TEMASEK FOUNDATION
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# Reporting
# Religion

## DILEMMAS OF PUBLIC DISCOURSE

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# Making sense of an
# "irreducibly religious dimension"
# of some public square issues

Dr Tan Seow Hon

- Coercive force of law requires justification
  - Sanctions on violaters
  - Restrictions on all
- Public decisions affect everyone

# Reliance on religion?

*"it is precisely because of Singapore's multi-religious nature that pure secularism in the public sphere is essential to ensure that no policies or public debates encroach on the beliefs or disbeliefs of any individual. By basing an argument on one's religious views, one would essentially alienate the views of other Singaporeans who are of other religions or are non- believers. Such an argument would be non-inclusive, narrow and, worst of all, belief- specific. In a country where people of various religions and non-believers alike co- exist, it would be extremely unreasonable and self-centred to assert that a policy be implemented because of the beliefs of a single religion, especially if this policy contradicts the beliefs or principles of another group.* **An argument about a policy or social issue should be made based on its own merits. Instead of appealing to one's faith as the basis of arguing for or against a policy or law, one must instead appeal to the scientific, sociological or economic facts of the issue***. Only then can Singaporeans be confident that the policy was made with each citizen's secular interests in mind, and not as a form of favouritism towards one or a few religions. In this way, pure secularism, with its clear separation of religion and politics, is the only rational option for a multi-religious country, to ensure every religion is free to practise in its own private space. Religion-based arguments have no place in public debates about policies. Only logic and reason should dominate discourse in the public sphere."*     *- Letter writer to Forum, Straits Times*

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- How media treats religion
- Sub-issues:
  - Do religious arguments have a place in public discourse that leads to public decisions and laws?
  - Should we treat all religious persons with suspicion, or as trouble-makers or intolerant people who are trying to impose their personal subjective views on others?

# Type of society

- Constitutional democracy
- Freedom of religion and other related rights: Arts 15, 12, 16, 152, 153, etc.
- Legislation:
  - Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act
  - Sedition Act
  - S298A Penal Code
  - Societies Act
  - Undesirable Publications Act
  - Internal Security Act
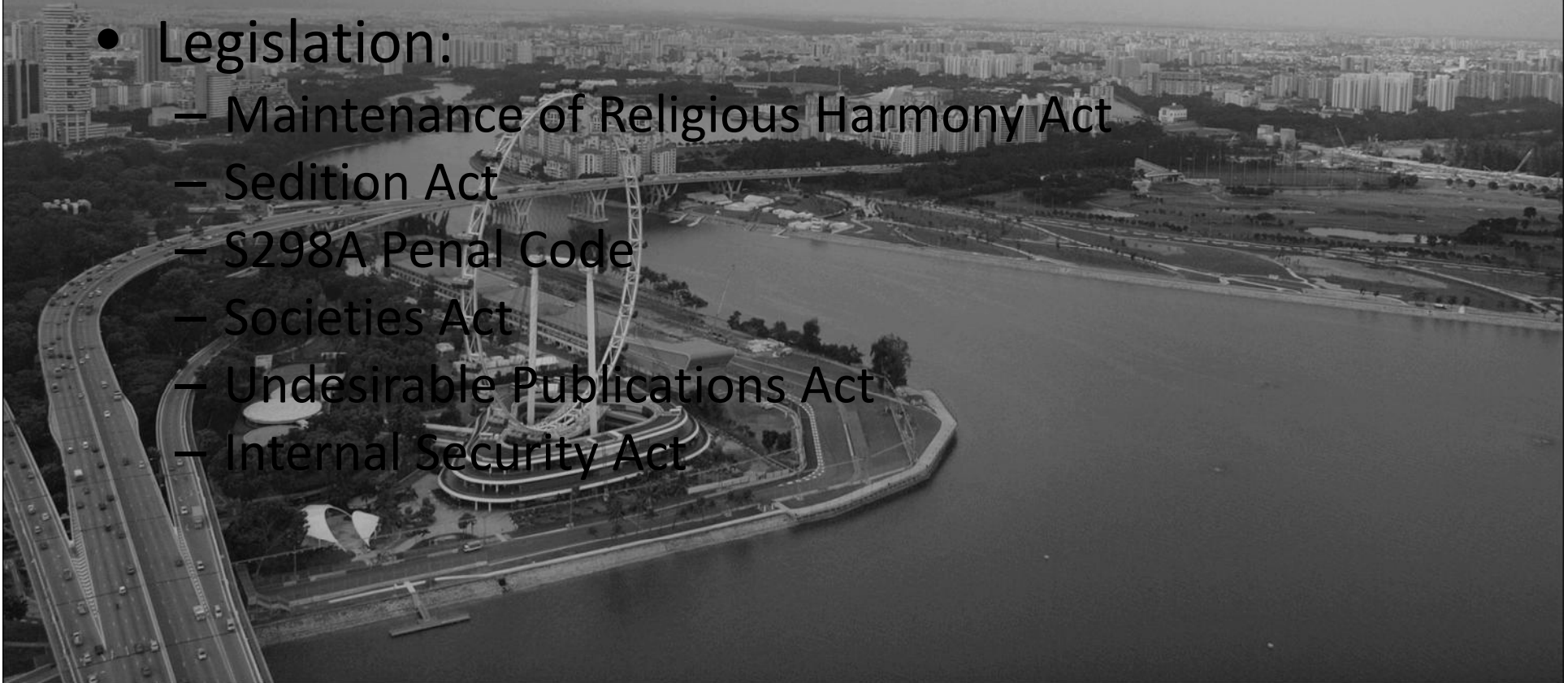
# Declaration on Religious Harmony

We, the people in Singapore, declare that religious harmony is vital for peace, progress and prosperity in our multi-racial and multi-religious Nation.

We resolve to strengthen religious harmony through mutual tolerance, confidence, respect, and understanding.

We shall always

- Recognise the **secular nature** of our State,

- Promote cohesion within our society,

- Respect each other's freedom of religion,

- Grow our common space while respecting our diversity,

- Foster inter-religious communications,

and thereby ensure that religion will not be abused to create conflict and disharmony in Singapore.

# Approaches

- Decide by a religion?

- Exclude religious persons?

- Exclude an argument as long as it is religiously motivated, regardless of content?

- Reliance on publicly accessible reasons?

# John Rawls and public reason

- Political conception of justice, not comprehensive doctrines
- Supported by an overlapping consensus amongst *reasonable* comprehensive doctrines
- Citizens view one another as free and equal, and offer one another fair terms of cooperation
  - Terms are proposed as the most reasonable for fair cooperation
  - Must think it at least reasonable for others as free and equal citizens to accept

# blic reason

> By what standard does one exclude some doctrines as unreasonable?

- Po...... not comprehensive d......

- Suppor...... by an overlapping consensus amongst *reasonable* comprehensive doctrines

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# John Rawls on Toleration

What values really lie within this overlap? Is overlap merely superficial?

- Political concepts and comprehensive doctrines

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External standard of reasonableness?
Or majority decision?

# Illustration: Abortion laws

- Recall 4 approaches
  - Religion?
  - Exclude religious people?
  - Beware religious motivations?
  - Rawls: no resolution of moral truths – decide by political conception of justice
    - Claims that many women who reject the claim that the fetus has a right to life from the moment of conception are not unreasonable in doing so

# Critique of reliance on public reason?

- Can't determine moral truths – reduced to decision by hunches (Finnis)

- Letting each decide – pronouncement on status of unborn, as worthy of less protection than a newborn (cf. slavery)

- Medical science shows that the difference between the unborn and the newborn to be no more and no less than being inside and outside the mother's body (Finnis)

# Critique of critique?

- Medical science can trace the development of the unborn, but not pronounce on the moral status

- Law resolves metaphysical questions: e.g. when death, when life begins (who is worthy of protection), etc.

- No publicly accessible reasons or shared grounds are available: Rely on convictions though legislative changes only when substantial support

  – Egs. Kent Greenawalt, *Religious Convictions and Political Choice* & Stephen Carter, *The Culture of Disbelief*