

# Emergence of Buddhist Revivalism as the Primary Challenge to Church Growth in Singapore

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## INTRODUCTION

*Proverbial Reflection:* Yin Shui Si Yuan

Despite its urban density, Singapore today still retains some measure of tropical bush, wherein lie a number of ancestral grave altars. Last Sunday on our way to church, my wife and I past by one such area. We noted the long queue of cars parked along the expressway, as families trekked into the bush to clean their ancestral altars. It was the third day of *Qing Ming* (Grave-Cleaning festival). That evening my parent-in-laws, along with 25 other Hainanese dialect Singaporeans, left for Hainan to visit their ancestral village, where they are participating in an anniversary commemorating their clan association hall, which many among their delegation helped erect 25 years ago.

Since last week's *Good Friday* was also the first day of *Qing Ming*, most of my wife's family gathered in the early morning at her parents home to offer ancestral prayers. We did not attend because we are believers. Yet because my in-laws requested, we took our dinner there that evening. Each of these events illustrates a Chinese proverb I discovered through this paper's research. The proverb reveals a major challenge facing Christian witness in the Singapore Chinese religious setting: "Remember the source when one is drinking water" (*yin shui si yuan*).

Reflecting the charismatic renewal during the late 1970's, church growth in Singapore was phenomenal throughout the 1980's, and

past studies indicated it would continue into the future<sup>1</sup>. The 2000 census report however confirms what both Christian leaders and laity have observed for several years now: Church growth has come to an *impasse*<sup>2</sup>. In spite of inroads over the past years via varied and systematic evangelistic strategies towards community penetration and reaching dialect-speaking Chinese, the impasse is well acknowledged. It has also been often observed that continued growth among several mega-churches is largely transfer rather than conversion growth.

Bridging the Confucian Worldview of Singaporean Chinese Religion, I want to propose one reason for this present ebb in conversion growth. The reason I propose here appears deeply missiological in nature, because in spite of sustained and broad evangelistic efforts over the past few years, such efforts have not effectively overcome emerging trends arising from Singapore's pluralistic setting over the past decade. One such trend regards the increasing shift among Chinese from Taoism to Buddhism, which consequently now represents the largest profession of faith among the Chinese. Correlated to this shift is Buddhism's increasing growth among higher educated Chinese, corresponding also to a proportionate decline in the number of Christian professions of faith among university graduates<sup>3</sup>.

I suggest that these two phenomena- the stabilization of church growth on one hand and the increasing growth of Buddhist adherents on the other, indicate a deeper challenge to Christian witness within the Chinese majority population. This challenge infers need for renewed evaluation on how well the enculturation of Christian life and witness has become indigenous specifically within the Singapore setting, to the Chinese worldview with reference to its perception of

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<sup>1</sup>Ernest Chew Chin-Tiong, "Singapore," in *A Dictionary of Asian Christianity*; Tong Chee Kiong, "The Rationalization of Religion in Singapore," in *Understanding Singapore Society*. eds. Ong Jin Hui, Tong Chee Kiong, and Tan Ern Ser (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1997), pg. 199-201.

<sup>2</sup>"Advance Data Release No. 2 (Religion)", Singapore Census of Population, 2000, Singapore Department of Statistics. Available: <http://www.singstat.gov.sg/papers/c2000/adr-religion.pdf>. 2002 April 4, pg. 1, 3.

<sup>3</sup>"Singapore Census of Population, 2000: Advance Data Release No. 2 (Religion)," pg. 5-6.

spirituality and religious values. More specifically, if local churches are to effectively resolve the present impasse, they will need to evaluate how to further contextualize their evangelistic strategies, specifically with reference to the governments' ideological shaping of Singapore's multi-religious and cultural setting, which I will argue has indirectly but significantly contributed to the emergence of Buddhism as the largest profession of faith among Singaporean Chinese.

## **DEVELOPMENT OF BUDDHIST REVIVALISM IN CONTRAST TO CHURCH GROWTH DECLENSION**

### *Emergence of Buddhism as Predominant Chinese Profession of Faith*

The dual trend of church growth stabilization and increasing growth of Buddhist professions over the past decade, is one of the major findings on religious trends derived from the 2000 census report. I will further demonstrate this correlation by examining several major variables influencing the growth of both Christianity and Buddhism within the Chinese population over the past 30 years. With a population of about four million people, Chinese comprise 76.8 percent of Singapore's population (53.6% Buddhist, 16.5% Christian, 10.8% Taoist, 18.6% no religion), Malays 13.9 percent (99.6% Muslim), and Indians 7.9 percent (55.4% Hindu, 25.6% Muslim, 12.1% Christian)<sup>4</sup>. In the following table I have summarized some of data tabulated in the 2000 census report as a reference point for the subsequent discussion I will present regarding the emergence of Buddhism during the 1990's as the major contender to church growth in Singapore. For simplicity's sake, I will usually refer to Singaporean Chinese as "Chinese."

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<sup>4</sup>"Advance Data Release No. 2 (Religion)," pg. 4; "Singapore in Figures," Singapore Department of Statistics. Available: <http://www.singstat.gov.sg/keystats/annual/sif>, 2002 April 10.

Table 1. Religious Affiliation of Singapore's Resident Population over the Past 30 Years<sup>5</sup>

Profession	1980		1990		2000	
	Total	Chinese	Total	Chinese	Total	Chinese
Christianity	10.1	10.9	12.7	14.3	14.6	16.5
Buddhism	27.0	34.3	31.0	39.4	42.5	53.6
Taoism	30.0	38.2	22.4	28.4	8.5	10.8
Hinduism	3.6		3.7		4.0	
Islam	15.7		15.3		14.9	
Other Religions	0.5	0.2	0.6	0.3	0.6	0.5
No Religion	13.0	16.4	14.1	17.7	14.8	18.6

While the religious composition of Malays and Indians remained stable over the past ten years, the one outstanding trend that can be observed is a notable shift of profession from Taoism to Buddhism among Chinese. Confirming this trend is that while Buddhism and Taoism together account for 51 percent of Singapore's population, 54 percent of Chinese identify themselves as Buddhist, compared to 39 percent in 1990 and 34 percent in 1980. Buddhism has thus emerged as the most professed faith among Chinese<sup>6</sup>.

Most noteworthy is that Buddhism has not only eclipsed Taoism in its growth among the lower educated, but has also increased among the better educated, having "jumped four times" between 1990 to 2000. Although 18.6 percent of Chinese professed "no religion," demonstrating a proportionate increase over the past 20 years, this does not necessarily reveal a movement towards secularisation<sup>7</sup>. A 1992 study revealed for instance that many who

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, pg. 1, 4; The table synthesizes percentage data from two tables provided in the report, both referring to the resident population aged 15 and over; the first table tabulated the population according to religious profession, whereas the second excluded reference to Hinduism or Islam as it only tabulated religious profession of the resident Chinese population.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, pg. 1, 3.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, pg. 4.

profess “no religion” in census surveys do practice some form of religious ritual, primarily involving traditional Chinese rites. The increasing number of “no religion” professions may therefore further demonstrate Buddhism’s increasing influence among English speaking and upwardly mobile Chinese. Warranting this argument is that many Buddhist adherents prefer to define their faith as a life philosophy rather than as a religion, and prefer to be called “free-thinkers”<sup>8</sup>. This factor has consequently resulted in a decline since 1990 in the proportion of Christian profession among university graduates, and so demonstrates how Buddhism is making inroads among both the lower and higher educated Chinese<sup>9</sup>.

Further examination of the shift from Taoism or traditional folk religions to Buddhism confirms Buddhism’s status as Christianity’s major contender for Chinese adherents. Buddhism’s growth signifies a “distinct shift away from traditional Chinese religions” (Chinese folk beliefs and practices), with the present number of Taoists being half its size in 1990<sup>10</sup>. This shift by many Chinese from a Taoist to a Buddhist profession of faith has resulted by default, in the emergence of Christianity as the second largest religion among Chinese, now accounting for 17 percent of the Chinese population. As in the preceding two decades, Christian adherents are still primarily among the better educated. This observation does not negate the fact however that Christianity has nonetheless more or less stabilized, with Christians now accounting for 15 percent of Singapore’s population, compared to 10 percent in 1980 and 13 percent in 1990<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup>Tong, pg. 204, 209. This may reflect how religious perception in the non-Christian Chinese worldview is essentially non-theistic in character (though not lacking a sense of the “divine”), with spirituality deeply rooted in ancestral lineage; Julia Ching, “The Ambiguous Character of Chinese Religion(s),” *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 11, No. 2 (2001), pg. 213-214, 222-223; Ching, *Chinese Religions* Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), pg. 1-9.

<sup>9</sup>Ching, 1993, pg. 5, 6.

<sup>10</sup>“Advance Data Release No. 2 (Religion),” pg. 2, 3.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, pg. 3.

## EARLIER PRESUMPTIONS OF BUDDHIST DECLENSION IN VIEW OF CHURCH GROWTH

The purpose of Bobby Sng and You Poh Seng's 1982 analysis on church growth in relation to the 1980 census was to evaluate the effectiveness of evangelistic strategies during the 1970s, forecast emerging trends, and offer suggestions for church growth<sup>12</sup>. Their research helps provide a historical perspective for this paper's analysis on Buddhism's growth in contrast to church growth declension. Two of their major conclusions however, have since proved false in light of both the 1990 and 2000 census reports.

First to note is that in view of Buddhism's apparent decline according to the 1980 census, Sng and Seng suggested that church growth among the youth (which was correlated with increasing English literacy and higher education among the Chinese) would result in Buddhism's continued decline. They concluded that higher education tended to make people of Buddhist or Taoist backgrounds sceptical of the "religious doctrines" associated with these traditions<sup>13</sup>. Confirming this conclusion was that Christianity was gaining the highest proportion of adherents among the English literate and better educated<sup>14</sup>.

Sng and Seng also concluded that the transition to English as the main language of instruction would "undermine" students' "traditional values," thus decreasing the influence of Chinese folk religion<sup>15</sup>. Sng and Seng posed a question whether Singapore's modernization would either "undermine" Chinese religious traditions

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<sup>12</sup>Bobby E. K. Sng and You Poh Seng, *Religious Trends in Singapore: With Special Reference to Christianity* (Singapore: Graduates' Christian Fellowship, 1982).

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, pg. 20.

<sup>14</sup>Sng and Seng, pg. 4-6, 11, 20, 25-26.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, pg. 46-47. Sng and Seng's conclusions were also based on a study in the 1970s using random surveys on student populations, which concluded that Chinese folk religion has "dramatically few followers" among young people; Joseph B. Tamney, "An Analysis of the Decline of Allegiance to Chinese Religions: A Comparison of University Students and their Parents," in *Analysis of an Asian Society: Singapore*, eds. R. Hassan and Joseph B. Tamney (Singapore: Department of Sociology, University of Singapore, n.d.), quoted in Sng and Seng, pg. 53.

as well as church growth, or cause a renewed movement towards “Asian religions” but in more “fundamentalist forms” that would enable Chinese to cope with modernization<sup>16</sup>. What the 2000 census report seems to suggest then, is that coinciding with Singapore’s development, there has been a definite renewed movement towards Asian religions, specifically in the form of “Buddhist revivalism.”

## **CONTRIBUTION OF GLOBAL RELIGIOUS REVITALIZATION TOWARDS EMERGENCE OF BUDDHIST REVIVALISM**

Sociological and political studies suggest that what may have facilitated the emergence of Buddhist revivalism in Singapore were global influences upon Singapore’s pluralistic setting, where religious orientation virtually parallels ethnic identity. This factor implies that religious revivalism in Singapore during the 1980s directly mirrored the religious revivalism that was permeating all major world religions<sup>17</sup>. Samuel Huntington proposed that beginning with the late 1970s, global religious revivalism largely emerged as means of coping with late 20th century modernization processes<sup>18</sup>.

Several variables demonstrate that Singapore’s rapid transformation into a highly urbanized and technologically advanced society reflects Huntington’s proposal<sup>19</sup>. First, the presence of all the major world religions in Singapore would filter global religious trends into its multi-religious environment; Buddhist revivalism evidences this tendency<sup>20</sup>. Second, religious revivalism in Singapore during the 1980s may be linked to the “cultural renaissance” that was underway across Asia, specifically expressed through the regional

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid., pg. 46-47, 61.

<sup>17</sup>Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilization and the Remaking of World Order* (London, UK: Simon and Schuster, 1997), pg. 64-65, 95-97; Applicable to Singapore’s setting may also be the parallel Huntington draws between global religious revivalism and global “resurgence of non-Western cultures,” pg 91-92.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., pg. 65-65, 96.

<sup>19</sup>Tong, pg. 204-205.

<sup>20</sup>John Clammer, *The Sociology of Singapore Religion: Studies in Christianity and Chinese Culture Asia Pacific Monograph No. 4* (Singapore: Chopmen Publishers, 1991), pg. 92.

“affirmation of Asian values”<sup>21</sup>. The Peoples Action Party (PAP) for instance sought to promote Singapore internationally as a successful bastion for Asian values, which elevated the stature of city-state in the Asian region<sup>22</sup>. By 1990 it was evident to the PAP, Singapore’s religious leadership, and thoughtful observers, that the 1980s was indeed a decade of tremendous religious revivalism<sup>23</sup>. The charismatic revival was only one expression of this greater religious revitalization of the 1980s<sup>24</sup>. Singapore’s transformation into a modern city-state during the 1980s thus contradicted theories postulating that intense modernization inevitably results in a “decline in the social significance of religion”<sup>25</sup>.

Given the infusion of global religious revivalism upon the Singapore setting, the PAP’s simultaneous attempt to inculcate moral values and introduce Confucian values into instructional curriculum by implementing the Religious Knowledge programme in 1982, unintentionally intensified the “religious fervour” of students, who usually enrolled in whichever course represented their parent’s religion<sup>26</sup>. With particular concern regarding both increased proselytism by Christians and emerging Islamic fundamentalism, the government scrapped the Religious Knowledge curriculum in 1989 in concern for racial cohesiveness. This action was predicated from

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<sup>21</sup>“Affirmation of Asian values” in Confucian cultures may have been an Asian manifestation of the “affirmation of religious values” throughout the world stemming from religious revivalism; Huntington, pg. 96, 104.

<sup>22</sup>Leonard C. Sebastian, “Values and Governance Issues in the Foreign Policy of Singapore,” in *Changing Values in Asia: Their Impact on Governance and Development*, ed. Han Sung-Joo (Tokyo, Japan: Japan Center for International Exchange; Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1999), pg. 223-225, 230-231.

<sup>23</sup>Martin Perry, Lily Kong, and Brenda Yeoh, *Singapore: A Developmental City State* (West Sussex, UK: John Wiley and Sons, 1997), pg. 77; Clammer, pg. 30, 79-97.

<sup>24</sup>Clammer, pg. 45, 57.

<sup>25</sup>Tong, pg. 204-205.

<sup>26</sup>Eddie C. Y. Kuo, Joh Quah, and Tong Chee Kiong, *Religion and Religious Revivalism in Singapore* (Singapore: Ministry of Community Development, 1988); quoted in Beng-Huat Chua, *Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore*. London, UK; New York, NY: Routledge, 1995), pg. 30; Raj Vasil, *Asianising Singapore: The PAP’s Management of Ethnicity* (Singapore: Heinemann Asia; Reed Elsevier, 1995), pg. 74-75.

awareness that the programme's unintended results were indirectly fuelled by the global "trend of a 'heightened consciousness of religious differences'" corresponding to a "new fervour in the propagation of religious beliefs"<sup>27</sup>. Yet the programme also revealed how global religious revitalization was contributing to Buddhist revivalism. The course most popular among Chinese was not Confucianism but Buddhism. By 1989 44.4 percent of Chinese students had enrolled in Buddhist studies, followed by 21.4 percent in Bible Knowledge, compared unfavourably (from the PAP's intentions) with 17.8 per cent in Confucian Ethics<sup>28</sup>. Perhaps because the course was taught in a way emphasizing its theological rather than ritual aspects, students were attracted to Buddhism as it appeared as a distinctively Asian religion that appeared more rational than Chinese folk religion and could therefore be approached from a more philosophical perspective<sup>29</sup>.

## **EMERGENCE IN SINGAPORE OF BUDDHIST REVIVALISM**

By the end of the 1980s, it was evident that Buddhism was undergoing a "degree of revivalism" in Singapore. Sociologist John Clammer described this as one of the "most significant religious processes characterizing the Singapore religious setting during the 1980s"<sup>30</sup>. Within a short time span, Buddhist revivalism

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<sup>27</sup>Vasil, pg. 75; Coinciding with the scrapping of the Religious Knowledge curriculum was the passing of the Religious Harmony Act in 1990. Beng, pg. 30; Tan Tai Wei, "Moral Education in Singapore: A Critical Appraisal," in *Education in Singapore: A Book of Readings*, eds. Jason Tan, S. Gopinathan, and Ho Wah Kam (Singapore: Simon and Schuster, Asia, 1997), pg. 100-101; Perry, pg. 77.

<sup>28</sup>Clammer, pg. 83; Clammer, "Religious Pluralism and Chinese Beliefs in Singapore," in *Chinese Beliefs and Practices in Southeast Asia: Studies on the Chinese Religion in Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia*, ed. Cheu Hock Tong (Petaling Jaya, Malaysia: Pelanduk Publications, 1993), pg. 202-203; Beng, pg. 30; Perry, pg. 70.

<sup>29</sup>Tong, pg. 207-208.

<sup>30</sup>Clammer 1991, pg. 82-83; Trevor Ling, "Singapore: Buddhist Development in a Secular State," *Buddhist Trends in Southeast Asia*, ed. Trevor Ling (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies; Stamford Press, 1993), pg. 161; Tong, pg. 203.

contradicted conclusions made in the 1970s, which predicted its demise presuming it was not compatible with modernization, urbanization, and technological advancement, evidenced by increasing conversions of young people and higher educated professionals to Christianity via increasing proficiency in the English language<sup>31</sup>. Another earlier study downplayed the spiritual vitality of Buddhism for two other reasons. First is that while about 50 percent of Chinese during the late 1960s and early 1970s labelled themselves as “Buddhists,” most were not actually Buddhist practitioners. The label was a convenient way for referring to Chinese religion. Second, most of Singapore’s “Buddhists” were actually “ignorant of much of the Buddhist philosophy” or its diverse sects and traditions<sup>32</sup>. There was some validity to these observations because many Chinese folk religionists, whose form of worship involves the blending of Mahayana Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, and various folk beliefs, have often referred to themselves as “Buddhists,” though they may actually have little comprehension of Buddhist theology<sup>33</sup>. These early analyses were correct perhaps in their phenomenological observations on “folk Buddhism” in Singapore. But what they failed to foresee, was that the future of Buddhism in Singapore was invariably linked to the global religious revitalization forces which effectively enabled it to adapt its thought and practice into what many of its practitioners found to be a viable means for coping with urbanization, modernity, and technological advancement<sup>34</sup>.

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<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 1991, pg. 82; 1993, pg. 202-203; I am referring here to Sng and Seng’s 1982 analysis and the one they drew upon by Tamney, *Analysis of an Asian Society* (n.d.); Sng and Seng, pg. 53.

<sup>32</sup>Vivienne Wee, “Buddhism in Singapore,” in *Understanding Singapore Society*, eds. Ong Jin Hui, Tong Chee Kiong, and Tan Ern Ser (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1997), pg. 130-131, 154-155.

<sup>33</sup>Wee, pg. 131-132, 145-145, 149-150; Brigitte Sie Kok Hwa, *Singapore, A Modern Asian City State: Relationship Between Cultural and Economic Development* (Ph.D. diss., Catholic University of Nijmegen, The Netherlands, 1997), pg. 9; Having grown up in a Chinese folk religious home, my wife tells me that as a child she “thought” she was Buddhist, though she also says she had no comprehension of what Buddhism was about.

<sup>34</sup>Tong, pg. 207-208.

evangelical doctrine of conversion.<sup>57</sup> The typical evangelical understanding of conversion is to see it in terms of crossing a fixed line, what is sometimes called a "crisis conversion." Hiebert argues that we need to see conversion as a movement towards a center of the faith, but a center with a porous rather than fixed boundary. In other words, becoming a Christian means a basic reorientation of life towards the center and a continuing move into it. As Hiebert puts it, "growth is an equally essential part of being a Christian."<sup>58</sup>

While the concept of continuing conversion is increasingly acknowledged, evangelical Protestantism has not come up with a practical response that does full justice to this understanding. In practice, it still tends to operate as if "accepting Christ as savior" is the climax of conversion, the only thing that really counts, and all that happens afterward is simply "follow-up" to build up the faith and prepare for service. Baptism, on this view, is somewhat redundant, more of a formality than an essential element in conversion-initiation. A new convert, i.e., one who has gone through the proper steps of becoming one after saying the "sinner's prayer," is almost immediately fully integrated into the life of the church. E.g., in most free churches, communion is open to anyone who has "accepted Christ as savior" whether baptized or not. If certain positions in the church are still barred to them, it is due more to pragmatic than theological reasons.

The ancient catechumenal process provides a practical response that corresponds more closely to the idea of continuing conversion than any of the practices currently found in the modern evangelical church. The evangelical language of "accepting Christ" and being "born again" gives the impression that conversion is largely a subjective act and a completed event. But when conversion is a process of becoming, then there needs to be a corresponding initiation process in which the initial response to faith is tested out, clarified, and strengthened. Just as true love between a man and woman culminates in marriage, the catechumenal process culminates in baptism, when one enters into full communion with the church. Only then is the Eucharist given to the "neophyte" for the first time.

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<sup>57</sup> Paul Hiebert, "Conversion, Culture and Cognitive Categories," *Gospel in Context* 1:4 (Oct 1978): 215-20.

<sup>58</sup> Hiebert, "Conversion, Culture and Cognitive Categories", p. 219.

setting<sup>38</sup>. It is also for this reason that many Chinese folk religionists may be apt to refer to themselves as “Buddhists,” when actually they are in fact Chinese folk religionists. Facilitating this paradigm is the worship in Singapore of a number of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, of whom to this day the female Guanyin (“Goddess of Mercy”) is most popular<sup>39</sup>.

In contrast to Mahayana belief, the Theravada tradition rejects the concept of Bodhisattva-hood, focusing worship primarily or solely upon the image of Gautama Buddha, though somewhat as an object of “respect” thus restricting the idea of deification<sup>40</sup>. Many people would refer to the Theravada tradition as “Sinhalese Buddhism” since it was primarily introduced through the Sinhalese community, and has been most influential throughout mainland Southeast Asia. In response to modernity, there developed in Sinhalese Buddhism throughout the late 19th and 20th centuries, a scriptural oriented reformation movement characterised by a depreciation of the clergy and increased role of laity in social activism<sup>41</sup>.

According to Clammer, it was this Sinhalese form of the Theravada tradition, with its attendant movement towards adaptation with modernization and purification of Mahayana theology, that began attracting upwardly mobile and educated Chinese to Buddhism during the 1980s<sup>42</sup>. The analyses made during the 1970s

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<sup>38</sup>Alvin P. Cohen, “Chinese Religion: Popular Religion,” in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*; Daniel L. Overmyer, “Chinese Religion: An Overview,” in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*,” Ching, 1993, pg. 205, 214; Chuah Toh Chai, “Understanding Chinese Religion,” in *Church and Culture: Singapore Context*, eds. Bobby E. K. Sng and Choong Chee Pang (Singapore: Graduates’ Christian Fellowship, 1991), pg. 17.

<sup>39</sup>Wee, pg. 130-132, 135.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., pg. 134-135, 152.

<sup>41</sup>Clammer, 1993, pg. 208; Throughout Southeast Asia, Theravadic Buddhism has been undergoing doctrinal reinterpretation emphasizing its ethical rather than mythical dimensions, rationalising its theology according to Western categories, and demonstrating its compatibility with modern science; Donald K. Swearer, “Buddhism in Southeast Asia,” and Frank E. Reynolds and Robert Campany, “Buddhist Ethics,” in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*; Prior to the 1980s, most Chinese Mahayanists, Taoists, and Chinese folk religionists, interpreted the Theravada tradition distinct from the scope of Chinese religion because of its Sinhalese origins; Wee, pg. 131.

<sup>42</sup>Clammer, 1991, pg. 83-84; 1993, pg. 204.

and early 1980s thus failed to consider the potential attraction Sinhalese Buddhism would have among higher educated Chinese. While young upwardly mobile English speaking Chinese were not attracted to Mahayana theology or practice, they eventually found in the philosophical expressions of the “more ethically based” Theravadic tradition, a relevant approach for coping with the challenges of rapid urbanization, modernization, and increased movement towards a technologically-driven economy<sup>43</sup>.

Regarding Soka Gakkai’s influence, Clammer believes it fuelled Buddhist revivalism by its highly organized propagating mission as a lay movement, which popularised among Buddhists its “simple and collective worship style” and “strong sense of community.” During the 1980s, it spread rapidly among both working class and white-collar professionals, while specifically targeting lower-middle income Buddhists. Clammer suggests that this group, though not as attracted to Chinese folk religion as were the lower class, were to a large degree overlooked by Christian witness during the charismatic revival<sup>44</sup>.

Also reflecting Soka Gakkai’s influence upon Theravadic Buddhist revivalism is that since 1989, Buddhist revivalism in Singapore increasingly took the form of “associational Buddhism.” This term illustrates its anchoring more upon lay fellowships and societies rather than upon leadership patterns emanating from Buddhist monasteries<sup>45</sup>. Associational practices have included: Dissemination of apologetic literature in English, facilitated through the establishing of bookshops and a library for this purpose, active propagation on university campuses, scheduling of regular seminars,

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<sup>43</sup>Ling, pg. 161; Tong, pg. 207-208.

<sup>44</sup>Clammer, 1988, pg. 28; 1991 pg. 80-81; 1993, pg. 202-204; Although strongly cultic in nature, Soka Gakkai developed as a prophetic movement out of the Nichiren school of Japanese Zen Buddhism; Tamaru Noriyoshi, “Buddhism: Buddhism in Japan,” in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*.

<sup>45</sup>Few monasteries exist in Singapore, and the number and influence of Buddhist monks is proportionally far less than in other Asian nations; Ling, pg. 160-177; Clammer 1993, pg. 204; A 1956 study argues that the roots of Singapore Buddhist revivalism dates back to 1934, when Buddhist associations were first formed with the agenda “to purify Buddhism in Singapore;” Majorie Topley, “Chinese Religion and Religious Institutions in Singapore,” *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 29, Part 1 (1956), pg. 7-118; quoted in Ling, pg. 161.

participation in ecumenical activities, provision of social welfare services, and adoption of Christian practices (i.e., Sunday services, with chanting carried out via English transliterated “hymn books”). Buddhist associations therefore effectively responded to its religious rivalry with Christianity via the charismatic renewal movement during the 1980s by assimilating into their own meetings, practices that were distinctly Christian in origin, in order to become a more “English speaking religion” that would be fully linked to the “mainstream of modernization in Singapore”<sup>46</sup>.

## **SIGNIFICANCE OF CHINESE RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY IN THE SINGAPORE CONTEXT**

### *Pertinent Distinctives of the Chinese Worldview upon its Conception of Religion*

I will now link the thesis of how church growth declension and Buddhist revivalism infers that Christian life and witness is not yet adequately indigenous or enculturated into the Singaporean Chinese setting, to two matters regarding Singaporean Chinese spirituality. First to consider are perceptions of religion and spirituality in the Chinese worldview. Second to consider are how Chinese folk religionists may be facilitating Buddhism revivalism, through their own response to emerging national and regional trends.

The Chinese worldview is revealed through its ideogrammatic writing system, which is essentially conditioned by Confucian thought<sup>47</sup>. The ideogram for “religion” (*zongjiao*) literally means “lineage-teaching;” referring to the transmission of lineages or

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<sup>46</sup>Clammer, 1988, pg. 26, 28; 1993, pg. 203-204; Ling, pg. 162-163.

<sup>47</sup>Ching, 1993, pg. 83; Many Confucian ideas originated not with Confucius, but were already anchored in Chinese civilization; Confucius’ legacy lies in his role as the seminal articulator of ancient Chinese wisdom and ethics; Shu-Hsien Liu, *Understanding Confucian Philosophy: Classical and Sung-Ming*, Contributions in Philosophy No. 61 (Westport, CT; London, UK: Greenwood Press, 1998), pg. 3, 15; Confucius validates this position: “I transmit but do not create. I believe in and love the ancients;” *Analects* 7:1; quoted in Wing-tsit Chan, *A Source Book of Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963), pg. 31.

traditions. This term reveals then the centrality of ancestral lineage in the Chinese worldview, which is “inextricably interwoven” to one’s ancestral lineage<sup>48</sup>. There is a conceptual model on worldview differences that contrasts Western, Chinese, and Indian cognitive approaches to reality, each having a different prioritising of three core elements in concentric circles: *Concepts*, *concrete relationships*, and *psychical experience*. In this model, *concrete relationships* conceptualise the core of the Chinese worldview, leading towards concepts, and then psychical experience<sup>49</sup>. What may help confirm this conception of the Chinese worldview is the ideogram for *ren* (“humanity”), which etymologically means “man in society,” consisting of the sign for a “man” and the sign for “two” (signifying a group)<sup>50</sup>. *Ren* therefore portrays “human-relatedness,” pointing to the Confucian principle of *li* (“propriety”) referring to right reciprocity in human relationships. *Li* provides then the life setting for manifesting *ren*<sup>51</sup>. Since *li* etymologically conveys a religious overtone which can be translated by words such as “ceremony” or “rites,” it reveals how *ren* and *li* together illustrate what *zongjiao* is all about: In the Chinese conception of religion, familial relations form a sacred community, confirming how the Chinese worldview is lineage-centred<sup>52</sup>.

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<sup>48</sup>Ching, 1993, pg. 1-3; 2001, pg. 213-214.

<sup>49</sup>*Concepts* are placed at the core the Western worldview followed by *concrete relationships* and then *psychical experience*, while *psychical experience* defines the Indian worldview core followed by *concrete relationships*, then *concepts*; Ralph R. Covell, *Confucius, the Buddha, and Christ: A History of the Gospel in Chinese*, American Society of Missiology Series, No. 11 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1986), pg. 12-13.

<sup>50</sup>Wing-tsit Chan, pg. 788-789.

<sup>51</sup>Hsü shen, *Shu-wen Chieh-tzu* (Taipei, Taiwan: I-wen Book Co.1958), 8:1, 4; quoted in Tu Wei-Ming, *Humanity and Self-Cultivation: Essays in Confucian Thought* (Berkeley, CA: Asian Humanities Press, 1979), pg. 18-19; these relationships are ruler-subject, father-son, husband-wife, elder-younger brighter, friend-friend; Mencius 3A:4, quoted in Wing-tsit Chan, pg. 69-70.

<sup>52</sup>Tu Wei-Ming, pg. 18-20; John M. Kollier, *Oriental Philosophies*, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1970; 1985), pg. 266-268; Christianity stands somewhat in contrast with its emphasis upon the “church” as a sacred community apart from humanity; Joseph M. Kitagawa, *Religions of the East*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia, PN: The Westminster Press, 1968), pg. 77-78; Herbert Fingarette,

I have sided with the position that the core of Chinese culture is shaped by Confucianism<sup>53</sup>. Confucianism is also blended with Buddhism and Taoism into the character of Chinese folk religion. Yet in this blending it is Confucianism that foremost characterizes Chinese ethics, while anchoring religious practice upon the concept of filial piety<sup>54</sup>. As a formal religious or philosophical tradition however, Confucianism attracts minimal interest among Singaporean Chinese, except perhaps in “academic circles”<sup>55</sup>. Given the government’s explicit but unsuccessful bid during the 1980’s to promote Confucian studies, some political observers and sociologists argue that Chinese Singaporeans never had a Confucian oriented culture, except in the form of “folk Confucianism”<sup>56</sup>. Such a position however overlooks the fact that Confucianism may be defined as a fluid concept; it need not be expressed solely as a highly articulated philosophical or religious tradition. Given its intrinsic presence within Chinese culture, Confucian scholars concede that folk Confucianism is certainly one way of defining Confucianism, in the sense that Confucian ethics and values shape the Chinese way of life at the grassroots of a society<sup>57</sup>.

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*Confucius: The Secular as Sacred* (New York, NY: Harper Torchbooks, Harper and Row Publishers, 1972), pg. 16-17.

<sup>53</sup>Yong Mun Cheong, *Asian Traditions and Modernization: Perspectives from Singapore* (Singapore: Centre for Advanced Studies, National University of Singapore; Times Academic Press, 1992), pg. 204; quoted in Kok Hwa, pg. 45.

<sup>54</sup>Chuah Toh Chai, pg. 17; Cohen, “Chinese Religion: Popular Religion,” in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*.

<sup>55</sup>Clammer, 1993, pg. 214.

<sup>56</sup>Beng-Huat Chua, pg. 28-39, 120; Perry, pg. 71; Lam Peng Er, “Singapore: Rich State, Illiberal Regime,” in *Driven by Growth: Political Change in the Asia Pacific Region*, rev. ed., ed. James W. Morley (London, UK; Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1999), pg. 259-260.

<sup>57</sup>Shu-Hsien Liu, pg. 13-14, 260-261; Tu Weiming, Milan Heutmanek, and Alan Wachman, *The Confucian World Observed: A Contemporary Discussion of Confucian Humanism in East Asia* (Honolulu, HI: Program for Cultural Studies; the East-West Center, 1992), pg. 39-41.

## **INFLUENCES OF NATIONAL IDEOLOGY AND REGIONAL TRENDS**

In order to examine how Chinese folk religion may be facilitating Buddhist revivalism through the interplay of current national and regional trends, it seems helpful to first place such a discussion in the context of national ideology. This context is necessary because it is in response to influences of ideology and regional trends, that Chinese folk religion may also be undergoing a modernization process that is indirectly facilitating Buddhist revivalism in Singapore<sup>58</sup>. After independence the PAP introduced a process described as “Asianising Singapore and restoring the ‘Chineseness’” of Singaporean Chinese<sup>59</sup>. These objectives paralleled the PAP’s resolve to accelerate English fluency, believing this would facilitate rapid modernization and access to Western technology<sup>60</sup>. Two potential fallouts however, were identified: First was an influx of certain unhealthy Western values and cultural traits, and second was the fear that Chinese would lose touch with traditional “Chinese traditions, values, and culture;” of utmost concern was the challenge of preserving “Confucian values,” thought by many PAP leaders, most notably Lee Kuan Yew, to represent the core of Chinese culture<sup>61</sup>.

“Asianisation” involved a two-fold response. First was the “Speak Mandarin” campaign, which implicitly sought to promote Confucianism by steering Chinese towards renewed interest in their

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<sup>58</sup>Given that Singapore is the only Southeast Asian nation with a Chinese majority, and also with a secular government overseeing a multi-ethnic and religious setting, Clammer observes that any “study of religion in Singapore inevitably raises questions of national ideology,” Clammer, 1991, pg. 39-40.

<sup>59</sup>Saravanan Gopinathan, “Globalisation, the State, and Education Policy in Singapore,” In *Challenges Facing the Singapore Education System Today*, eds. Jason Tan, S. Gopinathan, and Ho Wah Kam (Singapore: Prentice Hall; Pearson Education Asia, 2001), pg. 7; Vasil, *Governing Singapore: Democracy and National Development*, 2nd ed. (St. Leonards, Australia: Allen and Unwin; Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1994, 2000), pg. 205; Quah, pg. 204-207, 241.

<sup>60</sup>Vasil, 1995, pg. 52-53; Quah, pg. 82.

<sup>61</sup>Lee Kuan Yew, *From Third World to First: The Singapore Story: 1965-2000*, *Memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew* Singapore: Times Media Private Limited; Straits Times Press, 2000), Tan, pg. 95; 176-178; Vasil, 1995, pg. 64-65, 71, 77.

cultural heritage<sup>62</sup>. Second was pursuance of a national ideology, beginning with the Moral Education Programme, which transitioned into the Religious Knowledge programme of the 1980s, followed by the “shared values” white paper of 1991; the most recent attempt may be evident via the 1997 “Singapore 21” Report<sup>63</sup>. The government sought to counteract minority fears that the “shared values” paper was a renewed attempt to impose Confucianism on non-Chinese, arguing that it encompassed values fully representative of Singapore’s major ethnic groups. It has nonetheless been observed that the Shared Values drew “disproportionately on Confucian ideas<sup>64</sup>. I have earlier alluded to the observation that the PAP did not succeed in its attempt to inculcate Confucian values through its pursuance of a national ideology. One analysis proposes however that since Singapore is predominately Chinese, the “asianization” objective was primarily targeted towards the Chinese” in order to seek “enhancement of their Chineseness”<sup>65</sup>. Most Chinese are “in varying degrees morally and ethically Confucian, though spiritually they could be Buddhist, Taoist, Christian, or Muslim”<sup>66</sup>.

## IMPLICATIONS DRAWN FROM ANCESTRAL VILLAGE PILGRIMAGES

The opening of China and the end of the cold war, along with the 1978 reforms that allowed greater freedom for folk religious practice, created new opportunities for Singaporean ventures into China which with the PAP’s encouragement, were motivated by both

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<sup>62</sup>Ibid., pg. 179; Vasil, 2000, pg. 111, 207.

<sup>63</sup>Perry, pg. 76-77; Quah, pg. 85-86, 94-97.

<sup>64</sup>Quah, pg. 85; Reference is made to the Confucian idea of “government by honourable men” (*junzi*); Clammer, “Deconstructing Values: The Establishment of a National Ideology and its Implications for Singapore’s Political Future,” in *Singapore Changes*, ed. Garry Rodan (New York, NY: St. Martin’s Press, 1993), n.p, quoted in Perry, pg. 78-79; Throughout the 1990s PAP leaders continued articulating these ideas before the nation; Sebastian, pg. 233.

<sup>65</sup>Vasil, 1995, pg. 96; 2000, pg. 241.

<sup>66</sup>Sebastian, pg. 231; Vasil, 2000, pg. 248.

economic profit and cultural renewal<sup>67</sup>. A study recently published by Kuah Khun Eng examines how throughout this period many Chinese Singaporeans have been making regular pilgrimages to their ancestral villages, just as my in-laws visited theirs last week in Hainan. These pilgrimages are accompanied by community development projects, clan association activities, and ancestral worship accompanied when needful, by the erection or renovation of ancestral lineage houses<sup>68</sup>. In doing so Chinese Singaporeans “revive” their “ancestral lineage,” thus reflecting a Confucian proverb often quoted by Singaporeans and villagers alike for justifying these pilgrimages: *Yin shui si yuan* (“Remember the source when one is drinking water”)<sup>69</sup>.

The proverb *yin shui si yuan* illustrates how motives for these pilgrimages stem from Confucian moral duty, involving the life process of growing into *ren* and thus becoming an “honourable person” (*junzi*), resulting in a legacy after death<sup>70</sup>. Most Chinese may not be fully cognitively aware of such concepts. Kuah concluded that while pilgrims may not know the “meaning behind each ritual practice,” rituals form a “deep latent structure” of their worldview, that have shaped the nature of ancestral village pilgrimages<sup>71</sup>. Kuah’s study demonstrates that for Singaporean Chinese, pilgrimage to their ancestral villages is a religious experience based on identified kinship between the villagers and Singaporeans. It is also a cultural experience that serves to renew in Chinese Singaporeans, a renewed sense of Chinese self-identity<sup>72</sup>.

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<sup>67</sup>Leo Suradinata, “Ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia: Overseas Chinese, Chinese Overseas, or Southeast Asians?” in *Ethnic Chinese as Southeast Asians*, ed. Leo Suradinata (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1997), pg. 15-16, 223-224; Kuah Khun Eng, *Rebuilding the Ancestral Village: Singaporeans in China* (Brookfield, VT; Aldershot, UK: Ashgate Publishing Co., 2000), pg. 173, 141, 259.

<sup>68</sup>Kuah, pg. 135, 141-163, 171.

<sup>69</sup>*Ibid.*, pg. 1, 12-13, 27-29, 132, 134, 168, 260.

<sup>70</sup>*Ibid.*, pg. 13, 168, 171.

<sup>71</sup>*Ibid.*, pg. 174; Kuah derives her argument from E.S. Rawski, “A Historian’s Approach to Chinese Death Ritual,” in *Death Rituals in Later Imperial and Modern China*, eds. J.L. Watson and E.S. Rawski (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988), pg. 22.

<sup>72</sup>*Ibid.*, pg. 15-26.

These pilgrimages are increasingly receiving encouragement from the Singapore government and Chinese social institutions, recognizing their value in perpetuating Chinese culture<sup>73</sup>.

It should be clear that Chinese who profess Buddhism rather than Taoism, nonetheless would identify with traditional Chinese culture, at a far deeper level than Chinese Christians would. What would help reinforce this observation would be to know how far English speaking Theravadic or reformed Buddhists generally identify with their own dialect clan associations and religious festivals (including ancestral village pilgrimages) even if only for the sake of cultural identity, if not religious conviction. Clammer observed for instance that members of Chinese associations include both Buddhists and Chinese Religionists<sup>74</sup>. Kuah refers to motives arising from the doctrine of *karma*, that Buddhists would have in visiting the ancestral villages, which provides impetus towards Buddhist social activism and charitable work<sup>75</sup>. She also notes that in spite of the emergence in Singapore of Buddhist revivalism, its influence on the practice of ancestral village pilgrimage has been negligible<sup>76</sup>.

In spite of the increasing shift from Taoism to Buddhism, it is probable that cultural discontinuity is negligible; Buddhism is certainly closer to the matrix of Chinese religion than Christianity. Clammer observes that unlike Buddhism, Chinese obstructions to Christian conversion “occur more at the sociological level than at the level of belief,” since Chinese religionists usually still regard “Christianity as culturally alien”<sup>77</sup>. Traditional folk practices are performed by Chinese however, if not from belief in their actual meaning, then certainly from the perspective of cultural continuity, as a “identity-confirming mechanism,” for which reason their

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<sup>73</sup>Ibid., pg. 171, 264-265; Kuah, “Maintaining Ethno-Religious Harmony in Singapore,” *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 28, No. 1 (1998), pg. 103-121; Suryadinata, pg. 224.

<sup>74</sup>Clammer, 1993, pg. 211-213; Tong observed that Chinese non-Religionists more or less continue to observe to practice traditional Chinese rites; Tong, pg. 209.

<sup>75</sup>Kuah, pg. 14-15.

<sup>76</sup>Ibid., pg. 174-175.

<sup>77</sup>Clammer, 1993, pg. 206.

practice in Singapore will continue to thrive along with ongoing modernization processes within the Singapore setting<sup>78</sup>.

## MISSIOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

### *Need for Deeper Movement towards Indigenisation*

In spite of the recent economic crisis coupled with post September 11 realities, Singapore is pressing forward in its drive towards becoming not only a front running knowledge-based economy but also a East Asian cultural “renaissance city.” The “championing of Asian values” may well continue as a means of mustering “internal cohesiveness” which can bridge continued and rapid economic change<sup>79</sup>. Kuah concluded her study by surmising that given Singapore’s emerging focus on deepening its cosmopolitan nature, the cultural, fraternal, and kinship links Singaporean Chinese have with China will all the more develop and flourish through the government’s encouragement.<sup>80</sup>

It should be evident then that in view of its notable growth among upwardly mobile English speaking Chinese, Theravadic Buddhism in its reformed expressions is contextualizing according to the dynamics of urbanization and rapid technological change, and will continue to provide for many in this group, a belief-system that seems relevant to the Singapore setting. It is for this reason I have suggested that bridging the problem of church declension may require a renewed evaluation on how the enculturation of Christian life and witness can be taken to a greater level. Reaching a deeper level of indigenisation would mean further reflecting on how to express Christian life and witness within the context of the

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<sup>78</sup>Ibid., pg. 215, 219-220.

<sup>79</sup>Chong Wing Hong, “Asian Values: Asian Miracle or Asian Mirage?” in *Singapore: The Year in Review, 1998*, eds. Giok Ling and Ramkishan S. Rajan (Singapore: Institute of Policy Studies; Times Academic Press, 1999), pg. 132; Linda Low and Eddie C. Y. Kuo, “Towards an Information Society in a Developed Nation,” in *Singapore: Towards a Developed Status*, ed. Linda Low (Singapore: Oxford University Press; Centre for Advanced Studies, 1999), pg. 62-63.

<sup>80</sup>Kuah, pg. 264-265.

Confucian anchoring of the Chinese worldview, and also towards to the governments' ideological shaping of Singapore's multi-religious and cultural setting.

## **BUDDHISM'S SUCCESS AS A CULTURALLY RELEVANT REVITALIZATION MOVEMENT**

Ten years ago, Clammer sympathetically advised that in view of what seemed to be an emerging peak in the charismatic movement's growth in Singapore, the movement may "have to reassess its relationship" to "Singapore society in particular"<sup>81</sup>. What Clammer had in mind by this reassessment, appears to be that notwithstanding the vitality of believers (particularly charismatics) in church life, there is an ironic pull to "compartmentalize" Christian faith. Few Christians he claims "have seriously thought through the implications of their faith in its social, political or economic dimensions, or are even aware that these implications are there to be discovered"<sup>82</sup>.

I will present here a few conceptual frameworks that may provide some broad but helpful perspectives for evaluating where renewed effort can be made towards the indigenisation of Christianity within the Singapore Chinese setting. First to consider is deeper appreciation for the concept of worldview in relation to Anthony Wallace' religious revitalization model, which he defines as a "deliberate, organized, conscious effort by members of a society to construct a more satisfying culture"<sup>83</sup>. Wallace proposed that when a people experience intense challenge towards their worldview in times of unusual cultural stress (i.e. processes of rapid urbanization and modernization), that sometimes rather than fully letting go of their former ways, they synthesize the old and new in a way that revitalizes traditional values, usually via a religious movement. Out of such movements emerges a revitalized yet traditional

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<sup>81</sup>Clammer, 1991, pg. 63-64.

<sup>82</sup>Ibid., pg. 57, 61.

<sup>83</sup>Anthony F. C. Wallace, "Revitalization Movements," *American Anthropologist* 58 (1956), pg. 264, quoted in J. Raymond Tallman, *An Introduction to World Missions* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1989), pg. 194.

belief-system, which can effectively enable a people to cope with intense change<sup>84</sup>. Huntington applied this model upon the past quarter-century non-western cultural and religious revitalization, resulting in the Asian cultural renaissance that has encapsulated particular Asian nations, including Singapore<sup>85</sup>.

It would appear then that Buddhist revivalism may be functioning as such a revitalization movement, which is effectively enabling many upwardly mobile and English speaking Chinese a means for coping with rapid economic and technological change, with less cultural discontinuity that may be perceived to result from Christian conversion. Christianity in Singapore has paralleled Buddhist revivalism as part of the broader religious revitalization process that has been at work over the last 30 years in Singapore, which may be especially true through the influence of the charismatic renewal movement of the 1980s<sup>86</sup>.

It is not my intent to suggest in any way that spiritual renewal is a "mere sociological process;" I would rather affirm that God's Spirit sovereignly orchestrates natural phenomena in creating spiritual receptivity<sup>87</sup>. From this perspective, the ongoing phenomena of Buddhist revivalism should be seen to some extent as evidence that there is still a stirring towards spiritual receptivity. If so, then the seeds for a renewed movement of conversion growth are still very much present in the contemporary setting. The challenge we face then is how to apprehend the spiritual receptivity resident in the hearts of Chinese religionists and of many English speaking upwardly mobile Chinese, who believe that reformed Buddhism offers them a spirituality reflecting sensitivity to the traditional Chinese worldview and cultural expressions, yet in a manner that appears relevant to the challenges of ongoing technological and economic change.

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<sup>84</sup>Wallace, pg. 264-281, quoted in Paul G. Hiebert, *Cultural Anthropology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1983), pg. 387-388, 391-394.

<sup>85</sup>Huntington, pg. 76, 95-101, 103-104, 106, 108.

<sup>86</sup>Clammer, 1991, pg. 57.

<sup>87</sup>This concern reflects the critique often directed towards church growth methodology; Donald A. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 3rd ed., Ed. C. Peter Wagner (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1979, 1990), pg. 7, 92, 179.

## THE CHALLENGE OF INCULTURATION

It may be helpful to also reflect upon the forces of *acculturation* and *enculturation*, in relation to causes of receptivity or resistance to a given religious tradition. Acculturation refers to processes people go through in adapting to a new cultural system while enculturation refers to processes a culture puts people through so they can effectively live within the given culture<sup>88</sup>. Anthropological studies have demonstrated that educational processes are effective to the extent they are integrated with a society's effort towards cultural continuity<sup>89</sup>. While I am not specifically examining here the variable of educational processes, it seems reasonable to presume that this same dilemma can be observed when a "church culture" unnecessarily conflicts with the greater cultural setting.

This discussion therefore points to the task of *inculturation*, referring to the process of the Church deepening itself into the cultural foundations of a given locality<sup>90</sup>. The argument I have been developing in this paper is that the dual trends of Buddhist revivalism and church growth declension may infer that Christianity is not yet fully *inculturated* into the Chinese Singapore setting. I would also suggest then that local churches may need to evaluate wherein they should proactively reinforce cultural and religious values or traditions that may be congruent with biblical values, in order to both minimize cultural discontinuity; such cultural and religious parallelisms can also then be used as anchor points for acculturating believers into the Christian faith and worldview. In doing so, the Church may minimize the prospect of being a source of conflict with those aspects of a culture's enculturation processes, at least with those aspects which may essentially be amoral in nature.

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<sup>88</sup>Charles H. Kraft, *Anthropology for Christian Witness* (New York, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), pg. 367-368; Hiebert, pg. 434-443.

<sup>89</sup>George D. Spindler, "The Transmission of Culture," *Education and Cultural Process: Toward Anthropology of Education*, ed. George Dearborn Spindler (New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston Inc., 1974), pg. 303-309.

<sup>90</sup>Peter K. H. Lee, "Contextualization and Inculturation of Christianity and Confucianism in the Contemporary World," *Asian Journal of Theology* 7, No. 1 (1993), pg. 85.

## DISCERNING, CULTIVATING AND APPREHENDING SPIRITUAL RECEPTIVITY

Integrating Clammer's discussion regarding the Church's relationship with Singapore society at large with Wallace's revitalization model, points to another missiological implication, which is needed perhaps to identify core spiritual drives resident among both Chinese religionists and upwardly mobile or English speaking Chinese, who are today finding reformed Buddhism a more viably relevant faith than Christianity. A study by Robert Montgomery provides another framework for further exploring how Christianity may be further acculturated into the Singapore Chinese setting<sup>91</sup>. Montgomery examined the variable of receptivity to religious conversion as it relates to the "concept of social identity," which he derived from the work of social psychologist Henri Tajfel. Tajfel defines "social identity" as "that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group . . . together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership"<sup>92</sup>. Tajfel proposed that "an individual . . . will seek membership of new groups if these groups have some contribution to make to the positive aspects of his social identity, i.e., to those aspects of it from which he derives some satisfaction"<sup>93</sup>.

From Tajfel's observations, Montgomery developed the thesis that a major contribution towards receptivity to change religious profession, is the "perception and contribution that the new religion" appears to make on one's "social identity. Montgomery observed that a person's receptivity to a new belief-system, is generally "low if adherence to it is regarded as bringing about a sense of loss in a valued aspect of social identity," in the form of one's ethnic or national identity, or cultural heritage. On the other hand, receptivity

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<sup>91</sup>Robert L. Montgomery, "Receptivity to an Outside Religion: Light from Interaction Between Sociology and Missiology," *Missiology: An International Review* 14, No. 2 (July 1986), pg. 287-289.

<sup>92</sup>Henri Tajfel, *Human Groups and Social Categories: Studies in Social Psychology* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pg. 255; quoted in Montgomery, pg. 291.

<sup>93</sup>*Ibid.*, pg. 256, quoted in Montgomery, pg. 291.

will be high if an outside religion enhances a valued aspect of social identity, such as ethnic or national identity<sup>94</sup>.

One application of Montgomery's thesis might be to evaluate if the dual trends of church growth declension and the growing shift of Chinese profession of faith from Taoism to Buddhism, may have been over the long-term facilitated by the development of Chinese Christianity as a predominately English based religious tradition. It is possible that this variable may have somehow facilitated a "cultural divide" in Chinese families of mixed religious traditions, thus restricting rather than facilitating the Church's growth among the non-Christian Chinese population. This restriction may have thus hindered opportunity for affirming the "social identity" of Chinese speaking non-Christians, through limited use of Chinese language in the greater life of the Church<sup>95</sup>. This suggestion however, would raise other problems such as maintaining cultural relevancy towards other cultural groups, such as with reference to Indian believers or other local cultural groupings.

Many recognize that from among the three religious traditions (Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism) that together characterize the core of Chinese religion, Confucianism demonstrates the least sense of cultural discontinuity with Christianity. While Chinese Christians may steer clear from Buddhist or Taoist thought, their ethical behaviour often remains "very much Confucian"<sup>96</sup>. Given its centrality within the Chinese worldview, the concept of filial piety

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<sup>94</sup>Montgomery observed that in Asia, Christianity has usually fared best when it has "not been perceived as requiring them (i.e., adherents) to give up a valued aspect of their social identities", pg. 292-293.

<sup>95</sup>The 2000 census revealed that the language primarily spoken in the home has decisive influence on religious affiliation; Christianity has thus remained strongest among English speaking Chinese while both Buddhist and Taoist adherents preferably speak either Mandarin or dialect within the home; "Advance Data Release No. 2 (Religion), 7; Clammer observed that while many churches are "Chinese-speaking or have dialect services . . . Christianity is nonetheless "mainly a religion for English-speakers, followed by Mandarin-speakers. While this situation persists, Chinese religion is likely to retain its vitality for cultural as much as for theological reasons;" Clammer, 1993, pg. 207.

<sup>96</sup>Whalen Lai, "Cultural Confucianism, Cultural Christianity: One Dilemma of the Modernized Chinese," in *Confucianism in Chinese Culture*, ed. Cheu Hock Tong ((Petaling Jaya, Malaysia: Pelanduk Publications, 2000), pg. 132, 136.

(*hsiao*), may need to be more deeply evaluated, not just as virtue related to one's immediate family but in relation to all its cultural implications. Again, the challenge focuses on how to express this value in a manner that faithful to biblical faith yet also appreciated by non-Christian Chinese. The motive is to minimize the inevitable conflict that will arise, especially from the practice of ancestral worship (although this is sometimes perceived rather as ancestral veneration)<sup>97</sup>.

### PROVERBIAL APPLICATION

I introduced this paper with reference to my in-law's trip to their "village" in Hainan. I now remember that several weeks before that event, one of my wife's uncles told me how important he felt this trip was. I remember now that he in fact referred to it as a return to their "roots," and how he believed it is also was other Chinese Singaporeans. When I asked my father-in-law where they would be staying, he replied, "We put up in *our house*." I have no idea how big this house in Hainan is, but he said that he and other Singaporeans, along with the villagers, built it some years ago. I have to close this story carefully because the final application I will make involves critiquing the depth of my wife's comprehension into the motives governing her parents' trip to Hainan. I do not think she would have ever so quickly thought through how their motives could be rooted in the cultural drives inferred by the proverb *yin shui si yuan*, especially since her life just does not revolve around all the cultural and religious concerns and activities stemming from the clan association.

I am suspecting however that a Singaporean English speaking Chinese Buddhist, would more quickly comprehend the importance of my wife's parents' trip to Hainan, because such a person still resides closer to the cultural centre of his or her Chinese religionist parents. I wonder then if the challenge of minimizing cultural discontinuity may be facilitated at the very least, through careful

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<sup>97</sup>Lukas Tjandra, "Folk Religion among the Chinese in Singapore and Malaysia" (Miss. D. diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 1988), pg. 61.

## **Conclusion**

The Pauline principle of avoiding litigation between fellow Christians enunciated in 1 Cor 6:1-8 should be the norm. Paul's contention that we should live and act like an eschatological community should be a good reminder of where our ultimate concern should be placed. In light of the eschaton, all earthly material things should, by comparison, be considered trivial and of no permanent consequences. The Christian should therefore be willing to suffer wrong than perpetuate wrong in litigation under certain circumstances. In any case, it is a good thing to remember that litigation between Christians is a great blot on the community. It is, in fact, "a manifestation of an absence of community."<sup>32</sup> With some exceptions, lawsuits should be avoided wherever possible.

However, sometimes lawsuits are unavoidable. If there is concerted deceit and malice; where truth and justice are perverted; where character and reputation of longstanding servants of God are continuously defamed, where important points of law has to be decided in the interest of the wider Christian community or where not to litigate would seriously impede the ministry of the Gospel, then, it is respectfully submitted, an exception to 1 Cor 6 ought to be made.

An alternative to lawsuits is to have the dispute arbitrated by fellow Christians with a view to bring closure to the matter in such a way that reconciliation and restoration will eventually take place. The process of mediation and conciliation is to be encouraged before one considers the court option under all circumstances. It is only when such attempts failed because of an intractable position taken without any regard to fair play, truth or justice, that Christians should consider taking the matter to an objective and disinterested forum for final deliberation.

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<sup>32</sup> Robert D. Taylor, "Towards a Biblical Theology of Litigation: A Law Professor Looks at 1 Cor 6:1-11", *Ex Auditu* 2 (1986) p. 114.