

# INTERRELIGIOUS RELATIONS

**Conceptualising Social Cohesion in  
Relation to Religious Diversity:  
Sketching a Pathway in a Globalised World**

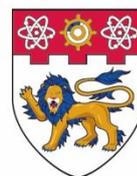
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# **INTERRELIGIOUS RELATIONS**

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**Conceptualising Social Cohesion in  
Relation to Religious Diversity:  
Sketching a Pathway in a Globalised World**

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## **Abstract**

This paper offers an overview of current literature and best practice in terms of promoting social cohesion with a focus on how this relates to religious diversity. Its focus is Southeast Asia, but it explores this within a globalised context. It sets out some issues concerning how diversity is related to and experienced, before considering how we can conceptualise social cohesion in terms of religious diversity, offering three aspects as part of a contextual and down-to-earth descriptor. Tensions and issues which arise and counter social cohesion in contemporary societies are then noted, before postcolonial and decolonial theory is addressed as it may affect thinking through these issues. Finally, four themes that may be seen as key in promoting social cohesion are discussed: narratives, youth, dialogue, and leadership. The paper does not propose, within the limits of the space available, to offer a definitional survey of all issues; rather, it seeks to promote a contextualised debate and discussion of social cohesion in relation to religious diversity in the Southeast Asian context and to suggest a pathway towards thinking this.

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Of increasing concern to policy makers, scholars, religious leaders, interfaith activists, and society at large in today's complex and religiously diverse societies is the question of promoting social cohesion. We find our societies beset by forces which seek to rupture the fabric of society and set groups at odds with one another. In every society, the matrix of threats is different, but it includes global, regional, national, and local dynamics. We may list some: the threat of religiously motivated violence and terrorism; the rise of socially divisive religious exclusivist attitudes and intolerance; the growth of ethno-racial group identities resulting in intolerance or violence; the utilisation of religio-ethnic and exclusionary tropes by populist political figures; threats arising from climate change or warfare in terms of human migration and displacement. The dynamics of prejudice, pathways to violence, and exclusion that threaten the fibres of social cohesion are arguably better understood than the dynamics of building social cohesion. As such, this paper offers selected insights on the complex ways in which we need to understand the process of building social cohesion with a particular focus on Southeast Asia but in a global perspective. These will inevitably be contextual and dynamic.

In this paper, I will proceed in five steps: first, to set out some background on the context of diversity in today's world; second, to overview the literature and strategically intervene in the debates on definitions of social cohesion, especially as it relates to religious diversity; third, to set out a number of the key issues and tensions working against social cohesion to understand better the dynamics being faced; fourth, to address questions around the postcolonial context of theorising these questions in Asian contexts; fifth, to outline four selected factors in promoting social cohesion, including aspects of good practice to help show pathways for future research and guidance in promoting social cohesion. This is not intended to provide a comprehensive theory of social cohesion, nor to cover all aspects, which would not be possible in a paper of this length, but rather to start developing a Southeast Asian contribution to global debates in dialogue with existing theories.

## Diversity

All human societies are diverse, though discursive claims to monocultural societal structures abound, especially in terms of either ethnic/ racial<sup>2</sup> or religious identities. For instance, imagining Europe as a white, Christian continent, or in emphasising only the Bamar Buddhist identity as the social framing of Myanmar.<sup>3</sup> Diversity exists at all levels. Most basically, we have at a minimum two genders recognised in most societies, though to give an Asian example, India accepts a third gender in the hijras.<sup>4</sup> Beyond gender, religious diversity,

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is developed from my Special Address at the first International Conference on Cohesive Societies (ICCS), 19-21 June 2019, Singapore. I express my indebtedness to Professor Katherine Marshall whose speaking notes inspired some aspects of this paper, though it extends beyond that in ways which are not her own and which I take full responsibility for. A shorter adaptation from the Address will appear as Paul Hedges, "Framing Cohesive Societies: Some Initial Remarks and Ways Ahead," in *Faith, Identity, Cohesion: Building a Better Future*, eds Amanda Huan and Jolene Jerard, Singapore and London: World Scientific, 2020. The original lecture can be viewed at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hytb8vOc7ps> (timing: 2.38-30.10).

<sup>2</sup> Both ethnicity and race are malleable, fluid, and socially constructed terms, and exist as what Rogers Brubaker would term groups constructed under the lens of "groupism," see Rogers Brubaker, 'Ethnicity without groups,' *Archives Européennes de Sociologie* 43.2 (2002): 163-189. On "race" and "ethnicity", see Steve Garner, *Racisms: An Introduction*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, London: Sage, 2017, and Steve Fenton, *Ethnicity*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010. On the specific Southeast Asian social imaginary of race, see Syed Hussein Alatas, *The Myth of the Lazy Native: A study of the image of the Malays, Filipinos and Javanese from the 16th to the 20th Century and its function in the ideology of Colonial Capitalism*, New York, NY: Routledge, 2010 [1977].

<sup>3</sup> See, respectively, Florian Bieber, "How Europe's Nationalists Became Internationalists," *Foreign Policy*, 30 November 2019, available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/11/30/how-europes-nationalists-became-internationalists/>, and Than Toe Aung, "The idea that 'to be Burmese is to be Bamar and Buddhist' should be supplanted by a broader notion – 'that to be Burmese is to be born in Burma'," *Frontier Myanmar*, 21 January 2019, available at: <https://frontiermyanmar.net/en/identity-crisis>.

<sup>4</sup> Gender is arguably far more fluid than this suggests, and for an overview of arguments in relation to religious traditions and contemporary theories, see Paul Hedges, *Understanding Religion: Theories and Methods for Studying Religiously Diverse Societies*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2021, chapter 10.

ethnic diversity, and cultural diversity abound, which is especially true in Southeast Asia.<sup>5</sup> Even in countries which see themselves as racially and religiously homogenous, diversity has long existed.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, our contemporary experience and understanding of diversity, especially religious diversity, has become increasingly problematised.

This givenness of diversity means that those experiencing it are immediately faced with a question: "How do I respond to it?" I will suggest that the answer to this question can be seen as mediating between two poles, which represent Durkheimian ideal types, but is actually a continuum rather than about dichotomous polar responses. A first pole is inclusion, which is being used here to mean the desire to embrace the Other as our neighbour, to rejoice in different cultures as opportunities to learn and expand our horizons, to celebrate and accept the many ways of life around us as different ways of being human, and to welcome a variety of perspectives on truth and meaning in our world.<sup>7</sup> The other pole is exclusion, defined here as the tendency to deny the human dignity of the Other, to believe that only our customs, culture, cuisine, or celebrations are of value and legitimate, to shut out difference as potentially polluting our prized purity, and to see from only one perspective and acknowledge truth as embedded in one's own worldview alone. As noted, these two are extremes, and much middle ground exists.<sup>8</sup> To some extent, this paper is an extended discussion around this question, in which it seeks for a scholarly and evidence-based assessment of how we may promote the tendency to inclusion over the tendency to exclusion.

A final important note on diversity is that while some literature argues that today's context of religious diversity is new and unprecedented, this typically represents a Western-centric bias in the analysis. Yet, there is a very real sense in which our experience of this diversity, wheresoever we hail from, is different from that of our parents or grandparents, or even our younger selves. Even in a place such as Singapore, which has been a vibrant site of the mixing of cultures, peoples, and religions for many hundreds of years, the possibility of experiencing first-hand ever more diversity is available for us today. This is not just from travel, books and television, but from the Internet and social media as most of us now have access, in our pockets, to a device more powerful than the computers and engineering that put the first humans on the moon. I speak, of course, of the smartphone which has put the world at our fingertips. We live therefore in an age of unprecedented access to, and knowledge about, diversity. However, we should heed some wise words: with great power comes great responsibility.<sup>9</sup> Our knowledge of diversity must be matched by wise ways of dealing with it.

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Mathew Mathews, "Introduction: Ethnic Diversity, Identity and Everyday Multiculturalism in Singapore," in *The Singapore Ethnic Mosaic: Many Cultures, One People*, ed. Mathew Mathews, Singapore: World Scientific: 2018: xi-xli.

<sup>6</sup> See Anna Halafoff and Paul Hedges, "Globalisation and Multifaith Societies", *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 25.2 (2015): 135-161, 2015. See also Geraldine Heng, *England and the Jews*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018, and Charlotte Higgins, "Mary Beard is Right – 'Romans' could be from anywhere, from Carlisle to Cairo," *The Guardian*, 7 August 2017, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/shortcuts/2017/aug/07/mary-beard-romans-ancient-evidence>.

<sup>7</sup> My terminology here relates to the Southeast Asian context, elsewhere the term "pluralism" may be used for this acceptance of diversity. See, for instance, Diana Eck, *Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Benares*, Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1993, 166-199.

<sup>8</sup> The terms inclusion/inclusivism, exclusion/exclusivism, and pluralism are used variously. For a descriptive treatment of some key variations, see Hedges, *Understanding Religion*, chapter 13.

<sup>9</sup> There are differing explanations of where this quote comes from, or who first uttered it, and variations date back to at least the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries.

## Cohesion

There are many definitions of what social cohesion means,<sup>10</sup> which have developed since at least the time that Emile Durkheim introduced the concepts of *solidarism*, *anomie*, and alienation.<sup>11</sup> More recently, the Council of Europe (2001) has suggested that it means that all people have the opportunity of access to the means to secure their basic needs; progress; protection and legal rights; and, dignity and social confidence.<sup>12</sup> This is not intended as a definition of social cohesion, so much as noting the factors involved with it. Again, some pairings of terms have been used, and, in Canada, the following has been applied: recognition/ rejection, belonging/ isolation (social involvement factors); legitimacy/ illegitimacy, participation/ non-involvement (political involvement factors); and, inclusion/ exclusion (economic involvement factor).<sup>13</sup> This allows for potentially measurable indices, but there is still little indication of what this refers to in terms of the interrelation between communities. Take for instance, the Amish in the USA, who may not be well integrated in these terms, but are very different from some other marginal/ marginalised communities in terms of their relationship and sense of antagonism to the wider community. Another recent set of factors uses three key "domains": "resilient social relationships, a positive emotional connectedness between the community and its members, and a pronounced focus on the common good."<sup>14</sup> Under three headings ("social relations," "connectedness," and the "common good"), each is broken down into three further sub-sections: 1) social relations: i. social networks, ii. trust in people, iii. acceptance of diversity; 2) connectedness: i. identification, ii. trust in institutions, iii. perception of fairness; and, 3) common good: i. solidarity and helpfulness, ii. respect for social rules, iii. civic participation.<sup>15</sup>

When we move beyond lists of factors there is little definitional agreement with widely differing notions being employed including: "the glue that binds us together," "the forging of a common sense of identity and belonging," "a willingness to extend trust to outsiders," "to respect fellow citizens and uphold their dignity", "to be moved to action in the face of persistent inequality on behalf of those who are marginalised," and "in the South African context... common humanity embodied in the notion of *ubuntu*."<sup>16</sup> In the sociological literature,<sup>17</sup> it is often associated with socio-economic factors such as common values and a civic culture; social order and social control; social solidarity and reductions in wealth disparities; social networks and social capital; place attachment and identity.<sup>18</sup> These are filled with various descriptive factors. It has been suggested that these various definitions often serve day-to-day political contingencies, focus on the interests of particular scholars, and have little analytical clarity or precision.<sup>19</sup> To this end, Joseph Chan, Hong-Po To, and Elaine Chan have suggested a set of more measurable criteria with a horizontal dimension, which is cohesion within civil society,

<sup>10</sup> For some of the literature, see: Andrew Markus and Liudmila Kirpitchenko, "Conceptualising Social Cohesion," in *Social Cohesion in Australia*, eds James Jupp, John Nieuwenhuysen, and Emma Dawson, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007: 21-32; Jane Jensen, *Defining and Measuring Social Cohesion*, London: Commonwealth Secretariat, 2010; Justine Burns, George Hull, Kate Lefko-Everett and Lindokuhle Njizela, "Defining social cohesion," *Saldru Working Paper No. 216*, Cape Town: University of Cape Town, 2018: 1-17; Robert Oxoby "Understanding social inclusion, social cohesion, and social capital", *International Journal of Social Economics* 36.12 (2009): 1133-1152; and, R. Pahl, "The search for social cohesion: from Durkheim to the European Commission," *European Journal of Sociology* 32 (1991): 345-360.

<sup>11</sup> See Markus and Kirpitchenko, "Conceptualising Social Cohesion," 21. See also Pahl, 'The search for social cohesion'.

<sup>12</sup> Cited in Jensen, *Defining and Measuring Social Cohesion*, 5.

<sup>13</sup> Dick Stanley, "What Do We Know about Social Cohesion: The Research Perspective of the Federal Government's Social Cohesion Research Network," *The Canadian Journal of Sociology/ Cahiers canadiens de sociologie* 28.1 (2003): 5-17, 7-8.

<sup>14</sup> Peter Walkenhorst, *What Holds Asian Societies Together?*, Bertelsmann Stiftung Asia Policy Brief, March 2018, available at: [https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/fileadmin/files/BSSt/Publikationen/GrauePublikationen/Asia\\_Policy\\_Brief\\_DA\\_2018\\_03\\_engl.pdf](https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/fileadmin/files/BSSt/Publikationen/GrauePublikationen/Asia_Policy_Brief_DA_2018_03_engl.pdf), 2. See also Bertelsmann Stiftung, ed., *What Holds Asian Societies Together?: Insights from the Social Cohesion Radar*, Gütersloh: Verlag Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2018.

<sup>15</sup> Walkenhorst, *What Holds Asian Societies Together?*, 3 Figure 1.

<sup>16</sup> Burns et. al., "Defining social cohesion," 1.

<sup>17</sup> See Markus and Kirpitchenko, "Conceptualising Social Cohesion," 21-24.

<sup>18</sup> R. Forrest, R. and A. Kearns, "Social Cohesion, Social Capital and the Neighbourhood," *Urban Studies* 38.12 (2001): 2125-2143, 2129. On the wider literature around this, see Markus and Kirpitchenko, "Conceptualising Social Cohesion," 22-23.

<sup>19</sup> Joseph Chan, Ho-Pong To, and Elaine Chan, "Reconsidering Social Cohesion: Developing a Definition and Analytical Framework for Empirical Research," *Social Indicators Research* 75 (2006): 273-302, 274.

and a vertical dimension, which is state-citizen cohesion.<sup>20</sup> While these various terms and debates are instructive for us, they tend to focus on wider political, economic, and social issues of cohesion, while I focus here on perceived religious identities. Certainly, political, economic, and others factors are not divorced from whatever we imagine religion to be, and, in Southeast Asia particularly, ethnicity and religious identity are closely intertwined.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, the focus here is on somewhat intangible aspects of discourse whereby the religious groups within society relate both to each other, to government and the wider secular or civic structures, and to those who may not identify with any religious tradition. Indeed, *contra* Chan, To, and Chan, but in line with some other definitions, I will argue that social cohesion is about social values and tolerance rather than being measurable solely in terms of extrinsic factors.<sup>22</sup> Again, I do not set out directly measurable factors, which some suggest are needed to make a “scientific” rather than a “quasi-concept”, as such quantifiable data may result in measures only of homogeneity or solidarity (see below).<sup>23</sup> In other words, quantifiable results measure only a certain majoritarian group level feeling, but tell us nothing about the dynamics within which these are embedded which may be deeply exclusionary in nature. This is because underlying sentiments and resentment against other groups, even if not socially enacted, can be said to be hindrances to social cohesion. There may be a situation that has been (is?) described as “precarious toleration,” where a surface level of respect and adherence to the rule of law is adhered to, but it is seen to rest on sensitive fault lines.<sup>24</sup> Again, a day-to-day toleration in situations described as super diversity is not a cure for intolerance and prejudice,<sup>25</sup> while situations where communities have lived with seemingly harmonious coexistence for centuries have, in the late twentieth century, been ripped apart with intercommunal violence based upon potential divisions existing within the social framework.<sup>26</sup> Here, I will not seek a single definition of social cohesion, while contextual factors mean it will also often be defined variously. Rather I will give focus to three phrases or concepts, which I believe are central in many definitions and also resonate within a Southeast Asian context. These are: trust and respect; unity in diversity; and resilient identities.<sup>27</sup>

The first pairing of terms is very basic, “trust,” like the term I pair it with, “respect,” is a facet of being able to live safely alongside others. This may seem mundane, but following Chan, To, and Chan, against “esoteric” scholarly categories, I agree that “a good definition of social cohesion should not be too distant from its ordinary meaning.”<sup>28</sup> These are key elements of society, for if we cannot trust others then our ability to communicate, to enact in trade, or live safely in communities are simply not possible. I would relate this to what has been described as well as “willingness”: “Social cohesion then is the sum over (of?) a population of individuals’ willingness to cooperate with each other without coercion in the complex set of social relations needed by individuals to complete their life.”<sup>29</sup> In short, without trust, there is no human society, a factor noted

<sup>20</sup> Chan et. al., “Reconsidering Social Cohesion,” 294-297.

<sup>21</sup> On some aspects in the Singaporean context, see Paul Hedges and Juhi Ahuja, “Interreligious Marriage: Perspectives from the Singaporean Context in Relation to Interreligious Dialogue,” *Interreligious Relations* 1 (2019): 1-25, available at: <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/IRR-Issue-1-February-2019-1.pdf>.

<sup>22</sup> Chan et. al., “Reconsidering Social Cohesion,” pp. 292-293.

<sup>23</sup> Peter Walkenhorst and Kai Unzicker, “Introduction: What holds Asian Societies together?,” in *What Holds Asian Societies Together?: Insights from the Social Cohesion Radar*, ed. Bertelsmann Stiftung: 13-28, 16. As noted of the results from the Social Cohesion radar, it is suggested that social cohesion is “Janus-faced” with “both positive and negative effects,” for it can be “the glue that holds a society together” or “a foundation for authoritarian political systems”: Walkenhorst, *What Holds Asian Societies Together?*, 7. See also, Stanley, “What Do We Know about Social Cohesion,” 9-10 and the discussion below on “solidarity”.

<sup>24</sup> Paul Hedges and Mohamed Imran Mohamed Taib, “The Interfaith Movement in Singapore: Precarious Toleration and Embedded Autonomy,” in *The Interfaith Movement*, eds John Fahy and Jan-Jonathan Bock, London and New York: Routledge, 2019: 139-156.

<sup>25</sup> Susanne Wessendorf, “Being open, but sometimes being closed”. Conviviality in a super-diverse London neighbourhood,” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 17.4 (2014): 392-405, 394.

<sup>26</sup> Arguably, the norm throughout human history has been coexistence, see Paul Hedges, “Religion and Conflict: The Myth of Inevitable Collision,” *RSIS Commentary* 18094 (2018), available at: <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/CO18094.pdf>. The Moluccas conflict is an obvious example, see Lailatul Fitriyah, “Religious Peacebuilding in Post-War Maluku: Tiwery’s Theology of the Mother (Teologi Ina) and Nunusaku-based Cosmology,” *Interreligious Relations* 10 (2019): 1-12, available at: <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/IRR-Issue-10-November-2019.pdf>.

<sup>27</sup> Paul Hedges, “The International Conference on Cohesive Societies – How to Build Cohesive Societies,” *RSIS Commentary* 19123 (2019), available at: <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/CO19123.pdf>.

<sup>28</sup> Chan et. al., “Reconsidering Social Cohesion,” 281.

<sup>29</sup> Stanley, “What Do We Know about Social Cohesion,” 9.

at many points in the Singapore Islamic Religious Council's stated values for a Muslim community in their context.<sup>30</sup> But we live, today, in a world where people talk about alt-facts and where divisive views polarise communities, such that it becomes impossible to agree even on basics. Conspiracy theories and distrust of experts are rife. Trust also often divides along ethno-racial and majority-minority lines.<sup>31</sup> While it is correct for us to approach our world with questions, and to exercise what philosophers will call a "hermeneutics of suspicion" – an attitude that queries sources of information and the power dynamics behind this – this is totally different from rampant distrust of basic facts and knowledge, often coupled with acceptance of nefarious sources of information and conspiracy theories. Respect is closely linked to an inclusive attitude, spoken of above, where we embrace and accept diversity and our neighbours. These can be seen to readily relate to the question of religion and social cohesion, as trust is needed between and beyond religious borders (i.e. including also the non-religious), while respect is often seen as a benchmark in this arena.<sup>32</sup>

Next, I very specifically invoke the phrase "unity in diversity" both because a cohesive society must include those who are not part of the majority, but also because of its resonance with the Indonesian national motto *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* which is often translated this way.<sup>33</sup> Again, it keeps the discussion close to everyday usage. A cohesive society must accept diversity as a core aspect of being human in community and embrace this diversity. This follows from what I have said above, and so I will not expand upon it here. But, as a note, developing the concept of "multiculturalism" (arguably in ways tied to how I am employing social cohesion) Chang-Yau Hoon has noted that this term has entered Asia as part of a globalised discourse but in the local context must be expanded from its typical employment to explicitly include reference to religion.<sup>34</sup> The notion of multiculturalism is certainly variously defined, and in Europe at least some politicians have suggested that the experiments in multiculturalism are "dead."<sup>35</sup> What is meant by this is often that allowing a flourishing of diverse cultures, without judgement or any expectation to adhere to majoritarian norms, has failed to produce a socially cohesive society. However, even assuming the suggestions of this failure are correct, which is certainly open to debate, it is far from clear how this may relate to spheres such as Southeast Asia where religious and cultural diversity is a norm in many places.<sup>36</sup> It is worth noting here that unity in diversity is not about an imagined, or enforced, homogeneity in values or worldviews, and shared values is something that as a Canadian research suggested was a "red herring," noting that: "Social Cohesion does not depend on social sameness, homogeneity

<sup>30</sup> See MUIS, *Thriving in A Plural World: Principles and Values of the Singapore Muslim Community*, Singapore: MUIS, 2018, especially 74 quoting Sheikh Hassoun ("Islam's enduring values for humanity," MUIS Lecture 2009, 13): "Beloved audience, we share a lot more common principles and values than we think, but we will not be able to extract them out unless we trust and feel secure with one another."

<sup>31</sup> Space does not permit a full exploration of such factors which vary across contexts, but see Rima Wilkes and Cary Wu, "Trust and Minority Groups," in *The Oxford Handbook of Social and Political Trust*, ed. Eric Uslaner, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018: 231-250. The World Value Survey also collates data on trust, see <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/wvs.jsp>.

<sup>32</sup> See, for instance, Anna Halafoff, Kim Lam, and Gary Bouma, "Worldviews education: cosmopolitan peacebuilding and preventing violent extremism," *Journal of Beliefs and Values* 40.3 (2019): 381-395, 392. In Singapore, researchers have noted that it is "imperative that greater efforts be made to foster mutual respect and empathy among Singaporeans of different beliefs," Adrian Tan and Abigail Leong, "Living with Religious Diversity," *RSIS Commentary* 18118 (2018), available at: <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/CO19118.pdf>. Again, MUIS, *Thriving*, cites it as a core value: "... thriving in a plural world lies in our collective ability, willingness and vision to extend our hands in mutual respect, understanding and common morality" (4).

<sup>33</sup> See Chang-Yau Hoon, "Putting Religion into Multiculturalism: Conceptualising Religious Multiculturalism in Indonesia," *Asian Studies Review* 41.3 (2017): 476-493.

<sup>34</sup> Hoon, "Putting Religion," 487. His specific point of reference in Indonesia, but it applies more generally. Religion, including interreligious discourses, have moved from the margins to the centre of secular and policy discourse. See Paul Hedges, "The Secular Realm as Interfaith Space: Discourse and Practice in Contemporary Multicultural Nation-States," *Religions* 10.9.498: 1-15, doi: <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10090498>, and Patrice Brodeur, "From the margins to the centres of power: The increasing relevance of the global interfaith movement", *Cross Currents* 55.1 (2005): 42-53.

<sup>35</sup> See Alexander-Kenneth Nagel, "Religious Pluralization and Interfaith Activism in Germany," *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 25.2 (2015): 199-221, and Anna Triandafyllidou, Tariq Modood, and Nasar Meer, "Introduction: Diversity, Integration, Secularism and Multiculturalism," in *European Multiculturalisms: Cultural, Religious and Ethnic Challenges*, eds Anna Triandafyllidou, Tariq Modood, and Nasar Meer, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012: 1-29.

<sup>36</sup> It is far from clear that Western liberal notions of multiculturalism apply in Asia, and also whatever models are looked to in one jurisdiction within Asia may not apply in others, see Will Kymlicka, "Liberal Multiculturalism: Western Models, Global Trends, and Asian Debates," in *Multiculturalism in Asia*, eds Will Kymlicka and Baogang He, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005: 22-54, and Hoon, "Putting Religion."

of values or opinions, everyone conforming to the same values, beliefs or lifestyle,” with Nazi Germany being noted as an example of how a society or nation could share a common (enforced) ideology without being inclusive, and contrasting a solidarity built on hate and fear with social cohesion.<sup>37</sup> Hence it is not “unity” but unity in diversity that is key.

Finally, resilient identities are essential.<sup>38</sup> If identities are not firm, and the embrace of diversity is shallow or superficial, there will be no depth when bonds are tested. By identities, I mean an inclusive identity that embraces unity in diversity alongside trust and respect for the Other. This should arise from the sources that people see as foundational for their own sense of self and group identity, i.e. as a Muslim or Hindu, Indonesian or Filipino, traditionalist or progressive, and so on. It is not to suggest a new encompassing multicultural identity for each individual, but an identity that embraces a Southeast Asian multicultural ethos. This is easily stated, but it is hard to build or measure. We are said to live in an age of identity politics, with tribalized identities,<sup>39</sup> and even an acceptance of differing facts. It is necessary to pay attention to the psychology and social dynamics behind such polarisation. But, importantly, understanding the dynamics of human social interaction in society means that these identity markers are not themselves causes of exclusion. It is natural that we will create in-groups and out-groups. This is unavoidable and is simply part of how humans make sense of the world.<sup>40</sup> However, how we understand our relationship to the various out-groups that our social world creates for us is vital. Whether these identities are based on gender, religion or lack of religion, what we see as ethnic or racial differences, or other sorts of identities from political allegiances to adherence to sports teams, the same basic social psychological factors are at play. We, as human animals, have certain basic ways in which we make sense of and order our world. Envisioning any out-group as hostile depends upon the way that our in-group identities are framed, portrayed, and imagined in relation to our out-groups.<sup>41</sup> As an additional note, there is also the question of the power relationships between the groups, and the relevant sense of security of those, especially perceived minorities, in relation to the perceived majorities, often related to the way groupism is operationalised in local contexts of identity creation and recreation.<sup>42</sup>

## Tensions

The tensions facing us today are, unfortunately, numerous and diverse, and here I address nine: security; exclusivism; climate change; disrespect and humiliation; populism and legitimacy; social media; humanity; ignorance; and, pandemics. I consider it important to address these tensions as part of a wider discussion of what promoting social cohesion means, because destabilising factors are integral to this. The significance of any factor, and the interplay between them, will always be contextual and may fluctuate rapidly.

Security concerns, at one level, involve the regrettable acts of violence that are ruptures in the social fabric of our societies. However, in most countries, it is not so much acts of terrorism, but rather the discourse

<sup>37</sup> Stanley, “What Do We Know about Social Cohesion,” 9-10.

<sup>38</sup> Resilience is a key term in Singapore in relation to ethnic and religious division, see Shashi Jayakumar and Nur Diyanah Binte Anwar, “‘Regardless of Religion’: Building a Stronger Singaporean Society,” *RSIS Commentary* 18021 (2018), available at: <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/CO18021.pdf>.

<sup>39</sup> This term draws from Marshall. See also Jeanine Hill Fletcher, “Religious Pluralism in an Era of Globalisation: The Making of Modern Religious Identity,” *Theological Studies* 69 (2008): 394-411.

<sup>40</sup> For a survey of such identity formation and how it leads into prejudice in relation to religious diversity, see Paul Hedges, *Religious Hatred: Prejudice, Islamophobia, and Antisemitism in Global Context*, London and New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021, chapters 1 and 2, and Hedges, *Understanding Religion*, chapters 6 and 13.

<sup>41</sup> See Hedges, *Understanding Religion*, and Paul Hedges, “Interreligious Engagement and Identity Theory: Assessing the Theology of Religions Typology as a Model for Dialogue and Encounter,” *Journal for the Academic Study of Religion* 27.2 (2014): 198-221.

<sup>42</sup> This is relevant to how groups are related as Brubaker has noted, see Brubaker, “Ethnicity without Groups,” but see also Nick Hopkins, Ronnie Michelle Greenwood, and Maisha Birchall, “Minority Understandings of the Dynamics to Intergroup Contact Encounters: British Muslims’ (Sometimes Ambivalent) Experiences of Representing Their Group to others,” *South African Journal of Psychology* 37.4 (2007): 679-701, and Tabea Hässler, Johannes Ullrich, Michelle Bernardino, et al., “A large-scale test of the link between intergroup contact and support for social change,” *Nature Human Behaviour* 4 (2020): 380-386, DOI:10.1038/s41562-019-0815-z. It may also be noted that, at times, the majority may have a (manufactured) sense of threat and lack of security in relation to a specific minority. For instance, in the contemporary context, this majoritarian angst is often operationalised against Muslims, often in interconnected discourses, and can be seen in some Buddhist discourses in Sri Lanka, in certain Hindu discourses in India, and in Western Islamophobic discourses, see Hedges, *Religious Hatred*. This is noted further in relation to security tensions in the next section.

and perception of violence that are threats to social cohesion; notwithstanding the real pain and suffering of those who have experienced acts of terrorism and the trauma that may ensue. This may bring to mind the popular association of Islam with terrorism through the actions of militant neo-Islamic jihadis who see themselves responding to Western aggression; the White terrorism seen in the 15 March 2019 Christchurch attack which can include narratives of an imagined white race under threat by multiculturalism, or a Judeo-Christian tradition under threat from Islam; or some social actors in places such as Sri Lanka who have argued that the defence of Buddhism entails violence against those perceived as aggressors.<sup>43</sup> From such narratives, our world faces many security threats which, in the minds of those committing violent acts, are not acts of aggression, but self-defence, and are tied to compelling – if false – narratives of oppression.<sup>44</sup>

An important note here is that while land disputes, economic disparity, or a sense of social exclusion and humiliation may be key to such acts of terror, we cannot absolve religious traditions, texts, and teachers from blame. Religion is not innocent. Professor Scott Appleby has spoken of the “ambivalence of the sacred,” where we see narratives of violence and peace in the same tradition.<sup>45</sup> As a brief note, in terms of narratives of peace, the Qur’an states that to kill one person is to have killed all of humanity, and if you saved one life it is as if you saved all of humanity (Q 5:32). Yet, traditions, texts, and teachers of almost every religion in mainstream manifestations have justified killing other human beings.<sup>46</sup>

The absence of violence is not enough for cohesion, and my second point highlights that exclusivist narratives are ascendant in many places. A simple example is the wishing of festive greetings. Many of my Muslim colleagues, indeed I think I can say all of them, will readily say to myself or others: “Happy Divali,” “Merry Christmas,” or “Blessed Vesak Day”. However, there are some trends of increasing intolerance with a number of well-known extremist/ exclusivist Islamic preachers who will teach that it is *haram*, Islamically forbidden, to make such well wishes to others.<sup>47</sup> I would posit that in Islam this relates to the concept of *adab* (roughly, “decorum”) as an Islamic virtue and how this relates to the virtue of “respect” raised above. Space does not permit more examples, but rising exclusivist trends can also be seen in some Buddhist narratives, in some Hindu narratives, and in rising Islamophobia and Antisemitism in various places.<sup>48</sup>

Predictions by the World Bank suggest that global warming could cause the internal displacement of at least 143 million people by 2050, a number which is likely to increase dramatically after 2050. While this is a forward-looking issue, the displacement of populations will put pressures on services and infrastructure, food supplies, and the goodwill of those who need to host displaced populations.<sup>49</sup> This will likely lead to the rising narratives of exclusion including xenophobic reactions and scapegoating of targeted groups. The desire for self-preservation that we must feel in the face of what seems to be impending climate disaster is currently balanced against the pressures for growth, monetary-based profits, and corporate dominance which are likely to deteriorate our planetary resources further,<sup>50</sup> and even a much-lauded document like Pope Francis I’s encyclical *Laudato Si’* has made relatively little impact against the threats facing us.

<sup>43</sup> See Paul Hedges, “Radicalisation: Examining a Concept, its Use, and Abuse,” *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analysis* 9.10 (2017): 12-18, and Paul Hedges, *Religious Hatred*.

<sup>44</sup> Some credible facts can be used, in admittedly distorted forms and often mixed with some falsehoods, to give credence to such forces opposed to social cohesion.

<sup>45</sup> Scott Appleby, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation*, Lanham, MA: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000.

<sup>46</sup> See Appleby, *The Ambivalence*, and Hedges, *Understanding Religion*.

<sup>47</sup> See Anon., “KL mufti: Okay for Muslims to wish friends ‘Merry Christmas’,” *Straits Times*, 22 December 2016, available at: <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/kl-mufti-okay-for-muslims-to-wish-friends-merry-christmas>. Of course, somebody who adopts such a viewpoint may not see it as an act of militant exclusion of the Other, but may simply see it within what they understand as a conservative worldview within their own tradition. This is not the place to discuss the jurisprudential issues and traditions (especially from the prophet Muhammad and his immediate followers) that might mitigate against such a view. Rather, it is necessary to note that we may have problems if we wish to immediately securitise or castigate those holding such views without considering the context and worldview in which they are held. While, such views may be a stepping stone towards militant exclusivism, it is not, in and of itself, indicative of such a stance, and securitising Islam into a “good Muslim versus bad Muslim” stereotype may negatively reinforce trajectories to intolerance. See Hedges, *Religious Hatred*, and Tania Saeed, *Islamophobia and Securitization: Religion, Ethnicity and the Female Voice*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

<sup>48</sup> See Hedges, *Religious Hatred*.

<sup>49</sup> Drawn from Marshall’s notes.

<sup>50</sup> See, for instance, Daniel Faber, “Global Capitalism, Reactionary Neoliberalism, and the Deepening of Environmental Injustices,” *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 29:2 (2018): 8-28.

Next is the question of disrespect and humiliation.<sup>51</sup> The 2015 attacks in Paris on the night of Friday 13 November which included at the Bataclan concert hall were largely driven by those from the grim suburbs of Paris and Brussels, including many Algerian immigrants who felt excluded from French society. Likewise, many far-right extremists find themselves distanced from what they perceive to be a liberal multicultural agenda and world, one which endorses gender equality and sexual mores which are not part of their own social experience. But we are not only speaking about violence and terrorism. Many feel distanced from mainstream society in many ways. Further, the sense of alienation does not come only from national issues, but can occur within schools, communities, and families. Those subaltern groups who face inequalities that are the result of Western colonialism, contemporary racism, or the domination of various societal elites have justified feelings of being not listened to and not respected by mainstream society and its discourses. With this may come a sense of humiliation and alienation from the society, community, or political structures.

The issue of populism and legitimacy derives partly from the last point. Globally, many countries are facing a crisis of legitimacy within their democratic systems. When one looks to the situation in many Western countries, it is easy to feel despair at the state of those democratic systems. Democracy there has been subject to many pressures from industry lobbies, especially the military-industrial complex, predatory media corporations, and demagogic populism from politicians. Far-right extremism, political populism, and exclusivist religious narratives are often mixed.<sup>52</sup> A figure like Geert Wilders in the Netherlands who leads the so-called Party for Freedom and may be seen as being openly Islamophobic is a clear case of a populist who seeks to weaponise diversity and identity.<sup>53</sup> Often the key driver is likely to be economic disenfranchisement or cultural alienation, but diversity becomes the scapegoat. I have drawn examples here from the West, but it applies equally in Southeast Asia, as in many other parts of the world.<sup>54</sup>

Unfortunately, the prophets who predicted that increased access to knowledge and communication between people via social media would be the beginning of a new golden age of humanity forgot a key part of the equation: humanity means people. Buddhists speak about the three fires (or “three poisons,” *triviṣa*) of greed (*rāga*), anger (*dveṣa*), and ignorance (*moha*), while Catholic and Protestant Christians refer to original sin. Attention to such traditional religious anthropology would have made us aware of the dangers of these mighty machines in our pockets. The populist demagogue can spread hatred as readily as the humanist activist can spread peace, the insults to my religion reach me as quickly as the narratives about co-operation.<sup>55</sup>

I have started to speak about humanity in the last point, and will continue the theme which concerns our instinctual reactions to threat perception.<sup>56</sup> Those who promote understanding and dialogue face an uphill battle in many ways, but I should not be unduly negative. I will narrate a short historical episode, narrated by the historian Max Bergholz, to illustrate. In 1941, in modern day Bosnia and Herzegovina, around 2,000 Muslim men, women, and children were massacred in one outbreak of mob violence in one district. During this, around two hundred mainly women and children from the Bosniak Muslim community found themselves caught on a bridge between two advancing militias of Serbian Orthodox Christians. They were slaughtered, with many women throwing their children into the river to avoid the blades cutting them down only to have them drown in the dark waters below. However, just a short distance away other Serbs stood facing down another group of

<sup>51</sup> On these issues, see Christian Picciolini, “My Descent into America’s Most Violent Hate Movement—and How I Got Out,” *TEDX*, November 2017, available at: [https://www.ted.com/talks/christian\\_picciolini\\_my\\_descent\\_into\\_america\\_s\\_neo\\_nazi\\_movement\\_and\\_how\\_i\\_got\\_out](https://www.ted.com/talks/christian_picciolini_my_descent_into_america_s_neo_nazi_movement_and_how_i_got_out), and Hedges, “Radicalisation.”

<sup>52</sup> See Paul Hedges, “Countering the Far-Right,” *RSIS Commentary* 18045 (2018), available at: <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/CO18045.pdf>, and Joseph Chinyong Liow, “Religion, Nationalism and Politics in Southeast Asia: The Ambivalence of the Sacred in an Uncertain World,” *Interreligious Relations* 5 (2019): 1-8, available at: <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/IRR-Issue-4-June-2019.pdf>.

<sup>53</sup> Wilders has been found guilty of Islamophobic discourse in Dutch courts, though it does not seem to have dampened his popularity, see Gordon Darroch, “Geert Wilders found guilty of inciting discrimination,” *The Guardian*, 9 December 2016, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/dec/09/geert-wilders-found-guilty-in-hate-speech-trial-but-no-sentence-imposed>.

<sup>54</sup> See Liow, Religion, Nationalism, and Politics,” and Hedges, *Religious Hatred*.

<sup>55</sup> Anon, “UN expert denounces the propagation of hate speech through social media,” UNHCR, 27 February 2020, available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25626&LangID=E>.

<sup>56</sup> See Hedges, *Religious Hatred*, and James Laurence, Katharina Schmid, and Miles Hewstone, “Ethnic diversity, ethnic threat, and social cohesion: (re)-evaluating the role of perceived out-group threat and prejudice in the relationship between community ethnic diversity and intra-community cohesion,” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 45.3 (2019): 395-418.

Serbs to protect their Bosniak Muslim neighbours. An important point Bergholz wanted to stress is that we are not determined by history or by issues of sectarian identity.<sup>57</sup> The in-group and out-group dynamics of these encounters went very differently. For some of these Serbian Orthodox Christians, the Bosniak Muslims were not their enemies but their neighbours for whom they would lay down their lives. They exhibited trust and respect. Our humanity is both a potential threat to us in contexts of diversity, but also our potential salvation.

Katherine Marshall has argued that ignorance can be combatted by religious and cultural literacy.<sup>58</sup> We live in societies where we are often deeply ignorant of our own traditions as well as those of others. Offense is sometimes unintentional, but it can be taken. In an increasingly diverse world, it is hard for us to know every tradition or cultural norm we will encounter, and so it remains a danger.

Finally, pandemics. This last point is added as an immediate response to the Covid-19 situation. Whether or not the virus proves, once waters have settled, to be as deadly as some predictions have made out, it has clearly turned our daily lives on its head, challenged globalisation, and changed the ways we live and work (whether it will result in dramatic long-term systemic changes is yet to be seen).<sup>59</sup> Religious teachers and organisations have often been picked out for criticism in terms of their response to Covid-19,<sup>60</sup> though it is often extreme examples, while others have noted the need to dialogue with them.<sup>61</sup> It has highlighted issues around prejudice and racism, but alongside this also a culture of fear and our responses to diseases as social phenomena.<sup>62</sup> It is an issue which will likely recur in the coming decades as a challenge to social cohesion.

## Postcolonial Questions

Many of the current fault lines which are causing tensions have direct links back to European colonialism, and are also tied to the ongoing neo-colonialism of Western nations. Moreover, certain elites have dominated the conversation and set the agenda. Globally, although we now see the ascendancy of China, the US remains the dominant global hegemon both militarily and economically. Its recent rescission of the nuclear deal with Iran has shown how even numerous European powers have been unable to maintain full economic engagement under the terms of that deal without the US.<sup>63</sup> Intellectually, though, the heritage of Germany, France, and the UK in particular still has lasting effects upon our conceptions of the world. In this context, the Peruvian scholar Anibal Quijano has spoken about coloniality. The term is deployed variously, but in part points to the continued dominance of Western modernity in our modes of thought.<sup>64</sup> In this it is akin to Syed Hussein Alatas' notion of the "captive mind," whereby the once colonised remain enthralled to the systems of thought and ways of thinking of their previous colonial masters.<sup>65</sup> It also highlights the displacement of ideas from those

<sup>57</sup> Max Bergholz, *Violence as a Generative Force: Identity, Nationalism, and Memory in a Balkan Community*, Cornell University Press, 2016. Details are narrated in Max Bergholz, "Max Bergholz | Violence as a Generative Force: Identity, Nationalism & Memory in a Balkan Community," *The Ellison Centre* (podcast), 24 April 2017, available at: <https://podtail.com/en/podcast/the-ellison-center-at-the-university-of-washington/max-bergholz-violence-as-a-generative-force-identi/>. How this relates to wider dynamics on human violence, see Hedges, *Religious Hatred*, chapter 2.

<sup>58</sup> Marshall's notes, see also Paul Hedges, "Discussing Religious Freedom: Need for Religious Literacy," *RSIS Commentary* 15171 (2015), available at: <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/CO15171.pdf>.

<sup>59</sup> Simon Mair, "How will coronavirus change the world?," *BBC* (31 March 2020), available at:

<https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20200331-covid-19-how-will-the-coronavirus-change-the-world>.

<sup>60</sup> For example, Jason Wilson, "The rightwing Christian preachers in deep denial over Covid-19's danger," *The Guardian*, 4 April 2020, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/apr/04/america-rightwing-christian-preachers-virus-hoax>.

<sup>61</sup> Farish Noor, "Global Health Security – COVID-19 and Tablighi Jama'at: Religious Movements and the Need for Dialogue," *RSIS Commentary* 20056 (2020), available at: <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/CO20056.pdf>.

<sup>62</sup> See Farish Noor, 'The virus scare as a mirror to ourselves and our society,' *The Straits Times*, 10 February 2020, available at: <https://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/cartoons/the-virus-scare-as-a-mirror-to-ourselves-and-our-society>.

<sup>63</sup> See, for instance, Michael Safi, "Iran puts pressure on Europe to save nuclear deal within 60-day deadline," *The Guardian*, 7 September 2019, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/sep/07/tehran-warns-time-is-running-out-to-save-iran-nuclear-deal>.

<sup>64</sup> Walter Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011. For a wider discussion and fuller explication of these issues, see also Hedges, *Understanding Religion*, chapters 7 and 18.

<sup>65</sup> See Syed Farid Alatas, "Captive Mind," *Wiley Online Library* (2016), available at: <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781405165518.wbeosc006.pub2>.

who are not part of this hegemonic elite. Again many issues, such as climate change or pandemics, often inversely disproportionately affect the poorest and most disadvantaged, the global subalterns, those whom Frantz Fanon termed “les damnés de la terre,” or in English, “the wretched of the earth” – those who are most oppressed even amongst other oppressed groups.<sup>66</sup> It highlights the need for a spirit of liberation against various forms of oppression as a prerequisite for building sustainable and cohesive societies.<sup>67</sup>

This issue also feeds back to the concept of humiliation and exclusion. Exclusion helps feed exclusivist attitudes into a reinforcing cycle. In the wake of 9/11, many Americans asked (of Muslims – but it may be applicable to others too): “Why do they hate us?” Without a knowledge of the global impacts of colonialism, and neo-colonial hegemony, the current world context and threats will remain mysterious. But, also, we may note the counter question to “why do they hate us?” is “why do we hate them?,” noting that Islamophobia and the disdain that some Muslims have for the West (and its claims of human rights – which only ever apply to some) are mutually reinforcing.<sup>68</sup>

When discussing social cohesion in a Southeast Asian context we are reminded that the term owes much to particular Western-centric discourses. How social cohesion as well as how religion and religious diversity operate within specific Asian contexts will be very different.<sup>69</sup> Again, particular terms and concepts will resonate in certain places. This has been inherent in what has been said previously, and some examples have been noted such as in relation to the term “multiculturalism”, but is drawn out more explicitly here as a theme. This is not to adopt a relativist stance suggesting that Western derived models are not, in any way, applicable, and we will certainly expect that in terms of human behavior and social interaction there will be meaningful crossover of ideas, concepts, and models across many societies. However, an Asian, or more specifically Southeast Asian, model of social cohesion will need to take account of local knowledge production and cultural norms of interaction.

## Promoting Cohesion

Many speak of “building” social cohesion, however, I use the term “promotion” to denote that developing social cohesion is not a simple matter, as for instance building a wall, of laying the right foundations and then proceeding brick by brick till cohesion is in place. Rather, at most, circumstances may be put in place to promote it with the hope that good foundations will secure the result. Indeed, the discussion of tensions and issues has noted that dealing with humans and other uncontrollable factors will always be a part of the process. With this noted, I will not attempt to say how cohesion may be “built”, rather I will address four themes: narratives, youth, dialogue, and leadership. Each is, I contend, an important aspect of promoting social cohesion.<sup>70</sup>

Cohesion is not simply about knowledge. In many ways what we know is often subsumed to how we feel.<sup>71</sup> As such, I stress here the question of narratives. One part of this is a knowledge base; religious and cultural literacy are important factors in overcoming hatred and extremism. At a very basic level, we fear that

<sup>66</sup> See Laudato Si', 2015, available at: [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_enciclica-laudato-si.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html), and Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, London: Penguin, 2001 [1961].

<sup>67</sup> On social action and religious diversity, see Paul Knitter, “Inter-Religious Dialogue and Social Action”, in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Inter-Religious Dialogue*, ed. Catherine Cornille, Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013: 133-148.

<sup>68</sup> An asking and answering of these questions can be found, in part, in Hedges, *Religious Hatred*, chapters 4 and 7.

<sup>69</sup> On the difference of the Chinese religious ecology, which arguably has resonances in the region, see Paul Hedges, “Multiple Religious Belonging after Religion: Theorising Strategic Religious Participation in a Shared Religious Landscape as a Chinese Model,” *Open Theology* 3.1(2018): 48-72. Notably, some suggest that Western derived quantitative models of measuring social cohesion can be applied directly to Asia, see Walkenhorst, *What Holds Asian Societies Together?*, and Bertelsmann Stiftung, ed., *What Holds Asian Societies Together?*.

<sup>70</sup> These draw from key issues developed by the author and Marshall in preparing papers for ICCS. While others could have been addressed, these are held to be key. This is not to say that there is not a certain set of knowledge about how cohesion may be promoted through good policy which puts in place trust between individuals, communities, and the state, as well as building equal and just societies and institutions, but they are generally seen as susceptible to decline and it is never a simple matter of putting the nuts and bolts in place and letting it go, see Stanley, “What Do We Know about Social Cohesion.”

<sup>71</sup> See John Dovidio, Samuel Gaertner, and Adam Pearson, ‘On the Nature of Prejudice: The Psychological Foundations of Hate,’ in *The Psychology of Hate*, ed. R. J. Sternberg, Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 2005: 211-234.

which we do not know, and hence knowledge may tend to dispel certain fears and hatred. At an example, Robert Putnam and others have shown that negative attitudes towards Muslims are most prevalent amongst those who know nothing about Islam, and that this reduces amongst those with even basic knowledge, and even more so when people have met Muslims as co-workers or in other contexts.<sup>72</sup> Even basic levels of familiarity and religious literacy are important steps. However, knowledge itself can be utilised in many ways, and positive narratives about religious integration and diversity are important. To be more compelling, knowledge cannot simply be about imparting facts but must be part of a story or narrative that people can buy into, and one which tells people about their place in the world. The interfaith activist Eboo Patel has particularly picked up on this in promoting the work of youth dialogue, noting that extremists give strong roles to young people and have compelling narratives to explain the world and their grievances (real or perceived).<sup>73</sup> The advocates of religious harmony and social cohesion need better narratives. We need stories about why diversity is good and how it can be positive, as well as how it fits into our own narratives (national, ethnic, religious, and so on). Sometimes, this may involve returning to traditional motifs and stories, as has been tried in the Molucca peacebuilding process.<sup>74</sup>

Secondly, youth are key in social cohesion. Patel tells a story of how, as an angry young man, he could easily have been drawn to the path of militant violence. Indeed, in the groups which were promoting social cohesion, especially interreligious dialogue, he noted that young people were simply an afterthought. By way of contrast, the militant neo-Islamic jihadi recruiters actively targeted young people. They fed their sense of purpose, gave them community, and supplied narratives that made sense of their lives. The young people were active parts of these groups. Much the same applies to the far-right.<sup>75</sup> In almost all cases, more can and should be done to make the voices of youth central, and examples of good practice certainly exist for this.<sup>76</sup> Including young people is important: it gives an alternative to the discourses and communities of militants; and, it builds an understanding of diversity and dialogue to shape our future.<sup>77</sup> This is very much a global concern, and seeking to promote regional young leaders' platforms is being taken on board in Southeast Asia.<sup>78</sup>

Third, dialogue is of vital importance. I do not mean simply interreligious dialogue, which itself names a very diverse set of practices,<sup>79</sup> but dialogue as a form of human communication. The Jewish philosopher Martin Buber is famous for his book translated into English as *I and Thou*.<sup>80</sup> He contrasted the attitude of approaching another human being as a "Thou", to approaching them as an "It". The former concerns respect for the Other. As an It, I see another human as something to be utilised for my own ends. This entails how we talk to and interact with that other person. This very basic distinction is immensely profound in its implications. Indeed, seeing the Other as a Thou could be seen to be the foundation of social cohesion if we could achieve it in our interactions. However, this ideal for fallible human beings is something we will always fall short of. Therefore, since Buber's time, many have raised issues for dialogue, including attention to power relations, how to set up safe spaces, and practices for respectful listening. One of those who have theorised further is Emmanuel Levinas, who we have followed to speak of the "Other" with a capital "O". For Levinas, who came from a Lithuanian Jewish background and who saw 90% of all his Jewish countryfolk die in the Holocaust, other human beings must stand before us as a duty to us. To look into their eyes is to see what Levinas describes as a basic

<sup>72</sup> See Robert Putnam and David Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*, New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2012.

<sup>73</sup> See Eboo Patel, *Acts of Faith: The Story of an American Muslim, the Struggle for the Soul of a Generation*, Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2010.

<sup>74</sup> See Fitriyah, "Religious Peacebuilding."

<sup>75</sup> See Picciolini, "My Descent," and Christian Picciolini, *Breaking Hate: Confronting the New Culture of Extremism*, New York: NY: Hachette, 2020.

<sup>76</sup> For instance, see Jayeel Cornelio and Timothy Andrew E. Salera, "Youth in Interfaith Dialogue: Intercultural Understanding and its Implications on Education in the Philippines", in *Interreligious Dialogue: An Anthology of Voices Bridging Cultural and Religious Divides*, ed. Christoffer Grundmann, Winona, MN: Anselm Academic, 2015: 155-168, and Linda Mills, *Of Many* (film), available at: <http://www.ofmanyfilm.com>.

<sup>77</sup> I would add here, that this does not mean excluding older people and that dialogue at all levels, and across generations, is key to securing a cohesive society.

<sup>78</sup> See ICCS, "Young Leaders Programme," (2019), available at: <https://www.iccs19.sg/young-leaders-programme.html>.

<sup>79</sup> See, e.g., Alan Race, "Interfaith Dialogue: Religious Accountability Between Strangeness and Resonance," in *Christian Approaches to Other Faiths*, eds Paul Hedges and Alan Race, London: SCM, 2008: 155-172.

<sup>80</sup> Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, New York, NY: Touchstone Books, 1970 [1923].

plea: “do not kill me.” They cannot be reduced to our wants or desire, but must always be the Other to us.<sup>81</sup> Many of these skills and theories of dialogue apply in good public conversations with our fellow citizens, as well as in seeking to understand someone from a different religious culture to our own. The ethical implications of Buber’s and Levinas’ work and how they may help us think about the work of relating to diversity is explored directly by the Norwegian scholar of interreligious studies Oddbjørn Leirvik.<sup>82</sup> While Western thinkers have been drawn from here, which reflects the theoretical underpinnings of dialogue, the argument can be seen to be relevant also to thinking about the Asian context. It has been argued that despite differing cultural and philosophical starting points, Levinas’ concern with the Other has important crossovers with the Vietnamese Zen monk Thich Nhat Hanh’s ethics of Interbeing.<sup>83</sup> Space does not permit the development of this idea here, but resources for dialogue (and/ or other ways of framing this in the local context) from Asian thinkers and their cultural, religious, and philosophical traditions will be a necessary part of thinking through a Southeast Asian notion of social cohesion.<sup>84</sup>

Lastly, leadership.<sup>85</sup> Pew Research Centre reports have shown that global discrimination against religion has been increasing.<sup>86</sup> However, while this raises the question of political regimes and their leadership, my concern is more with analysing both good leadership and dysfunctional leadership. By leadership, I am also not simply talking about politicians. Leadership is needed in every layer from government to the grassroots. It involves academics and thought leaders, community representatives, political representatives and policy makers, religious leaders, the media, NGO directors, and those who head or inspire grassroots initiatives. Some common factors link good leadership at all levels. First, leaders should act as agents of social change and model practices of inclusion and social cohesion. Second, moral authority is needed. Following the brutal civil war in the Democratic Republic of Congo, leadership in the peace process was led by the Catholic Church which, despite violence being seen as between Muslims and Christians, had stood above the fray and publicly called for peace between the actors, and so could bring both parties together. Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr, and Nelson Mandela are famous example of figures whose moral authority have bridged cultural, ethnic, or religious divides. Sulak Sivaraksa could be added as a South Asian example.<sup>87</sup> Third, to embody respectful dialogue. All too often, people associate leadership with macho posturing, shouting down opponents, and being the strong dominant authoritarian figurehead. This is dysfunctional leadership.<sup>88</sup> A leader should reach out to others, seek to understand what they do not know, and defuse tensions. Fourth, a leader has to represent those they appeal to. Jacinda Ardern’s response to the Christchurch terror attack is a case in point. The leader must let people know that she shares their concerns, has their fears, and is in tune with their anger and frustration.<sup>89</sup> This is very different from the populist who channels the anger and concern against others and strengthens narratives of exclusion and hatred. The leader needs to lead, and this means she stands with her community, but she shows them ways that they may move beyond hostility and exclusion.

## Conclusion

<sup>81</sup> On Levinas’ thought, see Andrew Wilshire, “Emmanuel Levinas,” in *Dialogue Theories II*, eds Omer Sener, Frances Sleaf, and Paul Weller, London: Dialogue Society, 2016: 189-203.

<sup>82</sup> Oddbjørn Leirvik, *Interreligious Studies*, London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014, 17-31.

<sup>83</sup> See Ozum Uçok-Sayrak, “Interbeing and the ‘Ethical Echo’ of Levinas: Exploring Communication Ethics beyond Willed Agency,” *Review of Communication* 14.3-4 (2014): 245-269.

<sup>84</sup> Discussion and surveys on dialogue in such Asian/ non-Western voices as Fethullah Gülen, Tenzin Gyatso, Paulo Freire, and Daisaku Ikeda, can be found in the *Dialogue Theories* book series (2 volumes) and in the *Journal of Dialogue Studies*, see <http://www.dialoguesociety.org/publications/academia.html>.

<sup>85</sup> This draws strongly from Marshall’s notes.

<sup>86</sup> Pew Research Centre, ‘A Closer Look at How Religious Restrictions Have Risen Around the World,’ 15 July 2019, available at: <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/07/15/a-closer-look-at-how-religious-restrictions-have-risen-around-the-world/>.

<sup>87</sup> See Berkley Centre, “Buddhist Peacebuilders and Fresh Challenges in Asia,” (video) Berkley Centre, 17 September 2014, available at: <https://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/events/buddhist-peacebuilders-and-fresh-challenges-in-asia>.

<sup>88</sup> See Manfred Kets de Vries, “Dysfunctional leadership,” INSEAD Occasional Papers (2003), available at: [https://flora.insead.edu/fichiersti\\_wp/inseadwp2003/2003-58.pdf](https://flora.insead.edu/fichiersti_wp/inseadwp2003/2003-58.pdf).

<sup>89</sup> Suzanne Moore, “Jacinda Ardern is showing the world what real leadership is: sympathy, love and integrity,” *The Guardian*, 18 March 2019, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/mar/18/jacinda-ardern-is-showing-the-world-what-real-leadership-is-sympathy-love-and-integrity>. See also, Mona Krewel and Sabrina Karim, “Is there a ‘feminine’ response to terrorism?,” *The Conversation*, 29 April 2019, available at: <https://theconversation.com/is-there-a-feminine-response-to-terrorism-115873>.

This paper has not aimed to be comprehensive, as far more can be said about social cohesion. For instance, gender justice,<sup>90</sup> development,<sup>91</sup> education, legal frameworks, or social capital could have been explored. This is not to downplay or dismiss the importance of these factors, which are integral to promoting social cohesion. My aim has been to start moving towards ways that a Southeast Asian discussion within a global framework of ideas may be explored. I hope to have given the outlines of such a project, while also noting a number of hindrances, or potholes,<sup>92</sup> that lie in the path towards more cohesive societies. This paper is offered in part as a spur towards further policy-relevant research in this area, as well as to help develop some terms and issues for a Southeast Asian discussion on social cohesion.

Some key issues can be further drawn out and explicated from this. One of these concerns the way in which multiculturalism, or other cognate terms, may be envisaged within Southeast Asia. Certainly, the landscapes of, for instance, Brunei, Indonesia, Myanmar, Singapore, Thailand, or other countries in the region are very different, and in some of them there is considerable internal heterogeneity.<sup>93</sup> As such, we will not find a single model. The majority-minority dynamics will differ, the connotations and perception of secularism vary,<sup>94</sup> and varying historical and contemporary socio-political realities mean that social cohesion cannot be taken as a one-size-fits-all conception. This needs to be seen within a decolonising perspective where indigenous theorising may replace the “captive mind” that thinks only within a Western-centric model and accepts its norms, parameters, and restrictions.

Beyond this, but also building from it, we may posit five further issues. Firstly, religion is likely to be more central to social cohesion discourse in Southeast Asia than in most Western conceptions. However, as we have noted, we must also pay attention to what “religion” means within the local context(s) and how it operates. This will differ from Thailand to Brunei to the Philippines, to note three quite distinct religious ecologies within the region. Secondly, some indigenous and even religious terminology may serve purposes of analysis if there is a need to seek emic language that resonates in places where religious ways of life are central. We have noted the ethics of interbeing and *adab* as being two terms, Buddhist and Islamic respectively, that crossover and relate to Western secularised discursive categories. Again, the resonance of each term will be local, both regionally and within specific communities. It will be the work of other papers, and the creation of narratives around such terms, to further develop the regional and contextual specificities of this. Thirdly, this paper has advanced a threefold definitional characterisation of social cohesion as trust and respect, unity in diversity, and resilient identities, which it is noted resonate with both wider theories and local concerns. This is advanced as a qualitative descriptive analytic basis, but may potentially be repurposed for quantifiable analysis which would, for many, add weight to any policy-based analysis.

However, I have expressed some concerns with the notion that such quantitative measurements are either more “scientific” or provide a better indicator of social cohesion. Taking such quantifiable measures as a yardstick, non-cohesive “solidarity” discourses and authoritarian oppression may all typically show up as good performance factors for social cohesion, which may simply mask majoritarian oppression or a precarious toleration kept in check. A suspicion of (neo-)colonial regimes of quantifying Southeast Asia for purposes of control by supposedly objective “scientific” categories which fail to understand local dynamics and ways of thinking may also mitigate against us supposing that such measurement, using what is still largely Western theorisations, will adequately suffice. Fourthly, both tensions and good practice have been raised, highlighting

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<sup>90</sup> See Anne Hege Grung, “Gender and Muslim-Christian Dialogue,” in *Contemporary Muslim-Christian Encounters: Developments, Diversity and Dialogues*, ed. Paul Hedges, London: Bloomsbury, 2015: 67-82.

<sup>91</sup> This was a key part of Marshall’s lecture plan.

<sup>92</sup> The term “pothole” was used by Piccolini in his ICCS lecture, and was felt in the discussion to usefully pick up some key issues, see <https://www.iccs19.sg/assets/pdf/ICCS-PressRelease-summary-keynotes-day2.pdf>.

<sup>93</sup> It may be noted that Southeast Asia, while a currently political relevant concept, is neither natural nor native terminology to discuss this region. The usage arose first in the nineteenth century through colonial deployment, but became most significant in the Cold War as a regional marker. As such, what is said here comes very much from a particular location within Southeast Asia and distinct regional (national and sub-national) narratives and conceptions of social cohesion will be needed. To speak of social cohesion in Southeast Asia may a sense be akin to the way in which Chakravarty Spivak speaks about “strategic essentialism,” meaning that here it is a deployment of a reified notion that can help galvanise thinking and raise issues that need addressing.

<sup>94</sup> On some differences between certain Asian and certain Western perspectives, but noting how an interfaith discourse permeates them all to some degree, see Hedges, “The Secular Realm.”

that social cohesion is always an interplay between factors that may promote (not build) it, and factors mitigating against it. Again, local context needs to be considered, and certainly colonialism and modern neoliberal regimes have often torn down existing networks of coexistence meaning that we need to consider the contemporary situation and how social cohesion can be developed in what are often rapidly changing societies where norms are not always fixed and where tradition<sup>95</sup> is in flux. As such, agents of social cohesion need to be proactive in developing narratives that resonate within their own context, especially when faced with the growing trends of exclusivism that have been noted herein.

This paper has not sought to define what social cohesion means within Southeast Asia, which as we have noted here would itself be a problematic venture. Rather it has started a conversation towards this end, noting the need for the development of a decolonising indigenous theorisation of concepts and narratives to embed this within particular contexts. This is a process that will need to be aware of both global flows and ideas, as well as regional specificities and concepts. Further, to emphasise a point made above, it will not simply be a case of building social cohesion. Rather, it will be a continuing journey of promoting practices, stories, and ways of living which may lead to greater levels of social cohesion with an eye to counter narratives, prevailing trends, and changing dynamics. As such, what is offered is at most a pathway, or rather a guide towards developing such a pathway, rather than a definitive answer for it must be recognised that it is a journey which will always need to be undertaken in every generation.

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<sup>95</sup> It is, of course, true that tradition is always changing and must be understood as “invented” rather than fixed and ancient, see Hedges, *Understanding Religion*, chapter 4.

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## About the Author

**Paul Hedges** is Associate Professor in Interreligious Studies at the Studies in Interreligious Relations in Plural Societies Programme, RSIS, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. He has previously worked for, or lectured at, other universities in Asia, Europe, and North America. He researches, teaches, and publishes widely in such areas as Interreligious Studies, theory and method in the study of religion, contemporary global religious ideologies, and interreligious hermeneutics. He has engaged in work beyond academia with the media, NGOs, faith groups, and governments. He has published twelve books and over seventy papers. Recent books include *Comparative Theology: Critical and Methodological Perspectives* (Brill, 2017), *Towards Better Disagreement: Religion and Atheism in Dialogue* (Jessica Kingsley, 2017), and *Contemporary Muslim-Christian Encounters* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2015). He has two further books under contract: one exploring method and theory in the study of religion, *Understanding Religion: Theories and Methods for Studying Religiously Diverse Societies* (California University Press, 2021) and another addressing the contemporary global rise of religious prejudice and hatred within the context of history and theory, *Religious Hatred: Prejudice, Islamophobia, and Antisemitism in Global Context* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2021). He is co-editor of *Interreligious Studies* and *Intercultural Theology*, and sits on the editorial board of a number of other international journals and book series. He maintains a blog at <https://logosdao.wordpress.com/>.

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