it happens, we can rejoice the world over at the signing of a new code of practice for controlling climate change by over 190 nations in the very same city that experienced that terrorist outrage. Local, national, and international boundaries of space and time have now become porous, and are beginning to merge in our lives in a way that forces us to, shall we say, globalize our emotions and judgments as citizens of virtual communities around the world. The sight of a dead migrant child washed up on the seashore hundreds or thousands of miles away makes all of us grieve profoundly for the loss, irrespective of who we are, and urges us to call for remedial action, irrespective of where we happen to be.

In a recent discussion on the radio in the UK by two or three BBC correspondents known for their coverage of international events, one of them observed that experientially the distinction between "international" and "local" is breaking down. What happens abroad, e.g. in Syria, has now become up-front and local by way of hundreds of thousands of migrants fleeing war and knocking for refuge on the doors of European countries close by. A similar point may be made about events in time: we find it difficult to process these events as they occur. Yesterday, the migrants were welcomed in most

countries of the European Union. Today, barriers are being erected to their entry into Europe even by countries that welcomed them a few weeks earlier. We live in a world of *compressed space* and *compressed time*. This is one side of the picture.

We are also familiar with the other. This has to do with *particularity*: the particularities of our personalities, our families, our communities, our national identities, our relationships, our hopes and sensibilities, fears, expectations, and beliefs. We cannot shake these off; we are particular people. Each of us has to cope simultaneously with the interactive dynamic of relating to and experiencing one another in a shared common space that is informed by the private experience of who we think we are. And who we think we are is constituted in significant measure by the perceptions of other people and the expectations of who we hope to become. In this sense, each of us has to live in a developing complex space of virtual reality: a space of constant becoming, of endless, sometimes exciting possibilities, but a space that we cannot easily control.

An increasingly important dimension of this common space has become what we may call, with others, "technospace". This is the space created by the electronic

revolution of our times: by the internet, by smart phones, by iPads and the like. It is a space hovering between private and public, requiring instant reactions and judgments. At one moment its content is private, and then by the press of a button this content goes viral. There is no going back, no chance for recall, no control over consequences. In addition to the speed of diffusion here, there is another aspect of this phenomenon which is equally disconcerting: its fractured and opaque intentionality, that is, it is very difficult if not impossible to make sense of, to integrate, its multiple dimensions of meaning. From the point of view of meaning, this is a centrifugal, not a centripetal process. Let me give you an example.

On the night of December 5<sup>th</sup> last year, a member of the public was slashed with a knife in an unprovoked attack at a station of the London Underground. Because of what the attacker shouted as he lunged with the knife, this was treated as a suspected terrorist incident. The perpetrator was soon wrestled to the ground, tasered and arrested. One or two members of the public rushed to help, but the immediate response of others at the scene was to video the episode on their mobiles and to disseminate the content. This reaction generated some controversy in the British press, and the following

questions were raised. How could the instant filming, so common a reaction today, be explained? Was it intended to be a helpful response, recording evidence for bringing the attacker to justice? Was some kind of voyeurism involved, a seeking of vicarious gratification by observing violence on display? Was this yet another example of what seems to be a creeping belief in the public mind that nothing really happens unless its occurrence is recorded in shared space? Does this way of thinking dull or conceal in some way the reality of what is recorded by adding layers of ambiguity between event and receiver? For questions of editing content and interpreting it instantly arise. There are so many facets to this phenomenon of techno-space that as we seek to unravel them we find it hard to get an overall sense of bearing, and of their meaning and significance. Yet it represents an experience - or an amalgam of experiences - that we all encounter more and more, and are called upon to integrate into the fabric of our lives. Its dimensions of virtual reality inform the shared, public space we all occupy, both enabling and enhancing communication between ourselves on the one hand, and complicating our inter-subjective negotiations on the other.

In this complex arena of real space and virtual space, of interpretation and sense-making, we cannot hope

to survive with soundness of mind and body unless we reach out with courage, humility, and solidarity to other human beings in order to steady ourselves and give meaning to the increasingly beguiling world in which we live. Here religion has an important part to play, for of its nature religion, at least the religious teachings that lie at the heart of the major faith-traditions of the world, have taught us through precept and practice, through their great historical exemplars, and indeed through the everyday lives of countless of their followers, to live as communities, to support and strengthen one another, to help the vulnerable and oppressed, and to project these values into the social limelight as necessary for virtue and the good life.

Historically, there has been another side to religious presence in the world, as we know: strife, enmity, feelings of righteous superiority etc., all accompanied by gratuitous violence. The interesting thing is that these vices of the dark side of religion have themselves been condemned and regretted by most religious people as lapses of human nature and abuse of religion at its best. The fundamental teaching is to reach out, to heal, and to save, however these objectives might be pursued in practice. All the faiths that have stood the test of time agree that to attempt to recoil,



individually or collectively, into some unshared private space, from fear of the unknown, is a recipe for decline, despair, and eventual destruction. This is not only a religious insight; it has been endorsed countless times - by scientific psychological evidence and the evidence of personal experience. We cannot flourish as human beings on our own, cut off from the rest of the world. It must be in this context, then, of reaching out to the other as a means of human survival and flourishing, that faith and belief must play its part.

But before we look more closely into this point, we must continue to set the scene of our inquiry. How can we describe further this shared, public space - already characterized by me as a mix between the virtual reality of a range of possibilities, choices, and becoming, and the actuality of our individual particularities - in which we must live and move and have our being, and in which we hope to flourish as human beings?

My focus will be on the space provided by what we understand as a liberal, secular democracy, that is, a polity in which each member of an electorate is entitled, from a fixed age, and on an equal basis with any other member, to vote freely for those who will govern at local, regional and national levels, irrespective of

differences of gender, ethnicity, creed, or socio-economic status. But this description of the liberal democracy I am investigating is not enough. For I have also used the epithet "secular" to describe it. What does this term mean? It is a very important descriptor for our purposes, but not easy to define.

In a work entitled *A Secular Age*, published in 2007, the well-known philosopher and historian, Charles Taylor, offers three definitions of "secularity": (i) a state of affairs in which religion or its absence is largely a private matter, and where interactions in public spaces are not governed by any necessary reference to religious affiliation or some God or higher power; (ii) a state of affairs where people actively turn away from religion or some transcendent principle, and finally (iii) a state of affairs where it is no longer *unproblematic* to be religious or believe in some God or transcendent principle.<sup>2</sup> As Taylor says, this last is a state of affairs "in which [such belief] is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace" (2007:3). In one way or other, all three meanings apply in our secular democracies of today. But

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<sup>2</sup> See Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA and London, Introduction.

the third category is especially relevant. In this third category, where religious faith is not unproblematic, people of religious faith are put to the test; they are challenged constantly to question the basis of their religious beliefs, practices, affiliations, in terms of what the social anthropologist Talal Asad calls "new concepts of "religion", "ethics", and "politics", and new imperatives associated with them".<sup>3</sup>

Here I am reminded of a tale the scholar of religion John Bowker narrates in one of his books (I cannot remember where, and I may have modified some details in the telling):

A man was walking on a path along a sheer cliff-edge, hundreds of feet above waves crashing against rocks below. Suddenly the ground gave way beneath his feet, and he was pitched over the edge. As he began to hurtle down, he saw the sturdy stump of a plant sticking out of the cliff-face at arm's length from him. In desperation, he lunged out and grabbed hold of it, breaking his fall. As he hung there precariously, high above the jagged rocks and crashing waves, he looked up at the sky - and prayed. "Oh God", he cried, "Save me, save me! Don't let me die. I have faith in you!" Then he heard a deep voice (it is

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2003, p.3.

always a deep voice) boom out from the heavens. "Let go!" said the voice. "Do not fear. I will not let you die. I will save you. Let go!" Clutching at the stump, the man looked down at the distant rocks below. Then he looked up at the heavens again, and asked, "Is there anyone else up there?"

This tale puts me in mind of the public space in which most of us in secular, liberal democracies live today. It is a space in which the faith of the religious believer lives a precarious existence. No longer can the rightness of religion itself, or of a particular religious faith be taken for granted, as used to be the case in the political dispensations of the past, or as it is even today under those regimes that seek to govern through a state religion. In the secular, liberal democracy of today, the faith of the religious believer is perforce re-interpreted through new understandings of the good life and of human fulfillment, of the ethics of solidarity and tolerance, and of the political governance towards which all, irrespective of belief, gender or status, are entitled to contribute equally. To have credibility, the religious believer must constantly justify, defend, review, question, in terms of these new understandings that challenge the complacent acceptance

of religious faith of the past (which is Talal Asad's point).

There are many clamorous voices in the public forum claiming to have reasonable counter-options to one's religious stance, either in the name of science, or rationalism, or atheism or agnosticism, or indeed, of another religious tradition or affiliation. And in each case of challenge to one's religious belief, the other party professes to put forward a view that is equally ethical and consonant with basic values of human flourishing, as one's own. In fact, the non-religious person now is no longer seen as inevitably "mad or bad", that is, as lacking in the capacity for sound thought or good morals; in theory, he or she can take their stand equally with the religious believer in the public forum as following an acceptable form of life. As a result, the public forum has now become a public market place of faiths, beliefs, stances for living, with each option jostling for acceptance among others.

Now I agree with the social theorist Jürgen Habermas that in principle this is a *desirable* state of affairs. I would argue further that from the point of view of state, religion and religious believer, it can confer many strengthening benefits to each member of this triad. But

before I embark on this, let me continue with my observations with special reference to Singapore.

If my understanding is correct, the Constitution of Singapore endorses this conception of a secular, liberal democracy for its citizens. The influential White Paper of 1989 entitled *Maintenance of Religious Harmony*, and setting out proposals for legislation to maintain religious tolerance and racial harmony in Singapore, while acknowledging the wide-ranging benefits that religious organizations and groups had conferred on the country, quotes from a Presidential Address at the time to the effect that:

"Religious harmony is as important to us as racial harmony. Singapore is a secular state, and the supreme source of political authority is the Constitution. The Constitution guarantees freedom of religion....We can only enjoy harmonious and easy racial relationships if we practise religious toleration and moderation." (Cf. Introduction, item 2.)

Indeed, at the opening of Parliament a few days ago, in his speech the President reiterated these sentiments. "Every Singaporean", he said, "has a role to play in keeping our country safe and preserving our multiracial harmony. All must reject violence, and

keep working to deepen mutual understanding and expand our common space”.

It is relevant to note that in a survey taken not very long ago which measured religious diversity across about 200 countries and territories globally with reference to various religious groupings including the Hindu, Buddhist, Taoist, Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and Sikh traditions, as well as religious people not affiliated to any institutionalized faith, the Pew Research Center found that the Asia-Pacific area has the highest level of religious diversity in the world, and that it was Singapore that ranked first in this region on the Religious Diversity Index, scoring 9 points out of a possible 10.<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, another survey by Pew found that 84% of the world’s population would regard themselves as religious in some way.<sup>5</sup> Finally, Pew research also projected recently that by 2050, if current demographic trends continue, most of the major religions of the world will grow in absolute numbers and continue to define by far

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<sup>4</sup> See <http://the-diplomat.com/2014/04/asia-leads-the-world-in-religious-diversity/> (dated April 9, 2014).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/12/18/global-religious-landscape-exec/>

the bulk of the world's population.<sup>6</sup> Of course, these are but projections and cannot take into account what happens in the wake of actual geo-political events and decisions of the future (thus the Pew survey had not foreseen that because of the unexpected growth rate of its ageing population, China will abandon its one-child policy this year. This could mean that, all things being equal, the growth-rate globally of Buddhists and adherents of traditional Chinese religions will probably increase well beyond the projections of the survey, although, according to some China-observers, the abandonment of the one-child policy may not lead to a significant growth in the Chinese birthrate, at least for some time). The point is that religion is here to stay as a major demographic factor not only in Singapore, but also, for the foreseeable future, around the world. No one can write religion off today.

True, you may say, but the question now becomes: how does the growth or persistence of the secular, liberal common space of which I speak - a space endorsed by the Constitution of Singapore - affect the future of the religious belief and affiliation that occupies it? Can we speak of some intrinsic connection between the exercise

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<sup>6</sup> See <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/04/02/religious-projections-2010-2050/>



of secular, democratic values and the fate of religious belief?

In September 2013, the Woolf Institute, which is based in Cambridge, UK, and whose brief is to study in particular the relations between the Abrahamic faiths, and of which I happen to be a Trustee, convened an independent commission to undertake the first systematic review of the role of religion and belief in the United Kingdom. The commission was chaired by the eminent peer, Baroness Elizabeth Butler-Sloss, and released their findings in a major Report on December 7<sup>th</sup> 2015 (that is, after two years of inquiry), entitled *Living with Difference: community, diversity, and the common good*.

The Report affirms:

“Over the past half century, Britain’s landscape in terms of religion and belief has been transformed beyond recognition. There are three striking trends:

- The first is the increase in the number of people with non-religious beliefs and identities.

Almost a half of the population today describes itself as non-religious, as compared with an eighth in England and a third in Scotland in 2001.

- The second is the general decline in Christian affiliation, belief and practice. Thirty years ago, two-thirds of the population would have identified as Christians. Today, that figure is four in ten, and at the same time there has been a shift away from mainstream denominations and a growth in

evangelical and Pentecostal churches.

• The third is the increased diversity amongst people who have a religious faith. Fifty years ago Judaism - at one in 150 - was the largest non-Christian tradition in the UK. Now it is the fourth largest behind Islam, Hinduism and Sikhism. Although still comprising less than one in ten of the population, faith traditions other than Christian have younger age profiles and are therefore growing faster.

Furthermore, intra- and inter-faith disputes are inextricably linked to today's geopolitical crises across the Middle East, and in many parts of Africa and Asia. Many of these disputes are reflected back into UK society, creating or exacerbating tensions between different communities.

So twenty-first century ethno-religious issues and identities here in the UK and globally are reshaping society in ways inconceivable just a few decades ago, and how we respond to such changes will have a profound impact on public life."<sup>7</sup>

Making the necessary changes, we might certainly apply the last paragraph to religious life in Singapore in a rapidly globalizing world. Twenty-first century ethno-religious issues and identities will no doubt exert a powerful influence on this country, not least because of its strategic location in the hub of the Asia-Pacific region. Just consider, for example, the

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<sup>7</sup> *Living with Difference: community, diversity, and the common good*, published by the Woolf Institute, Cambridge, 2015, p.6.

recent terrorist incident in Jakarta, close to "home" here in Singapore, to which the President alluded in a cautionary way in his address. But let us raise first the following question that arises from the above Report's analysis of the British situation: is this the effect on religion of a secular, liberal democracy in the modern age, that is, an appreciable decline in the number of people who call themselves religious? Or is this a feature of a well-established secular, liberal democracy that has its own distinctive western mix of national character, faith and history - as in the case of the UK?

As an independent secular state subject to a different range of geo-political influences, Singapore is only 50 years old with a blend of religious and social diversity that may well give rise to a very different trajectory with respect to the effects of secularity upon it. Who can predict what this trajectory will be? It would be a mistake to assume that it will ape the British model. In fact, I think that the distinctive mix of religion and race in Singapore will make a UK-type scenario unlikely. In any event, two considerations come to mind from our analysis:

First, even if Singapore *is* heading for a secular future similar to that of the UK at present - and this, I

have said, is by no means certain - it is likely that this trajectory will work itself out with its twists and turns over an appreciable period of time. However, it is to the culturally plural situation of Singapore today and its foreseeable future that we must look at present, and this still has a substantial element of religion in it. The same might be said for other plural societies that conform to the liberal democratic model we are considering.

Second, irrespective of what the future might hold, prudence, wisdom and fairness dictate that we include those who do *not* subscribe to any religious stance in our cogitations about these societies' religious future. As citizens of the secular state, the non-religious have an equal stake in the shaping of their country, and so an equal right, and indeed responsibility, to help define that enterprise. But there is another important reason for including such people in our deliberations: the role they can play in helping reconfigure the stance of religious commitment in the public forum. I mentioned earlier that they are in a position to act as a catalyst for change among religious people. By the questions and challenges the secularists pose, religious people are encouraged not only to reformulate their own convictions in terms of a shared polity and publicly contested notion

of the common good, but also to dialogue in solidarity and tolerance with each other (as part of the ongoing debate with the secularists). In this the secularists perform a valuable civic function. They are here to stay in the politics and spaces that give us greatest scope to live and flourish freely with difference; we cannot put the clock back.<sup>8</sup>

Let us pause now to consider the point about dialogue that I raised earlier: that is, dialogue among religious folk, and dialogue between the religious and avowedly non-religious. In fact, such dialogue should be a continuous, tripartite process if it is to meet with success, involving an *intra*-religious dialogue between people who belong to the same broad religious stance (e.g. Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Christianity, Islam and so on), an *inter*-religious dialogue between people who belong to different religious faiths, and thirdly, the

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<sup>8</sup> Surveys repeatedly show that the professed non-religious or those who say they have "no-religion" are by no means a homogenous category: they range from robust atheists or agnostics to those who are uninterested in religion or who do claim belief in some transcendent power or God but disassociate themselves from a form of institutionalized faith. The hardliners who say that religion is a negative force in society are usually a small minority; see the British surveys, initiated by Linda Woodhead, under the headings "The 'Fuzzy' Nones" and "No Religion is the New Religion" in <http://faithdebates.org.uk/research/>.

dialogue between believers and those of good will who profess to have no religious faith at all. These three dialogues should proceed simultaneously through a reconstituted "shared language" that results in a cross-fertilization of ideas and reformulated objectives about co-operation towards a shared life in the public forum.

There is plenty of scope for all three forms of dialogue, not least the intra-religious kind. Not infrequently, dialogue between religionists falling under the same broad canopy of faith can be the most needed, as this little tale told me by a Jewish friend illustrates.

A rabbi became a castaway on a remote and tiny desert island in the middle of a vast ocean. There was enough food, shelter, and firewood on the island, but no other human being. For years the lonely castaway built a bonfire on a hillock in the middle of the island and kept it burning round the clock in the hope that its smoke would be seen by a passing ship which would come to the rescue. One day, a passing ship did indeed see the trail of smoke, and anchored near the island. Soon a small boat set out from the ship with the captain and two sailors on board to discover what the smoke was all about. When the boat arrived at the island it was met at water's edge by the delighted but impatient castaway, who led his rescuers at once to the small hut in which he lived. When

the little group reached the hut, the captain was surprised to see *two* tiny synagogues built of branches and bits of driftwood standing near the hut, about a hundred yards apart.

"But I thought you said there was no one else on the island?" exclaimed the captain.

"That's correct," answered the rabbi. "There is no one else. I've been living here alone for years".

"Then why are there *two* synagogues here?" asked the captain.

"Ah", replied the rabbi, pointing to the synagogue nearest the hut. "*This* is the synagogue in which I worship, and *that's* the one I *don't* go to!"

This tale could apply to most religious traditions of the world, of course. The passage of time, the perspectival nature of human attitudes and approaches to truth, the tendency of people to challenge and question, and the context-bound limitations of human experience inevitably generate diversity in belief. This is not necessarily a bad thing, producing discord and strife; it can also be a strength, providing an opportunity for the sharing and enriching of insights. Intra-religious difference can be a creative phenomenon, if we allow it to be so - similarly for dialogue *across* boundaries that define religions, and for dialogue between religionists

and secularists. The common good, as its name implies, belongs to everyone, and does not have to do only with the provision of jobs, food, shelter, clothing, and other physical and material needs, but also with the realization of such goods as health-care, education, ecological security and a united social order and sense of well-being that contribute to our flourishing as human beings in the round. All need to work together, across divides and differences, to contribute to the public good.

Unless these dialogues are conducted with a sense of inclusiveness and tolerance, and a readiness to review and change one's viewpoint in keeping with new insights about the values, rights and responsibilities that constitute social well-being for all who share the public space that defines a liberal, secular democracy, there is no prospect of arriving at even a semblance of viable public order and the common good. Remember our earlier observation at the beginning of this lecture: it is only by reaching out to the other in solidarity across the unnerving boundaries of constant change and flux that beset us today that we can hope to survive and flourish individually and collectively in the context of a national, public space.



But under what rubric can we achieve this? In this final Part of my talk, I want to make some practical suggestions. Let us start with this thought. The independent Report commissioned in Britain by the Woolf Institute mentioned earlier, speaks of seeking a "national story or narrative" of the United Kingdom that might function as an instrument of social tolerance and cohesiveness. This idea is not developed clearly or in detail. But let us try to formulate it at greater length ourselves, with special reference to kind of plural society we are considering. To begin with, a national narrative which begs the question, "Who are we as a nation?" must be *inclusive* if it is to do its job; every segment of society that agrees to abide by the rules of its country's Constitution must be given to believe by the state that it has a fair stake in shaping this narrative, irrespective of ethnic, religious, social, gender or political differences. Further, this national story must be inhabited by what we may call national icons, whether these be individuals or institutions. In the case of Britain, an example of an institutional national icon could be its National Health Service, which to date is inclusive of all citizens, delivering urgent health care freely to all at the point of need. It was no accident that at the Olympic Games in London in 2012, it was Britain's National Health Service that was showcased

so prominently in the opening ceremony.

One could inquire if there is a "national narrative" to any secular democracy, including Singapore, that is, a narrative that largely defines the country's public space and time and its place in the world, a story that begs the question, "Who are we as a nation?" Would it be a good thing to identify such a narrative as an instrument of patriotism, social cohesiveness and religious tolerance, not to mention a shared trajectory for the future? Or do you think it is a sinister idea, subject to exploitation by various unscrupulous agencies? Suppose it were a viable concept in your estimation, what could be this narrative's national icons, either as individuals or as institutions? It would be necessary for all segments of society that agreed to abide by the principles of its Constitution to have a fair stake in this story's formulation. What role should religion play in its articulation? And the nation's leadership - civic, educational, and governmental - what role should it play in developing or guiding this narrative? Some might say that if such a democracy did not identify its own story, others might feel free to formulate it, with their own agenda in mind. If I could ask the question of you, would you, as citizens of Singapore, wish to create or articulate a national narrative to uphold the secular,

liberal and democratic values of your Constitution, or do you think that adopting such a project would be playing with the fires of self-interested and manipulative agencies? In short, should the contingencies of national, regional and international events reign supreme in defining a nation's profile, or should their challenges be met in terms of a national story? Is such a concept worth debating on some national platform?

Whether a plural society of the kind we are considering wishes to identify a national narrative or not, it is undeniable that clear leadership is essential for upholding the liberal and secular values of its Constitution. Briefly, for time is against us, we can review the terms of such leadership with special reference to religion and its resources under the three headings mentioned earlier: (i) the civic, (ii) the educational, and (iii) the authority of the state.

(i) Leaders of religious organizations and groupings have a key civic duty: that of endorsing the values of their Constitution in the public sphere in which they function as leaders and in which these values are best articulated, but also of challenging any attempt, from wherever it arises, that seeks to abuse or imperil these values. Ideally religious leaders have always been

expected to act fearlessly in performing these functions. The achieving of such ends requires from them a raft of practical measures: setting up groups or committees to study their own traditions as resources for conflict resolution among their followers; creating deradicalization programmes for extremists of one sort or other; establishing agencies and/or participating with other faiths in a non-partisan way, to help the needy and vulnerable; forming bodies to engage in dialogue with people of other faiths and the secularists, and so on. These are necessary but largely remedial measures.

But these leaders must also not neglect the celebratory: that is, those teachings of their faiths that endorse the qualities of compassion, forgiveness, repentance, truth-telling, forbearance, perseverance, honesty, hope, kindness, patience, humility, generosity in a shared ethic of common space for all. The teachings of all the respected faiths, in one combination or other, project these virtues in abundance, virtues without which the body politic of any liberal democracy, comprised as it may be of religious and non-religious members, cannot flourish. Indeed, as recent events on the world stage in the west have shown, even those actively engaged in pursuing and furthering capitalist and market economies, need to demonstrate these virtues if they are to function

with respect in the public forum.

(ii) The educational dimension of leadership in the context of which we speak is of prime importance, for it is through education in the study of religion and its forms from the primary to the tertiary levels that the goods of religious understanding, tolerance and harmony are inculcated. How can individuals reach out across religious and other boundaries unless they receive the right education in the formative stages of their lives? And this begins in primary school. Is the teaching of mutual respect between the faiths an integral feature of every educational institution in the land, including so-called faith-schools like seminaries and madrasas? Are there government bodies that oversee and test this requirement? Are there sufficient sanctions for defaulters? Do religious curricula reflect this need? Are these curricula regularly updated for the appropriate inclusion of advances endorsed by the academic study of religion, or do they teach old and inaccurate material? Is there adequate representation in schools of properly trained teachers in the study of religion? Are these teachers and their subjects given due recognition?

Here, with reference to Singapore, I must mention the creation of the SRP - the Programme for Studies in

Inter-Religious Relations in Plural Societies in the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies in Nanyang Technological University (NTU). This Programme, begun in June 2014, and in which I am privileged to play a part, is a new venture at the tertiary level dedicated to the academic study of religion and its forms, and of the way religions can interact in plural societies for the common good. As such it is just the sort of practical innovation at the tertiary level that a democracy of the kind we are considering needs, in order to inform, explore, and guide with respect to the plurality of religious presence in our troubled world. It is envisaged that the work of the SRP Programme will be of key relevance not only to the region, but also much wider afield. Under the most able leadership, this Programme has already initiated several modules in a Master's course at NTU, and has organized lectures, and executive and other workshops in the city. Indeed, one of my colleagues in the SRP Programme is undertaking a survey of religious self-understanding and dialogue among the religious leadership of Singapore; this will provide valuable data for study of religious life and its prospects in the country. The Symposium you are attending is yet another instance of this centre's public outreach.

Under this heading of education, one must not forget

the role of the media. For, as we know, the media in a liberal, secular democracy seeks not only to inform but also to shape public opinion. For reasons we have given in this lecture, a vital ingredient of its concern must be religion, and not disproportionately only a somewhat reductive interest in business, economic and political affairs. But is the media religion-savvy? Are there enough journalists *trained* in understanding, assessing, and reporting religious events? Or is religion in the media generally consigned to a minor or insignificant place in everyday coverage, handled by those hired principally to do other tasks? Responsible journalism in television and the press should not focus on opportunities to sensationalize religion, but should give it the regular and fair-minded coverage that such an important topic increasingly deserves.

(iii) Finally, we come to the role of the government in a secular, liberal democracy. This, of course, is of great importance, for government in such a context affirms, sustains and safeguards public space and time and the nature of their content. For this a clearly worded, directive Constitution is crucial, as is the effort to ensure free and fully representative governance at all levels. There should be no exclusions on any basis, of those who agree to abide by the rulings of the

Constitution. It is only when government secures the trust of its people that it can fulfill its function. For this adequate security, legislation, and sanctions are vital. Talal Asad, who, in the work cited earlier, does not hesitate to point out that the reality of a public space in our liberal democracies in which all citizens are enabled to negotiate their future and interact freely, is still a long way from the ideal, also observes that "most politicians are aware that "the system is in danger" when the general population ceases to enjoy any sense of prosperity, when the regime is felt to be thoroughly unresponsive to the governed, and when the state security apparatuses are grossly inefficient" (2003:3-4). But the state cannot function without fair-minded and civilized sanctions and the active will to enforce them. In the case of Singapore, the White Paper of 1989 makes this very clear. Whilst human beings may not naturally be wolves to each other as the old Roman proverb remarks (*homo homini lupus*), humans often lapse into predatory behaviour where others are concerned, and require both inducements and sanctions to obey the law. The inducements include the freedom to debate, trade, criticize (including criticizing the government) and vote as inhabitants of the public sphere; the sanctions include restraint and restrictions by the state if this freedom is violated. Religious freedom is a



responsibility as well as a right, and in the public arena members of all faiths compliant with the kind of Constitution I have been considering, have equal standing with those who profess no religious faith at all.

Let me conclude this lecture with a reference to Singapore. In the public arena of multi-religious relationships, independent Singapore has had an honourable past. But in the new world of a rapidly globalizing techno-space, where democracies such as ours are sometimes hemmed in by illiberal religious forces and threats, it has become an even more pressing need to safeguard the integrity of this shared arena so that all citizens, the religious and the non-religious alike, can interact freely and with confidence in negotiating their future. Implementation of the kind of practical measures I have suggested under the three headings above for enhancing the public profile of religion will, by initiating a structural change in the common space occupied by all, not only affirm but also increase the scope of this space. If such an effort is made in Singapore, then the country's honourable record in ethno-religious diversity will have sound prospects in a world changing with unnerving speed. Then all its citizens will be able to sing with renewed hope and vigour in polyphonic unison, *Majulah Singapura: Onward Singapore,*

with the next 50 years in view. Thank you.

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