

## Religious or not, debate about the public good should be opened up to all, especially not just the PAP

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***The Online Citizen***, 19 September 2017

The insights offered by the former Head of the Civil Service, Lim Siong Guan, seem to have been lost amidst the kerfuffle over his comments about the decline of religion in Singapore.

In his [lecture](#), *Can Singapore Fall? The Accidental Nation*, delivered on 12 September, Lim took up the question of how Singapore might possibly fall. Drawing on Sir John Bagot Glubb's essay, "The Fate of Empires and Search for Survival", Lim examined seven stages in the rise and fall of great nations. He then applied those ideas to Singapore and notes several ways in which Singapore fits within Glubb's model of decline. In particular, he highlights rising affluence, a decreased sense of public duty, a growing desire to accumulate wealth, an increase in discussions and debates that is not matched by action, a shift towards a welfare state and a decline in religion.

The last point on religion was promptly criticised by Public House owner, Andrew Loh. In a [Facebook post](#), Loh criticised Lim for suggesting that "those without any religious affiliations, such as atheists and agnostics, are necessarily and automatically - somehow - immoral or people without morals or conscience." This is "obviously utter rubbish," Loh said, pointing out his discomfort with the "insinuation that a lack of religion or religious beliefs could or would contribute to the downfall of Singapore."

Two other letters to TODAY were later published as well. Huang Yihua pointed out in her [letter](#) that Singapore is a secular, not theocratic, state, where Singaporeans enjoy freedom of religion and conscience. "Religion is a personal affair," said the author, before adding that Lee Kuan Yew was irreligious too.

In a subsequent [letter](#), the president of the Humanist Society, Tan Tatt Si, took Lim's remarks about the decline of the religious population in Singapore as implying that it is "a possible sign of the Age of Decadence." He then argued that non-religious people have their own morality too, pointing to their ability to empathise with others and the good they do as proof of their morality.

One problem with these arguments over religion's monopoly over morality is that they still fail to answer the question of what morality is. The Humanist Society's defense of an alternative non-religious basis for morality appears to be the most robust, so I will deal with that first. The problem here is that empathising with others and doing good do not answer the question of what the "good" is in the first place. Empathising with others is taken to be an unalloyed good when in fact empathy without action is neither good nor bad—it is merely understanding. One should seek to understand the motivations and circumstances of both a child sex offender and a homeless person, but one cannot possibly say that this act of empathy is moral in itself (at least not without begging the question of what morality is in the first place). It is the decision to act—condemning the child sex offender and helping the homeless person—that has a moral quality to it. I'm not saying that there are no non-religious arguments for morality, I'm just saying that if we are to contest our public conception of morality, we need to make a stronger case than this.

The second problem is that these arguments miss the point. Morality should be a matter for public debate, not restricted to being a matter of personal conviction. Huang Yihua's assertion that "religion is a personal affair" comes dangerously close to suggesting that morality itself has no place in the public sphere because religious people, whose morals are defined by their religion, should keep their religious views private. But if the moral views of religious people are shaped by their religion, how can they debate morality in public if they are forced to keep their religion private? Separating religion from morality is as difficult for religious people as it is for non-religious people to separate their atheism or agnosticism from morality. For both kinds of people, their views about religion represent their most foundational beliefs about who and what they are. These are the beliefs that shape their morality. It is the same for both atheists and non-atheists. Therefore, if we want to have a healthy debate about the public good, we must allow both the religious and the non-religious to express their moral views without censoring those that are founded on religious beliefs. Sure, Singapore should maintain its secularity, but not because of any a priori commitment to religious freedom as such; rather, rather Singapore's secularity should be founded on the belief that without genuine religious freedom, there can be no genuine religious belief (or lack thereof).

The ruling party's definition of the public good has, for a long time, been defined by a narrow elite. This definition, formulated when the ruling party first came to power in 1959, has become increasingly problematic. Economic growth for the nation continues to take precedence over income equality and poverty eradication. Political control and stability continues to take precedence over a diversity of thought and ideas. The need to maintain law and order continues to take precedence over the rights of the accused to due process. These are all matters of the public good that can be informed by both religious and non-religious perspectives. What matters is that we permit open debate of these questions rather than stifle the views of either the religious or the non-religious whenever they publicly identify themselves as such. What matters even more is that we see things for what they truly are.

The debate over the public good is not being monopolised by either the religious or the non-religious; it is being monopolised by the ruling party. They, and they alone, have deemed themselves the true guardians of our morality. This attitude was betrayed by Chan Chun Sing when he said that the PAP was prepared to pay the political price for the elected presidency because they thought it was the right thing to do. The problem, however, is that it isn't, and even if were indeed the right thing to do, shouldn't the Singaporean people get to decide that question? The widespread dissatisfaction among Singaporeans with the reserved presidency shows that the people do not agree with the PAP's definition of the public good as it pertains to the reserved presidency. So the question is, who gets to determine what the public good is? Is it the PAP? Or is it we, the people?

In his lecture, Lim Siong Guan suggested that Singapore may have reached the Age of Intellect. He described it as one where there is an "increase in discussions, debates, and arguments, especially on online social media, without a focus on action, or leaving the action as something for others to do." He is right about the importance of action, but without understanding which course of action to take first, any action would be premature. We need to act, but only after deciding what we value as a society.