

Ideological hegemony and the political symbolism of religious buildings in Singapore

L Kong

Department of Geography National University of Singapore, 10 Kent Ridge Crescent, Singapore 0511

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Abstract. Cultural geographers have for too long ignored the association between the 'religious' and the 'political', concentrating instead on separating the 'religious' from the sociopolitical and economic forces in society. The challenge is taken up in this paper in an analysis of the contemporary meanings and values of religious buildings in Singapore as invested by the state. Attention is paid to the states conceptions of religion and religious space and the roles it plays in influencing such space. The ways in which, through its various roles, the state in Singapore plays a significant part in influencing context and hence in shaping the constraints to the construction of meanings are demonstrated. Also discussed are the ways in which religious groups respond to state policies which have direct and indirect implications for their space.

Introduction

In much of their earlier research this century, cultural geographers with an interest in religion were concerned primarily with studying "the part played by the religious motive in man's [sic] transformation of the landscape" (Isaac, 1959-60, page 14). In particular, they sought to "separate the specifically religious from the social, economic and ethnic matrix in which it is embedded, and to determine its relative weight in relation to other forces in transforming the landscape" (Isaac, 1961-62, page 12). Reflecting these views, a large body of works emerged and evolved, focused on a variety of themes. These included the study of spatial patterns arising from religious influences, such as the spatial diffusion and territorial demise of religious groups (for example, Johnson, 1967; Meyer, 1975); mapping the distribution of religious groups (for example, Mukerji, 1972; Shortridge, 1976); defining the culture regions on the basis of religious characteristics (for example, Francaviglia, 1970; 1979; Lehr, 1972; Meinig, 1965); and describing the impact of religion on the physical form of the landscape, including, inter alia, the study of cemeteries (for example, Darden, 1972; Pattison, 1955) and religious structures (for example, Biswas, 1984; Curtis, 1980; Griffith, 1975; Laatsch and Calkins, 1986). Although these research trends reflected significant geographical interest in religion, they failed to address various issues. The symbolic meanings of religious buildings, for example, have not received sufficient attention even though the material impacts of religion on the landscape have been researched. That religious buildings may be invested with symbolic meanings—personal, sacred, social, and political, for instance—deserves far greater attention. Most researchers have also failed to acknowledge and address plurality within societies, disregarding both the coexistence of different religious groups, as well as the coexistence of religious and secular cultures within

societies. As a result, tensions arising from the different meanings that may be invested in religious places by different groups and from the differential allocation of space for different religious groups and for secular use have been ignored. Some of these issues will be addressed empirically in this paper.

My aim in this paper is to examine the relations between culture and politics and to take the current efforts at theorization within cultural geography into empirical folds. In particular, I wish to demonstrate the role of the state in the social construction of religion and religious space in Singapore by examining the state-religion nexus at three levels: the state's conceptions of religion and religious space; the roles that it plays in influencing religious space; and the responses of religious groups to the constraints imposed by the state. My objectives are fourfold: (1) to outline the state's secular policy and all the corresponding principles; (2) to outline specific state policies and actions towards religious buildings, addressing this at the level of material provisions; (3) to explore beyond this material level and to examine the symbolic uses that the state makes of religious buildings; and (4) to discuss some of the ways in which religious groups resist or reconcile themselves to the state's policies and actions. In other words, I will be examining the wider sociopolitical context in which individual religious lives are set. This is necessary because individuals do not exist in a vacuum, and relationships and experiences with religious places are in fact formed and negotiated within the constraints set by the wider milieu. Here, I will argue that the state in Singapore plays a significant role in influencing context and hence in shaping the constraints to the construction of meanings. Individuals who relate to and interact with their religious places are not totally free to invest their meanings and values as they wish because there are others with the power to shape the context and constraints. In illustrating this "power of others" (Eyles, 1988), I will throw light on the political and economic agendas that lie behind the state's official commitment to religious freedom and religious buildings.

Theoretical context

The interest in the interface between politics, symbolism, and religious landscapes can be situated in the wider theoretical developments that are taking place within human geography. First, it reflects recognition of the importance of the symbolic as opposed to the purely functional meanings of places. Certainly, within cultural geography, this is part of a larger reorientation in which much more attention is given to the importance of symbolism in landscapes, as opposed to 'traditional' cultural geographical concerns with the description, distribution, and diffusion of material artifacts. The new studies reflect an interest beyond the "physicality of the cultural landscape" (Ley, 1988, page 115), and, as Cosgrove (1986, page 3) argued, disclose "the meanings that human groups attach to areas and places and the ways in which these are expressed geographically".

Amongst the array of symbolic meanings of landscapes that are being examined, there is growing recognition that landscape itself is a "concept of high tension" (Ley, 1988, page 115) and that the tension arises from the investment of political meanings in previously 'innocent' landscapes. In other words, there is increasing acknowledgement that landscapes are not "transparent windows through which reality may be unproblematically viewed" (Duncan and Duncan, 1988, page 118); indeed, landscape meanings "are always buried beneath layers of ... ideological 'sediment'" (Duncan and Duncan, 1988, page 117). Such a view reflects the rising interest among cultural geographers in cultural politics, with its associated concepts

of ideology, hegemony, and resistance (for example, see Jackson, 1989). Landscapes, as the argument goes, are ideological, in that they can be used to endorse, legitimise, and/or challenge social and political control. A more focused interest in the political symbolism of religious landscapes is thus a part of this broader trend and extends beyond the more established and traditional analysis of the symbolism of religious architecture. It is recognised specifically that religious buildings may portray symbolically the politics and local structures of power and authority (Gilsenan, 1982).

Another way in which geographers studying the political symbolism of religious landscapes may reflect wider theoretical developments within geography, and, indeed, within the social sciences, is through the way in which they address the structure-agency or choice-constraint debate. It is not necessary to rehearse the specifics of the debate here (Gregory, 1981, Gregson, 1987). Suffice to say that it has led to a developing analysis of the “social structuring of human actions within the evolving frameworks of society” (Dear, 1983, page 1). Indeed, it is such a focus, amongst others, that has led to a convergence of social science research interests and that has provided the inspiration for journals such as *Society and Space*. By acknowledging that religious landscapes may be invested with symbolic meanings and values both by individuals and by more impersonal forces (such as the state and its planning agencies), cultural geographers may address in an empirical way the interaction between human agency and wider political and economic structures. Analysis of the responses of religious groups and individuals to state policies and actions in terms of resistance and/or reconciliation is also a way of engaging the interactions between structure and agency.

Before the empirical material can be discussed, it is necessary to define my usage of the term ‘state’. A vast body of literature exists on the ‘state’, and insofar as my aim is to focus on the state’s conceptions of religious places and its role in influencing religious places, my use of the concept vis-a-vis related ones (such as government, bureaucracy, state apparatus, and state institutions) needs to be clarified. The ‘state’ has been defined as a supreme, central power which rules over a people (Hall, 1984, page 14), and which is responsible for the protection and maintenance of society (Dear, 1986, page 456). It stands for a set of institutions, including the government (the executive), the legislature (parliament), the bureaucracy, the judiciary, police, and armed forces (Miliband, 1969, page 46; Dear, 1986, pages 456-457). Together, these institutions form the state apparatus (Clark and Dear, 1984). In the following discussions, I use the term ‘state’ to refer to the supreme, central power which rules over the people of Singapore, and which comprises the set of institutions listed above. Of specific interest here is the government, made up of democratically elected representatives. In Singapore, the government consists of one ruling party, the People’s Action Party (PAP) which has an overwhelming majority in Parliament (77 of 81 seats). Within this government, the Cabinet (either independently or on the advice of senior civil servants) identifies the policy needs in Singapore, thus constituting the chief, policy-formulating body of the state (Chan, 1985, page 75). Another directly relevant institution in my discussion is the bureaucracy, in particular two statutory boards, the Housing and Development Board (HDB) and

the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA). Both have significant roles to play in implementing many state policies of interest here.

By treating the 'state' as a central power which is engaged in policymaking and implementation, and which invests political significance in religious buildings, it may appear that a certain degree of abstraction and reification is involved. However, I will stress that the state is realised through the real apparatuses (or institutions) of the state machinery (Hall, 1984, page 19), and these institutions in turn comprise real people who run the machinery. On the other hand, I would also emphasise that, at all times, the focus is on the institutions and the public offices rather than the office holders. Although officers may come and go, the office or authority of the state continues (Hall, 1984, page 19). Hence, when reference is made to public speeches and interviews by politicians, they are quoted in their capacity as public office holders and not as individuals. The views they express are held to be the views of the government and the state. What I will not be exploring are the private views of office holders and how these may influence public actions.

State policies towards religion: general principles

Singapore is characterised by a high degree of religious heterogeneity, with the population comprising Buddhists (: %), Taoists (13.4%), Christians (18.7%), Muslims (16.0%), and Hindus (4.9%). In addition, 1.1% of the population adhere to other religions, and 17.6% have no religion (Kuo and Quah, 1988:2). With such a variation, the state has adopted a secular position. Four specific tenets form the cornerstones of its policy. Singapore is *a secular state* in the sense that no one religion is identified as the official state religion, unlike in Malaysia, for example, where Islam is officially declared the state religion. In Singapore, all the major world religions are represented and so the state argues that "to accommodate such totally different spiritual and moral beliefs among the people without being torn apart, Singapore must be a strictly secular state" (Ho, 1990:2). This 'secularism' in no way implies that there is official disinterest in religion (Siddique, 1989:565), nor does it imply that the state is antireligion per se. In fact, the state allows for *freedom of worship*, and Articles 15 and 16 of the Constitution of the Republic of Singapore (henceforth, the Constitution) set out the rights of individuals and groups with respect to such freedom. Specifically, every person has the right to profess and practise his or her religion and to propagate it. Every religious group has the right to manage its own religious affairs, to establish and maintain institutions for religious or charitable purposes, and to acquire and own property and to hold and administer it in accordance with law. Every religious group also has the right to establish and maintain institutions for the education of children and to provide instruction in its own religion, but there must be no discrimination on the grounds of religion only, in any law relating to such institutions or in the administration of any such law.

Closely related to the principle of freedom of worship is that of *multiculturalism*.¹ The state is committed to all cultural groups and, in this instance, all religious groups, without prejudice to any group in particular, whether they are majority or minority groups.(1) This is enshrined in the

¹ Various versions of this concept have been discussed by sociologists. For example, Benjamin (1976:115) discussed the concept of 'multiracialism' in the context of Singapore as the "ideology that accords equal status to the cultures and ethnic identities of the various 'races that are regarded as comprising the population of a plural society". Siddique (1989:565) discussed the "4Ms": multiracialism, multilingualism, multiculturalism, and multireligiosity. To her, multireligiosity "acknowledges a societal situation in which a number of religions are practised, but none is officially recognized as paramount". It is distinguished by a "religious populism supportive of moral order".

Constitution in two ways. First, a general clause protects the fundamental rights of the individual and citizen and prohibits discrimination by race, language, or religion (Article 12). Second, the Presidential Council for Minority Rights established under Article 69 has the general function of considering and reporting on matters, referred by parliament or the government, affecting persons of any racial or religious community in Singapore. In particular, the Council's function is to draw attention to any bill or subsidiary legislation if it is, in the opinion of the Council, a differentiating measure.

The last tenet of the state's secular policy is the view that *religion and politics must be kept strictly separate*. Religious groups should not venture into politics and political parties should not use religious sentiments to gather popular support. If members of religious groups are to participate in the democratic political process, they must do so as individuals or as members of political parties and not as leaders of religious groups. In this, the former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew has been most emphatic: he argues that religious groups should look after the spiritual, moral, and social well-being of their followers but should leave the economic and political needs of people to nonreligious groups such as political parties (1988). The Maintenance of Religious Harmony Bill, passed in November 1990, is designed to define behaviour that is acceptable as opposed to that which is not. Specifically, the Bill allows the relevant minister to issue prohibition orders should any individual engage in any of four categories of harmful conduct. These are where a person causes feelings of enmity or hatred between different religious groups; where if, under the guise of religion or propagating religious activity, a person carries out political activities for promoting a political cause or the cause of any political party; where a person carries out subversive activities under the guise of propagation of religion; and where a person instigates and provokes feelings of disloyalty or hatred against the President or the government.

However, despite the general secular position and despite the specific stance of multiculturalism, the state also recognises the special position of the Malays, and, relatedly, of the Muslims in Singapore. Article 152 of the Constitution focuses on minorities and, in particular, on Malays. It spells out clearly that the government must care for the interests of the racial and religious minorities in Singapore; particularly, it must "recognise the special position of the Malays, who are the indigenous people of Singapore, and accordingly it shall be the responsibility of the Government to protect, safeguard, support, foster and promote their political, educational, religious, economic, social and cultural interests and the Malay language" (Constitution, 1985: 73). This consideration for the Malays is a legacy of the politics of the 1950s. Specifically, in the negotiations for the coalition government of 1959, one of the agreed conditions was that the Malays, as the indigenous population, should have special rights, which would be enshrined in the Constitution. It could also be an acknowledgement of geopolitical realities; that is, of Singapore's position in Southeast Asia, a predominantly Malay world. Recognition that the Malays are the indigenous population and according them a special position could help to avert any suspicions on the part of Singapore's neighbours that it is trying to be a "Third China" (Chua, 1983:38).

State policies on religious landscapes

Aside from the general policies pertaining to religion, specific policies have also been drawn up with regard to religious landscapes, including, for example, religious buildings, public shrines, use of public spaces and private domestic spaces for religion. In this chapter, we will focus our discussion on policies affecting the establishment, demolition, relocation, and conservation of churches, temples, and mosques. These policies reflect general characteristics of land-use policy in Singapore. For example, 'efficiency', 'pragmatism', and 'orderly growth' form

the guiding principles in land-use planning. As a result, urban renewal has generally emphasised demolition and reconstruction rather than conservation. At the same time, a centralised approach has often been taken towards planning and decision-making. In the establishment of new religious buildings, the state specifically sets aside parcels of land for tender by religious groups. These parcels of land are usually found in the new towns built by the HDB on the basis of the neighbourhood principle, adapted from British and European town planning practices. The basic planning philosophy is to give maximum self-sufficiency with respect to basic community needs, and so within each neighbourhood there will be shopping facilities, community centres, recreation facilities, schools, medical care, and so on to cater to the needs of residents. If there are more than three neighbourhoods close together, then a town or district centre will be built to provide higher order goods and services, such as banks, theatres, cinemas, and department stores (Drakakis-Smith and Yeung, 1977:6; The, 1969:175). It is clear therefore that a strongly modernist stance is adopted in town planning in which the successful formula is based on efficiency and functionalism (Ley, 1989: 47-51). The description of 'good' town planning, as outlined in a 1923 article "Reasons for town planning" would apply well in the context of Singapore: "Good city planning is not primarily a matter of aesthetics, but of economics. Its basic principle is to increase the working efficiency of the city" (quoted in Ley, 1989:50). In such a context, religious building sites are provided in the new towns as another amenity that sections of the population require. Precise planning standards guiding the minimum provision of such sites are drawn up in the same way as for other amenities (table 1). For churches, mosques, and Chinese temples, these guidelines are made on a new town basis. For example, for every 12000 dwelling units in a new town, a church site will be set aside; and for every 9000 dwelling units in a new town, a Chinese temple site will be designated. However, Hindu temple sites are made on a regional basis because it takes two or three new towns to make up 90000 dwelling units. Factors taken into consideration when drawing up these guidelines include 'demographic characteristics', 'religious habits', as well as space requirements and architectural design for the different religious groups (correspondence with Strategic Planning Branch, URA, and with the Systems and Research Department, HDB). These planning standards are reviewed periodically in the light of demographic and social changes. The precise sites are usually proposed by the HDB and submitted for consideration to the Master Plan Committee and for the approval of the Ministry of National Development.

Each parcel of land is only open for tender to each particular religious group. Hence, a site for churches, for example, is open for tender to the various Christian denominations, but Muslims, Hindus, and Chinese religionists cannot make a bid for it. The Muslims, however, do not have to tender for the first mosque site because it is a policy to have one mosque in every new town developed (MoC, 1987).² A site is therefore allocated to the Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura (Muslim Religious Council, or MUIS for short) at a price determined by the chief valuer. This is usually three to four times lower than the market value (MoC, 1987).

Although this general policy of ensuring that the minimum requirement of every religious group is met has prevented competition among religious groups, it has had a significant impact on Christian groups in particular, because there are more denominations seeking to set up their own church buildings than there are available sites. Church groups have become locked in fierce competition in tendering for land.

² This is the normal provision for mosque sites; the earlier stated figure of one mosque site per new town in which the Malay population is 20000 or more is a planning standard to guide the provision of such sites. They are therefore not necessarily inconsistent (correspondence with Strategic Planning Branch, URA).

Table 1. Planning standards for the provision of religious sites (source: Systems and Research Department, Housing and Development Board).

Religious building	Approximate site area	Planning standard
Church	3000-4500 m ²	1 per 12 000 du
Chinese temple	2000-3000 m ²	1 per 9000 du
Mosque	2500 m ²	1 per 20 000 du
Hindu temple	1800-2500 m ²	1 per 90 000 du

Note: du, dwelling unit.

This led the first vice president of the National Council of Churches of Singapore to call on its members to ‘repent’ and improve ecumenical relationships (The Straits Times 1984a). Conversely, it has actually led to some ecumenical cooperation, seen in two examples. The Yishun Christian Church houses both the Anglican and Lutheran congregations, who, in response to land scarcity and high construction costs, came together to construct the shared church building. The Mount Carmel Bible Presbyterian and the independent Bible Church have also shared the cost of the Clementi Bible Centre and run it jointly (The Straits Times 1985).

Besides sites earmarked in each new town to meet the identified needs of the major religious groups, additional sites may also be designated by the HDB after the minimum requirements, outlined in table 1, are met. Such sites are open to all religious groups to tender (correspondence with Estates and Lands Division, HDB), which means religious groups may bid against each other. Since 1979 the URA, in its ‘sale of sites’ programme, has also periodically offered sites for development for religious buildings. Should a situation arise where sites set aside for religious purposes have all been allocated and other groups still require land, the private sector can propose religious development on privately owned land for the consideration of the planning authority. Alternatively, the HDB and the URA can be approached for further site

Apart from the establishment of new religious buildings, religious groups may try to convert existing buildings from secular to religious use. The state may also influence this process. It has direct control over the use to which existing buildings are put. For example, HDB flats are strictly for residential purposes only, and those who use flats for regular religious purposes are contravening regulations. Enforcement action amounting to eviction will then have to be taken (personal communication, Public Relations Department, HDB, 5 February 1990).(3) In such situations, there is no possibility of a change in use. However, in other situations, applications can be made to the Development Control Division (DCD) of the URA for permission to change the use of land or buildings. The powers conferred in the Planning (Development) Rules, 1981, require that all plans for change of use be approved by the DCD [Planning (Amendment) Act, 1985]. Whether a building can be converted from secular to religious use depends on several considerations, such as the location of the building, whether the area is a predominantly residential one, whether too much traffic is going to be generated as a result of conversion to religious use, whether there will be parking facilities nearby, and other such practical

considerations (personal communication, DCD, URA, 5 February 1990). In recent years, churches in search of a 'home' have managed successfully to obtain approval for converting old disused cinemas. For example, Fairfield Methodist Church is housed in what was previously Metropole Cinema, and the Church of Our Saviour is housed in the old Venus Cinema.

Just as the state has a role to play in the establishment of religious buildings, it also has a role in their relocation and demolition. Relocation and/or demolition take place when buildings are unauthorised structures or, more commonly, when the buildings are affected by public schemes. Specifically, a policy statement was made in 1973 which asserted that "as people move out from old areas to be redeveloped

temples, mosques or churches will have to give way to urban renewal or new development, unless they are of historical and architectural value" (MoC, 1973).

(3) However, as the HDB itself acknowledges, it is sometimes difficult to define precisely what constitutes using the flats for 'regular religious purposes'. It is also difficult to monitor the situation and so, unless neighbours complain of noise, for example, it is entirely possible that the HDB may have no knowledge of contravention.

The stand taken is that religious buildings will be treated as any other buildings which may come in the way of development. This was clearly spelt out in a statement by Tan Eng Liang (the then Senior Minister of State for National Development), who declared: "The resettlement policy is clear-cut, irrespective of religions, irrespective of owners and irrespective of organisations" (GPO, 1978, column 978).

In putting this policy into practice, between 1974 and 1987 the government has acquired and cleared 23 mosques, 76 *suraus*, 700 Chinese temples, 27 Hindu temples, and 19 churches for public development schemes (MoC, 1987).

Religious groups to be resettled are offered alternative sites by the policy implementing agencies [usually the URA, HDB, and the Jurong Town Corporation (JTC)]. However, such alternative sites are not offered on a one-to-one basis: "It is not possible to have a temple for temple, a mosque for mosque, a church for church substitution. This is uneconomic, impractical and, in the limited land space of Singapore, impossible" (MoC, 1973).

In fact, religious buildings affected by clearance are primarily allocated land on a joint basis. In other words, one site is made available to two or more existing buildings of the same religion. This is the most common recourse for groups affected. In one instance, as many as eight Chinese temples were affected by clearance and, because each could not afford a new place, all eight groups came together to build one temple (in Tampines Street 21) to rehouse them all. Although they were under one roof, each group was able to retain its own activities and celebrations because the individual gods had their own birthdays and special celebrations (The Straits Times 1986). This can be compared with the ecumenical cooperation between different Christian church groups discussed above. However, in exceptional circumstances, a building site may be offered for the exclusive use of those from a single religious building which is to be demolished. In such an instance, prices of land will be determined by the land valuer in accordance with prevailing market rates (The Straits Times 1977). This happened, for example, with the construction of a new Central Sikh Temple, because the government recognised

that it was the main Sikh temple for the entire community in Singapore.

In some instances, the lease may run out for a religious site just as redevelopment is about to take place. In such instances, the lease will not be extended, and those affected may not be allocated land. They will then have to tender and pay market value for sites set aside by the HDB for religious use or for sites put up for sale by the URA to religious groups and associations. This has caused some smaller religious buildings to close down completely because it was not possible to find suitable alternative sites or because the cost of new sites was unaffordable (The Straits Times 1979).

In some situations, the religious building may be deemed to be of historical and architectural value and, instead of demolition or relocation, such buildings are gazetted as national monuments for preservation. This is decided by the Preservation of Monuments Board, a body set up by parliament in 1971 “to preserve monuments of historic, traditional, archaeological, architectural or artistic interest; to protect and augment the amenities of those monuments; to stimulate public interest and support in the preservation of those monuments and to take appropriate measures to preserve all records, documents and data relating to those monuments” [Preservation of Monuments (Amendments) Act, 1985:3-4]. To date, sixteen religious buildings have been designated as national monuments and have been preserved(4) (see for example figure 1).

(4) These are: Sultan Mosque, Abdul Gaffoor Mosque, Al-Abrar Mosque, Hajjah Fatimah Mosque, Jamae Mosque, Nagore Durgah, Sri Mariamman Temple, Sri Perumal Temple, Siong Lim Temple, Hong San See, Tan Si Chong Su Temple, Thian Hock Keng, Cathedral of the Good Shepherd, St Andrew’s Cathedrals St George’s Church, and the Armenian Church.

Endorsing the rhetorics: symbolic roles of material buildings

The state clearly has a significant impact on religious buildings at the purely material level, but it also invests symbolic meanings in these same buildings. Specifically, the buildings serve to endorse political rhetoric about support for religion and freedom of worship, commitment to multiculturalism and, relatedly, equality of treatment, as well as to religious tolerance and harmony.

State policies and actions act as evidence of state support for religion. They allow the state to claim it recognises and values the role of religion in Singapore. This was spelt out very clearly by Lee Yiok Seng (1988:2), Senior Parliamentary Secretary, Ministry of National Development, who claimed that “The importance which our Government places on religion is reflected ... in the nature of the physical development that is taking place today in Singapore. In the development of HDB new towns, our planners make provisions for places of worship.”

Even the occasional preservation of religious places is used by state representatives to illustrate the state’s support for religion. As Lee Yiok Seng continued, “In other areas and where the planned development or redevelopment allows, efforts are also made to conserve particular temples, mosques and churches. Some of the places of worship which have special historic significance are also designated as national monuments.”

This claim of state support for religion reinforces public rhetoric about the importance of religion in Singapore society. In all public discourses, representatives of the state are careful not to appear antireligious; indeed, they take every opportunity to show their support for religion. For example, ministers and members of parliament in their public appearances often speak of the “strong and positive influence” of religion, how it adds to the “moral fibre” of society (Othman Wok, 1974c:2), and how it is “one of those factors that enables the total development of a person as an individual and as a member of the family and the community” (Lee Yiok Seng, 1988:1).

Beyond endorsing state support for religion, the state is also able to claim a commitment to allow freedom of worship in Singapore by pointing to the abundance of varied religious buildings. Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong took pains to point out, “Those who criticise us by saying there is no freedom in Singapore are talking nonsense ... I can think of only one other place in the world where you can see a mosque, a church and a temple in the same constituency” (*The Straits Times* 1984b:16).

He goes on to cite the case of Yugoslavia where there is a large Muslim population and not enough places of worship. However, in Singapore, there are fewer Muslims but many more mosques. Similarly, the role of the built form was recognised by Ho Kah Leong (1987:1), Senior Parliamentary Secretary, Ministry of Communications and Information, when he spoke of religious buildings as “reminder[s] and ... symbol[s] of freedom of religion and worship in our multi-religious Republic”. Such symbolic use of religious buildings allows the state to substantiate in a tangible way the constitutional rights accorded to individuals and religious groups to freedom of worship, specifically outlined in Articles 15 and 16 of the Constitution. The same argument is reinforced through other channels, such as the mass media. For example, one editorial in a local newspaper commented on the state’s role in encouraging and supporting religion through its material provisions: “The different religious groups worship freely. To an extent, in Singapore, they are encouraged by the government which sets aside a certain amount of land in each Housing and Development Board estate for churches, temples and mosques” (*The Business Times* 1987:8).

Another way in which material provisions play a politically symbolic role is when they allow the state to claim a genuine commitment to multiculturalism and equality of treatment for all groups. This is possible because some space is provided for all religious groups in planning guidelines and no group is denied at least some space. At the same time, resettlement and demolition policies also apply to all religious groups—churches, mosques, Hindu and Chinese temples have all been affected—and so the state can hedge itself against potential accusations that it has not been fair in its treatment of different groups. Two public statements can be cited to illustrate such symbolic use of religious buildings. For example, Rohan bin Kamis (then Member of Parliament for Telok Blangah), suggested that “Singapore ... must be the only Government in the world which although secular has supported in concrete terms the aspirations of the Muslims in Singapore to build their own mosques ... this speaks well and clearly demonstrates to the world that the Singapore Government promotes a plural society” (GPO, 1984, column 1301).

A Muslim ex-minister, to drive home the point that the state is fair in its treatment of all groups, also emphasised that provisions are made for every group within new

towns, and all groups are similarly affected by demolition and relocation (Othman Wok, 1974b). In a statement from the Prime Minister's Office (MoC, 1987), it was spelt out that the state is evenhanded in all its dealings with religious groups. In the case of land clearance for the Mass Rapid Transit stations in the Orchard Road corridor, a variety of religious buildings were similarly affected, including Angullia Mosque, Ngee Ann Kongsi land, Bethesda Chapel, Chek Sian Teng Chinese Temple, Sri Sivan Temple, and a Sikh temple at Kirk Terrace. In short, even in the relocation and demolition of religious buildings, the state puts into practice its principle of equality of treatment. Such specific policies and actions help to bear out the state's claim of commitment to multiculturalism, and give substance to broader constitutional provisions which protect the citizen against discrimination on the grounds of religion, race, descent, or place of birth. The state also invests political meanings in religious buildings when it holds them up as symbols of religious 'tolerance' and 'acceptance'. For example, the then President Henry B Sheares (1972:2) commented: "many of our oldest buildings are places of worship and they stand as monuments of the generations of tolerance which have gone to making up our way of life". Such statements illustrate the symbolic use made of religious places to exhort Singaporeans to religious tolerance and acceptance.

Beyond rhetorics: political power through ideological hegemony

The state believes its policies are the best for all members of society. Members of government therefore seek to attain and maintain popular support and political power so that policies can be implemented with minimal resistance. To do so, the state cannot afford to alienate any social group, including religious groups. Indeed, the state seeks political support from religious groups and individuals by being ideologically hegemonic, so that it has the power to shape social lives. In the context of Singapore, the state has the power to influence people's private lives, specifically religious lives, through its policies and actions. It then seeks to persuade people that these policies and actions are the most natural and commonsensical courses of action. The symbolic use of religious buildings is one way of exercising such hegemony. In other words, religious buildings play an ideological role in supporting a set of ideas and values, in this case the state's ideas and values. These buildings are therefore not neutral backdrops to human action (Duncan and Duncan, 1988:123).

As I illustrated earlier, state policies and actions pertaining to religious places have been invoked to show that the state recognises and supports religion. At the same time, as I have also illustrated, from a functionalist perspective, the state and its planning agencies have tried to meet the various needs of people through the efficient provision of schools, recreational facilities, hospitals, housing, and places of worship. Although this may be true, it is also possible that in formulating these policies the state is at least as much guided by political interests as it is by a genuine desire to support religion. At this level of interpretation, the state is careful not to alienate religious groups and individuals, and indeed attempts to garner political support from them by showing approval of and support for religion. It has chosen two tangible ways of doing it: the provision of sites for religious use and the preservation of selected religious buildings. The apparent contradiction between a state that declares itself to be secular and which proceeds to have a large say in the production and maintenance of religious landscapes can therefore be explained in part by reference to hegemonic intentions. In short, it is using the sacred to engender loyalty to and trust in the secular state (Muir and Weissman,

1989). This parallels Lewandowski's (1984) discussion of Madras, in which the state and national governments created an urban landscape which not only met the needs of its contemporary citizens, but also contributed to its own political legitimation. For example, in Madras the government portrayed itself as a protector of religious institutions and as a patron of the arts. New buildings drew on classical architectural tradition and were named after local heroes. Statues were erected that honoured classical Tamil language writers and contemporary Tamil poets, as well as local state and national leaders. Here was a conscious attempt to politicise culture and to manipulate it for the ends of the party in power and to gain popular support for its policies. Duncan's (1990) analysis of nineteenth-century Kandy is another case in point. Whether it was the Asokan or Sakran discourse on kingship that was accepted, Duncan showed that religious landscapes could be used to endorse the political order. The Asokan discourse favoured the production of landscapes dominated by religious structures and public works for the benefit of the people and so a king who successfully created such a landscape gained political legitimacy. The Sakran discourse, on the other hand, favoured a landscape of palaces and cities modelled after the landscapes of gods. To an extent, a king's construction of such a landscape could gain him political legitimacy as well.

The state in Singapore enjoys a degree of political power which enables it to influence the private lives of religious individuals. Despite the rhetoric about freedom of worship, it could be argued that the state reserves enough power to define religious places, and, at a larger level, religion itself. As I have already shown, in the establishment of religious buildings, the state exercises control over where religious buildings go, how much space is to be given to each, how many there are to be in each neighbourhood, and so forth. Even building height restrictions are imposed, as personal correspondence with religious leaders involved in setting up new buildings testifies. The most tangible and public manifestations of religious space—churches, temples, and mosques—are, to a large extent, defined by the state. It illustrates well the fact that "space is not just a value allocated by the government/market nexus, but also has the characteristics of a power resource" (Young, 1975, pages 187- 188, emphasis in original), and that the power to shape religious landscapes is symbolic of the greater power to influence religious groups and individuals (Agnew and Duncan, 1989).

This power to define religious space is but one example of how the state has exercised its power. There are yet other examples. MUIS was set up as a statutory board with a significant number of members appointed on the recommendation of the Minister for Community Development.⁽⁵⁾ This would appear to be incongruous in a secular state. In effect, the reasons for its existence are political. It allows Muslim religious affairs to become better organised and therefore less vulnerable to agitation by subversives. The existence of MUIS has the psychological effect of assuring Muslims that their affairs are being properly taken care of by the government, as there is now an official body liaising between the Muslims and the government. Last, the government is not willing to give Islamic leaders a free reign because in the past Muslim leaders exploited religious issues and created trouble in Singapore. MUIS, with members appointed by the President of Singapore, now oversees Muslim activities (Kho, 1979-80:80).

The state has also set up a series of laws regarding public religious celebrations and processions. The Commissioner of Police is charged with the responsibility of making general rules for the conduct of such assemblies and processions, subject to the approval of the Minister, and the Deputy Commissioner of Police may, with the sanction of the Minister, prohibit any such activity

(Minor Offences Act, 1985). Some of the general rules set down include the requirement that the promoters apply for a permit to be issued by the Deputy Commissioner of Police (Operations) or the Administrative Officer of the Police Division in which the activity is to be held. The permit is granted under a variety of conditions. For instance, the route of a procession must be approved and there must be no deviation from it. The same specifications apply to the time permitted for processions and assemblies.

There must be no singing or music, gongs, drums, or music-producing equipment; there must be no public address systems; no banners, posters, or placards, unless authorised by the police officer issuing the permit. Should there be any circumstances in which it is deemed that the conditions of the permit have been breached or that a breach of the peace is likely to occur, any police officer may order the dispersal of any assembly or procession [Miscellaneous Offences (Public Order and Nuisance) (Assemblies and Processions) Rules, 1989]. Any person who infringes the rules or holds an assembly or procession (including assistance in and presence at) in defiance of a prohibition by the Deputy Commissioner of Police will be liable, on conviction, to a fine, or imprisonment, or both (Minor Offences Act, 1985). These controls over space, time, and activity can be interpreted in two ways. On the one hand, they are necessary to ensure that there is orderly behaviour and minimum disruption to other sectors of the population who are not part of the public assemblies or processions. On the other hand, they can also be interpreted as further examples of how the state reserves the power to define religious activity through controls over space, time, and behaviour. If interpreted in this light, these controls are equivalent to Jackson's (1988) notion of "strategies of containment", which he discussed in the context of the policing of London's Notting Hill Carnival. Furthermore, by delimiting these crowd activities in very specific ways, they become "officially institutionalized mass activity" within a "controlled set of enclosed spheres", which is then neither "incomprehensible" nor "alarming" (Harrison, 1988:195). In these senses, the controls are no longer simply functional in intent, but strongly political as well.

That the state holds power is also evident in the way in which it seeks to define religion and its role in the context of Singapore. In many public discourses,

(5) MUIS consists of a President appointed by the President of Singapore; the Mufti; not more than five members to be appointed by the President of Singapore on the recommendation of the Minister; and not less than seven members to be appointed by the President of Singapore, from a list of nominees to be submitted by the President of MUIS (Administration of Muslim Law Act, 1985).

state leaders have sought to define religion as it 'should be' in Singapore. Foreexample, S Rajaratnam (1981) stated unequivocally that religion should not be "esoteric and spiritual" but "action oriented and relevant"; it should be concerned with worldly problems and it should help to cope with change. This is echoed by S Jayakumar (1982) and Sidek Saniff (1985) who define religion as concerned with the "here and now", "linked to the practical", and not "merely the esoteric". Yet, although an action-oriented religion is encouraged, such social action is also defined within certain acceptable spheres. In the words of former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew (1988:4), religion looks after the "moral and social well-being" of a people, but it should not be concerned with the economic and political needs of the population. In concrete terms, religion should preferably demonstrate its practical value in certain ways in Singapore. Education such as that provided in Christian schools is acceptably if only because of their emphasis on moral teachings (Lee Boon Yang, 1985). Homes for the aged and destitute, care for the poor and less fortunate, counselling for the 'misguided' (such as drug addicts), and childcare services are other acceptable areas of activity for religious organizations. The clearest statement to this effect was articulated by Lee Kuan Yew (The Straits Times 1987:15):

“What we want our religious and para-religious groups to do is to give relief to the destitute, the disadvantaged, the disabled, to take part in activities which will foster communal fellowship. Emphasis on charity, alms-giving and social and community work ... And priests [had] better stay out of espousing a form of economic system, or challenge the way we do things, social policy or theory.”

In brief, the state has power over religious groups and individuals, and this is apparent in two mutually reinforcing ways. It has attempted to define and delimit the role of religion. Relatedly, it has attempted to define and delimit religious use of space. This supports Anderson's (1987; 1991) argument that authorities have the power to define or legitimise definitions of identity and place. Specifically, in her study of Vancouver between the 1880s and 1920s, Anderson illustrated how the municipal authorities granted legitimacy to the ideas of 'Chinese' and 'Chinatown' by "inscribing social definitions of identity and place in institutional practice and space" (Anderson, 1987:580). In my context, the state not only legitimises definitions of religious roles and places, it also works to provide these very definitions and then persuades religious groups to abide by them.

It is possible to tease out the precise arguments which the state employs to persuade people that its policies and actions are natural, commonsensical, and necessary. In particular, the policies of relocating and demolishing religious buildings illustrate the ways in which the state seeks to persuade Singaporeans of the necessity of such actions. The state has always maintained that 'rational' and 'pragmatic' decisions must be made for Singapore to progress, which, in the present context, is translated as 'economic' use of scarce land. Hence, many areas in Singapore have undergone massive redevelopment, which, more often than not, involves demolition of the old and construction of the new. Given the direction of such rationality, religious buildings have not been spared the bulldozer; much-loved buildings have been knocked down to give way to Mass Rapid Transit stations, new housing projects, and other symbols of modernization and development. This process of urban change is presented as inevitable, as extracts from two speeches by Othman Wok in 1974 (then Minister for Social Affairs) show.

“Progress in Singapore cannot be achieved without change. The numerous development schemes such as oil refinery, public housing, etc. have necessitated the reciting of burial grounds and religious institutions. These have affected all sections of the community. It is not a deliberate policy of the Singapore Government to demolish places of worship. The process of urban renewal has necessitated the moving of population from one area to another. However, every effort has been made to ensure that the way of life of the people concerned is not adversely affected both economically and spiritually. In fact, the object of development is to upgrade the living standards of the population as a whole. In the process of development, the old must make way for the new and demolition of some masjids, temples and churches affected by redevelopment is inevitable. Such action has only been resorted to when absolutely necessary and unavoidable” (Othman Wok, 1974a:3-4).

“Development projects which are for the benefit of Singapore society as a whole must go on, and if any building is in the way of such development, obviously it will have to go if this is unavoidable” (Othman Wok, 1974b:5).

In these arguments it is assumed that there is only one form of rationality in any given situation, but rationality is, in fact, ultimately ideological. What the state has presented is only one construction of rationality. There is an alternative position, one which begins with the premise that religion is important for a modern, fast-changing society because it provides a spiritual

anchor and moral imperative. This has been recognised, for example, in Mr Ho Kah Leong's (then Senior Parliamentary Secretary, Communications and Information) statement that "In our progressive but materialistic society, religion provides the much needed spiritual and moral support" (The Straits Times 1989:17). Extending from this, it is also true that religious institutions and buildings are important because they help people to focus on their religious lives and they act as physical reminders of people's faith in the bustle of urban living. Seen in this light, the rational option would be to keep these buildings, particularly when they have a long-shared history with the people. The fact that the state's conception has been presented as the only rational and pragmatic option indicates that the state is seeking to persuade people its beliefs and actions are the only natural and commonsense way of doing things. In other words, it seeks to be ideologically hegemonic. Even if the destruction of a religious building means some personal loss or if it affects one community in particular, Singaporeans are encouraged to think in terms of public and national interests and the overall good of the country. This reflects wider calls to Singaporeans to subordinate personal and sectional interests for the common good in order that multiracial and multireligious Singapore can enjoy successful community living (Othman Wok, 1971). For example, Chan Chee Seng (1975:2), then Parliamentary Secretary, Ministry of Social Affairs, spoke of how "religion can and must play a part to get people to think in terms of nation, rather than sectional interests" (see also Ahmad Mattar, 1977b; 1988). In real terms, two other examples will further illustrate how such overall interests have overridden sectional interests. The Abortion Bill of 1969 liberalised abortion laws to allow for legalised abortion. This was done at a time when family planning and population control were primary goals on the state's agenda. Religious groups, particularly Christian and Muslim groups, objected, but nonetheless, the Bill was passed with few amendments. At the height of the population control policies in the 1970s, the Ministry of Education gave priority in school enrolment for children whose parents were sterilised. Catholic schools protested that sterilization went against their religious teachings, which meant that Catholic children were likely to be systematically discriminated against. The Minister, Chai Chong Yii replied to criticism by saying: "We have no intention to meddle with religious beliefs. But national policy should take precedence over other policies" (quoted in Kho, 1979-80:75).

Although the 'public interest' is often invoked speedily to counter any objections, there has been little discussion of what constitutes 'public interest' and of who defines such interests. As Simmie (1974:121 - 125) argued in the context of urban planning, there is no such thing as the public interest. Rather, there are a number of different and competing interests, defined by different groups. In such a context, it is fallacious to pretend that "policy makers acting alone can determine and safeguard the 'public interest'" (Burgess and Gold, 1982:2). By contrast, as Vasil (1988:123 - 124) pointed out, the PAP's view is that in a developing society where there are many ethnic groups and economic classes, each group or class has its own distinctive views of what the common interests are. As a result, there will be no "accepted consensus on the interests of the nation". Given this view, the PAP works on the premise that the government "alone [has] the legitimate right to represent the whole nation. Its perceptions of the national interest must prevail". It is such definitions of public interests, generally made with little consultation with the people who will be directly affected, that the state invokes to persuade people to accept its actions.

"Mosques, like other buildings, are but an assemblage of bricks and concrete. For a mosque to become a spiritual household, warm and welcoming to those outside—joyful, harmonious, loving and forgiving to all those inside, it should have life breathed into it through the congregation and their participation in the activities organised. Although all of us gathered here tonight admire the structure and design of this beautiful mosque, we must not forget that the spirit of worship does not lie in the building and design alone; it lies within our hearts ... if we are steadfast in our faith

and sincere in our thoughts, the physical setting and atmosphere are really not that important in drawing us near to God.”

The state also conflates religious and state ideals to persuade religious groups and individuals to support its demolition and relocation policies. Specifically, the state argues that the destruction of religious buildings is necessary for purposes of development and progress, and these are positive goals which religion encourages. Religious teachings are invoked to lend credence to the state’s call for continued development of the country. The Minister in charge of Muslim affairs, Ahmad Mattar (1987) and the then First Deputy Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong (1985), for example, have both said that Islam emphasises not just the spiritual well-being of its adherents, but the material well-being as well. Many leaders have argued that the values which religions seek to impart to their adherents are the very same values which can propel a country on its road to development and progress (Chin Harn Tong, 1988; Rahim Ishak, 1979; Wong Kan Seng, 1985). The overall logic, then, is that religion encourages material development and progress, and the values religions impart encourage such progress. Therefore, if in the pursuit of these laudable goals religious buildings have to be demolished, then the ends will justify the means. If all other arguments fail, in order to justify their acts of demolition the state attempts to persuade people that religious buildings are in themselves meaningless. This is illustrated, for example, in the following speech by Ahmad Mattar (1977a:4):

This quotation would seem to imply that those to whom the physical setting and atmosphere are important are really not steadfast in their faith nor sincere in their thoughts. This implication should perhaps be challenged. In my in-depth interviews with adherents of the various religious communities, it was clear that even those who were very committed and extremely steadfast felt that physical environments played an important role in evoking certain ‘sacred’ feelings and contributed to the ‘sacred experience’ (Kong, 1992).

The relocation and demolition of religious buildings, and the associated arguments cited in support of such actions, suggest the state is seeking ideological hegemony, but the provision of religious sites and the preservation of selected religious buildings may also be cited as examples of genuine state support for religion. After all, there is no reason why a state that does not support religion should provide religious sites or preserve religious buildings. However, it could be argued that even when religious buildings are preserved, such preservation is not inimical to the state at all. In fact, it is appropriate for state ends. Specifically, preservation articulates and supports in practice those very values that the state seeks to perpetuate, such as entrepreneurship, economic prosperity, and progress. This is because these preserved buildings are incorporated into the tourist industry as exhibits and as showcases of Singapore’s multireligious setting. It is evident in the ways in which the Singapore Tourist Promotion Board appropriates and ‘sells’ these preserved monuments in their promotional literature on Singapore (STPB, 1989:32-39; 1990:26-29, 49-50, 58-63).

Furthermore, although the state has chosen to illustrate its recognition of religion and religious needs by providing sites for places of worship, their policies only acknowledge religious needs at a superficial level, admitting only that people who are religious need a place of worship, much like people who are ill need a clinic and children need schools. The recognition does not include the latent, private levels of meanings associated with religious places—certainly not of the sacredness invested in these places. If the state lay store by these values, then urban renewal would more often be planned around religious buildings. In short, the provision of religious sites does not reflect so much a recognition of sacredness—for many, an important part of religion—as a recognition of overt needs. This, in fact, exemplifies well a modernist approach to planning in which buildings are provided because of the functions they fulfil, while other values are de-emphasised, if not totally ignored.

Responses to ideological hegemony: adaptation and resistance

Some deep-seated contradictions are apparent in state policy, and these contradictions, as I have illustrated, clearly impinge on individual lives. Evidently, the professed state commitment to religion is quickly subordinated when an urban renewal scheme arises. Even though these broader structural forces impose constraints on people's lives, these same people—as individuals and as religious groups—do not remain inactive impacted 'objects'. They respond to the state's ideological hegemony either by adapting to and accepting the state's arguments and actions or, conversely, by resisting as far as they can. Two examples will illustrate these extreme responses.

Exemplifying the total success of hegemonic control, there are those who come to terms with the destruction of their religious places by accepting the ideological arguments put forth by the state. They argue that state actions are 'rational' and 'necessary'. For example, some argue that there are religious buildings which have to go because they are old and in a bad state anyway. To them, rehabilitation does not seem to be an option. Others point out that the old are replaced with new and better buildings. Demands are still met. Some buildings are unused or underused and do not deserve to remain standing. Demolition is all part of 'pragmatic' planning and contributes to a more efficient use of space. Growth and change are inevitable. All these reflect the adoption of modernist arguments in planning which recognise the observable functions of places but not the often intangible meanings and values invested. There are even those who deny the sacredness of religious places and refuse to demarcate space as sacred or profane.

Not all individuals and groups respond amicably. In 1978, the Sikh community's Central Temple site was to be acquired because the area in which it stood was largely occupied by prewar shop houses and was due for urban renewal. A Ministry of National Development statement pointed out that "comprehensive development compatible with good planning is not feasible if the site occupied by the temple is to be excluded" (*The Straits Times* 1978a:5). Hence, the land was to be compulsorily acquired to make way for three blocks of eight-storey flats and one block of nineteen-storey flats on a two-storey shopping podium. Although there is no compulsion for the government or its agency (the HDB) to provide alternative sites for religious buildings affected by public projects, it made an exception in this case because the temple was the main Sikh temple catering for all sects. The government therefore helped the community to look for a suitable site for its relocation (*The Straits Times* 1978a). A site in Albert Street was offered in June 1977 but was turned down. Another site in Manila Street was offered in February 1978, which was again rejected. At that point, 750 members of the community attended a meeting, at the end of which three resolutions were passed. The first was that the state should preserve the temple as evidence that it was treating all religious groups evenhandedly. In the second, they urged the government to protect the religious rights and interests of the Sikh community. The third was a unanimous resolution that the temple should remain on the Queen Street site and that there was therefore no question of accepting an alternative site, or selling or exchanging it (*The Straits Times* 1978b). The resolutions were sent to the then President Henry B Sheares and the then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew. In May 1978 the Prime Minister met with nine Sikh community leaders and stressed two points. One was that all religions were and would continue to be treated equally. The other was that Singapore's "progress through redevelopment must go on",

meaning that the “old must give way to new—and this covered churches, temples, mosques and so on” (quoted in *The Straits Times* 1978c:9). He also extracted from the Sikh representatives an agreement that there had been no discrimination against the Sikh community in Singapore. After the meeting, a spokesman for the group expressed confidence that the matter would be resolved amicably soon, “as the Sikh community wants also to contribute to the progress of the nation” (*The Straits Times* 1978c:9). Eventually, the community moved out of their premises into temporary buildings until 1986 when they moved into their new temple in Towner Road.

Whether religious groups and individuals have accepted state ideology and actions or have attempted resistance, the end result in material terms has been the same. Opposition, if it occurs at all, has been ineffectual. Part of this may be attributed to the fact that in some instances, religious functionaries play a mediatory role by de-emphasising the sacredness of religious buildings and stressing the importance of the community instead. In that way, they have not become the rallying point for resistance which they could otherwise quite naturally be. Often, the lack of a coordinated voice has also contributed to the lack of effective resistance to state power: some impacted groups have no organised leadership that can support and present a united stand. Most importantly, the lack of effectual resistance can be attributed to the poor bargaining positions of those affected. As Simmie (1974, page 140) pointed out, groups with different beliefs may be prevented from taking up a valid bargaining position because the power groups set the rules and the procedures. Hence, in the case of compulsory land acquisition, for example, groups have no legal recourse because the Land Acquisition Act (1966) gives the government the legal right to acquire land compulsorily. Landowners affected, including religious groups, have no way of appealing against the decision to acquire their land, and the sole Appeals Board considers only appeals in relation to the compensation award, not to the decision to acquire the land. All this reflects the wider political culture in Singapore where there is little public participation in general policymaking, and little resistance to policies and actions.

Conclusion

At the material level, I have shown that the state clearly plays a large role in deciding how space is to be used for religious purposes. From a functionalist perspective, the policies are a reflection of the state’s commitment to providing an ‘efficient’, ‘orderly’ system in which the various needs of the population are taken care of, ranging from the provision of housing, to schools, public recreational facilities, and so forth. It is in this context that places of worship feature in the planning framework. In other words, in the rationalisation of land-use patterns, the provision of sites reflects a ‘pragmatic’ planning decision to cater to the religious needs of the people. At the same time, the demolition and relocation of religious buildings to make way for public projects is a reflection of how pragmatism, efficiency, and orderliness are emphasised over other values, such as the sacred meanings which adherents invest in religious places. Only rarely, and only in recent years, have alternative values such as historical significance and architectural merit been recognised.

The state’s influence on religious buildings at the material level is obvious, and the ascription of symbolic meanings is not lacking either, even though the Community Development Minister, Wong Kan Seng, has stressed the idea that the state does not ascribe meanings to places, including religious places. Indeed, he has argued it

is not for the state to do so. What the state does do is to set aside land for religious use, but it is the community that then invests meanings in these places (personal interview, 5 April 1990). However, I have shown that the very ways in which the state formulates its policies pertaining to religious buildings are indicative of the underlying symbolic meanings and values ascribed to them by the state. These policies also indicate values that the state wishes Singaporeans to imbibe and adopt as their own. In this sense, religious places are not neutral backdrops to the unfolding human action. Neither are the provision, demolition, and preservation of religious sites purely material actions; they are also politically symbolic ones. Aside from the functional role they play in 'pragmatic' planning blueprints, these buildings have political significance for the state because they are tangible evidence of the state's support for religion. With such concrete testimony, the state can hope to win political support from religious groups and individuals. Furthermore, religious buildings are an important part of the state's exercise of hegemony. Specifically, the state has defined its own conceptions of rationality and public national interests, and, on the basis of these conceptions, it has implemented a demolition and relocation policy. The state then persuades religious groups and individuals that its particular constructions of rationality and public national interest are the only legitimate ones, and the actions arising from them are necessary for Singapore to survive and grow. These attempts at persuasion are ideologically hegemonic, and are further supported by arguments which conflate state and religious ideals and which deny the meaningfulness of religious buildings to ordinary individuals. Even when these buildings are clearly invested with sacred meaning and intense personal attachments, they are treated as no different from other buildings, and attempts are made to persuade people of this 'truth'. In other words, the state seeks to instill in people its particular set of values which will allow it to maintain political power.

Hegemony, however, is never fully achieved (Gramsci 1973). Domination is never total or static, but is always contested. Resistances can take a variety of forms: active and open, or latent and symbolic. Singaporeans' responses to the state's hegemonic controls have varied. Where there has been resistance, such resistance has not succeeded in allowing religious groups to keep their buildings. The balance between domination and hegemonic control, on the one hand, and resistance, on the other, has been maintained in the context of Singapore's religious buildings, often with adaptation and reconciliation on the part of religious groups.

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