

## Shedding light on decline in Buddhism

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Reasons cited by faith leaders, experts include rise of churches here

THE decline in Buddhism over the past decade may be traced to the rise of churches, more people wanting to choose their own faith or the lack of one, and greater clarity between Buddhism and Taoism, said scholars and faith leaders yesterday.

That may also explain the increase in the proportion of Christians and people with no religion here.

On Wednesday, the Government released some results from its Census 2010 survey, including new data on the religious lives of Singapore residents.

What stood out was the drop in the proportion of people subscribing to Buddhism, from 42.5 per cent in 2000 to 33.3 per cent last year. This was the religion's first dip in 30 years. The percentage in the other faiths either held steady or grew slightly over the 10-year period.

Dr Lai Ah Eng, a researcher who has studied religious trends here, said a reason may be the growing prominence of Pentecostal and Evangelical Christian groups here, which was a 'reflection of a larger trend around the world'.

Mr Henry Baey, president of the Buddhist Fellowship, a non-sectarian group, said this was especially true among younger Chinese who inherited their Buddhist identity from their elders. He said: 'Those who don't have a good grasp of Buddha's teachings can be easily converted.'

While past surveys had shown the number of Taoists declining, the latest census survey revealed a reversal in the trend. The proportion of Taoists grew from 8.5 per cent in 2000 to 10.9 per cent last year.

Taoist Federation chief Tan Thiam Lye said efforts to educate the public on the faith's philosophy had staunched the bleed. This was a point raised yesterday by the Singapore Buddhist Federation (SBF), when asked about its declining figures.

'Buddhism for many people was not a conscious decision,' said SBF's secretary-general, Venerable Kwang Phing. 'Nowadays, it is a matter of personal choice. The Taoists have worked very hard. We must work hard too.'

Christianity continued its steady climb, with the proportion of its followers growing from 14.6 per cent in 2000 to 18.3 per cent last year. The increase

was greater among permanent residents (PRs), which saw the proportion of Christians rise 6.5 percentage points, from 16.9 per cent to 23.4 per cent.

In comparison, the percentage of citizens who were Christian went up from 14.4 per cent to 17.5 per cent.

Dr Mathew Mathews, a research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, said the sense of community Christian groups offered was ideal to new residents, whether they were Christian or not. Non-Christians, therefore, may convert to blend into the new society.

He added that the increased proportion of Christians among the lesser educated was possibly because of outreach in the heartlands, and dedicated services in dialects, Mandarin and Tamil.

Housewife Teo Mong Geck, 54, said she became a Christian after attending the Hokkien services at Faith Community Baptist Church for a month in 2006. 'The words the pastor says are very reasonable,' said the former Taoist, who left her studies after secondary school. 'I understood him, inside my heart.'

PRs also accounted for the 1.1-point hike in overall proportion of Hindus here, from 4 per cent to 5.1 per cent. The proportion of PRs who were Hindu jumped from 9.7 per cent in 2000 to 14.8 per cent last year.

The increase, said Mr Harikrishnan Muthusamy, president of the Tamil Language and Cultural Society, was likely due to the wave of Indian immigrants over the past decade.

The other group to gain new followers was those with no religion - from 14.8 per cent in 2000 to 17 per cent last year.

Sociologist Daniel Goh, an assistant professor at the National University of Singapore, said the increase could be due to overall higher education levels and the loosening of kinship ties in society.

'Higher-educated people are more likely to look to a de-ritualised way of life. They want to be able to choose freely a belief system that works for them.'

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