



Ethos  
Institute

# **RELIGION AND POLITICS IN SINGAPORE**

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Ethos Institute™ for Public Christianity

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## ABOUT ETHOS INSTITUTE™

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**E**thos Institute for Public Christianity was formed by the National Council of Churches in Singapore, Trinity Theological College and The Bible Society of Singapore in 2014. Ethos Institute seeks to serve church and society by engaging contemporary issues and trends from the Christian perspective. Ethos Institute offers:

- Studies on important topics and issues from the Christian perspective
- Regular lectures, seminars, conferences and symposiums for the Christian public
- Resources to Churches and Christians in different professions and vocations
- Resources to the National Council of Churches in Singapore

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Engagement  
Series

## ETHOS INSTITUTE ENGAGEMENT SERIES

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*Series Editor: Roland Chia*

The Ethos Institute Engagement Series aims to address pertinent issues in church and society from the biblical and Christian perspectives. Authored by theologians and scholars in different fields, this booklet series discusses a variety of topics including theology, politics, economics, education, science and the arts. The booklets are an important resource not only for pastors and leaders of the church, but also for Christians who wish to reflect more deeply on the most important and pressing issues of today.

## SPEAKERS' PROFILE

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### **Dr Mark Chan**

Mark L. Y. Chan is the Earnest Lau Professor of Systematic Theology. He was formerly the Director of the Centre for the Study of Christianity in Asia (CSCA), a research arm of Trinity Theological College as well as editor of the Centre's publication, *Church & Society in Asia Today* (2007-2013). He is also currently serving on the Ethics Committee of Farrer Park Hospital.

### **Rev Dr Chiang Ming Shun**

Rev Dr Chiang Ming Shun is the Associate Dean at Trinity Theological College, where he also teaches Church History. His PhD thesis was on Church and State in Singapore. He has been a Methodist pastor for over 20 years, and comes from a true-Singaporean multi-racial multi-cultural background.

### **A/Prof Eugene K.B. Tan**

Eugene K.B. Tan is an associate professor of law at Singapore Management University's Yong Pung How School of Law where he specialises in constitutional and administrative law and ethnic conflict regulation. He has been involved as an instructor in religion and rule of law training programmes in Vietnam, Myanmar, Indonesia, Kazakhstan and Nepal for more than a decade.

## INTRODUCTION

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On 20 March 2021, the Ethos Institute for Public Christianity conducted a seminar on 'Religion and Politics in Singapore'. Religion and politics are complex and multidimensional phenomena, yet they are inextricable and unavoidable parts of our lives. When combined, they can be a highly combustible mixture, and this stems especially when religion is politicised or when politics is sacralised. From a Christian perspective, believers are exhorted to connect their faith with the larger world in which they live. The Christian worldview thus impacts all areas of life, and it is necessary to know how to be faithful followers of Christ and yet responsible and contributing citizens at the same time. This need for biblical grounding and pastoral guidance is especially acute at a time when misguided ideas about Christianity and politics are being circulated in social media.

The purpose of this seminar is to reflect on the role that religion has played in multi-religious Singapore and the significance of the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act (MRHA), twenty years after it was introduced. We are very pleased that the Minister for Home Affairs and Law, Mr K Shanmugam, has kindly agreed to speak at the seminar and take questions from participants.

In his address to the participants in the seminar, Mr K Shanmugam, reiterated three key principles the government has adopted in relating religion to politics in Singapore.

First, the government adopts a secular approach to policy making, not showing preferential treatment to any one religion, but ensuring the right of its citizens to practice their religious beliefs. Second, secularity need not mean disengagement. Minister Shanmugam emphasised the interaction and engagement between the government and the different religious groups, citing the recent document *Commitment to Safeguard Religious Harmony* affirmed

in June 2019 as an example of this open-channel approach. Third, the Minister reiterated his approach of clamping down on hate and offensive speech as a crucial move in preserving religious harmony. Unlike other Western countries, the Minister emphasised that in Singapore “free speech stops at the boundary of giving offence to others.” Singapore, in her governance, must “not allow any race, or religion to be attacked or insulted by anyone else.”

Minister Shanmugam concluded his address with a call not to take religious harmony and understanding in Singapore for granted, reminding us that this harmony has taken many years to be built up through the efforts of religious leaders and the government working closely together.

In his essay, Professor Mark Chan discusses the relationship between religion (especially Christianity) and politics from the Christian perspective. His essay seeks to do three things: firstly, to examine briefly the different ways in which the relationship between Christianity and politics has been construed historically, and then provide a biblical and theological framework to understand the nature of both the state and the Christian’s role in it. Secondly, the biblical/theological framework will form the basis for a critique of attempts emanating from some quarters of global Christianity to commend a resurgent form of Christendom with its theocratic predilections. We will argue that such a conquest paradigm is contrary to Christian discipleship and poses dangers to the fostering of peace and harmony in our multi-religious society. Finally, we will put forth a cross-centred paradigm for Christian public engagement, and suggest that Christians should both exemplify a “convicted civility” in relating to others and be a “faithful presence” in society as they work together for the common good.

In “Religion and Politics in Singapore: A Historical Perspective” Rev Dr Chiang Ming Shun takes us on a trip down history lane to trace the relationship between Church and State since Singapore’s inception in 1819. Chiang shows that in the very early years of Singapore’s history under the East India Company, the close relationship between the church and the state—with the clergy being under the payroll of the government—meant that the clergy were reluctant to speak up on social issues pertinent to their day. The government, that is, the early colonial administrators in Singapore, were also willing and even keen to use missionary or church resources for secular purposes. It was only with the dissociation of the Anglican Bishops as public servants that the

former was emboldened to speak out on issues in public, for example, the seriousness of venereal disease in Singapore in the early 1900s.

Chiang also cites the example of an Anglican Bishop of Singapore who was not only willing to comment on political matters but took further quiet action to replace the existing governor of Singapore back then. Fast forward to modern day Singapore, Chiang shows that the religiously diverse society of Singapore meant that from the very beginning, the modern Singapore government saw religious harmony as one of its top priorities, and it sought to keep politics and religion separate as a way of safeguarding that harmony. While allowing for a great latitude of religious freedom (as enshrined in the Singapore Constitution), the government's strategy of the "rationalization of religion" meant the demarcation of the social and public space in which religions may operate. Chiang highlights three episodes in modern Singapore's history—the Religious Knowledge classes that were taught in public secondary schools from 1984 to 1989, the alleged 1987 Marxist Conspiracy, and the implementation of The Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act (MRHA) on 31 March 1992—as examples that serve to showcase the immensely intricate balance sought after in Church-State relationships in the religiously diverse society but secularly governed state of Singapore.

In his essay 'Abiding Church-State Relations in Singapore', Eugene Tan explores the relationship between religion and politics in Singapore, as framed and regulated by the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act (MRHA). It begins by providing a helpful summary of the religious scene in Singapore, and proposes that we have a system of "enlightened secularity" (rather than strict "secularism"), where the state actively harnesses religion for the goal of nation-building. This makes religion a major facet of public life.

The essay then focuses on the MRHA, describing its genesis, summarising its key provisions (including the latest amendments of October 2019) and suggesting that it is founded upon a "harmony ideology", which serves as a kind of governing ethos. Tan goes on to outline some of the grassroots actions and codes of conduct developed to promote inter-religious understanding, to advance his point that coercive laws are not the only mechanism used by the government to ensure harmony. The essay concludes by raising two key considerations that will have a major impact on the future of religious harmony in Singapore: How the government intends to enforce the updated MRHA regulatory framework and how

capable and willing religious organisations are to self-regulate and seek mutual dialogue and understanding on their own accord. In Tan's words, "the government can provide guidelines but impactful regulation is fundamentally about aligning the hearts and minds of faith communities to the common good".

It is hoped that this publication will enable Christians achieve a better appreciation of the complex issues surrounding the relationship between religion and politics in Singapore.