

A Dialogue on Secularism and Religion: French and Singaporean Approaches

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France and Singapore are multi-religious and secular societies. They have in common the separation of government from religious institutions, and the equality of people of different faiths before the law. Yet, there are some differences in how secular traditions are upheld in both countries. To discuss the differences and some common approaches shared by France and Singapore, the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) organised a dialogue session on 23 September 2014, titled “Secularism and Religion: French and Singaporean Approaches”. The speakers were Valentine Zuber, Professor at the École Pratique des Hautes Études (EPHE) at the Sorbonne; Yves Teyssier d’Orfeuil, Deputy Counsellor for Religious Matters at the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs; Nazry Bahrawi, Literary and Cultural Critic at the Singapore University of Technology and Design and Research Fellow at the Middle East Institute in the National University of Singapore; and Eugene Tan, Associate Professor of Law at the School of Law, Singapore Management University. The session was chaired by Dr Mathew Mathews, Senior Research Fellow at IPS.

Laïcité 101

Professor Zuber provided a comprehensive background of *laïcité* (the French version of secularism) and what it means to the governance of France. *Laïcité* was first launched during the French Revolution, and existed in different forms before it was inscribed in the French constitution. The current instituted form of *laïcité* harmonises three principles: respect of the fundamental right of freedom of conscience and worship, individually or within a group; separation of the state and public institutions from religious and philosophical beliefs; and non-discrimination, whether direct or indirect, towards human beings. Professor Zuber emphasised that France must be careful to avoid religious discrimination given the delicate religious fabric that France has to contend with, especially with the immigration of Muslims in large numbers into France.

Mr Teyssier d’Orfeuil spoke about the place of religion in France’s diplomatic engagement with its neighbours, in light of its geographical position in a multi-cultural Europe and the historical tradition of immigration from the Maghreb, or the North African region. He also acknowledged the need for France to better understand the role of religion with the rise of Islamic extremist groups and their exploitation of religion.

(Post-)Secularism in Singapore

The discussion then turned to Singapore's brand of secularism. Associate Professor Tan described secularism in Singapore as being driven by pragmatism, unlike in France, where secularism is grounded in principles. For instance, while Singapore's political leaders are careful about the separation of the state and religion, religious views and values do play a role in nation building and are heard in the run-up to important policy decisions. This approach to secularism ensures that religion continues to have a place in public life.

Dr Nazry suggested that Singapore is experiencing post-secularism, which he defines as "the idea that ethical worldviews, or beliefs, punctuate political action in the public sphere". He widened the definition of beliefs to non-faith related concepts, for instance, environmentalism and humanism. Listing events like The Pink Dot and National Library Board protests in 2014 as examples of post-secularism in Singapore, he established the point that Singaporeans are starting to identify with issues and causes, going beyond categories like race and religion. Dr Nazry asserted the need for policies to recognise that human identities are complex.

Challenges Faced by Secular States

Members of the audience identified common challenges Singapore and France face as secular states. Questions on how gay rights issues have affected Singapore and France were raised. Mr Teyssier d'Orfeuil responded that gay marriage is now a hot topic in France, and that there is a reappearance of extremist Catholic groups. There are massive demonstrations against gay marriage, and France sees an interesting alliance between the Muslims and the Catholics. As for Singapore, Associate Professor Tan pointed out that the gay rights issue is currently a legal issue, but it is likely to evolve to become a political issue in future.

Another challenge for secular states like Singapore and France lies in dealing with extremist groups in society. The panel agreed that both countries manage this through legislation and active engagement of religious leaders. Both France and Singapore have made it illegal for its citizens to participate in the fight in Iraq and Syria. In Singapore, committees like the Inter-Religious Organisation (IRO) are set up to ensure that political leaders and religious leaders have constant dialogues to ensure religious harmony in Singapore. However, a member of the audience pointed out that the legitimacy of religious leaders could be affected by their perceived closeness to the political establishment.

When asked if existing structures in Singapore are still relevant for managing religious harmony, Dr Nazry answered that structures to encourage frequent inter-religious dialogues and dialogues with political leaders are still relevant. However, laws like the Sedition Act and the Internal Security Act (ISA) put in place to curb religious extremism might affect other forms of civil liberty. Dr Nazry suggested that the current system should be improved on to cater to the growing diversity of religious groups in Singapore. There should also be more consistency in the application of pragmatism in Singapore.

There was a comment that France does not seem committed to accommodate the needs of the Muslim community and there is inconsistency in the French model of secularism. For example, while the canteens in Singapore have designated collection points for *halal* utensils and cutlery, France does not even have slaughterhouses that respect *halal* practices. In response to this comment, Mr Teyssier d'Orfeuil pointed out that France's long Catholic history sometimes makes it more challenging to accommodate other religious communities. Professor Zuber added that exemplifying liberty creates difficulty in catering to specific religious requirements.

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