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SPEECH BY PRIME MINISTER MR LEE KUAN YEW
AT THE FIRST RITUAL FOR THE OBSERVANCE OF
THE FIVE PRECEPTS CUM THE BUDDHISATVA PRECEPTS
BY THE SINGAPORE BUDDHIST FEDERATION
AT MANJUSRI SECONDARY SCHOOL
ON TUESDAY, 13 DECEMBER 1988

Many European colonies became independent during the 1950s and 60s. during that period, religions like Hinduism, Buddhism and Taoism, were believed to be tolerant and peaceful religions that allowed the more active and all-embracing religions like Islam, Christianity and Sikhism to co-exist without fierce competitions and conflicts. This view arose because in spite of the horrendous Hindu-Muslim massacres during partition and independence in India, for many years, Hindus and Muslims lived more or less in peace.

Under the secular leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru as Prime Minister, Hinduism was not a factor in the politics of India and did not play a role in getting votes.

That is no longer the case. By the early 1970s, Mrs Indira Gandhi, as Prime Minister, had to rally the Hindus in North India by appealing to their religious loyalties as the Muslim vote fell away from her Congress Party. Islamic resurgence had already affected India's politics and the Hindus reacted.

In the 1970s, the Sikhs became militant and demanded a separate state. The ensuing violence has been disastrous for both Sikhs and Hindus throughout India, especially in Punjab. Both religious groups have become intolerant and violent in their reactions to each other.

Buddhism was also believed to be a tolerant religion. Both Burma and Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) were Buddhist. Burmese Buddhists lived peacefully with Christians and Hindus for the first ten years after independence in 1947. However, in the 1960s, the Hindus were expelled from Burma.

In the late 1950s, Buddhist monks in Ceylon entered the political arena in support of Buddhism as the national religion, and of Sinhalese language as the national language. They helped make Solomon Bandaranaike Prime Minister in 1956. A year later, one Buddhist monk assassinated this Prime Minister. Once Buddhism and the Sinhalese language became political forces, the Hindus who spoke Tamil in Jaffna were excluded. They gradually fought back. The results have been grievous.

In Singapore, the last three elections had, with each election, brought into Parliament more MPs and ministers who are more active Christians, or more orthodox Muslims, less MPs who are Buddhists, or traditional religionists, and more MPs with no religion. This has not changed the secular outlook of the government. However, it does require ministers and MPs, of whatever religion, to be extra aware of the need to be secular in dealing with their constituents, for they represent voters of many different religions or no religion.

There were long periods in Mediterranean history when different religions co-existed peacefully. At the time of the Spanish Inquisition, the Jews peacefully practiced their faith in the Muslim countries of North Africa. So also there were long periods when Christians lived peacefully with Muslims and were not engaged in wars of the Crusades.

However, the present phase in Singapore tends more towards intensely held beliefs than towards tolerant co-existence. At a time when Islam is resurgent and thrusting, Christians, especially charismatics, are in a dynamic, evangelising phase. This has sometimes led to friction, and requires sensitive handling.

In recent years, the Buddhists and traditional Chinese religionists have also become active. Traditional Chinese religions are revising and updating their rituals and explanations so that the young Chinese Singaporeans will accept them as rational and reasonable.

Singapore Buddhist organisations have started to make Buddhism more relevant to contemporary Singapore. They are separating Buddhist teaching from superstition. English is used in Dharma classes, talks and meetings. The Buddhist sutras have been and are being translated into English by academics in America and the United Kingdom. For a long time, Hokkien and Cantonese have been used instead of Pali and Sanskrit. Buddhist societies have sprung up in the university and polytechnics. They are also reaching out to students in schools. Buddhist songs are being composed and are sung in English to guitar and percussion music. In other words, Buddhism is adapting its practices to be

effective and to keep its followers. The fact is no religious leadership can be tolerant and passive when its following is being eroded by other religions. But there is a difference between Islam and Christianity on the one hand, and Hinduism and Buddhism on the other. Islam and Christianity each believes in one God as the only true God. Hinduism accepts that there is more than one way to the truth while Buddhism teaches that everyone can attain Buddhahood through self efforts by practicing the eight-fold path. To that extent, Hinduism and Buddhism are more tolerant.

Last year, to get reliable data, the Ministry of Community Development asked the National University of Singapore (NUS) to conduct a study of religion and religious revivalism in Singapore. The NUS conducted a survey as part of their study. It revealed that the percentage of our population who belonged to traditional Chinese religions has declined: Buddhism, Taoism and Bai Shen (1980 56 per cent to 1988 41.7 per cent). They are the religions of the majority of the Chinese.

The percentage of our population who are Muslims or Hindus is stable. The percentage who are Christians has increased significantly from 10.3 per cent in the 1980 Population Census Report to 18.7 per cent in 1988. Those who have no religion have increased from 13.2 per cent in 1980 to 17.6 per cent in 1988.

The study concluded that Christianity appeals to the English-educated and to females, while “No Religion” appeals to the Chinese-educated and to males. Twenty-five per cent of the English-educated are Christians (10 per cent Catholics and 15 per cent Protestants). Only 7.5 per cent of the Chinese-educated are Christians (2 per cent Catholics, 5.5 per cent Protestants).

The appeal of Christianity is strongest amongst the ‘A’ level (30.8 per cent) and university students (41 per cent). The next strongest appeal is that of “No Religion” for ‘A’ level (28 per cent) and university students (23 per cent). They were not necessarily against religion and were described in the study as “people who are not sure which religion they should identify with and hence perceive and find themselves as belonging to no particular religion”.

Religion is the strongest part of the culture of a people. It enjoins its followers to moral values and practices. A religion looks after the spiritual, moral and social well-being of its followers. But religious organisations should leave the economic-political needs of people to non-religious groups, like political parties. This is because if any religious group tries to define the socio-economic agenda of Singapore and mobilises on grassroots by “social action programs”, other religious groups will do likewise. Once people are mobilised

on socio-economic issues on the basis of religious loyalties, the consequences will be bad for all.

I hope that the Buddhists and traditional religionists who are the majority in Singapore will set a good example to the other religions and keep religion separate from politics. Tolerance of each other's religion is vital in a multi-racial, multi-religious Singapore.

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