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SPEECH BY BRIG-GEN (RES) LEE HSIEN LOONG, MINISTER FOR
TRADE AND INDUSTRY AND SECOND MINISTER FOR DEFENCE
(SERVICES), AT THE INAUGURATION OF THE PARLIAMENT OF
RELIGIONS ORGANISED BY THE RAMAKRISHNA MISSION IN SINGAPORE
AT THE WORLD TRADE CENTRE ON SUNDAY, 30 APRIL 89 AT 7 PM

RELIGIOUS HARMONY

The Vision of Sri Ramakrishna

The theme of this Parliament of Religions - Religious Harmony - is one of abiding importance to Singapore. As a multi-religious society, the words of Sri Ramakrishna have special significance to us:

"Many are the names of God and infinite the forms that help us to know Him. By whatsoever name and form you desire to know Him, in that very form and under that name you will see Him. Different creeds are but different paths to reach the one God ...

"Every man should follow his own religion. A Christian should follow Christianity, a Mohammedan should follow Mohammedanism. For the Hindu the path of the Rishis is the best. A truly religious man should think that other religions are also so many paths leading to Truth. We should always maintain an attitude of respect towards other religions."

This message of universalism and spiritual brotherhood was elaborated by his disciple, Swami Vivekananda. In yesterday's proceedings of this Parliament of Religions, the Special Edition of Swami Vivekananda's complete works was released. To quote the Swami:

"I accept all religions that were in the past, and worship them all; I worship God with every one of them ... Is God's book finished or is it still a continuous revelation going on? It is a marvellous book - these Spiritual Revelations of the world. The Bible, the Vedas, the Koran, and all other sacred books are but so many pages, and an infinite number of pages remain yet to be unfolded ... We stand in the present, but open ourselves to the infinite future. ... Salutation to all the prophets of the past, to all the great ones of the present, and to all that are to come in the future!"

Singapore's Experience

Sri Ramakrishna's and Swami Vivekananda's ideal both describes and explains the happy absence of inter-religious strife in recent times in Singapore. Ever since its founding in 1819, Singapore has had a religiously mixed population. People of different faiths have lived and worshipped here, side by side. Mostly they have done so peacefully, although there have been several racial and religious riots since the War, most recently in 1969, nearly a generation ago.

We must preserve and strengthen this tolerance and appreciation of one another's religious beliefs. It is the only way that each citizen can pursue his own religion, without fearing discrimination or persecution, in freedom and in peace.

The Example of St Joseph's Institution

From the beginning, far-sighted men have realised that the only way Singaporeans can live harmoniously together is for every faith to practise restraint and to be tolerant of other faiths. Dr Tony Tan has pointed out to me that more than 140 years ago, the founder of St Joseph's

Institution, a Catholic Priest named Father J M Beurel, had already addressed this issue. In 1848, Father Beurel published a prospectus for the new school in the Singapore Free Press. In it, he emphasised that:

"St Joseph's will be open to everyone, whatever his creed may be; and should, for instance, a boy of a persuasion different from that of Roman Catholics attend it, no interference whatever will take place with his religion, unless his parents or guardians express their wishes to have him instructed in the Catholic religion."

Following this principle laid down by Father Beurel, today Secondary 3 students in SJI can choose for their compulsory Religious Knowledge subject any of the five options available - Bible Knowledge, Buddhist Studies, Confucian Ethics, Islamic Religious Knowledge, or Hindu Studies. By next year, all Religious Knowledge subjects at Secondary 3 and 4 levels will be taught in SJI during normal curriculum time, by SJI's own staff.

Not coincidentally, recently, when SJI raised funds for their new building, two of the contributors were Buddhist organisations: the Kwan Im Thong Hood Cho temple, which donated \$30,000, and the Tai Pei Foundation, which gave \$10,000.

Harmony is Fragile

Our religious harmony is a delicate and fragile balance. The many ancient and great religions are all represented here this evening by their followers in Singapore - Muslims, Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Sikhs, and Zoroastrians. Racial differences in our society accentuate these religious distinctions. All Malays are Muslim, all Hindus are Indians. It does not take much for relations between religions to degenerate from mutual trust and respect to misunderstanding, suspicion and conflict.

The situation will always remain in delicate balance. There is no possibility of Singapore ever becoming a country with a single religion, short of an unthinkable cataclysm. The Malay community will never cease to be Muslim, nor will Christianity or Buddhism ever disappear from Singapore. No sensible person would wish it to be otherwise. Neither conversion of the faithful nor any convergence of the faiths is likely to alter this.

As long as everyone understands this, all can live and let live, and everything will be well. But should any group ever feel threatened, either by the activities of other religions, or because they receive less than even-handed treatment from the Government, then that group too must respond by mobilising themselves to protect their interests, if necessary militantly. Tensions will build up, and there will be trouble for all.

Two vital conditions are therefore necessary to preserve our religious harmony. Firstly, followers of the different religions must practise moderation and tolerance in their beliefs. Secondly, we must maintain a rigorous separation between politics and religion. The Government must remain strictly secular, deriving its political authority from the Constitution. These were the points made by the President in his speech at the opening of Parliament in January. Today, I shall focus on the first requirement.

The Government's Concern

The Ministry of Community Development recently published a Report on Religion and Religious Revivalism in Singapore. The Government commissioned this report to gather basic data on religious trends in our society, and to understand the changes that are taking place. In June 1990, we will be conducting the next National Census. The

Government will take the opportunity of the Census to do a comprehensive survey of the religious beliefs and practices of Singaporeans, and bring the figures up to date.

Some Singaporeans may wonder why the Government is making an issue of religious harmony now, when we have enjoyed it without debate for so many years. Perhaps because religious beliefs are so deeply held and so personal, some may feel awkward discussing this sensitive subject in public, and may be uncertain about the Government's actual motives and intentions. These are legitimate apprehensions which we need to address.

Religious Revival

The Government has reasons for doing this. As the Prime Minister pointed out in a speech last December, the trend in Singapore over the last few years has been towards fervently held exclusive beliefs, rather than tolerant coexistence. This is so with Islam, and it is also happening with Christianity, especially among the strongly evangelistic Protestant groups. Other religious groups too, like the Buddhists, have become more active.

These are world-wide trends affecting many countries, and not Singapore alone. We cannot avoid being carried along by them. However, in our context, they increase the possibility of friction, and require sensitive handling.

For example, in our tertiary institutions, religious societies have in recent years become more active. Competition amongst these societies for members has also grown more intense. I understand that during orientation weeks, these societies sometimes jostle one another for the most prominent space to set up recruitment stalls, and compete to put up the largest banner to attract freshmen.

In the past we might have ignored these activities as harmless rivalry, but now they portend a trend towards less relaxed and tolerant competition.

Christianity and Islam

More serious problems can arise from insensitive evangelisation, especially among people who already belong to other faiths. It is no secret that the Government discourages Christian groups from aggressively proselytising among the Muslim community in Singapore. A few extremist groups do deliberately seek to do just this. The Internal Security Department has reported individual cases of preachers delivering fiery sermons, exhorting their congregations to convert Malays to Christianity, even if this means bloodshed and martyrdom.

It would be hard to imagine a surer and swifter recipe for disaster. As one Roman Catholic wrote to me: "It would be suicidal in Singapore's context to have Muslims converted to Christianity. There'll be riot in the streets!"

The reality is that Islam occupies a central place in the society and culture of Malays in Singapore. Christian evangelisation is highly unlikely ever to result in more than a tiny number of converts. But our Malay community is extremely sensitive to any attempt to persuade any of its members to give up their faith. The most innocent approach can easily be misunderstood and found to be offensive, never mind sermons full of fire and brimstone. A single unfortunate incident may cause large segments of the Malay Muslim community to become agitated and alienated. Four decades may have passed since the Maria Hertogh riots in 1950, but the volcano which erupted then is not extinct, only dormant.

I am not suggesting that religious groups should not have the right to propagate their faiths. The Constitution guarantees every person freedom of religion, including the freedom to profess, practise, and propagate it. I have myself been approached by Christian friends and colleagues, who had found great personal peace in their faith, and wanted to share their discovery with me. I have not as a result become a Christian, but I know they acted out of the best of intentions, and I am grateful that they took the trouble to overcome what must have been considerable hesitation in order to talk to me. They remain my respected and valued friends. But in Singapore in general, evangelisation must be very sensitively done, and the limits set by prudence stop far short of the limits set by law.

Prof Wu Teh Yao's Letter

I believe this perception of danger is shared by many moderate Christians. Recently the Straits Times published an interview with Prof Wu Teh Yao, Director of the Institute of East Asian Philosophies. Prof Wu is a Presbyterian Church elder. He said that he personally saw no contradiction between his Christian faith and visiting his mother's grave every year during Qing Ming. Arising out of this interview, Prof Wu wrote a letter to Mr Ong Teng Cheong, about the trend towards greater religious fervour. With Prof Wu's permission, I quote from this letter:

"As a member of the Mandarin Service of the Orchard Road Presbyterian Church, I have noticed that there is a substantial growth in membership ... With this growth, there is also an increase in the number of "very devout" Christians especially among the young who tend also to be very aggressive in bringing in new converts. This concept is also preached as the duty of every Christian. The

Christian God is a zealous God and so also are the beliefs of other religious believers, that their gods are also zealous and true gods. Islamic believers hold on to this view too. Such is the nature of all religions and all religions tend to produce "devout believers" at one time or another. Some tend to be fanatical and intolerant.

"As years go by, say, in the next few decades, there will be a substantial increase in the number of Christians in Singapore. Correspondingly, there will be a substantial increase in the number of Islamic believers. Both religions, deriving from the Judaic tradition, are by nature very forward and aggressive. The more converts the more accumulation of credits to enter Heaven. Such is the conviction of many a devout believer. Herein lies the potential danger of an ugly conflict not only of a religious nature, but also a racial one as most Christians will be Chinese and most Muslims will be Malays.

"In such a perspective, the spectre of a Lebanon cannot be entirely ruled out for Singapore. Lebanon was one time Phoenicia, a great but small state excelling in trade and commerce. It is surrounded by Islamic states with substantial portions of Christians and Muslims in its population, now at war with each other with no end in sight. Muslims get their support from the surrounding states and Christians get theirs from abroad. With the world revival of Islam and the growth of Christian charismatic groups, also world wide, the danger of a conflict could be real, in perhaps less than a generation. I say this because of my experience in the Christian church and contacts with many young

church-goers who believe in every word of the Holy Bible. On Tuesday night ... I had a call from ... a Singaporean Chinese Christian and for fifteen minutes, he was telling me how wrong I was to go to the grave of my mother to pay my respects as a filial son during Qing Ming."

I am not saying that Prof Wu is right in observing Qing Ming, and that his caller is wrong. Whether or not Qing Ming is compatible with Christianity is a matter each Christian has to decide for himself. But I do think that Prof Wu is entitled to his beliefs, and that it is better for each one to choose what he wants to believe, than for anyone to impose his view on others. Inevitably, different people will reach different conclusions, even when they share the same religion, never mind people of different faiths. The more relaxed we are about these matters, the easier it will be for all of us to get along.

Concern is Fervour, Not Christianity

To illustrate the danger of religious strife, I have chosen the example of Christian evangelism. To avoid any misunderstanding, let me stress that the Government is not in any way against Christians. It does not consider Christianity incompatible with the national identity we are trying to create for ourselves, and the traditional values we want to preserve. Many Chinese Christians see no contradiction between their Christian faith and traditional Chinese customs. For example, I know of churches which are decorated with red cloth at Chinese New Year, and where church members exchange mandarin oranges with each other. Having been educated in Catholic High School myself, I am deeply conscious of the great contributions which Christian schools have made in the field of education, and I hope they will continue this good work.

What the Government is concerned with is the increase in evangelical fervour, assertiveness and competition for converts among the Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, and other religious groups in Singapore. The danger arises from the zealotry of the sub-branches of the main-line religions, and can originate from any one of them. Whether it is a Seventh Moon feast and auction held next to an HDB block housing some Malay residents, or a Friday service conducted at a mosque in a mixed Malay and Chinese neighbourhood, we have to be careful not to cause offence. Whatever the source of the friction, its consequences affect all groups.

What Should Be Done?

Given the situation I have outlined, the question is what the Government should do about it, if anything. This is an exceptionally delicate matter, because a wrong move in a tense situation can easily make things much worse. That is why it is important to take positive action now, before there is religious discord, while heads are still cool and open to reason. To wait till a crisis or conflict looms large may be too late.

Cooperation With Religious Leaders

Three basic approaches can be identified. Firstly, as far as possible, the Government will enlist the cooperation of the leaders of the major religious groups, rather than act directly itself. These religious leaders will have the moral and religious authority to restrain their flock if necessary. The need to maintain harmony is so overwhelming, and the possible dangers are so dire, that good sense must surely prevail among the leaders of all the faiths. This will minimise the danger of any unintended conflict between the state and any religion.

Let me illustrate how this approach worked in a slightly different situation. In 1987, the Government exposed the Marxist conspiracy, and moved against Vincent Cheng and the other plotters. Vincent Cheng himself and a few of his group were sheltering under the cover of para-church organisations affiliated to the Catholic church, like the Justice and Peace Commission. When the Government arrested them, to avoid any misunderstanding with the Catholic Church, it took considerable pains to explain its actions to church leaders.

The Prime Minister himself met the Archbishop and lay Catholic leaders. The Government also kept the Vatican informed, through the charge d'affaires of the Holy See in Bangkok, Rev Giovanni d'Aniello. The Government made clear that its action was not directed against the church. The Vatican, on its part, reassured the Government that it did not agree with the theology of liberation. In fact, Rev d'Aniello told the Prime Minister that he did not believe that Liberation Theology was applicable in Singapore, because Singapore had a different social and cultural system from that in Latin America. Had both sides not met to clarify matters, a grievous and unnecessary collision might have taken place.

An Inter-Religious Advisory Council

Secondly, the idea of an Inter-Religious Advisory Council is worth considering. This was one of the recommendations of the MCD report on religion. Such a Council will bring together men of goodwill and authority on all sides. The Report suggested that the Council be given two roles: to promote harmony between the different religions in Singapore and monitor relations between them; and secondly, to minimise friction and misunderstanding between these religious groups, and perform an arbitration role if necessary. I would suggest giving the Council a third

possible role: to advise the Government on relations between religious groups, as well as on possible conflicts between religion and politics, so that when the Government has to intervene, it can do so with the benefit of informed advice.

Clear Ground Rules

Thirdly, as the President indicated in his speech to Parliament, the Government has to spell out some ground rules clearly and unequivocally. All political and religious groups must understand these ground rules, and abide by them scrupulously. The question is what form these rules should take.

A clear Declaration of Principles is necessary. Such a Declaration should reaffirm that Singapore is a secular-state, in which the Constitution is the fundamental basis of political authority. It should elaborate on the two principles in the President's speech: firstly, that each religion must recognise and accept the multi-religious nature of our society, and exercise moderation in their sermons and activities; and secondly, that religious organisations should not be used for political purposes, nor should they become a cover for members who seek to exploit them for political ends.

Possible Legislation

However, the Declaration alone may not be sufficient to avoid conflicts and problems. To be effective in getting the principles observed, the Declaration may need to be backed up with legislative sanctions for violating these principles.

In extremis, of course, the Government will use the Internal Security Act to detain a person whose "religious" preaching is likely to set different religious groups against one another, or to cause riots and bloodshed, or

who is involved in activities which heighten differences and intolerance between our different religions. Unfortunately, much harm would have been done long before this point is reached. To forestall such damage, a more focused approach is necessary.

For example, to deal with someone who has been inciting his congregation to violence against other religious groups, the bill could empower the Minister in charge to prohibit him from repeating such speeches or sermons when addressing any congregation. If he then violates this order, he can be prosecuted in court.

It will require tact and sensitivity to get these norms accepted by all religious leaders as a safety first approach. Then it will take great skill to draft the bill. The line between proper and improper behaviour in preaching and evangelising is a fine one, and where to draw it depends on fine judgment. There are also other questions: for example, should the decision be taken by a body like the Inter-Religious Advisory Council? By the Minister in charge? Or by the Minister after consulting the Inter-Religious Council? The Government intends to spend a few months to consider the alternatives, then take soundings of the various religious leaders, before making a decision.

Goodwill and Good Sense Must Prevail

It is our responsibility to strengthen inter-religious harmony in Singapore, especially at a time when this can no longer be taken for granted. Deliberations such as this Parliament of Religions can contribute to this objective. So long as rational men can talk to one another quietly and sincerely about our common problems, irrational outcomes can be foreseen and avoided.