INTERRELIGIOUS RELATIONS

Interreligious Marriage

Perspectives from the Singaporean Context
in Relation to Interreligious Dialogue
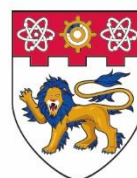
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Juhi Ahuja and Paul Hedges

Abstract

This paper explores the phenomenon of interreligious marriage in Singapore, based on a literature review and interviews with religious leaders and laypeople. The distinct nature of the Singapore context is noted, as well as the limits of the mainstream discussion which focuses upon the Abrahamic traditions in a Western context. The distinctive patterns of six different traditions are discussed (Buddhism, Catholic Christianity, Protestant Christianity, Daoism and Chinese folk religion, Hinduism, and Islam), as well as issues drawn from these patterns. The paper is primarily devoted to presenting an empirical overview from the interviews, and enters conceptual issues mainly in showing how the Singaporean (or Southeast Asian) context disrupts the standard Western-centric assumptions in the literature. Areas for further research are noted.

Introduction

While often seen as a relatively new phenomenon, interreligious (or mixed) marriages (IRM) have been common for centuries in Southeast Asia. Like much literature around interreligious relations and dialogue, the focus has been on the West, especially the United States. This partly explains the perception of it as a new phenomenon. Nevertheless, patterns of religious identity, belonging, and classification in many parts of the world have, through colonisation and intellectual neo-colonialism, become infused and inflected with Western notions from Europe, North America, and elsewhere.[1] The colonial influence affected classification of religion, brought missionary forms of Christianity, and, altered people's identities within religions.[2] These factors have, in turn, changed perceptions of what an IRM is and how it is understood. The focus of this paper is not historical, however, the (neo-) colonial heritage that influences IRM in Singapore needs to be considered.

Religious syncretism has been normative not just in Southeast Asia, but globally, in the pre-modern period.[3] Moreover, in religiously diverse societies, marriages across religious boundaries would have been relatively common and often unproblematic. Islam reached Southeast Asia mainly through male traders arriving by boat, and so their marriages with local women would have crossed religious boundaries. Likewise, Buddhism, Hinduism, and animistic traditions have survived in many places, and it is unlikely that religious affiliations would have been seen as significant hurdles when marrying. In the modern context, however, highlighted in the census system, where people need to tick only one box in the category "religion" a heightened (or created) sense of religious boundaries and differences has arisen.[4] This is related in Singapore to "racial" identities, discussed below.[5] Hence, an IRM may also be a cross-cultural or mixed ethnicity marriage which adds to the perception of problems inherent in it. Further, in contemporary Singapore, every person is seen, at least officially, as having only one religion and so crossing between these may seem problematic. Some of these boundaries are more marked than others, as outlined in later sections.

The paper will be based on a literature review, and a research project that mapped the state of interreligious relations in Singapore. The latter has two phases. The first, conducted in 2016, involved thirty-four interviews with what were termed "apex" religious leaders across Singapore's main (in numerical terms) religious traditions (Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Daoism[6] and Chinese folk religion, and Hinduism).[7] The second phase, conducted from 2017-2018, involved interviews with what were termed mid-level leaders, as well as conducting focus groups with laypeople/ grassroots groups. Over fifty interviews took place, alongside focus groups with around two hundred people. It was extended to include the Baha'i community beyond the traditions noted above. All interviewees and focus group participants were guaranteed anonymity and given the right to withdraw consent from having their data used. The first phase of the research project was undertaken by both authors, while one of the authors was only involved in the early part of the second phase of the project but has been cognisant of the ongoing research, and has had access to the data. The data from this is used to represent a current picture of some religious views rather than providing a definitive assessment of what religious traditions teach.

We start with a literature review on IRMs, putting it within the context of the dialogue of life. We then move onto Singapore, firstly laying out demographics and the context, before exploring data collated from

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[1] The literature is extensive, but for a perspective from Singapore on rethinking Eurocentric blind spots in theory, see Syed Farid Alatas and Vineeta Sinha, "Introduction: Eurocentrism, Androcentrism and Sociological Theory." In *Sociological Theory Beyond the Canon*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017: 1-16.

[2] See David Chidester, *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in South Africa*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1996, and Paul Hedges, *Understanding Religion: Method and Theory for Studying Religiously Plural Societies*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, forthcoming (due 2020).

[3] See Robert Winzeller, *Popular Religion in Southeast Asia*, London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016, 23-54.

[4] See Richard King, *Religion and Orientalism*, London: Routledge, 1999.

[5] "Race" is the official designation of the Singaporean government for these four markers which appear on people's identity cards. It harks to British colonial classification, which was part of the "divide and rule" policy of separating groups. In this paper we will generally use the terminology of ethnicity to refer to the "races" of Singapore, as it is seen as a more academic and less problematic (though not unproblematic) category.

[6] In Singapore, Daoism is normally spelt "Taoism", however, we follow the standard academic convention of using pinyin romanisations here.

[7] Given Singapore's limited size, no particulars on traditions or leadership levels are offered as this would allow direct identification of individual leaders in many cases.

interviews. We then discuss our data in relation to the wider literature on IRMs, noting issues arising from the local context. A brief conclusion points to areas for further study, and highlights that IRM is perceived as more problematic for two main groups but often for different reasons: Protestant Christians and Muslims; for the former because of theological concerns; for the latter often due to the local legal framework.

Understanding IRMs

From the standard typology of interreligious dialogue (IRD) perspective, IRM comes within the remit of the dialogue of life.[8] This dialogue "values people over beliefs," and is "where people strive to live in an open and neighbourly spirit, sharing their joys and sorrows, their human problems and preoccupations".[9] While including day to day interactions of people in the public sphere, it includes the private or family sphere. This emphasises that IRM is an area where members of different traditions need to negotiate issues that arise with the meeting of religious worldviews, and is recognised as a form of dialogue. It is, however, quite distinct from ways that people may normally envisage dialogue, which may typically expect what is termed the Dialogue of Theological Exchange. In turn, the latter often involves elite leaders or academics discussing concepts.[10]

However, it may be argued that interactions of people in the personal or private space of marriage are different from day to day interactions in the public sphere, typical of the dialogue of life. However, it is of sociological interest to posit IRM within the dialogue of life precisely because it is an institution and circumstance where two individual's religious identities become prominent features of each other's lives. Although some individuals in IRMs may profess they are themselves not very religious, the meeting and interaction of different religious identities arguably shapes their worldviews nonetheless.[11] Certainly, not just two individuals, but their families and wider social networks may become involved in IRD. However, the question remains whether it is IRD by virtue of simply concerning different religious identities, or by virtue of actual engagement on religious issues and commonalities. As will be seen later, it is often difficult to separate not just these two within IRMs, as religious identity reveals itself in various aspects of marriage and family life, but also wider cultural and ethnic dialogues and interactions which may be more or less intertwined with religious identities. As a dialogical activity, IRM may be related to reflection on Gadamer's hermeneutics, where what is spoken of as an Opening of Horizons[12] occurs, referring to a new understanding reached by bringing together differing perceptions or ways of life. The application of this to the dynamics of IRM refers to questions raised, such as whether the child is brought up in one, both, or neither of the parent's religions, and how family celebrations around festivals are negotiated and enacted as shared familial spaces.

Academic literature on IRMs over the past few decades has shown certain general patterns that have remained consistent. For instance, couples tend to include at least one individual from a higher or lower socioeconomic status group, even if this discrepancy changes later in the marriage.[13] Furthermore, individuals

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[8] The standard typology has four classifications: the dialogue of life; the dialogue of action; the dialogue of theological exchange; the dialogue of religious experience, though some extend this variously, see Alan Race, "Interfaith Dialogue: Religious Accountability between Strangeness and Resonance," in *Christian Approaches to Other Faiths*, eds Paul Hedges and Alan Race, London: SCM Press, 2008: 155-72, 161-3, and Marianne Moyaert, "Interreligious Dialogue," in *Understanding Interreligious Relations*, ed. David Cheetham, Douglas Pratt, and David Thomas, Oxford: Oxford University Press: 193-207, 201-204.

[9] Race, "Interfaith Dialogue," 162, citing *Dialogue and Proclamation* 1991. I thank one of my anonymous reviewers for noting the way this definition foregrounds "belief" as emblematic of "religion" and so speaks to a very Protestant conception of that term as normative. For critiques of this, see Hedges, *Understanding Religion*.

[10] On the typological categorisation of dialogue, and ways it is perceived, see Race, "Interfaith Dialogue," Paul Hedges, *Controversies in Interreligious Dialogue and the Theology of Religions*. London: SCM Press, 2010, and Moyaert, "Interreligious Dialogue." A critical overview is in Hedges, *Understanding Religion*, chapter 14.

[11] Audrey Allas, "Religious Conversion and Kinship Cohesion: Intermarriage Amongst British Pakistani Muslims," *Interreligious Studies and Intercultural Theology* 2.1 (2018): 27-45.

[12] For this as a preferable usage to Gadamer's own "Fusion of Horizons", especially in relation to IRD, see Paul Hedges, "Gadamer, Play, and Interreligious Dialogue as the Opening of Horizons," *Journal of Dialogue Studies 4* (2016): 5-26.

[13] See Paul C. Rosenblatt, "A Systems Theory Analysis of Intercultural Couple Relationships," in *Intercultural Couples: Exploring Diversity in Intimate Relationships*, eds Terri A. Karis and Kyle D. Killian, New York: Routledge, 2009: 3-20, 11, P.R. Spickard, *Mixed Blood: Intermarriage and ethnic identity in twentieth-century America*, Madison: University of

within IRMs tend to be younger or older than the average marrying age within a particular society, with many having been married before.[14] Further, many individuals tend to become less religious as they enter IRMs, one reason being that sometimes one spouse may dominate.[15] Moreover, ideas of religion and the relationship to their spouse's religion changes when children come into the picture. It is also worth noting that an individuals' religious leanings may become less significant when compared to how much they value the relationship.[16]

Crucially, research on IRMs overwhelmingly concerns the "Abrahamic" religions, and the global West.[17] This imbalance highlights the significance of studying Singapore, where religious diversity allows for meaningful research of IRMs beyond the Abrahamic religions. Furthermore, in the Singaporean context, the relationship between culture, ethnicity, and religion can be fluid and ambiguous, especially as we follow what may seem clear divides between the following six main religious groups: Buddhism, Catholic Christianity, Protestant Christianity, Daoism and Chinese folk Religion, Hinduism, and Islam. We discuss below our reasons for subdividing this way. We also offer an exploration of the local context below and in the next section.

For Buddhism, questions of marriage have not traditionally been of concern. Developing primarily as a monastic tradition, it did not directly concern itself with the social and familial organisation of the lay community in what we may call scriptural terms. Marriage, in Buddhist majority countries, simply followed the prevailing local customs; at the most, some may seek the blessing of a Buddhist monk after the ceremony. Therefore, there has generally been no Buddhist position on IRMs although, in postcolonial contexts, these have arisen.[18] Moreover, as we are dealing with Singapore where Buddhism is predominantly Chinese Mahayana, it has reflected a context of Chinese religiosity where the question of an IRM was simply not an issue (discussed below).

For Catholic Christianity, since the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), when the documents *Unitatis Redintegratio* and *Pastorale Munus* were propagated, but especially in the wake of Pope Paul VI's encyclical *Matrimonia Mixta* (1970) the official position decrees IRM as permissible. Nevertheless, the process is regulated, requiring "dispensation from disparity of cult" obtained from the local bishop for a priest to conduct a church wedding between a Christian and a non-Christian. Marriage with Christians from other denominations is also regulated, but since 1983 has been recognised as a sacrament.

For Daoism and Chinese folk religion, there has generally never been any marriage customs. While the early Celestial Masters (Tianshi Dao) tradition had regulations, this operated as a theocracy, and subsequently Daoism has existed in a wider Chinese cultural sphere, discussed below. Weddings have both regional and class distinctions, but common patterns of feasts and various customs have existed. Certainly, we could meaningfully relate many of these customs to Chinese folk religion, for instance, in terms of Chinese astrological calculations to choose suitable partners, but they were not perceived as sectarian religiously. Today, we may say Chinese weddings are simply "customary" rather than "religious" events.[19]

Hindu weddings are traditionally based upon regional and caste customs. In many cases, there has traditionally been no particular prescriptions on IRMs when employing elements found within Vedic texts.[20]

Wisconsin Press, 1989, and Eddie C. Y. Kuo and Riaz Hassan, "Some Social Concomitants of Interethnic Marriage in Singapore," *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 38:3 (1976): 549-559.

[14] Kuo and Hassan, "Some Social Concomitants," 553.

[15] Naomi Schaefer Riley, *'Til Faith Do Us Part: How Interreligious Marriage is Transforming America*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2013.

[16] Riley, *'Til Faith Do Us Part*.

[17] The authors' recognise the problems associated with the use of the term "Abrahamic religions" and use it here for the sake of convenience. See Hedges, *Understanding Religion*, textbox 2.2. Certainly, there is a fairly significant literature beyond the West, but its focus is on Islam and so still stresses an Abrahamic tradition.

[18] Sri Lanka and Myanmar are examples, where the conversion of Buddhist women has become a matter of debate, see Abby Seiff, Quintus Colombage, and Niranjani Roland, "Taking a stand against radical Buddhism in Sri Lanka," *Union of Catholic Asian News Limited* (April 28, 2015), available at: www.ucanews.com/news/taking-a-stand-against-radical-buddhism-in-sri-lanka/73452.

[19] This is not to say that a natural division exists between the spheres of "religion" and "culture." However, in the modern context, these terms describe how they will often be perceived. To note, Confucianism is not mentioned here as it does not provide a current "religious" identity in Singapore, but was part of the matrix of social life in traditional China and still, arguably, underlies family relations and norms today.

[20] This is mainly because of the universalistic nature of traditional Hinduism.

Indeed, certainly pre-colonialism (referring here to both the Moghul and European/ British invasions) there were generally no sense of different "religious" traditions.[21] Caste would often have been a more significant factor.

Islamic traditions have included elements both recognising and denying IRMs. Owing to particular dynamics of Abrahamic monotheisms, a recognition of different "religions" (Muslims would not traditionally use that term) means IRMs were significant. Some Qur'anic verses seemingly deny the viability of IRM (most notably Q 2:221, 5:5, 60:10), but following the *sunnah* (traditions) of the Prophet Muhammad and later practice, it is generally seen as permissible. However, there are two major provisos. First, it is normally only seen as permissible for a Muslim man to marry a non-Muslim woman; not for a Muslim woman to marry a non-Muslim man. There is therefore a gendered aspect to this. Second, IRMs are normally only seen as permissible with "People of the Book" (*ahl l-kitab*). The Qur'an identifies three groups by this term: Jews, Christians, and Sabians. The Sabians is a term which has long puzzled scholars. However, with the expansion of Islam, many other traditions have been recognised as "People of the Book" including Zoroastrians, Hindus, and Buddhists.[22] This coincided with the expansion of Islam into territories where these were the major religious traditions. In terms of IRMs, it could be seen as a practical necessity. Certainly, in Southeast Asia, where many of the early Muslims were traders – often only males – intermarriage with local women was generally not a problem, allowing the early growth of Islam in the region.[23] Some scholars have argued that Muslims should see IRM as permissible currently.[24]

For Protestant Christianity, lacking Catholicism's hierarchy, there is much variation. However, in the Singaporean context, we can streamline this discussion. Singapore's Protestantism consists of mainstream denominations, i.e., Anglican, Lutheran, Methodist, and Baptist, as well as a range of independent Evangelical and Pentecostal churches, including notable Megachurches (often characterised as those with congregations in excess of two thousand). Today, most of these churches are strongly influenced by American Evangelical and Fundamentalist strands of Christianity, including mainstream denominations.[25] Therefore, they exhibit a fairly conservative or exclusivist theology vis-à-vis other religious traditions, which frames their stance on IRM.[26] Evangelical Protestant Christians often look to verses which are seen to speak against IRMs. This includes texts from the Hebrew Bible (including Deut 7:3, Neh 10:30), but most commonly cited is a verse from Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians, that uses the phrases "unequally yoked" (2 Cor 6:14-16). This passage does not deal with IRM, but Evangelicals invoke the phrase "unequally yoked" as shorthand for opposing IRMs. Globally, for mainstream Protestants, IRM is not generally perceived as a problem. The turn to IRD has become the *modus operandi*, and no explicit theological condemnation exists.[27] Of course, local contexts, perceptions of racial/ ethnic and religious boundaries, and specific conflicting issues affect this. The concept of being "unequally yoked" is specific to the more Evangelical wings of Christianity.

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[21] Julius Lipner, *Hindus: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*, London: Routledge, 1994, 8-11.

[22] Ghulam Haider Aasi, *Muslim Understanding of Other Religions: A Study of Ibn Ḥazm's Kitāb al-Faṣl fi al-Milal wa al-Ahwā' wa al-Niḥal*, New Delhi: Adam Publishers: 2010.

[23] A classic example of such IRM in Singapore in pre-colonial and colonial days was between Chinese traders and local Malay/Indonesian women. The children of such marriages and their subsequent generations identify as *Peranakans*. Although these were IRMs often involving one Muslim spouse, most Peranakans do not identify as Muslims. See Jürgen Rudolph *Reconstructing Identities: A Social History of the Babas in Singapore*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998, J. E. Khoo, *The Straits Chinese: A Cultural History*, Amsterdam: The Pepin Press, 1996, and Leo Suriyadinata, *Peranakan Chinese in a Globalizing Southeast Asia: The Cases of Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia*, Singapore: Chinese Heritage Centre and Baba House, 2010.

[24] Khaleel Mohammed, "Can Muslim Women Marry Non-Muslim Men?" lecture delivered at Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles, USA (2012), available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Kcp2W9V3C4.

[25] We use "fundamentalism" here in the technical sense of referring to certain strands of literalist interpretation in Christian thought that self-defined in this way, while also noting that the various strands we may term as Evangelical and Fundamentalist are far from unified. On the use of terms and some background, see Christopher J. van der Krogt, "The Rise of Fundamentalisms," in *Controversies in Contemporary Religion: Education, Law, Politics, Society, and Spirituality*, ed. Paul Hedges, Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2014: 1-38.

[26] On the terminology of exclusivisms (and also inclusivisms, pluralisms, and particularities), see Hedges, *Controversies in Interreligious Dialogue.* Notably, apart from the Methodists, none of Singapore's Protestant churches belong to the World Council of Churches, often taken as a sign of fringe or extreme Christian groupings.

[27] On the development of IRD in the Christian churches, see Douglas Pratt, *The Church and Other Faiths: The World Council of Churches, the Vatican, and Interreligious Dialogue*, Peter Lang AG, 2010.

Singapore's Context: Religion, Ethnicity, Law

In 2015, Singapore's Department for Statistics' General Household Survey published the following religious demographics: Buddhism (33.2 per cent), Christianity (18.8 per cent), Daoism and Chinese folk religion (11 per cent), Hinduism (5 per cent), Islam (14 per cent), no religion (the "Nones") (18.3 per cent), and smaller religions (0.6 per cent). It goes alongside an ethnic makeup comprising Chinese (74.3 per cent), Malays (13.3 per cent), Indians (9.1 per cent), and others (3.2 per cent). Much of this has remained constant over recent decades, though Daoists and Chinese folk religion followers have fallen dramatically. Meanwhile, Buddhists have risen significantly, while both Christianity and "Nones" (those ticking "none of the above" on census questions on religion) have grown exponentially. The former is probably related to ways of identifying with Chinese religiosity (see below). The latter relates to successful Christian evangelistic (and identity placement) campaigns, and a growth of people refusing identities in traditional religious terms.[28]

Another significant factor is the fusion in the Singaporean context of religious and ethnic identities. IRMs tend to overlap with inter-ethnic marriages.[29] Statistics released by the Singapore Department of Statistics in 2016 revealed that one in five married couples are inter-ethnic couples, which may overlap with IRMs.[30] Singapore officially identifies four ethnic ("racial") groups: Chinese, Malay, Indian, and other; giving rise to the acronym CMIO. It relates back to classifications employed by the British colonial government and directs Singaporean state policy on multiculturalism.[31] The connection of religion and ethnicity is "closely but not exclusively related."[32] Nevertheless, IRMs in Singapore are mired in questions of ethnic identity and relationships. Some of the crossover between religious and ethnic identity follows fairly clear lines. Most Buddhists and Daoists are Chinese, most Hindus are Indian, and most Malays are Muslims. In case of the other category, it predominantly refers to Eurasians (mixed Asian and European descent) who are largely Christian. Christians, though, represent significant proportions of the Chinese, and to a lesser extent Indians, the latter having a high proportion of Muslims. Ethnicity and religion is most intertwined in the so called Malay-Muslim community, which deserves special comment, where ethnic and religious overlap is 98 per cent.

The background to the Malay-Muslim community relates to Singapore's position in relation to the wider Malay Archipelago and British colonial history. We cannot deal adequately with these complex issues here, and will therefore only note pertinent key points. The Federation of Malaysia obtained independence from Britain in 1963, and, after two years of strained relations, Singapore broke away as a separate nation-state in 1965. It had been an outlier in Malaysia, being predominantly ethnic Chinese, and many Malays were wary about the split, as they moved from being a national majority (even if a local minority) to becoming a national minority. Therefore, as part of the deal over independence with Malaysia, and to reassure the local population, the new Singaporean government enshrined certain constitutional protections for the Malays as the indigenous people of the land. Malay is the national language, with the national anthem being composed in it (although the common working language is English, and Malay is categorised as one of three "mother tongues" taught to the specific ethnic groups in schools, along with Tamil to Indians and Mandarin to Chinese). The Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS, reflecting Malay terminology in its acronym) was founded as a statutory body to protect Muslim rights, and importantly under the stipulations of the Administration of Muslim Law Act (AMLA) to oversee Shari'ah (locally Syariah) law, while the Office of the Mufti resides within it. Arguably, this continued a colonial system of administration of the Malay community since, alongside the Hindu Endowments Board (HEB), only Muslims and Hindus had bodies representing them in such ways under British rule. (The HEB also continues to

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[28] The issue of religious "Nones" in Singapore is discussed in Paul Hedges and Mohamed Imran Mohamed Taib, "The Interfaith Movement in Singapore: Precarious Toleration and Embedded Autonomy," in *The Interfaith Movements*, eds John Fahy and Jan-Jonathan Bock, London: Routledge, 2019 (forthcoming).

[29] Kuo and Hassan, "Some Social Concomitants."

[30] Felicia Choo, "One in Five Marriages Here is Inter-ethnic," *The Straits Times* (19 July 2017), available at: https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/one-in-five-marriages-here-is-inter-ethnic.

[31] Norman Vasu and Juhi Ahuja, *Multiracialism*, Singapore Chronicles series, Singapore: Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) and the Straits Times Press, 2018.

[32] Trevor Ling, "Religion" in *Management of Success. The Moulding of Modern Singapore*, ed. Kernial Sandhu and Paul Wheatley, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1989: 692-709, 696.

exist, like MUIS, as a statutory body linked to the government.) There is also a Minister-in-charge for Muslim Affairs. The Malay-Muslim identity was therefore effectively safeguarded and protected.

Attention should be given to the double-barrelled appellation: Malay-Muslim. The high affinity of religious and ethnic identity marks it out as unique locally. Moreover, the concept of being Malay and being Muslim is not just seen as incidental, but as conjoined. To give up being a Muslim is, in the eyes of many Malays, tantamount to rejecting Malay identity. However, adopting Islam, Malay customs, and speaking Malay can make somebody "Malay", in the significant sense that the community accepts somebody as a member. It is well-known academically that ethnic or racial identities or categories are arbitrary, but for much of the general population in Singapore they are often taken to be "real" markers of difference. Therefore, the fluid concept of "Malayness," while in some ways the most significant and protected, is also the site of hybrid transgression of the system.

The other combination of religious identities that can be remarked upon is the Buddhist-Daoist[33] matrix. Traditionally, in East Asia, religious identities have not been singular. Indeed, the terminology of religion is not unproblematic in this context. The Chinese have traditionally engaged in Strategic Religious Belonging in a Shared Religious Landscape.[34] The Chinese have engaged with religions in ways that suits their needs without any sense of confessional belonging, such that one may employ a Buddhist monk for a funeral (an area of traditional specialisation), a Celestial Masters priest for an exorcism (their forte), while looking to Confucianism for social mores, and attending rites at the local folk religion shrine. Even for religious professionals, traditionally Buddhists and Daoists would study with one another, while Neo-Confucianism borrowed from both. Therefore, distinguishing the Chinese as being only Confucian, Daoist, Buddhist, or folk religionists, would be misleading, if not outright distorting. However, increasingly (under Western normative pressure) these traditions have often striven to "purify" and demarcate themselves. Despite this, most Chinese, irrespective of what they state on their census forms, will seemingly attend Buddhist, Daoist, and folk religion temples. A few though, will clearly identify as only one of these. This has implications for considering IRMs because their classification, in part, will depend upon how we understand religious boundaries.

A final and significant issue to consider is the discourse that surrounds Singapore's interreligious fabric.[35] This vacillates between two poles: on the one hand, Singapore is held up as an exemplar of religious harmony with the much-vaunted Inter-Religious Organisation of Singapore (IRO), founded in 1949, seen as a paradigm of success. On the other hand, Singapore's situation is held as inherently conflicting and prone to communal disharmony and inherently strained. Again, space does not permit us to explore this in depth, so we will just note some key issues. One of these is that these two narratives both exist as official and popular perceptions.

It is usually understood that Singapore's relative religious harmony is a result of careful policy and administrative planning because of what was learnt from certain incidents before independence. It is a deliberate and calculated strategy to maintain peace. The former narrative of Singapore's interreligious success story is based upon the fact that despite a prehistory (before 1965) of communal violence (discussed next), Singapore has now existed for over fifty years in a state of peace.[36] This is particularly contrasted with the often-fraught situation in neighbouring countries where interreligious violence and tensions have erupted periodically. As mentioned, the IRO is seen as the guardian of this coexistence. The second narrative harks back to the Maria Hertogh riots of 1950[37] and the race riots of 1964,[38] when ethnic communities clashed in religiously charged contexts. These two narratives are retold by Singaporean politicians today, often as justifications for severely

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[33] Much fluidity exists between Buddhism, Daoism, folk religion, and Confucianism in the Chinese religious ecology which means that adherence to a single category is often a misnomer, see Paul Hedges, "Multiple Religious Belonging after Religion: Theorising Strategic Religious Participation in a Shared Religious Landscape as a Chinese Model," *Open Theology* 3 (2017): 48-72. In the contemporary context, Buddhism and Daoism comprise the two main official categories for identity today.

[34] Paul Hedges, "Multiple Religious Belonging."

[35] Hedges and Taib, "The Interfaith Movement."

[36] This political narrative is often used to justify both inter-racial and interreligious categorisations and policies.

[37] NLB, "Maria Hertogh riots," *National Library Board* (Singapore), 2014a, available at: http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_83_2005-02-02.html.

[38] NLB, "Communal riots of 1964," *National Library Board* (Singapore), 2014b, available at: http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_45_2005-01-06.html.

curtailing public religious discourse that may hurt the sentiments of any religious-ethnic community.[39] A wider history, that included what is seen as the politicisation of religion and aggressive evangelical Christian crusades, both in the 1980s, led to the passing of the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act (MRHA) in 1990 which has been termed the "pragmatic" response of the state.[40] For the purposes of this paper, a few pertinent issues may be highlighted. First, it is illegal, and seen as damaging to society, for anybody to hurt the religious sentiments of another community. It is likely that a considerable amount of self-censorship (especially in public) is practiced by religious communities to avoid any condemnation of other communities. Second, there is also a sense that religious tolerance is part of the Singaporean way of life, and that religious traditions get along well together. Third, and paradoxically, there is often a fear of openly engaging in addressing religious issues, especially as they relate to interreligious issues. It is seen as something that may spark tensions, offend religious sentiments, and exacerbate natural fault lines. We may therefore say that there is something of a sense of cognitive dissonance in the Singaporean perspective on interreligious relations and communal harmony. The Dialogue of Life therefore exists in a situation of tension: the harmony of communities is assumed as normative, yet held to be fraught and potentially prone to violence. IRM provides a place where the dialogue across perceived borders (as noted, some borders are perceived as harder or more significant than others) becomes a necessity, and therefore involves discussions that may sometimes be seen as touching Singapore's OB markers.[41]

IRMs in Singapore: An Evidence-based Assessment

This section is primarily based on the interview project in which both authors have been involved. This paper primarily draws upon the first phase, adding insights from the second phase when it is useful.

The interviews showed a diverse range of responses, with some fairly typical trends within specific traditions. Here we focus on the significant trends within each tradition. For the project, the five largest religious communities based upon census data were surveyed: Buddhism, Christianity, Daoism, Hinduism, and Islam. However, two notes are needed. First, we will distinguish between Protestant and Catholic Christianity for two reasons. On the one hand, a clear division on IRM existed between these two traditions, which was the only sectarian division identified. On the other, there is a particular Catholic policy, noted above, which does not apply in Protestantism. Second, under Daoism, we also included Chinese folk religion since for many ordinary Chinese, no clear division exists.[42] A brief overview of each tradition is given here, while specific issues are addressed in the next section.

There was no opposition stated by any Buddhist leader towards IRM, and they expressed no problem with it in principle. Indeed, it was often noted that traditionally there was no such thing as "Buddhist marriage." Leaders suggested, for their traditions, it was not an issue compared to how they saw other traditions conceptualise it. It was seen as normal within a multicultural and multi-religious society. This reflects the general literature on IRMs and typifies the Chinese ethos. However, elsewhere in Asia this has, as noted, becomes a politicised issue. There were no signs of this in Singapore.

Catholic leaders were united in holding the hierarchical and institutionalised policy, although some were naturally more familiar with the policies. There is no opposition, in principle, to IRMs; however, certain stipulations would be made to the couple. First, they would need to attend meetings with a priest who would discuss the Catholic understanding of marriage, and to affirm that they accept this. Second, a particular document exists which is required to be filled for the bishop to authorise any IRM, requiring certain

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[39] See Laavanya Kathiravelu, "Rethinking Race: Beyond the CMIO Categorisations," *New Naritif* (09 September 2017), available at: https://newnaritif.com/research/rethinking-race-beyond-the-cmio-categorisations/.

[40] Mohammad Alami Musa, *Engaging Religion with Pragmatism: The Singapore State's Management of Social Issues and Religious Tensions in the 1980s*, RSIS Working Paper no. 305, Singapore: RSIS, 2017, available at: https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/WP305.pdf, 11-17.

[41] OB or "out of bounds" markers is a term used by Singaporean politicians for areas that should not be publicly discussed. They are not always explicitly stated and are fluid, but involve politics and religion.

[42] This is not to deny that, officially and institutionally, Singapore's major Daoist lineages will demarcate themselves very strongly.

commitments. Third, the principal commitment, needed from both parties in the marriage, is that children from the marriage will be brought up within Catholic traditions.

Daoist and Chinese folk religion leaders, like Buddhists, expressed no opposition to IRM. Responses did not really expand, but it may be noted that traditional Chinese marriage ceremonies could be spoken of as being more of a "cultural" rather than a "religious" event, and would therefore not be a "Daoist marriage" in any sense. Evidently, there is much in common with Buddhism. Notably, Daoism and Chinese folk religion are not included in mainstream existing literature on IRM. Covering the traditions noted therefore provides one important addition to existing studies.

Hindu leaders, like Buddhists and Daoists, saw IRM as normal and unproblematic. Indeed, perhaps representing the relatively smaller size of the Hindu community, the naturalness of such marriages was more stressed as an everyday event. While a cultural event, institutionalised (temple) Hinduism is often a part of these weddings, making them more "religious" compared to the other two traditions. However, more than any other group, Hindus expressed concerns with IRM where Protestantism was involved. In relation to wider interreligious relations, one leader made the strong remark that Hindus felt like "a community under siege." The implication was they felt besieged by Protestant Christians as targets for conversion. Their stance was while they maintained an equitable and easy attitude towards IRMs, Protestantism did not reciprocate the same.

The Islamic tradition represents an outlier in relation to IRM in Singapore. This relates to the AMLA which stipulates that marriage between Muslims will be governed under Shari'ah law. A marriage between a Muslim and a non-Muslim, however, cannot be undertaken within the remit of AMLA, and so must be a civil marriage. In principle, this means that IRMs are technically legal. However, while possible, IRMs are effectively barred by the identity of the Malay-Muslim community within Singapore. Turning to the responses of leaders, most noted that while Muslims could marry outside of Islam, this was not possible within Singapore. One leader stated it was permissible to have an IRM without any problem and be a Muslim, while another stated it was entirely forbidden by Islamic law. Upon further probing, their view seemed to imply this is not just the case within Singapore, but in the wider Islamic context as well. In general, aligning with the typical Islamic views noted above, most leaders stated an IRM would only be possible in terms of a Muslim man marrying a non-Muslim woman, but not vice versa. In addition, such cases would only allow marriage to an individual from the "Religions of the Book", which was clarified as Jews and Christians in today's context.

Protestant leaders exhibited the widest variety of stances. The vast majority were clear that IRM was definitely not ideal. This ranged from the standpoint that, although not ideal, it was perfectly acceptable and any Christian who married outside the faith would be supported in their choice, to one leader who stated anyone who chose an IRM would no longer be welcome in their congregation. Most leaders veered towards the former stance, although it was strongly implied that it was not ideal. This position aligns with the discussion above about the generic Evangelical Protestant sense that marrying a non-Christian involves being "improperly yoked." Also, a significant view, found more among mid-level leaders – or expressed more willingly by them – was that IRM was seen as an opportunity for proselytising. The Christian partner should try and bring the other partner "to the faith," even targeting their partner's family if they were not Christian. Singapore has quite strong denominational identities, and the leaders saw no problem marrying outside among other Protestants. However, one significant quote from an apex leader was that marriage to other Christians outside their denomination was fine and that "this even applies to Catholics." Notably, some Protestant laypeople were more open to IRMs and this was reflected in one focus group where a participant was in an IRM himself. The whole group felt that IRMs were entirely acceptable for Protestants. This seemed to emerge from this personal encounter of an individual in an IRM, and also because the pastor of the church was active in IRD and encouraged positive relations with other religions in his congregation. This highlights the potential role of IRD, including the dialogue of life (everyday interactions with a family in an IRM) as a factor in shaping attitudes. However, in most focus groups, the laypeople typically seemed more opposed to IRM than the pastors of their congregations, and certainly compared to the apex leaders.

These findings can be related to research from an Institute of Policy Studies survey that looked at whether Buddhists, Muslims, and Protestants would be happy with partners from another religious tradition.[43]

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[43] Mathew Mathews, Mohammad Khamsya Bin Khidzer, and Teo Kay Key, "Religiosity and the Management of Religious Harmony: Responses from the IPS Survey on Race, Religion and Language," *IPS Working Papers* No. 21 (2014), available at: https://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/docs/default-source/ips/workingpaper21_180614_v4.pdf?sfvrsn=56bf9e0b_2, 51-2.

This showed that while the vast majority of Buddhists would be happiest with a Buddhist partner (95.8 per cent), they would also be very comfortable with a Daoist partner (77.3 per cent).The majority had no problem with Christians (Catholic: 64.6 per cent, Protestant: 63.8 per cent). However, they would be much less happy with a Muslim (31.7 per cent), Hindu (34.9 per cent), or Sikh (31.6 per cent). For Muslims, the vast preference was for a Muslim partner (94.6 per cent), with somewhat comparably low rates among others religions: Buddhist (20.1 per cent), Catholic (22.5 per cent), Protestant (22.4 per cent), Daoist (19.7 per cent), Hindu (19.8 per cent), and Sikh (17.7 per cent). In the case of Protestants, the vast majority preferred a partner from their denomination (94 per cent), with most accepting a Catholic (65.8 per cent), and much less acceptance for other religions: Buddhist (43.4 per cent), Muslim (19.3 per cent), Daoist (37.8 per cent), Hindu (22.1 per cent), and Sikh (20.3 per cent). One area not explored in this paper is the ethnic dimension. Therefore, are lower levels of acceptance of some religions related to the perception of the ethnic differences? Arguably this may be a factor as to why Protestants (many of whom are Chinese) seem more accepting of a potential Buddhist or Daoist partner as opposed to any other.

Discussion: Highlighting Issues on IRM

We can note from the above a few specific issues relating to the Singaporean context, although they may not be unique to Singapore. Nevertheless, the dynamics that will eventually play out between particular traditions are specific to the local context. The ones that will be discussed here are as follows: first, the outlier of Protestant Christians attitudes; second, Muslim law and perceptions on IRMs; third, the dynamic of Protestant proselytisation in IRM and how this may relate to IRD; fourth, what is actually meant by IRM.

First, most religious leaders expressed an appreciation towards the naturalness of IRMs, with only the Protestants regarding it as religiously problematic (excluding, for the moment, Malay-Muslim leaders). At the same time, it does not necessarily imply other traditions were without prejudice. Leaders from all traditions spoke about tensions that were likely to arise. Two were most notable. First, which religion must the children follow? Second, what was the likelihood of ethnic/ cultural differences arising, assuming most IRMs would be inter-ethnic? The Protestant opposition to IRMs is reflected in parts of the existing literature, especially where it focuses on contexts where there is quite a strong Evangelical community.[44] In relation to what has been said about natural harmony and likely tension, in terms of Singaporean interreligious and interethnic tensions, this may be expected. IRMs may seem to be a part of the dialogue of life where most assume it is possible to get along, although potential fault lines are considered.

Second, at least one leader – if not more – from each community when asked about IRMs expressed the view that it was not possible to marry a Muslim, hence highlighting them as a perceived exception. As discussed, this is not strictly true, although it may reflect a societal reality. It reflects the connection between AMLA and the Malay-Muslim identity. This is a distinctive aspect of the local context with regards to IRM. It may also be noted that historically, in Southeast Asia and across other regions, Muslims allowed IRMs with Hindus, Buddhists, and others who were regarded as "People of the Book." That this is not the case today is notable.

Third, the majority Protestant stance on IRM is seen by others as a cause of communal disharmony, especially as it involves seeking to convert the prospective spouse and their family. As noted, there was some disconnect between the approach of apex leaders, mid-level leaders, and laypeople: a tendency to be more opposed to IRMs and to see conversion as an aim is correlated to descent through the hierarchy. While it is impossible to generalise from one example, the experience of knowing somebody in an IRM may also affect attitudes. In terms of the dialogue of life, the Protestant stance is perceived as the least positive by others. Notably, at least one leader from each other community (including Catholics and it also became a theme in all focus groups with Buddhists), stressed tensions with Protestants as the biggest concern around the dialogue of life. This was irrespective of whether it involved family contexts, work places relations, or the wider society.

Fourth, as discussed, the census approach to religious identity, where everybody has one religion as a distinct identity, does not gel well with certain traditional Asian contexts. Even if an ethnic Chinese husband and wife "identify," respectively, as Buddhist and Daoist in census terms, it is quite likely not to signify any meaningful sense of an IRM from a traditional Chinese perspective; both may attend a Chinese temple of their choice.

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[44] Riley, *'Til Faith Do Us Part*.

Indeed, given the Buddhist and Daoist attitude (reflected to some degree by Hindu leaders) that marriage is not primarily a religious affair, speaking of an IRM carries quite distinct connotations. It certainly differs from the Christian context from where most theories derive, which sees religious border-crossing as inherently problematic.[45] Moreover, as a distinctly religious activity for Catholics, it is understood as a "sacrament", and for most Protestants church weddings are normal, hence the sense of this being about "religion" is highlighted. The Evangelical motif of being "unequally yoked" highlights the way that marriage is seen as religiously charged. It is relatively recent that intra-denominational Christian marriages have become more readily acceptable. As such, theory derived from Abrahamic contexts may not be suitable for considering the nature of IRMs in Singapore, or wider Asian contexts. Any study of IRM needs to deal with the question of what exactly is signified by this in an East, South, or Southeast Asian context. The dynamics of a Hindu marrying a Daoist are very distinct from a Christian marrying a Muslim. Further, in both, the interethnic dynamics may be more significant than interreligious dynamics; a point noted above in relation to the data on who acceptable partners would be. As noted, a concern raised by almost every interviewee was that ethnic and cultural differences were likely to be the main problem rather than any religious identity. Again, the religious and ethnic imbrication of Malay-Muslim identity may mean any strict distinction of "religious" and "ethnic" is arbitrary in certain contexts. This also highlights the issue of the colonial heritage as Islam was first spread, as discussed above, through IRM, with the Malay-Muslim identity being a distinct creation of the colonial period. Furthermore, the way that religion has come to signify identity under Western pressure, within traditional East and South Asian contexts, it is neither a natural way by which people would have identified, nor had their sense of belonging.

Conclusion

In some ways, this study of Singapore reflects dynamics seen in the wider literature, based primarily on Western contexts. However, it extends that in various ways, partly because of the significance of non-Abrahamic traditions and also since distinct local dynamics shape the form and interaction of traditions. Several key findings can be noted. First, the local issue of Protestants as a perceived problematic player in IRMs, and the subsequent implications for the dialogue of life and social harmony is clearly an issue of concern to many. Second, the way the Malay-Muslim identity and legal frameworks are structured, implies that this community stands apart from the local discussion. This is because to be in an IRM effectively means one is no longer Malay or Muslim. Third, the connection of ethnic and religious factors in this specific context is highlighted. Fourth, the way a colonial heritage and neo-colonial frames (shaped by Western Christian norms) are distorting discussions and changing perceptions is seen. Fifth, an understanding that IRMs and the dialogue of life are interconnected aspects of study, and in the Singaporean context, they become a key area where interreligious issues may be discussed.

We conclude by stating that there is considerable scope for further study, including: a) examining the effect that knowing somebody in an IRM has on such perceptions; b) deeper case studies and interviews with couples in IRMs, including how the dialogue of life occurs; c) further exploration of the situation with regard to Nones (in the interviews most leaders saw this as no more problematic than any other marriage outside their tradition); d) further study of how IRMs and inter-ethnic issues relate; e) ways in which children, in the context of the dialogue of life, are socialised into the norms of religious practices in their wider family and social networks; and, f) potential correlation between being in an IRM and attitudes towards, or participation in, IRD.

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[45] Hedges, "Multiple Religious Belonging."

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