

[Singapore Seeks To Define its Religious Future](#)

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Published by Anonymous on Apr. 02, 1989

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"What sort of society will we become in another generation?" asked Singapore's President Wee Kim Wee in his January speech to Parliament. "Traditional Asian ideas of morality, duty and society which have sustained and guided us in the past are giving way to a more Westernized, individualistic and self-centered outlook on life," Wee observed.

The President's remarks are part of a larger discussion underway in Singapore which began with Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's December speech on religious tolerance [reprinted in HINDUISM TODAY'S "My Turn" column, February, 1989]. It has continued with a passionate "letters to the editor" debate in The Straits Times, a speech by Trade and Industry Minister Lee Hsien Loong and the release of a comprehensive government study on religious life in this island nation of 2.5 million people.

The discussion focuses on westernization, loss of religious belief among citizens and the specific problem of aggressive Christian evangelists and politicians. The Prime Minister's speech in late December brought Hindus, Buddhists, Confucianists and Catholics out in support of his call for mutual religious respect and put evangelical Christians on the defensive.

The key issues were expressed in a letter from Dr. V.K. Pillay, governing committee member of the Singapore Hindu Centre. He wrote, "The Christian evangelists have begun to decry Hinduism and Buddhism openly, and unfortunately some Members of Parliament and some civil servants are taking on an active role in Christian evangelism. There has been an intrusion of our privacy by evangelists who ring our door bells regularly and want to tell us how to save our souls. Dying and seriously ill patients have their minds upset by foolish doctors." Philip Motha, Chairman of the Catholic Social Guild of Singapore, wrote, "[Pillay's letter] was very heartening for all those who believe in any religion at all, and most of all for Hindus and Christians."

Mr. Tan Eng Kian echoed Pillay's grievances. In replying to a Christian letter writer named Mr. Lee he wrote, "If Mr. Lee's children come home and tell him he is praying to the devil, and refuses to share with him the food he had offered during prayers and if, on discovering which party is responsible for putting these thoughts into his children's minds, would he accept it quietly? The activities of some Christian sects are tending to upset [our religious] balance. If we do not control these deviants, deviants of other religions might surface. Then where will we end?"

The early February release of a year-long study commissioned by the Community Development Ministry appeared well-timed for augmenting the debate. Among the conclusions of this comprehensive study on Singapore's religious life is a warning: "It would be an unhealthy scenario if politicians in high positions make decisions based on their own religious beliefs and interests, and not on the interests of the country and the general public." The report said that the delicate religious balance in Singapore, as Christianity's more zealous adherents are often perceived to be aggressive and insensitive.

Several solutions were offered during the debate, including the PM's advice that politicians leave their religion at home. Other plans call for increased religious education in the schools and the teaching of ancestral languages. But the most interesting is the proposal for a "National Ideology," put forth in President Wee's speech and reiterated in Trade Minister Lee's address.

President Wee said, "We should preserve the cultural heritage of each of our communities, and uphold certain common values which capture the essence of being a Singaporean." He then proposed a set of core values for a National Ideology: "placing society above self, upholding the family as the basic building block of society, resolving major issues through consensus instead of contention and stressing racial and religious tolerance and harmony."

In his speech. Trade Minister Lee said that the National Ideology was not Confucianism by another name ("society above self is a particularly Confucian ideal). He said these values are compatible with the major cultures in Singapore. "With a common understanding of what we believe in, we can absorb what we want from the practices of other countries, without blindly following irrelevant American or European standards."

No particular implementations of the National Ideology were indicated by the leaders, and the implications of the ideology were unclear. For 45 years neighboring Indonesia has had a national ideology, the Pancasila: belief in One Supreme God; Indonesian unity; peoples' sovereignty; humanitarianism and social justice. Unfortunately, various Indonesian governments have chosen to interpret the Pancasila to suit their own needs over the years. It remains to be seen if Singapore's attempts will meet a better fate.

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