

## Budding faiths; Faith tapestry

Singapore is far more religiously diverse than people imagine. Few will guess that it is now home to a smorgasbord of spiritual movements. The little red dot is not simply the nexus of international trade routes but it is also, less visibly, at the crossroads of the world's spiritual traffic.

**Lee Siew Hua**

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SUFI

A rare, handwritten, 200-year-old Sufi Islam prayer book

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NEW spiritual movements have set up shop here in recent years in an ever more bustling marketplace for the soul. These include at least two dozen India-derived groups whose guru-founders purvey a shining array of spiritual goods, from meditation to self-development.

And established faiths such as Taoism, Islam and Christianity are not at all monolithic. Esoteric sects and schools increasingly share space with the mainstream denominations of these giants.

Then there are the Jains, Baha'is and Zoroastrians, which are independent religions, only tiny and less-known for now.

These many movements, new and old, colour the Singapore tapestry of faiths afresh, offering the seeker more choices than ever.

What this tide of diversity brings to the Republic and its reputation for harmony bears watching too - more so if any tension forms within religions.

Just as container ships and airlines call here with rising frequency, so Singapore's strategic position on the globe is bringing in ever more spiritual business.

'The physical location of Singapore assumes a different kind of strategic importance today and is in fact focal in facilitating different kinds of religious and spiritual traffic to routinely pass its shores,' writes sociologist Vineeta Sinha in *Religious Diversity In Singapore*, published in 2008.

It is not uncommon for Indian spiritual leaders to stop over to deliver lectures and meet followers en route to Europe or America, for instance. Gurus who passed

through this year include Mata Amritanandamayi Devi who blesses through hugs, and preacher of universal love Sudhanshuji Maharaj.

New religious movements - which have earned their own acronym, NRMs - are a global, transnational phenomenon, akin to labour and capital flows. Singapore, an open society that enshrines religious freedom in its Constitution, surely catches a big wave of this spiritual tide.

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong observed in his 2009 National Day Rally speech that religious fervour is surging worldwide. 'Singapore is carried along by this global tide,' he said.

The reasons for the proliferating diversity here closely track the shifting tides in Singapore society. Dr Lai Ah Eng, senior research fellow at the Asia Research Institute, succinctly lists the causes: 'Globalisation, specifically immigration, going abroad and bringing back religious influences, the spread of religion through missionaries, preachers and visitors, Internet connections.'

Beyond these ever-expanding external forces, looser kinship ties inside the home make it easier for seekers to search out new faiths. 'There is much more space as well for the personal search as family and kin ties weaken for some. There is greater tolerance for religious diversity even within families,' says Dr Lai.

'I know of a girl who is a 'non-practising' Hindu and this is tolerated by her parents,' adds the sociologist, who teaches a religion module at National University of Singapore.

Less remarked upon is the religious entrepreneurial streak in Singaporeans.

Dr Sinha, of the National University of Singapore, notes an 'enthusiasm among Singaporeans for founding religious groups, institutions and organisations'.

Indeed, figures from the Commissioner of Charities show that groups described as 'Religion and Others' make up the lion's share of more than 60 per cent of all registered charities here. This is true for every year between 2007 and 2010.

Newly released figures for 2010 illustrate the trend well: Religious (61.2 per cent) groups outstrip all other registered charities by a significant margin.

The next closest are social services groups (17 per cent), followed by health (6.3 per cent), education (4.9 per cent), arts and heritage (5.1 per cent), community (4.1 per cent) and sports (1.4 per cent).

Among all charities, Christians seem to be the most ardent in registering new groups. In response to queries from The Straits Times, the Commissioner of Charities gave figures showing that in a five-year stretch from 2006 to 2010, 72 new religious organisations were registered.

Of these, Christians registered 45 new groups. Next were Buddhists and Taoists who set up 25 groups. Muslims and Hindus registered one organisation each.

These statistics do not distinguish between new spiritual movements and offshoots of existing faiths that form through breakaways or when a mother organisation sets up a new node.

Amid this proliferation of choices, will newly seeded religious movements find fertile soil here?

Dr Mathew Mathews, an Institute of Policy Studies research fellow who has written on Christianity in Singapore, suggests that they may not, in the end, enjoy broad appeal.

'For one, established religions are sure to adapt somewhat when they notice where a new form has been gaining success so that they can 'compete' more successfully in the religious marketplace,' he says.

'I think the majority of people want religion which is established and institutionalised. They trust establishment, which has historical legitimacy.'

Still, among seekers, there are bound to be those who do feel their spiritual yearnings have not been sufficiently met by established religion. 'Often, new religious movements propose solutions or provide new experiences which some people might be searching for,' he says.

And, interestingly, some people yearn to go back to a 'purer' form of religion. 'Some Christians are revisiting the roots of their Christian faith and noticing its Jewishness and so want to celebrate that part of it,' he observes.

The Straits Times found that this purist momentum is clear in the wide and vivid spectrum of Christian-Jewish movements that have emerged here. At one end are Protestant churches and small Messianic Christian groups that in varying degrees observe Jewish festivals and traditions.

They may offer Biblical teaching from a distinctly Jewish perspective, and nurture warm links with groups in Israel.

Then at the other end of the spectrum are Christians who go to the extent of converting to Judaism. But in his 17 years here, Rabbi Mordechai Abergel, spiritual leader of the Jews, has counted fewer than 10 Singaporean conversions to Judaism, which requires a rigorous understanding of Jewish religious law, and circumcision for men.

Others stop just short of conversion and turn to Noahidism, a movement rooted in the seven laws given by God to Noah, a Biblical hero who built an ark to save people and animals from a global deluge.

All these adventures in faith, if they occur within the same spiritual tradition, can lead to fractiousness.

'Intra-religious harmony is just as important as inter-religious harmony,' says Dr Mathews.

'You can expect some tension especially when newer movements work to grow their membership base.'

They may well poach members of the established tradition that they left. Or they offend because in stating their new beliefs, they raise questions about an established tradition.

He counsels a new tolerance. 'Both established and new forms need to respect each other's quest for spiritual perfection within some boundaries.'

Increasingly, the new movements will demand new ways to navigate the dynamic religious terrain of Singapore.

Ultimately, the intensifying diversity points to an enlarged search for meaning that somehow accommodates seeking Singaporeans of all persuasions.

Dr Lai says: 'Religions offer some degree of certainty, whether it is values and approaches to cope or actual salvation especially for the follower-type, and some room for personal choice and creativity for those who are more individualistic or have leadership quality.'

Perhaps the appeal - or agony - of diversity is that it never quite ends.

'There are simply more options, and the personal religious journey can, like nationality, change several times in one's lifetime,' she says.

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