INTERRELIGIOUS RELATIONS

The Construction of Nonreligious Identities among Chinese Millennials in Singapore: A Qualitative Study

Issue 23: MARCH/APRIL 2021

OLIVER ZIKAI LIM

RSiS
S. RAJARATNAM SCHOOL OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES
Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

NANYANG TECHNOLOGICAL UNIVERSITY SINGAPORE

INTERRELIGIOUS RELATIONS

Occasional Papers of
The Studies in Inter-Religious Relations
in Plural Societies Programme

The Construction of Nonreligious Identities among Chinese Millennials in Singapore: A Qualitative Study

Oliver Zikai Lim

ISSN: 2661345X

Editors:
Professor Abdullah Saeed, *University of Melbourne, Australia, and Advisor to the SRP Programme, RSIS, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore*
Dr Paul Hedges, *SRP Programme, RSIS, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore*

Editorial Assistants:
Nursheila Muez, *SRP Programme, RSIS, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore*
Luca Farrow, *SRP Programme, RSIS, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore*

Advisory Board:
Ambassador Mohammad Alami Musa, *SRP Programme, RSIS, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore*
Ambassador Barry Desker, *RSIS, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore*
Rt Rev Dr John Chew, Emeritus, *Trinity Theological College, Singapore*
Professor Lily Kong, *Singapore Management University, Singapore*
Professor Joseph Chinyong Liow, *College of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences (COHASS), and RSIS, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore*
Professor Julius Lipner, Emeritus, *University of Cambridge, UK*

Editorial Board:
Dr Mohamed Ali, *SRP Programme, RSIS, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore*
Professor Scott Appleby, *Keough School of Global Affairs, University of Notre Dame, USA*
Professor Azyumardi Azra, *Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University Jakarta, Indonesia*
Dr Lang Chen, *Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong*
Professor Catherine Cornille, *Boston College, USA*
Professor Gavin D'Costa, *Bristol University, UK*
Professor Farid Esack, *University of Johannesburg, South Africa*
Dr Julianne Funk, *University of Zurich, Switzerland*
Dr Marion Grau, *Norwegian School of Theology, Norway*
Dr Anne Hege Grung, *University of Oslo, Norway*
Dr Anna Halafoff, *Deakin University, Australia*
Professor Elizabeth Harris, *University of Birmingham, UK*
Dr Heidi Hadsell, *Hartford Seminary, USA*
Professor Jeanine Hill Fletcher, *Fordham University, USA*
Professor Manuela Kalsky, *Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, Netherlands*
Professor Paul Knitter, Emeritus, *Union Theological Seminary, Columbia University, USA*
Professor Lai Pan-Chiu, *Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong*
Professor Marianne Moyaert, *Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, Netherlands*
Professor Ebrahim Moosa, *Kroc Institute, Notre Dame University, USA*
Professor Vali Nasr, *Johns Hopkins University, USA*
Dr Nazirudin Mohd Nasir, *Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS), Singapore*
Dr Jennifer Howe Peace, *USA*
Professor Michelle Voss Roberts, *University of Toronto, Canada*
Dr Dicky Sofjan, *Universitas Gadjah Mada, Yogyakarta, Indonesia*

Abstract

This paper investigates the lived experiences of Singaporean Chinese millennials who adopt a nonreligious identity following the recent increase in the percentage of people who identify as having no religious affiliation in the country. Using a qualitative research framework, the author discursively explores the life worlds of three individuals to reveal a contextual fluidity inherent within the overarching “nonreligious” label. The study demonstrates that the construction of a nonreligious identity is influenced by the perpetual tension between Singapore’s unique secular multireligious legislation and educational policy, the dominant Western discourse on religion, and far-reaching Chinese cosmological perspectives as they intersect socially in the lives of these individuals growing up in a diverse country. Using religious studies scholar Paul Hedges’ model of Chinese religion as “strategic participation in a shared landscape,” the author illustrates that despite adopting a nonreligious identity, the individuals embody the same religious hybridity as their parents and families as they adopt a “modern dimension of Chinese religion” by strategically participating in Singapore’s unique contemporary social, political and religious landscape as they see fit to maintain harmony at home and in their social lives. Thus, Singaporean Chinese millennials who identify as nonreligious could – from a Sino-centric perspective – still be considered “religious.”

Introduction

In 2016, Singapore's national newspaper *The Straits Times* published an article which was boldly titled: "Youth in Singapore Shunning Religion."[1] The article gathered much attention in the multicultural and multireligious Singaporean society and took many by surprise in what has traditionally been a deeply religious country. The article published statistics from the *General Household Survey* conducted in 2015 by the Department of Statistics.[2] The statistics noted that 18.5 per cent of the population identified themselves as having no religious affiliation, an increase from 17 per cent in 2010. Most distinctively, much of the nonreligious population came from those in younger age groups, with 23 per cent of those aged 15 to 24 and 22.4 per cent of those aged 25 to 34 identifying as having no religious affiliation. This was compared to just 14 per cent for those over 55. The statistics brought about much concern regarding the future of religion in Singapore, with the article quoting local sociologist Mathew Mathews stating that there is a need for more research to be done to understand Singapore's nonreligious population.[3]

Religious studies scholar Phil Zuckerman, anthropologist Luke Galen and psychologist Frank Pasquale note that research done on nonreligion as a whole around the world has been limited to historical studies and has not adequately examined lived experience. The particularities of how nonreligion manifests in the lives of individuals as they negotiate the world around them is eschewed. Furthermore, Zuckerman, Galen and Pasquale note that normatively, nonreligious people have been seen simply as individuals lacking a religious belief or identity, and are often grouped together as a monolithic whole (we shall discuss more of this later as we define the notion of "nonreligion").[4] The failure to recognise diversity and nuance within this group has placed nonreligious people at a "disadvantage regarding optimal social functioning, mental health, or engagement with the community."[5] It is not surprising then, for Singapore's national newspaper to raise its concerns on the country's changing religious landscape. This is especially so as the future of a country is contingent on its population's lived experience and changing characteristics.

I thus carried out a qualitative study on members of Singapore's nonreligious population. In this paper, I analyse a series of interviews I conducted with three millennial Singaporeans aged 26 to 33 who are Chinese in ethnicity and who identify as nonreligious. While the data sample cannot be considered representative, I believe the experiences represented herein speak to a wider demographic, and so while an initial study, I will argue that the identities of Singapore's nonreligious millennials are actually fluid, influenced by subtle tensions between growing up in a diverse country with a unique secular multireligious policy, the dominant Western discourse of religion constructed against the backdrop of Christianity, and the influence of traditional Chinese religion and practices – all intersecting contextually in their social lives. I then argue that although these millennials construct a "nonreligious" identity, their identities actually embody what I call a "modern dimension" of Chinese religion that is not too different from their parents and families. I use religious studies scholar Paul Hedges' model of Chinese religion as "strategic religious participation in a shared landscape" to illustrate how the nonreligious identity of millennial Chinese Singaporeans actually reflects the same religious hybridity as their parents and families but is labelled in a different way as they negotiate the contemporary social, political and religious landscape of Singapore. My data thus speaks to the notion that the wider demographic of nonreligious Singaporean Chinese millennials could still – from a Sino-centric perspective – be considered "religious."

---

[1] Melody Zaccheus, Xue Qiang Pang and Keng Gene Ng, "Youth in Singapore Shunning Religion," *The Straits Times* (21 March 2018), available at: https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/youth-in-singapore-shunning-religion.
[2] Department of Statistics, Singapore, *General Household Survey 2015*, available at: https://www.singstat.gov.sg/publications/ghs/ghs2015.
[3] Zaccheus, Pang and Ng, "Youth in Singapore Shunning Religion."
[4] Phil Zuckerman, Luke W. Galen and Frank L. Pasquale, *The Nonreligious: Understanding Secular People and Societies,* New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016.
[5] Ibid., 7.

Methodology

I chose a nonprobability qualitative method of analysis because my main aim for this paper is not to get generalised results but to discover and understand the contextual lived experiences contributing to the formation of nonreligious identities amongst millennial Chinese Singaporeans that might speak to a wider demographic – similar to what Zuckerman and his co-authors recommend in researching nonreligious people. The aim of this paper is also not to reach data saturation. Because the topic I identified is relatively new, my research allowed me to gain insight into nonreligious identities and experiences which I used to generate new ideas. These ideas would in turn be useful for more in-depth research in future. Thus, I decided to engage in purposeful, criterion-based sampling and searched for up to five individuals identifying as nonreligious Singaporean Chinese millennials. Being active in the Singaporean interfaith scene, I put up a call on my personal and semi-public social media networks asking if anyone was willing to participate in my research. Three individuals – all of whom happen to be male and people I am friendly with – responded to my social media call with full commitment to my interview schedule.[6]

Profile of Interview Participants

The profile of interview participants will provide for a clearer picture as I discuss my interview data, together with current literature related to my paper's topic. In selecting my interview participants, I decided to interview a slate of individuals who all identify as Chinese. There were two main reasons for doing so. Firstly, the Chinese are the majority ethnic group in Singapore and hence, Chinese culture and worldviews have always influenced, and continue to influence Singaporean society and politics to a large extent; and secondly, the Singaporean Chinese community shows much more religious variability than the other ethnic groups, with the nonreligious making up 23.3 per cent of the Singaporean Chinese population (the biggest proportion of the main racial groups in Singapore) alongside 42.3 per cent Chinese Buddhists, 12.9 per cent Chinese Taoists and 20.9 per cent Chinese Christians.[7] The Chinese millennial population therefore provides a good platform for research into Singapore's contemporary nonreligious population as a whole.

Lenny is a 29 year-old officer in the Republic of Singapore Navy. He considers himself a freethinker who, in the Singaporean context, is open to and accepting of any belief, ideology, and practice – religious or nonreligious – without specifically adhering to any single one. He speaks Chinese at home to his parents and grandparents. He describes his family members to be part-Buddhist and part-Taoist, noting how the lines between these religions are often blurred. Lenny's parents never imposed a certain belief system onto him while he was growing up and although he does not visit any places of worship by himself, he does accompany his parents and grandparents to Chinese temples occasionally. While he mentions that he does not engage in any spiritual practices by himself, Lenny does engage in rituals such as holding joss sticks and venerating his ancestors and deities during major festivals with his family. He states that his parents do not fully understand the beliefs behind the rituals but that they all do it as part of a family practice.

Gary is 33 years old and is a teacher in one of Singapore's most prestigious high schools. Gary mentions that he does not have a religion but is hesitant to give himself a label. When pressed, he said that he would label himself a "science-believer" noting that he "believes in science." While he is not an atheist and he believes that there is something bigger out there, Gary thinks that this "bigger thing" is probably not yet explained by science. While he does not engage in any spiritual practices or visit any places of worship, he does say a little "prayer" or "wish" for hope and comfort whenever he sends his condolences to anyone. Gary considers his mother a staunch Buddhist-Taoist who engages in rituals regularly and believes in the existence of spirits. His father engages in ritual practices occasionally but does not necessarily acknowledge the existence spirits. Gary, however, was a Christian for a short period of time in his life. Gary's sister, like him, is nonreligious while he

[6] The study was done as part of a project for a Masters class at the Claremont School of Theology in accordance with the school's IRB guidelines. Informed consent was received from participants for their interviews to be used for not only the project but in future research. Participants' names were also changed to guarantee their anonymity. Voice recordings of the interviews and their transcriptions are also password protected and shared solely between myself and my class instructor.

[7] Department of Statistics, Singapore, *General Household Survey 2015*.

describes his brother to be the most religious of the three siblings, taking after his parents. While Gary's parents used to persuade him to engage in ancestral veneration when he was younger, they do not do so anymore. Gary, however, says that he prefers to pay his respects in his own way such as visiting his ancestors' niches and saying a silent prayer in remembrance during festivals. Gary grew up practising rituals such as holding joss sticks at the family altar at home but stopped once his family relocated to a new house without an altar. He followed some friends to church as a teenager but started to have doubts about religion after encountering what he describes as his church's aggressive nature. Gary mentioned that his education slowly replaced his faith as he grew up.

Wei Ting is a 26 year-old engineer working for a multinational corporation. He actively eschews any labels when it comes to religion and primarily considers himself nonreligious, although he does mention that he describes his religious identity variously, particularly when he is pressed by different people. In order to end such conversations, he would say that he is nominally agnostic or spiritual. Wei Ting describes his parents as intermittently Buddhist-Taoist who engage in certain practices including being vegetarian during festivals and auspicious days as penitence. He describes his father as stauncher than his mother who usually follows his father's lead when it comes to religious practice. Wei Ting's sister became a Protestant Christian when she was in university. Wei Ting also mentions that he used to follow his parents to Chinese temples when he was growing up and would engage in certain rituals such as holding joss sticks and venerating his ancestors and deities. These days however, Wei Ting says that he seldom partakes in these practices and does so primarily during special festivals. Wei Ting never considered himself religious growing up and did not think very much about his beliefs until he took a class in philosophy in junior college (the Singaporean equivalent of high school).

All the participants are university graduates who speak both English and Mandarin. They are part of the 80 per cent of Singaporeans who grew up and currently live in Singapore's public housing flats. They all attended local state-supported schools in Singapore though Lenny and Gary studied abroad during university. The three are all Singapore born. I would describe their experience as Singaporeans to be typical in many ways though they were still among the privileged 32 per cent to have had a university education.[8]

Defining Nonreligion in Context

Religious studies scholars Anna King and Paul Hedges note that "religion" as we understand it today, has been defined mainly out of beliefs and doctrines which stem from a Eurocentric knowledge system which privileges Christian theological universalism and the rationalism of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment period.[9] Hedges further describes this Western-centric definition of religion to be one which has three primary aspects: religions are seen as "bounded territories of belonging", with "belief in a set of principles" at their core, and each religion "is seen to be its own inherently coherent and regulated entity."[10] This understanding of religion was then systematically imposed globally through the hegemony of Western academia first by European colonialism, and then by the outworking of American exceptionalism. This concept of religion has been readily adopted in Singapore, a country with a British colonial heritage (this will be discussed more clearly in the next section). Religious studies scholar Russell McCutcheon mentions that the problem with the Western construct of religion is that it has caused religions to become what he calls *sui generis* categories, defined solely by themselves, far removed from culture and societal influences.[11] The three aspects of the Western-centric definition of religion that Hedges' describes then do not always exist in traditions we may nevertheless label as "religious."

---

[8] Sandra Davie, "Record 15,000 to Enter Local Varsities This Year," *The Straits Times* (11 July 2015), available at: https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/education/record-15000-to-enter-local-varsities-this-year.

[9] Paul Hedges and Anna S. King, "Is the Study of Religion Religious? How to Study Religion and Who Studies Religion?," in *Controversies in Contemporary Religion: Education, Law, Politics, Society, and Spirituality*, Vol. 1, ed. Paul Hedges, Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2014, 31-56.

[10] Paul Hedges, "Multiple Religious Belonging after Religion: Theorising Strategic Religious Participation in a Shared Landscape as a Chinese Model," *Open Theology* 3 (2017): 48-72, 53-54.

[11] Russell T. McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1997.

Religious studies scholar Lois Lee notes that "nonreligion," as the word reveals, is defined in relation to this Western concept of religion and one which is in contradistinction to it.[12] In the West, individuals with no religious affiliation often categorise themselves as "nones," taking precedence from the "none" or "no religion" category in census documents. However, like religion, nonreligion is not a straightforward term. To Lee, to not identify with a religion does not mean that the individual is simply indifferent to religion – which classic secularization theory suggests – but that he or she is shaped by "experiencing or performing their difference from religious others."[13] Her research notes that nonreligious people are in fact more positively than negatively engaged with religion and that this engagement spans beyond just the intellectual claims about god(s), encompassing all aspects of their emotional, social, cultural, and political lives.[14] Lee's research participants "exhibited diverse attachments to theistic and spiritual cultures and it seems likely that most people have hybrid or multiple religious, spiritual and non-religious identities and experiences that cut across the 'religious-atheist' divide that dominates media portrayals."[15] Within the category of "nones" lie a myriad of individual identities, with examples ranging from the "spiritual but not religious," who might have religious beliefs and practices, and who are seeking some sort of higher fulfilment and development but who do not affiliate themselves with organised religion, eschew religious labels or prefer the boundaries between religion and spirituality to remain ambiguous, to the atheists who outrightly reject any religious or spiritual belief and practice outright. Other nonreligious individuals simply prefer to avoid specific nonreligious labels, revealing the fluidity of the identifier.

In fact, like Zuckerman, Galen and Pasquale, who argue that "lumping people together waters down or obfuscates important differences between types of nonbelief regarding things like the confidence with which individuals may hold worldviews, their relative interest or apathy regarding existential and metaphysical matters, and their engagement with other individuals or organisations,"[16] religious studies scholar Christopher Cotter also critiques the use of term "nonreligious" as an identifier because, like the term "religion," it reflects a homogenising category masking nuances and blurring individual contexts.[17] In this light, Cotter argues for the study of *identification* rather than the study of *identities*. To better understand the nonreligious then, he calls for the adoption of qualitative discursive analysis which shifts the research focus from the "individual to the discourse they employ, from the person to what they say, and how they say it, allow(ing) the social reality of the individual to be incorporated analytically into the wider societal conversation of which they are inherently a part."[18] Cotter hence roots his study of nonreligion in a specific locality. His intentional focus on a particular space – the Southside of Edinburgh – revealed that, similar to religious identity, nonreligious identity is not monolithic and universal but based on discourse relationally influenced by subjective, spatial, and conceptual factors played out in a contextual locality which various actors experience and participate in.[19]

As we can see from the brief profile of interview participants, the construction of the nonreligious identities of the three individuals is very much influenced by a series of social institutions in the Singaporean context such as religion, family and upbringing, and school and education, which intersect with their individual life worlds. Their understandings of what it means to be nonreligious are therefore diverse. Gary and Wei Ting were both raised in Buddhist-Taoist families and went to state schools. Gary's education replaced his faith with him taking a more sceptical view of the world than Wei Ting. He noted that he became a "science-believer" unlike Wei Ting who said his experience with philosophy lessons in school led him to be more agonistic or spiritual. And while Gary, Wei Ting and Lenny all practised religious rituals and visited places of worship with their Buddhist-Taoist families growing up, only Lenny and Wei Ting continue the traditions – albeit only with their family members present – whilst Gary mentioned that he pays his respect in his own quiet way. However, to better comprehend the construction of their nonreligious identities, I first dissect the wider socio-political dimensions against which their identities are formed, before analysing these nonreligious identities alongside the social realities of each individual.

---

[12] Lois Lee, *Recognising the Non-Religious: Reimagining the Secular*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.
[13] Ibid., 4.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid., 13.
[16] Zuckerman, Galen and Pasquale, *The Nonreligious*, 7-8.
[17] Christopher R. Cotter, *The Critical Study of Non-Religion: Discourse, Identification and Locality*, London: Bloomsbury, 2020.
[18] Ibid., 9.
[19] Ibid.

Race, Religion, and State Power in Singapore

To understand nonreligious identities in Singapore, one must comprehend the national discourses influencing the construction of religion. Anthropologist David Eller in his summary of *Formations of the Secular*,[20] a classic work of Talal Asad, describes power and control in the relationship of state to society so well that I quote him here in full:

> Modern politics, particularly in the form of the modern state or government, seeks to delimit, quantify, and institutionalize all sorts of things – its borders, its population, its economy, its industry, and of course its religion. This leads to the identification – or creation – of disparate institutional realms like "the economy," "the household," and "the religion." More important, political leaders claim the authority to define and defend the lines between these realms, as well as to regulate each institution within its realm. In other words, the modern state decides what each institution is and how it may behave, in this case what and where is "religion" and more crucially what or where is normal religion.[21]

The Singaporean government's actions are no different from those described in Eller's summary of Asad's work on the state's power in societal formations. The Singaporean state is openly interventionist and has maintained a unique secular multicultural and multireligious society where race and religion share a generalised intertwining relationship where their boundaries are clearly demarcated and defined as ideological categories for governance.

The Singaporean government, which has been formed by the same party since independence in 1965, has continuously noted that while Singapore's ethnic and religious diversity should be celebrated, it should never be taken for granted. "Harmony" is a vogue word for the Singaporean state. In 2006, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong reasserted this stance, stating that "in Singapore, we have to maintain our social harmony and religious harmony at all costs."[22] A contributing factor to this emphasis on harmony was a racial and religious riot which broke out between Malay and Chinese populations in the traditional Malay enclave of Geylang Serai in 1964, a year before Singapore's independence. Since then, as sociologist Vineeta Sinha states, "the view that such diversity must be judiciously managed and could not be left to 'natural' forces has remained."[23] Thus, the state continues to actively intervene in racial and religious matters and, in the process, ensure political control and social stability. This is done mainly through two aspects: legislation and education.

Building from its legacy as a former British colony, Singapore has been organised along racial lines. The government has built on colonial hegemony by retaining the notion of race as an essential ideological category in its governance. The government introduced what is commonly known as the CMIO policy on multiculturalism, confining national identity to a convergence of cultures consisting of four primary races – Chinese, Malay, Indian and Others, essentially demarcating what constitutes "race." The 2015 General Household survey noted that the population was 74.3 per cent Chinese, 13.3 per cent Malay, 9.1 per cent Indian, and 3.2 per cent "Others."[24] Every citizen is given a national identity card with his or her race stated, and this race is used for data collection and governance purposes, including the allocation of public housing.

Religion is similarly organised into clearly demarcated categories through the Western lens of the World Religions Paradigm (WRP). The 2015 General Household Survey also noted that 33.3 per cent of Singaporeans identified as Buddhist, 9.9 per cent as Taoist, 18.8 per cent as Christian, 14 per cent as Muslim, 5 per cent as Hindu, 18.5 per cent as having no religious affiliation, and 0.6 per cent as others.[25] As stated above, religion is closely tied to race and an analysis shows that almost all Malays are Muslim (98.9 per cent) and the majority of

---

[20] Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam and Modernity*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003.
[21] David Eller, "Varieties of Secular Experience," in *The Oxford Handbook of Secularism*, eds Phil Zuckerman and John R. Shook, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017, 501.
[22] Charlene Tan, "Creating 'Good Citizens' and Maintaining Religious Harmony in Singapore," *British Journal of Religious Education* 30.2 (2008): 133-42, 135.
[23] Vineeta Sinha, "Theorising 'talk' about 'Religious Pluralism' and 'Religious Harmony' in Singapore," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 20.1 (2005): 25-40, 25.
[24] Department of Statistics, Singapore, *General Household Survey 2015*.
[25] Ibid.

Indians are Hindu (59.8 per cent) while a large proportion of the Chinese are Buddhist or Taoist (55.2 per cent).[26] Similar to the CMIO policy and discourse on harmony framing that sphere, the government crafted the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act (MRHA) and enshrined religious harmony into Singapore's penal code in 1990.[27] Within this, religion, like race, became an essential ideological category for governance, with seemingly clear and discrete markers of separate religions and races formed for classification. The MRHA essentially divorced the state from religion, separating the secular and religious realms of the country. It, however, also ensured that religion is maintained in a privileged position as a respected and legitimate institution in its own right. The MRHA, the first law of its kind in the world, "stipulates that no religious groups should be involved in politics and that religious organisations are not to stray beyond the bounds of educational, social and charitable work."[28] Furthermore, under the penal code, individuals would be prosecuted for "injuring or defiling a place of worship, disturbing a religious assembly, and uttering words or sounds to deliberately wound religious feelings."[29]

Together with the above, the government has introduced what it terms "National Education" (NE) in all schools to promote the maintenance of racial and religious harmony in the country. By establishing NE in schools, the government aims to encourage students to learn about different races and religions, and to emphasise why harmony between all groups is essential for the country's security and survival.[30] The NE syllabus notes that Singaporeans, despite distinct differences, should come together to develop their country. NE is integrated into the formal curriculum via subjects such as Civics and Moral Education, Social Studies and History, and in extracurricular activities and other enrichment programmes.

In addition, human geographer Robbie Goh reminds us of Singapore's unique language policies in education.[31] The English language remains privileged and is the country's primary language of instruction and commerce despite Malay being the country's national language. However, under the mother tongue language policy, a student would, additionally, have to study a language the government deems as closely related to his or her race. Hence, an ethnically Chinese student would have to study Mandarin alongside English in school; an ethnically Malay student would study the Malay language; and an ethnically Indian student would learn Tamil (or Hindi, Punjabi, Urdu or Gujarati).[32] The primary use of English, a language rooted in Western domination through European colonialism and American exceptionalism, alongside one's supposed "mother tongue" bolsters Western modes of knowledge production, and the internalisation of the historical patterning and classification of "race" and "religion" which assists in furthering the government's political agenda of demarcating and separating racial and religious identities for strategic governance.

These three categories of race, language, and religion are closely intertwined, and the way they are negotiated as identity markers by Singaporeans has its roots in state manufacturing, perpetuated by the educational system. The impact state manufacturing and intervention has on individual identities becomes clearer later when I note the perpetual tension (non)religious identity markers remain in, particularly as individuals negotiate the epistemologies of religion from a Western-centric viewpoint backed by the state and reinforced by English instruction, together with those of their ethnic backgrounds (Chinese in this case), creating an often conflicting and complicated worldview in the process.

---

[26] Ibid.
[27] On the background to the MRHA, see Paul Hedges and Mohamed Imran Mohamed Taib, "The Interfaith Movement in Singapore: Precarious Toleration and Embedded Autonomy," in *The Interfaith Movement*, eds John Fahy and Jan-Jonathan Bock, London and New York: Routledge, 2019: 139-56.
[28] Tan, "Creating 'Good Citizens,'" 135.
[29] Eugene K. B. Tan, "Keeping God in Place: The Management of Religion in Singapore," in *Religious Diversity in Singapore*, ed. Lai Ah Eng, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008, 64.
[30] Tan, "Creating 'Good Citizens," 135.
[31] Robbie B. H. Goh, "Christian Identities in Singapore: Religion, Race and Culture between State Controls and Transnational Flows," *Journal of Cultural Geography* 26.1 (2009): 1-23.
[32] Ibid.

Contextual Influences on Nonreligious Identity Construction

This two-pronged legislation-education approach to creating a unique secular, multicultural and multireligious society has caused subtle cultural clashes in the way the individuals approach their understanding of (non)religious identities. Epistemologies of religion in a Chinese context take on a different form in the negotiation of a controlled space built on the back of Western knowledge production. It is worth noting here that all three of my interview participants define religion as belief. Lenny defines religion closest to the Western definition as described by Hedges by mentioning beliefs and the regulation of practices. During his interview, he notes that, "most people believe in something or have a set of beliefs, therefore they are religious in a certain way. There's also some kind of cultural ingraining where there are certain set of practices [to] follow based on [a] certain set of beliefs." Gary also privileges belief, mentioning that "I would think it's believing in, for the lack of a better word, the God that you think exists. And in whatever form that will be." Wei Ting responds in the same way, upholding belief as central to religion but also adds another dimension as to why he considers himself nonreligious. He said, "I think the point of religion is to believe in a narrative about our world and that narrative is the principle [of religion]. That's why I'm nonreligious. I cannot see that [belief] as fundamental to the meaning of religion." As I will elaborate further in the next paragraph, Wei Ting's reply shows a cultural tension that exists in the three individuals' definition of religious identity because of the differences between the Western construction of the term "religion" as espoused by the Singaporean state and perpetuated by our Western-centric educational system, and the traditional understanding of religion in a majority Chinese society.

As I have illustrated in the interview profiles, Lenny and Wei Ting still engage in certain rituals like holding joss sticks and venerating their ancestors together with their family during special festivals and occasions. Furthermore, Lenny, Gary and Wei Ting all noted that their families practise a combination of Buddhism and Taoism. This hybridity and fluidity of religions seems to be in opposition to the understanding of religion from a Western-centric WRP outlook. The three participants seem to want to differentiate the two religions, yet they know that the two are interchangeable in Chinese culture and often practised together. Lenny aptly mentions that for "Asian religions like Buddhism and Taoism, the lines are blurred especially in Singapore… and they share a common background of some sort; maybe one was a medium for the other one to be proliferated." Hedges notes that in the Chinese context, the Three Traditions (*San Jiao*) of Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism are better seen as "three different versions of Chinese religiosity rather than entirely distinct traditions"[33] that exist together in what he calls a "shared religious landscape" together with Chinese Folk Religion, where a common cosmology exists in perpetual tension among the religiosities, and where books, spiritual figures, and rituals are sometimes shared.[34] There is also less of a focus on belief but on participation and practice which Hedges calls "strategic religious participation."[35] This occurs when these religiosities are crossed, adapted and engaged in a way that makes most sense to people especially within their familial and communal contexts.[36] The participation in the landscape of the religiosities also provides the Chinese people with a shared heritage and perspective where a "basic harmony of metaphysics and worldview underlies China's major indigenous or adopted religious traditions."[37] Thus, the ambiguous and fluid nonreligious identities of Lenny, Gary and Wei Ting seem to stem from the way they engage with society, its political definition and use of religion, the education which perpetuates it, and familial influences of the traditional Chinese understanding of religion.

A Modern Dimension of Chinese Religion

Interestingly, although all three have engaged in Buddhist-Taoist practices especially with their family at some point in their lives, with Lenny and Wei Ting continuing to do so on occasion, I am surprised that they do not simply adopt the "Buddhist-Taoist" label their parents identify with, particularly, as Lenny mentions,

[33] Hedges, "Multiple Religious Belonging," 61.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Ibid., 65.

because their parents do not have specific beliefs about what their ritual practices mean. I question if this stems from their Western-centric education and the clear demarcation of religion in Singaporean socio-political space. To try to understand if this is the case, I asked them about their beliefs when it comes to understanding certain categories that make up "religion." These were: religion as a metaphysical worldview including a belief in a god or the afterlife, religion as ethics by which they live, and religion as spiritual practice.

Of the three, Lenny answered the least in the interview even when probed. He mentioned that he does not know if there are gods or if there is an afterlife. When questioned about his ethics, he simply stated these were "to be true to yourself and others." When it comes to engaging in ritual practice, he noted that he follows whatever his parents do. Because he does not have any clear views on god or the afterlife, a very well-defined ethical system, nor reasons for engaging in ritual other than following his parents, he identifies as a freethinker. He does not believe or follow any specific creeds or absolutist statements that one would traditionally link to a particular religion, yet is comfortable with practising any religious act or ritual without attachment. I observed a degree of the strategic participation that Hedges notes is present in Chinese religion, and infer that Lenny engages in ritual so as to not upset his parents and to maintain harmony at home.[38] Lenny seems to take a more Sino-centric approach to his religious performance though his religious identity formation seems to be one defined from a Western, nonreligious perspective.

Gary was a little more specific than Lenny about his view of the afterlife, although he mentioned that "it's more of a curiosity rather than a belief that there's anything after life." True to his label as a "science-believer," he bases his views strictly on empirical evidence, although he, like Lenny, mentions that he just does not know. Gary notes that:

> Maybe when I was younger, I really thought, okay, when you die, there might be a heaven or a hell or something. But these days, I really don't know why, I suppose that when I die, I just cease electrical activity and cease to be. Unless after I die, there is evidence that an alien comes to take me or something. Then maybe I'll be really happy to know that okay, there really is something you know? I mean that's my current feeling, I'm not going to live each day now, knowing that if I die at this moment, there will be salvation or that I'll be going to this particular place.

To Gary, it does not seem like it matters if there is a specific afterlife and he is not going to take a stand on a specific belief that there is. Furthermore, he takes a similar approach to his understanding of god, grounding it very much in empirical evidence, stating that:

> while I believe in that supreme being, it's not really to appeal to, it's more like there's some sort of like things that we don't know in life and because I don't know, I can't deny whether life is preordained or not. I can't say for sure. This is because of my scientific beliefs. If I can't prove that it exists but I can't disprove that it exists, therefore to me this being still exists in a sense.

Like Lenny, Gary is ambiguous about his ethics but as with his metaphysics, he mentions that he takes a very "scientific approach." He said: "I suppose my ethics are pretty much grounded in science, like don't falsify things. This might transmit to 'don't tell lies in religion' or like you need to know what you're looking out for before you can actually find it or something. I don't know whether I have ethics per se." Gary, too, seems to be influenced very much by a Western-centric approach to his religious identity formation, providing himself with a specific label and linking his beliefs to "science." He grounds his identity in belief in the Western empirical scientific notion rather than specific creeds or truths. To him, evidence should prove if something exists but if

[38] While some may not perceive participation in religious rituals to please one's parents as evidence against an individual's claim to be nonreligious, one must remember that in the Chinese cultural and religious context, one is bound by his/her duty to the family. This usually occurs at the expense of one's independent beliefs, whether for spiritual benefit or not. Religious studies scholar Jordan Paper illustrates this well, noting that "Familism" – as he calls it – is the determining aspect of Chinese culture and religion, and not individual belief. Bound up in Familism are the core virtues of maintaining harmony and demonstrating filial piety. That is why rituals in the Chinese religious context are primarily oriented towards the family and take place at home. Thus, strategic participation in Lenny's context is about making the decision to follow familial norms, choosing to partake in his family's practices over his individual beliefs about them. See Jordan Paper, *Chinese Religion and Familism: The Basis of Chinese Culture, Society and Government*, London: Bloomsbury, 2020.

there is no evidence and nothing can disprove an existence, it may still exist. Furthermore, belief to Gary still seems to take more precedence in religious identity construction than practice and participation.

Yet Gary would admit his occasional participation in some sort of religious practice. As mentioned in his profile, he would say a prayer when he offers his condolences. He notes:

> Prayer maybe occasionally when I'm like... when I wish my friend feels better because his mum just died – that sort of thing. Maybe that's about it but not so much... Yeah, I don't know. More of like when there's something good in my life that I appreciate, then I might just think about that and feel appreciative but whether or not it's really a prayer, I can't tell for sure.

To me, however, this also sounds like the strategic participation that Hedges mentions as central to Chinese religions, though it does not seem as outright as the rituals of holding joss sticks and the venerating ancestors that Lenny and Wei Ting engage in. Gary strategically participates even though his beliefs are more grounded on empirical evidence because it simply sets his mind at ease.

Wei Ting, in comparison to Lenny and Gary, presented a very different approach to his metaphysics and ethics. He did however, mention that a lot of this was developed out of attending philosophy classes in junior college and university. He said:

> Oh, in university I attended a course on Eastern philosophy. Chinese philosophy to be specific and then I came to realize that actually (Chinese) religion itself is not (actually religion).... In the Chinese community, religion is a term coined from the West. Before that, there wasn't a term “religion” in the Chinese language until Western influence occurred. In the sense, what they believe... they're not so concerned about truths but rather how to live your life. Like Confucianism and Taoism. So, I can't really identify myself. I have my own beliefs and I still look up to religious teachings as a frame of reference to how I was taught to live my life.

Wei Ting seems to understand the problems with the term “religion” in the Chinese context especially as it is defined through a Western lens, but it seems that he sees Chinese thought, particularly with its concerns with how one lives one’s life, taking precedence over concerns with absolute truths in the Western sense. When talking about ethics however, Wei Ting takes a more specific Western-centric religious view as compared to Lenny and Gary. He mentioned his specific belief in sin, saying:

> I also think that I buy into the whole idea of sin in this world because I can literally see along the lines of Christianity and Buddhism when they talk about sins [sic]. One talks about how it brings you to hell, the other talks about how it literally makes you live in hell. One is instantaneous in the whole karmic thing. The conclusion is the same but don't be rash, you need to keep your instincts in check. I believe in those.

I identified the most tension in Wei Ting’s nonreligious identity construction and I note that studying philosophy in a Western educational context has most probably impacted his personal understanding of religion. However, seeing that he never identified himself as religious even prior to learning about philosophy in high school and university, I opine that he still adopts a Western-centric understanding of religion which privileges belief and truth claims.

When it comes to spiritual practice, Wei Ting takes a similar approach to Lenny – following his parents and imitating them as he sees fit. He said:

> If there are joss sticks, I would burn them. I didn't really question; I didn't really devote myself to it. They were just rituals. There wasn't much explanation. I mean for instance, after you light the joss sticks, you have to flip these coins [divination blocks] and if one is tails and one is heads, it means they [the deities/ancestors] have finished their meals. And we can pack up. And sometimes if you flip them, they show that the ghosts are taking their own time to eat… and I think that's fascinating in a sense because there's a need to communicate with the deceased. I mean I also have my own innate interests in that

> but I don't really know. So, these things may influence me in a certain way but I wouldn't say that much… but I mean at the very least it forced me to consider the possibility that these things exist.

However, Wei Ting did mention he specifically visits his ancestors' niches and venerates them at the yearly Chinese tomb sweeping festival (Qing Ming) and also venerated Confucius before he sat for any major examinations when he was in school. The former, he mentions, is to practise filial piety and to remember those who came before him, and the latter, he believes, was to cultivate the same wisdom that Confucius had so that he could excel in his exams. I note a similar tension in Wei Ting's reasons for engaging in spiritual practices and he seems to display the traits and feelings of both Lenny and Gary. Although he too does not rank this highly on the scale of his identity formation and he does not think much about the rituals, I infer that he does not engage in them just to satisfy his parents' wishes but to preserve a greater order of the way things are and to ensure that this order continues for him and for his family's benefit. I also note that there is a degree and form of strategic religious participation in Wei Ting's life.

In my analysis of the interviews of my three participants, I note that all three identify as nonreligious, despite cultural tensions, due to their Western-centric understanding of religion which privileges a Christian perspective that religion is constructed out of belief. It seems that their opposition to having certain specific and well-defined beliefs has caused them to reject the label of "religious" although they seem to engage in certain Chinese religious rituals and participate in important festivals with their families. Their "nonreligious" identities are in opposition to their parents' identities as loosely Buddhist and/or Taoist because participation in ritual and festivals without a specific set of beliefs does not seem religious in the Western sense. However, I also note that their parents would not identify as nonreligious in the same way as their children because they belong to a generation prior, and that contemporary socio-political dynamics take time to develop and change. They would not have internalised the Western-centric notion that to be religious is to conform to a specific set of beliefs in truth claims. Hence, as Lenny pointed out in his interview, although their parents do not have a specific set of beliefs in truth claims, they still identify as Buddhist-Taoist as they engage in rituals or participate in festivals.

As King and Hedges note, Asad reminds us that not all religions privilege a common set of specific beliefs and a distinct "truth".[39] Moreover, Asad, in another one of his classic works, *Genealogies of Religion*, reminds us that even Christianity as a religion is impacted by society, culture, and temporal processes, and that our present understanding of religion has evolved out of colonial classifications where an internal psychological perspective is privileged over an external, ritualised and participatory one.[40] Thus, Asad's notion of religion and Hedges' definition of Chinese religion, lead me to question whether Lenny, Gary and Wei Ting's nonreligious identities are actually a modern take on religion in the Chinese context as strategic participation in a shared religious landscape.

Singaporean society seems like an extension of traditional Chinese societies albeit in a modern, postcolonial sense, made up of a landscape of religions which, with socio-political intervention in legislation and education, aim to co-exist in harmony despite the potential for tensions to occur. Lenny, Gary and Wei Ting respond to that in their own contexts, participating strategically in religion. They identify as nonreligious in response to Singaporean society's overall worldview of religion as Western-centric and Christian influenced but continue to participate in specific rituals, festivals and practices as they see fit and as I inferred, to maintain harmony and order for their families' benefit. Lenny and Wei Ting still engage in Chinese ritual with their families and Gary does it in his own way, saying prayers when he sends condolences and paying his silent respects when visiting his ancestors' niches. I argue that these nonreligious Chinese millennials in Singapore actually embody the same "Chineseness" as their parents and families but display it in a slightly different way. I note that they only identify as nonreligious because of the prevailing worldview of religion set against the backdrop of state power which intervenes to demarcate religion in secular socio-political space through legislation and privileges Western-style education. Their continuous participation in and adaptation of religious practice in varied ways reflects a traditional Chinese understanding of religion in Chinese majority societies which is performed at home and in families, and passed from generation to generation and forms what I call a "modern dimension of Chinese religion" in Singapore. It is the embodiment of what is essentially the hybridity of Chinese

---

[39] Hedges and King, "Is the Study of Religion Religious?" 4.

[40] Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*, Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins University Press, 1993.

religion – albeit in a modern sense – among nonreligious Singaporean Chinese millennials. The nonreligious Singaporean Chinese millennials are thus still "religious" in the broader, Sino-centric sense.

Conclusion

In conclusion, in line with Zuckerman, Galen and Pasqual's suggestion to focus research into the nonreligious on lived experience, my paper parallels Cotter's in its focus on the study of the nonreligious identification of a specific community – Singaporean Chinese millennials – through a qualitative discursive analysis. My paper traces the construction of nonreligious identities through the analysis of three interviews, noting the significant socio-political influences of state power and traditional Chinese epistemologies in a diverse but majority Chinese society have on the interviewees' social lives. I demonstrate that although fluid, nonreligious identities are constructed primarily in opposition to the state's Western-centric definition of religion with clear demarcations imposed through legislation and education – very much in-line with Lee's thesis that nonreligion is defined in contradistinction to the common Western definition of religion. My deeper analysis also reveals the contextual fluidity embodied within the monolithic nonreligious label that both Lee and Zuckerman, Galen and Pasqual note. Using Hedges' model of Chinese religion as "strategic religious participation in a shared landscape," I argue that nonreligious Singaporean Chinese millennials merely adopt a modern dimension of Chinese religion which embodies the same hybridity as their parents and families in what is essentially a modern strategic participation in the Singaporean religious landscape but which is displayed in a different way. Thus, nonreligious Singaporean Chinese millennials could still be considered "religious" in a broader Sino-centric sense. My paper hence reiterates Zukerman, Galen and Pasqual's call to focus research on the nonreligious on their life worlds, as a failure to do so would impede our understanding of and support for this group of individuals who are not only diverse but influenced by their individual and social contexts. Again, it must be stressed that these arguments are provisional and based upon a limited dataset that is not necessarily universalizable. Nevertheless, as noted, based upon my experience within the communities studied, I would strongly suspect that it speaks to a much wider context in which strategic religious participation continues to mark out the behaviour of many younger Singaporeans classified as "nones."

Ironically, despite privileging a Western-centric definition of religion, the basis of the Singaporean state's attitude to maintaining social cohesion and harmony comes from a traditional Chinese cosmology and perception of reality. This cannot be divorced from the fact that a large majority of the country is Chinese. As concerned as Singaporeans might be by those who identify as nonreligious, their fears may be unfounded because, as I have previously noted, the experiences of my research participants most probably reflect the wider context of the demographic – that younger nonreligious Chinese Singaporeans embody the same hybridity of their parents' religiosity but display it in a different way due to the influence of legislation and education which are part of the government's use of religion as an essential ideological category for governance. Thus, I argue that although it is impossible now to divorce the understanding of religion from the Western, WRP model due to historical patterning and internalisation, policymakers should note that religion as contextually embodied and performed, is broader than the single, clear definition that currently predominates, and that they should adjust their programmes to serve an inherently fluid population.

Finally, I do also note the need to engage in further research to understand the influence of Christianity on the construct of nonreligious identities in Singapore as that might present a different dimension to my findings. I raise questions about whether my thesis – that the nonreligious Chinese population actually engages in a modern dimension of Chinese religion – would work for the nonreligious Chinese population who come from Christian families. Goh's article raises an interesting analysis of Christianity in the country noting that Christianity is the primary religion among the Singaporean Chinese population who are English-speaking, university-educated and who live mainly in private housing.[41] The participants whom I interviewed grew up mainly in public housing and, although they are university-educated, they speak both Mandarin and English at home. Hence, this niche population of nonreligious Chinese individuals who grew up in Christian families and Anglophone households is worth researching. I am curious for future research to discover whether their

[41] Goh, "Christian Identities in Singapore," 11.

nonreligious identities are less fluid, and if they embody a fuller and clearer rejection of the traditional Western-centric understanding of religion.

Bibliography

Asad, Talal, 2003, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam and Modernity*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Asad, Talal, 1993, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*, Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins University Press.

Cotter, Christopher R., 2020, *The Critical Study of Non-Religion: Discourse, Identification and Locality*, Bloomsbury Advances in Religious Studies, London: Bloomsbury, 2020.

Davie, Sandra, 2015, "Record 15,000 to Enter Local Varsities This Year," *The Straits Times* (11 July), available at: https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/education/record-15000-to-enter-local-varsities-this-year.

Department of Statistics, Singapore, 2016, *General Household Survey 2015*, available at: https://www.singstat.gov.sg/publications/ghs/ghs2015.

Eller, David, 2017, "Varieties of Secular Experience," in *The Oxford Handbook of Secu*larism, eds Phil Zuckerman and John R. Shook, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 499-515.

Goh, Robbie B. H., 2009, "Christian Identities in Singapore: Religion, Race and Culture between State Controls and Transnational Flows," *Journal of Cultural Geography* 26.1, 1-23.

Hedges, Paul, 2010, *Controversies in Interreligious Dialogue and the Theology of Religions*, London: SCM Press.

Hedges, Paul, 2017, "Multiple Religious Belonging after Religion: Theorising Strategic Religious Participation in a Shared Landscape as a Chinese Model," *Open Theology* 3, 48-72.

Hedges, Paul and Anna S. King, 2014, "Is the Study of Religion Religious? How to Study Religion and Who Studies Religion?," in *Controversies in Contemporary Religion: Education, Law, Politics, Society, and Spirituality*, Vol. 1, ed. Paul Hedges, Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 31-56.

Hedges, Paul and Mohamed Imran Mohamed Taib, 2019, "The Interfaith Movement in Singapore: Precarious Toleration and Embedded Autonomy," in *The Interfaith Movement*, eds John Fahy and Jan-Jonathan Bock, London and New York, NY: Routledge, 139-56.

Lee, Lois, 2015, *Recognising the Non-Religious: Reimagining the Secular*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

McCutcheon, Russell T., 1997, *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Paper, Jordan, 2020, C*hinese Religion and Familism: The Basis of Chinese Culture, Society, and Government*, London: Bloomsbury.

Sinha, Vineeta, 2005, "Theorising 'talk' about 'Religious Pluralism' and 'Religious Harmony' in Singapore," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 20.1, 25-40.

Tan, Charlene, 2008, "Creating 'Good Citizens' and Maintaining Religious Harmony in Singapore," *British Journal of Religious Education* 30.2, 133-42.

Tan, Eugene K. B., 2008, "Keeping God in Place: The Management of Religion in Singapore," in *Religious Diversity in Singapore*, ed. Lai Ah Eng, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008.

Zaccheus, Melody, Xue Qiang Pang, and Keng Gene Ng, 2018, "Youth in Singapore Shunning Religion," *The Straits Times* (21 March), available at: https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/youth-in-singapore-shunning-religion.

Zuckerman, Phil, Luke W. Galen and Frank L. Pasquale, 2016, *The Nonreligious: Understanding Secular People and Societies*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

About the Author

Oliver Zikai Lim is a Singaporean research fellow and doctoral student in theological studies at Emmanuel College of Victoria University in the University of Toronto. He holds a Master of Divinity degree from Claremont School of Theology and a Master of Arts degree from the University of Edinburgh. Oliver's research interests include theologies of religious pluralism, contextual theology, queer theology, postcolonial theology, ethnographic theology, theories of interreligious dialogue and the study of nonreligion. His work explores the theological and sociological worlds of spiritual but not religious people, individuals with multiple and fluid religious identities, and vernacular religious practitioners. Oliver has also been involved in interreligious engagement work for the past seven years in Singapore, the United States, and Canada. He has organised and facilitated face-to-face dialogues, taught postgraduate level courses and led excursions to places of worship of various religious communities. Oliver is also a founding and current board member of the Centre for Interfaith Understanding (Singapore).

About the Interreligious Relations Occasional Papers Series

Interreligious Relations (IRR) is a peer-reviewed Series of Occasional Papers covering issues of religious diversity, including questions relating to social cohesion, religious contextualisation, religious-state-secular interactions, bridge-building between faiths, religiously-motivated conflicts and peacebuilding, as well as cognate areas. The *IRR Series* focuses mainly on contemporary contexts of religious diversity, but at the same time, it is also interested in historical and methodological questions relating to religious diversity. Though its coverage is international in scope, there is a focus on Asia, especially Southeast Asia. Contributions are invited from a range of academic fields including interdisciplinary approaches, and papers may cover any religious tradition, as well as atheism and non-religion.

About the Studies in Inter-Religious Relations in Plural Societies Programme

The Studies in Inter-Religious Relations in Plural Societies (SRP) Programme aims to study various models of how religious communities develop their teachings to meet the contemporary challenges of living in plural societies. It will also deepen the study of inter-religious relations, formulate models for the positive role of religions in peace-building and produce knowledge to strengthen social ties between communities. The Programme seeks to be at the forefront in the development of scholarship and applied knowledge on the roles of religion and inter-religious relations in plural societies today.

For more details, please visit our website at https://www.rsis.edu.sg/research/srp/, or follow us at https://www.facebook.com/srpprogramme/.

About the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies

The S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) is a think tank and professional graduate school of international affairs at the Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. An autonomous school, RSIS' mission is to be a leading research and graduate teaching institution in strategic and international affairs in the Asia Pacific. With the core functions of research, graduate education and networking, it produces cutting-edge research on Asia Pacific Security, Multilateralism and Regionalism, Conflict Studies, Non-traditional Security, Cybersecurity, Maritime Security and Terrorism Studies.

For more details, please visit www.rsis.edu.sg. Follow us at www.facebook.com/RSIS.NTU or connect with us at www.linkedin.com/school/rsis-ntu.

RSiS
S. RAJARATNAM SCHOOL OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES
Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798

Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg