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Moral Education in Singapore: a critical appraisal

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ABSTRACT Moral education in Singapore, ever since political independence, has been pragmatically aimed at forging together, by promoting shared values, the four major racial and cultural communities which at various stages had threatened to polarise. It has also been used for preserving a cultural and national identity against the perceived erosion of Asian roots by Western education. Social cohesion and moral ballast have been seen as instrumental towards a strong economy, including the attraction of foreign investors. In these ways, moral education has been regarded as a means for nation-building. In its implementation, it has been considered necessary to teach Asian values and preserve cultural identities via transmission of the mother tongues of the respective races. Religions have also been recognised as being important for moral ballast and effectiveness. This article surveys the implementation of these policies in Singaporean education, and at the same time indicates areas of possible tension and internal contradiction, and where questionable assumptions may have been made. Explanations are suggested for the perceived ineffectiveness in cultural and moral transmission. Strengths of the policies are also indicated and appraised.

This article traces the development of moral education in Singapore, from about the time of political independence in 1965 until recent times, and also suggests certain critical principles with which it might be evaluated and understood. Moral education in Singapore schools has been an integral part of the process of nation-building at large, which has been exclusively pragmatic in orientation. Values, even when religious values were concerned, have been seen mainly as of instrumental worth for forging national unity and maintaining national identity.

Forging a Common Bond

Morality has been seen in Singapore as pragmatically valuable in broadly two ways. First, it has been seen as a means of bringing together the diverse racial and cultural groups that make up the people of Singapore. In the 1960s the government inherited from the British a population divided into four major communities, along linguistic and/or racial lines. These communities were largely polarised, with each upholding strong intra-communal loyalty, but seriously lacking in unifying inter-
communal bonds one with another. The dominant racial group was the Chinese which comprised about 70% of the population. They were descendants of migrants who had arrived from China with purely commercial interests. The other relatively dominant racial community, similarly of migrant descent, were the Indians which made up some 10% of the population. There was also a small minority of migrants and their descendants of other national origins. The indigenous people of the land were the Malays, whose counterparts in Malaysia comprised the politically dominant majority there. In Singapore, Malays made up only about 20% of the population. There had, of course, been inter-communal marriages, and Eurasians, the descendants of Europeans and Asians, were significant among the small minority in this category.

The Chinese were largely educated through private Chinese schools, established by Chinese clan associations with the help of Chinese philanthropists. These catered for the interests of the various Chinese dialect groups. The medium of instruction was mostly Mandarin, the common language shared by all the dialect groups, and the curriculum and cultural slant were orientated towards China, which largely explained the support then given by many Singapore Chinese to the Communist insurgency which was enjoying its heyday. Such privately educated Chinese, who had comparatively poorer economic prospects, were contemptuous yet envious of the minority of Chinese who took advantage of the English education system set up by the colonial British administration. (This also included some Christian mission schools that largely taught the same syllabuses as government schools and subsequently became government funded.) This system of education was aimed at grooming bureaucrats and professionals for the civil service. At its pinnacle it provided the only few opportunities for higher education in the arts, sciences and medicine. Most Indians attended state run or aided English schools, even though a small number of Tamil schools existed. The British established Malay schools in deference to the Malays as the indigenous people, but the community privately ran their own Islamic schools, Islam having long been absorbed as the religion of the ethnic group.

It may seem that this polarisation of the main language streams was because of a British neglect of the need for social cohesiveness among the populace, or even a deliberate attempt by the colonial masters to divide and rule [2]. However, it has also to be remembered that any attempt by the British administration to impose common schools and a common curriculum with a common medium of instruction (which would have had to be English) would most likely have been viewed with suspicion among the politically alienated and volatile Chinese. Moreover, the laissez faire approach to education, with the administration being only concerned with what was needed through schooling to run the colony well, was in some ways justifiable by principles of liberalism. It had, at all events, left natural cultural bonds untampered with, to remain intact and strong, even if somewhat problematically diverse. Such bonds were to prove important as the stuff for nationalism to be built upon, as the subsequent political history of Singapore shows.

Be that as it may, the diverse peoples of Singapore were largely polarised at the
time of the hand-over of political power from the British to the local government, even though the cultural loyalties that had existed had been artificially and temporarily merged as a common force to agitate for political independence. In due course, concerted efforts were made to forge into being a united nation through a common curriculum and through deliberate moral education based on common values. Thus, moral education was viewed, not as being aimed at a state of being worthwhile attaining for itself, but only as a means to bring the diverse communities together.

Preserving Traditional Values for National Identity

The second way in which morality has been seen to be of pragmatic value in Singapore is in combating what has been seen as undesirable erosion of Singapore’s Asian identity by ‘decadent’ Western influences. For practical reasons again, English has been adopted as the language of politics and commerce, and for reaping the benefits of Western science and technology. English has also been a ‘neutral’ language to the four racial communities, and therefore suitable as the medium of communication cutting across racial and cultural barriers. Yet the official perception has been that with the English language and Western education have come influences of an overly individualistic lifestyle, involving the pursuit of freedom without responsibility, and of personal gain at the expense of societal interests. There has been no open attempt to consider whether irresponsible individualism has been a trait of Western sub-cultures like the hippies of the 1960s, and whether or not mainstream Western culture has had its share of collectivist philosophies and an emphasis on freedom with responsibility. This simplicity of perception has probably been deliberate, the intention being that clear signals must be sent and strong leadership felt, so that the populace would not be confused by debates that tolerate both sides of the argument.

To combat the ‘aping’ of such supposedly Western ‘decadent’ values, it has been thought that Asian values and traditions should be retained where they still existed, and deliberately inculcated where they had been forgotten. This has been to engender ‘cultural ballast’ and the forging of a Singaporean identity to oppose the trends among the young of developing Western-oriented lifestyles. Therefore, coupled with English, students of the various races have had to learn their mother-tongue through which it is hoped that the diverse Asian cultures and values will be transmitted.

Now this would seem to clash with the policy explained above of teaching common values to irradicate problematic social diversification, unless it can be assumed that all Asian cultures share common basic values. But this assumption is questionable. For even assuming that as a matter of principle the same values such as truthfulness, justice and beneficence are advocated in the various cultural and religious traditions, the ways they have been interpreted as practical moral policies and practices, including the priority they have been given relative to one another,
would differ, depending on the various metaphysical and empirical beliefs about the world and the social circumstances in the historical development of the traditions. Whether these different moral practices cohere with the values deemed to be of pragmatic value to Singapore’s survival and progress would also be an issue that could not be taken for granted.

This problem could be accentuated by the fact that in order to be really effective in creating the desired cultural bond—which would involve spontaneous commitment and authenticity—there cannot be too much interference and deliberate selectivity with regard to the values taught in cultural and values education. Also, the promotion of cultural values cannot be obviously deliberate and instrumental in intention. For morality would lose its force and the reverence of people for it once it was perceived as merely an artificially selected means for achieving some end extrinsic to morality itself. However, left on its own without some adapting, selecting and engineering of cultural ingredients, the imbibing of traditional values might not issue in a common bond reaching across the races and cultures. And should such a bond develop by chance, it might not necessarily be built upon the values deemed to be of pragmatic worth to Singapore.

This perception must be balanced by the observation that the teaching of bald moral principles, away from the inspiration and communal loyalty and identification which the historical context of a great culture of a people can afford, may not be effective in promoting moral commitment and practice. Also, it might well be that morality would have greater impact when seen from within an inspiring metaphysical system of belief such as religion. This would not necessarily be because people need extrinsic incentives, such as heavenly rewards, in order to be moral. For, perceived within the wider context of an ultimate metaphysical reality, the moral goods already valued intrinsically from a this-worldly perspective would be felt to have a broader and more profound and compelling intrinsic significance.

For these reasons, there is much to say in support of Singapore’s having insisted upon the transmission of values in the respective mother-tongues of the diverse cultural communities. The aim has been to transmit traditional Asian cultures and values along with the languages. One should add that with the learning of the respective mother-tongue a whole value system as enshrined in religion is learnt. For in the traditions of the various Asian peoples, religions have been inseparable from the respective ways of life and belief. The habit these days of speaking of values away from their religious roots is due to the influence of western secularism, a relatively recent movement on the Western intellectual scene. Singapore’s artificial bifurcation of religious and cultural values has resulted, with the exception of a brief recent change, in the relegating of the transmission of religions to private agencies like mosques, temples and churches. Even government-funded religious schools have had to restrict religious activities and worship to about one lesson period per week and a brief prayer at the start or close of the school day after a pledge to the nation before the national flag has been made. In state schools, no religious activities have been permitted, and student religious clubs have had to function after school hours in premises, mostly pupils’ homes, outside the campuses.
Implementation of Moral Education: c. 1965 to Late 1979

Thus the state steadily advocated bilingualism in schools in the 1960s and 1970s with the hope that, through the learning of the mother-tongue of Mandarin, Tamil or Malay as the second language to English, desirable secular values would be transmitted. At the same time, a common curriculum, emphasising nationally significant events in history and civics lessons, was mounted. Since 1967 at least one lesson per week of secular ethics or civics was conducted in both primary and secondary schools. This was supported with weekly general assembly talks on citizenship and ethics by school principals, constant admonition by government ministers through the mass media, and national dissemination campaigns to inculcate virtues like respect for labour, courtesy and cleanliness. Eventually, in 1974, a broad-based moral education course entitled ‘Education for Living’ was introduced in primary schools, which, while still being aimed at secular moral education tried to go beyond the mere teaching of moral values. This was an improvement on the previous civics and ethics syllabi, for it acknowledged the importance of morally significant knowledge other than moral virtues in the making of moral decisions and the translating of moral values into practice in the contexts of living. It accordingly brought local social studies, such as history, geography and information on local social services like hospitals and post offices, within the ambit of moral education. The course was taught in the mother-tongue of the respective communities, for the reasons explained above.

How successful has this state-sponsored secular moral education programme been both in and out of school? The official recognition that it had not been as successful as intended was announced soon after Dr Goh Keng Swee, then First Deputy Prime Minister, was posted in 1978 as Education Minister. He initiated a revamping of the whole education system which implied, among other things, that not only traditional values but also the respective mother-tongues as means of communication, especially Mandarin, had not been successfully transmitted via the past bilingual policy. The ‘Education for Living’ programme was adversely criticised in the Report on the Ministry of Education 1978, produced by a study team supervised by Dr Goh, as being diffused and covering too wide an area not all of which was deemed to be relevant to a focused transmitting of values[3]. It would seem that the need for a broad-based moral education which does not ignore the learning of morally significant social facts and even information from the physical sciences, and the training in abilities and skills for moral practice, had not been recognised by the study team. The criticism of past moral education syllabi aside, Dr Goh’s view that a drastic review of moral education was needed was the result of on-going official perceptions at that time that a dangerous trend existed in the increasing number of incidents of highly trained professionals like lawyers, medical doctors and bankers being charged in court for criminal breach of trust. Among the perceived long-term dangers of this trend was that foreign investors would be less inclined to a place where people could not be depended upon to be honest. Also, the seeming increase in self-centredness and the snobbery of the financially successful with their tendency to despise the less fortunate were seen as a danger to social harmony[4]. The fear
was that the majority which comprised the less well-off would not acquiesce in this inequality and this could spell grave social problems, especially when the Malays were as a whole the poorest community. For pragmatic purposes such as the prevention of these difficulties, moral education was considered to deserve priority in the educational revamp.

If any sustained study was made to determine the causes of the apparent failure of the many years of secular moral teaching in the mother-tongues, it has not been made public. Could it be the pragmatic, hard-headed conduct of government that had undermined the inculcation of such virtues as care, respect and consideration for others? Could it be the official utilitarian conception of morality that had warred against the intrinsic reverence for the moral life? Could it be due to the ineffectiveness of an artificially imposed morality taken away from its natural home in the respective cultural and religious beliefs and practices? Could it be that without the anchorage of a metaphysical and religious world-view, the intrinsic categorical force of morality had not been duly appreciated, and people tended to regard morality as an obstacle to attaining their pragmatic self-interests in a meritocratic, competitive Singapore?

Revamp of Moral Education and the Introduction of Religious Instruction: 1979 to Late 1980s

Be that as it may, Goh Keng Swee, whilst planning the revamp of moral education recommended by the above-mentioned report, hit upon the observation that professionals like doctors and lawyers who were previously students of Christian schools had rarely if at all been hauled to court for criminal breach of trust. The inference was drawn that, whatever might have been the nature of the influence of religion on moral character, the data indicated that religious teaching would inculcate moral virtues better than a secular moral training. It was accordingly decided that in future the policy of excluding religious teaching from the school curriculum, that had been enforced ever since Singapore became an independent nation, would be reversed, and moral education would include, at an appropriate level, the teaching of religion. The teaching of a religion was thus made compulsory for 15–17-year-old pupils in the third and fourth years, and for pupils following a slower academic stream, also the fifth year of secondary school, prior to their sitting for the Cambridge O Level School Leaving Examinations. This religious instruction was to crown a secular moral education programme to be developed for pupils from the first year of primary schooling through six or eight years of primary school (depending on whether they pursued a faster or slower academic stream) up to the second year of secondary school. There was to be, however, a relatively small number of pupils, who would be streamed away to vocational training after primary school, and for these formal moral education would end when they left school for a vocational institute.

Even though the decision to teach morality in the context of whole ways of life and beliefs, both socio-physical and metaphysical, was made for only pragmatic reasons, the intrinsic advantages of so doing would still stand the chance of being realised through the new policy. But to realise them the policy would have to be
implemented in a way that would not involve the artificial forging into being of common moral beliefs. As explained above, if a genuine bond and unity was to be effected, it should be left to evolve naturally. But then the teaching of the various cultural beliefs, untempered by cultural ‘engineering’, might reinforce diversity and cultural polarisation rather than unify. The effect of this internal tension of the policy can be seen in its implementation.

As recommended by the Report on the Ministry of Education 1978[5], a concerted effort was made to have a more focused and direct secular moral education for pupils, in the case of some until they leave primary school to join a vocational institute, and for the majority until they reach the third year of secondary academic schooling when they would begin to study a religion as part of their continuing moral education. Two alternative moral education programmes were developed. One, which retained what was considered the better content of the former Education for Living syllabus, was offered to primary pupils under the telling pragmatic title ‘Good Citizen’. Its instructional mode was more formal, following textbooks, supportive pupils work-books and teachers’ guides. It was initially offered more as a stop-gap measure while a new common syllabus was being developed. But, because it was basically instructional in teaching style and provided more definite guidance through textbooks, some 84% of primary schools opted for it, even after the entirely new programme, entitled ‘Being and Becoming’, became available in stages up to the second year of secondary school. The latter was more activity orientated, being based on the belief that values could only be caught and internalised through on-going living experiences. It accordingly required pupil participation in activities begun in but carried through beyond the classroom into the school environment of interpersonal relations. Like ‘Good Citizen’, it stressed but did more than its competitive programme in providing opportunities for meaningful relations within wider and yet wider circles of persons. No textbooks nor pupils’ work-books were provided but only a teachers’ manual containing guidelines on what activities to initiate and carry through, and how to eventually discuss and evaluate pupil learning.

The media of instruction were the mother-tongues, i.e. Mandarin, Tamil and Malay, since the assumption continued to be made that Asian values were best transmitted via Asian languages in order to combat the ‘morally decadent’ influences of English, the necessary language of commerce and technology. This ignored the fact that Mandarin and Tamil were not mother-tongue to most Chinese and many Indians. The spoken languages at home for most Chinese, particularly those not literate in Chinese, were Chinese dialects and not Mandarin. A parallel situation existed among the Indians, many of whom spoke Indian dialects other than Tamil. At all events, the second language was to English educated Singaporeans their weaker language, especially in the written and literary form, and it might therefore not be the best for the accurate and comprehensive transmission of values. At this stage in Singapore’s educational development, most young Singaporeans had been channelled to English schools with most parents’ compliance, as this had been the language stream that best promised vocational success. They were therefore most proficient in English, their first literate language. For these reasons the policy of
teaching morality in the second language could have been an important cause of the ineffectiveness of moral education in schools.

In addition it may be observed that no matter how much lacking in Asian cultural flavour and emotive force English might be, the fact that Chinese, Indian and Malay values can be explained in English terms is already indicative that the values in some basic form do exist in cultures whose main medium is English. The lack in Oriental flavour could be to some extent remedied with explanations that put the concepts within the appropriate cultural perspectives, which good translators proficient in the languages can provide. Might it not be better for pupils to use a good translation of Asian values into English than to read them in the original on their own with their limited knowledge of their 'mother-tongue'?

The decision, however, was that not only were 'Good Citizen' and 'Being and Becoming' to be taught in the mother-tongue, religious knowledge at the third, fourth and fifth year of secondary school would also be so taught, even though studying it in English was to be left an option. At the third year of secondary school pupils were compulsorily to opt for one of the following studies: Bible knowledge, Buddhist studies, Confucian ethics, Hindu studies, Islamic studies and Sikhism. They could also offer it as an examination subject at the Cambridge O Level School Leaving Examination at the end of the fourth year, or for those in a slower stream, the fifth year of secondary school. Their performance in the subject at this examination would then be treated on a par with their grades in other academic subjects when considering their eligibility for pre-university studies beyond secondary four or five. This examination orientation would tend to foster morally unworthy motives, and thus work against the authentic imbibing of values. However, it was the official response to earlier observations that because moral education had not been accorded 'examination status', schools had tended not to take it seriously and had often used moral education periods to complete the syllabuses of examination subjects.

In order to avoid proselytising, which could not be officially condoned in a multi-religious society, the distinction was made between teaching about religion, and teaching religion. The former was conceived as neutral, informing about the beliefs, practices and morality, of the respective religions and this was the approach officially advocated. But it was not considered whether any moral education programme, whether or not it made use of religious material, could be neutral and non-committal and whether the conscious pursuance of neutrality would run counter to the aim in moral education of transmitting moral commitment. It could also be asked, if the teaching about religion were to succeed where a secular moral education presumably did not, whether commitment to holistic and metaphysical beliefs were not the necessary complement absent in a secular moral teaching. In the case of Confucian ethics, the issue of the role of religious metaphysics in backing up moral practice was supposed by officialdom to be capable of being bypassed. The accepted opinion, advised by several Confucian scholars, holding academic positions in America and engaged as consultants on the syllabus, was that Confucianism was a secular humanistic philosophy. It was never acknowledged that such a secularistic 'demythologised' Confucianism was only a contested interpretation of the cosmic
and metaphysical referents of classical and neo-classical Confucian writings, such as the ultimate aim of fostering a unity of humans, heaven and earth. Along with recent secularistic trends in reinterpreting Christianity in the West, the Confucian scholars consulted by the government had advised on it from a Western modernist slant, probably making the tacit and unexamined assumption that only a secularised account of Confucianism could be reputable in an empiricist age.

Notwithstanding the official policy to only teach about religion, considerable flexibility was accorded to practitioners of the several religions whose participation was solicited by the Ministry of Education to help implement the teaching of religions. This was a concession, again made on pragmatic considerations, in view of the sensitivities of the various religious believers, some of whom could even become militant should they perceive that their religion was to be misrepresented. Accordingly a curriculum development team for each of the several religious studies options was constituted comprising scholar-advisors, professional educationists and members of the respective religious community, all of whom were practising believers of the faith. The teams worked under the auspices of the newly established Curriculum Development Institute of Singapore, set up by Dr Goh Keng Swee as part of the education revamp of the late 1970s, to centralise and monopolise the production of curriculum materials for use in Singapore schools. The development of the syllabuses and curricular materials was done with much deference to the opinions of the respective religious communities, with the Ministry of Education by and large approving first the syllabus outlines, and eventually the finished materials. For reasons given above, this freedom would be conducive to the development of authenticity and genuineness of commitment to the religious and related moral beliefs. The intrinsic worth of religions and their moralities would have a better chance of being appreciated, as compared with the case of an artificially constructed and imposed morality free from cultural intimacies and beliefs, and construed instrumentally.

But then the other horn of the dilemma asserted itself. No common set of nationally useful substantive and spontaneously adhered-to moral beliefs, practised in a common order of priority and able to stand on secular considerations alone, could be guaranteed to develop via this relatively laissez faire approach to curriculum planning and implementing. In effect, despite the policy of teaching about religion rather than winning religious commitment, the curriculum materials, written by teams whose members were mostly persons of partisan religious commitment, were implicitly and in many places even explicitly prescriptive. Each set of the religious studies textbooks sought to glorify the history of its own religious tradition. In the area of religious morality, all the texts actively advocated belief and commitment, and of course, the respective religious moralities could not in theory and practice be separated from the religious doctrines and metaphysics that gave them their sense and point. Similar difficulties were experienced in the selecting of teachers to teach the subjects, and in the actual performance in the classroom of selected teachers. Some Christians who happened to be selected by school principals to teach Confucian ethics (under the presumption that this was only a secular morality and thus Christians would not have conscientious objections to teaching it) refused on
religious grounds. The Muslim religious council in charge of Islamic affairs in Singapore objected confidentially that it was against the tenets of Islam for teachers of the religion to be merely picked and trained in a matter of months, as was being done in training courses mounted by the Curriculum Development Institute. True Islamic teachers, according to Muslim rites, would take years to be initiated and trained. Many Christian teachers of Bible knowledge taught with evangelical zeal.

It was therefore only to be expected that the newly implemented religious studies curricula affected religious sensivities beyond the school walls. This was especially so when their debut coincided with religious revivals going on in society at large—the Singaporean counterparts to the resurgence of religious fundamentalism elsewhere in the world. Particularly worrisome were the Christian fundamentalist revival, and the equally fervent Muslim one. There was passionately expressed unhappiness among Muslims about the increasing fervour of Christian mass evangelism. Concern was voiced in particular over the number of Muslims (who were mostly Malays) converting to Christianity (which was largely the work of Chinese Christians since the majority of Christians in Singapore were Chinese). This unhappiness had therefore arisen out of both religious and racial loyalties, and was viewed with apprehension by the government in the light of events such as the racial riots that erupted between Malays and Chinese during the two years (1963–1965) that Singapore was a state within the federation of Malaysia, and when the direct impact of Malaysian racial politics was suffered. The teaching of Confucian ethics accentuated the difficulty as it was seen by many Malays (and Indians too) as a Chinese chauvinistic move. This must be seen against the background of suspicion among Malays and Indians over the annual government-sponsored ‘Speak Mandarin Campaign’ which had already been conducted for some 10 years. The campaign was aimed at encouraging the Chinese to learn only Mandarin, rather than Mandarin and other Chinese dialects, mainly to reduce their learning load and therefore help them to master Mandarin better. But since 75% of the populace were Chinese the campaign had taken on the appearance of a national campaign promoting Chinese.

Reversal to Secular Moral Education: Late 1980s to the Present

The stage was therefore set for the subsequent reversal to the original position of only teaching a secular morality in schools, with the religious studies options being relegated to the side-lines. This decision to revert was made under a new Minister of Education who in 1989 replaced Goh Keng Swee on his retirement from politics. The swing back to the situation, where traditional cultural bonds, beliefs and values, which were largely religious in nature, could not be allowed unimpeded freedom to develop, was due to the other horn of the dilemma asserting itself. Genuine commitment needed a naturally evolving tradition within which to grow. But allowing for this would mean according freedom for the diverse cultural values and beliefs to have their impact, which in Singapore would threaten to result in conflict and the polarisation of the different racial and cultural communities.

The change in policy amounted to the fact that religious knowledge was no
longer to be compulsory for third and fourth year secondary pupils, and where applicable, fifth year pupils, even though it could still be pursued by them as an option outside standard curriculum time. Where it was pursued, it could still be offered as a Cambridge O Level School Leaving Examination subject. But it was no longer to be accorded equal status with other academic subjects in consideration for the pupils’ admission to post O level, pre-university studies. The strategy was probably a gentle way of letting religious studies die a natural death, for with the already crowded curriculum, it was not to be expected that many pupils would choose to study an additional and ‘irrelevant’ subject after school hours.

Coterminous with the demise of religious studies, yet another overhaul of the entire primary and secondary moral education curriculum was initiated. A common secular moral education curriculum was to be constructed for pupils in primary and secondary schools. In content and method, the new syllabus would aim at incorporating the strengths of both the ‘Being and Becoming’ and ‘Good Citizen’ programmes. Attempts were made to solicit the views of parents, teachers, principals and the general public in a fresh consideration of the values that should be included. Among virtues to be built into the syllabus were ‘the best from the East and West’, including key Confucian values thought to be useful for high group performance and social cohesion in Singapore. Lee Kuan Yew had long opined that it was Confucian virtues that had been instrumental to the Japanese and other East Asian countries’ economic and social success, and this view had been confirmed by the Confucian scholars whose advice he had sought.

At the national level, a major campaign was started in order to work out a common ‘state ideology’ that hopefully could be the means of unifying the diverse cultural groups that had threatened to polarise. This of course meant that the preparation of the common moral education curriculum materials would have to incorporate ingredients of the state ideology as and when they were decided. Four basic values were finally decided upon and endorsed by parliament, after a long consultative process. The decision process seemed to presuppose consensus as the sole basis of the values. No question was raised as to whether the consensus had been based on truthful moral insights and considerations. This seeming subjectivist cum pragmatist view of the basis of morality, depending on mere consensus on what would be likely to be useful for a particular society, might prove counter-productive even when judged on pragmatic grounds. For, as mentioned above, the morality of convenience would lack the imperative force to inspire reverence and awe, and might therefore prove ineffective in forging social bonds. However, not all processes of the mind and heart can and need to be explicit, and, judging by the obvious independent validity of the four basic values agreed upon to constitute the state ideology, one could suspect that the consensus had been built upon implicit and intuitive awareness of some basic, rationally inescapable fundamental moral obligations. For, is it conceivable that any one would not find fundamentally important the values of: cooperation, mutual respect and tolerance; the individual’s respect for others in the community; the respect of others in the community for the individual; and respect for the family as the basic unit of society? Under the new arrangements there was therefore the possibility of respect for the intrinsic worth of the moral law
developing as teachers and pupils discussed these ‘state values’, and other basic values not stated in official pronouncements. The government could aid this development by playing down its longstanding policy that while foreigners, especially westerners, were welcome to contribute to Singapore’s economic and technological growth, they should not voice their opinions on matters of human rights and values in Singapore. For this, too, could send the message that values are merely a subjective matter for locals to decide and to be used only when convenient in a specific social context.

Even though a secular moral education would require the deliberate and artificial separation of many virtues away from their natural cultural context of religious and metaphysical beliefs and historical circumstances, the possibility existed for moral education in schools to be complemented by religious education in the home and the community at large. For the government would continue its policy of encouraging what it judged to be the proper transmission of religions in society at large by private agencies, despite its having lately taken to policing the activities of zealous evangelical Christian groups and Muslim fundamentalists through legislating a Religious Harmony Bill. This bill empowered the state to order, on pains of fines and imprisonment, the discontinuation of preaching and other activities deemed to endanger religious harmony. Even under then existing laws several Christian and sub-Christian ‘sects’ had been banned, and certain Muslim preachers had been deported or detained under the Internal Security Act, which empowered the government to imprison persons without trial. But on the whole, the government had been encouraging the healthy growth of private religious affiliations through land allocation for churches and temples, and in the case of Islam even helping to fund the building of mosques.

The motives for this have undoubtedly been pragmatic; nevertheless the freedom to transmit the respective faiths would arguably be conducive to authentic belief and moral commitment. This would hopefully complement the utilitarian secular moral education curriculum of the schools. It might also counterbalance the detrimental effect, in the area of values acquisition, of strong pragmatic governmental measures, such as capital punishment for drug-trafficking and the permitting of abortion of even six-month-old foetuses, which the state had all this while been implementing on grounds of mere utility and social convenience. And in one respect, allowing religious awareness to develop informally away from the context of school moral education might prove advantageous. For the practice of teaching religion in the name of moral education could send the misleading message that religion is reducible to secular morality[6].

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NOTES

[1] The British administered Singapore as a colony since its founding in 1819 until events in the 1950s led first to obtaining self-government, then briefly becoming a state within the federation of independent Malaysia, and subsequently a breakaway from Malaysia to become an independent republic on 31 August 1965.

[2] These common criticisms are reflected in S. Gopinathan's (1974) *Towards a National System of Education in Singapore*, pp. 3, 4 (Singapore, Oxford University Press). (Readers might see this book for a documentation of events, policies and social trends that would serve as fuller background information than can be given here for an understanding of the historical scenario for Singapore's moral education.)


[4] Dr Goh Keng Swee shared this concern with the present writer at an interview in March 1983.

