Religion, State, and Society in Singapore: A Partial Bibliography

Introduction to this List

Compared to some countries, literature on the relationship between religion, society, and the state in Singapore is relatively sparse. This is not, in and of itself, necessarily surprising. Singapore is both a new and small country, more a city state than anything else. Furthermore, as there has historically been no specialisation in the study of religion within its universities, academics with such interests will also be few in number. Religion has also been seen as a somewhat controversial area, and so one that many see as best avoided in discussion, and perhaps also research. Nevertheless, there is a growing literature in this area, some main aspects of which are noted below.

This survey is not intended to be comprehensive nor definitive, and is mainly put together as an aid to my students who work on issues relating to religion in society and want to do research on Singapore. It picks up works on areas that often come up as matters of interest, as well as other works that seem to me to be important in exploring the nexus of religion, state, society, and politics. The focus is on recent and contemporary issues, rather than historical ones.

The list while mainly focused on the nexus with religion also includes some essays which are more explicitly about governance, law, or education in Singapore, but that is because they are useful to understand the context, and also because these issues are often related (one may say conflated, or intimately inseparable as distinct spheres). It also includes some works focusing only on religious practices rather than the wider context of society, state, and politics.

I include a few annotations in notes for some texts.

As already noted, this list is just a jump off point for those who wish to go further in exploring these questions. It no doubt also reflects the biases and blind spots of the compiler, and I welcome suggestions for items missed or expansions to the list.

This initial list was compiled in February 2018. Paul Hedges, SRP, RSIS, NTU, Singapore.

---

1 The National University of Singapore (NUS), formerly Singapore University, was founded as a secular institution and like many such modern foundations did not have a place for the study of religion as a distinct discipline. Meanwhile Nanyang Technological University (NTU), which incorporated two previous institutions, was founded as and remains a primarily engineering and science focused institution, though it now has a substantial College of Humanities and Social Sciences. Newer universities, such as Singapore Management University, are again secular with foci elsewhere. But this is not to say that the study of religion does not exist, but it has mainly been very much the case of individual interests of academics in fields such as sociology, Malay studies, philosophy, history, geography, etc. This has come together as a Minor in the Bachelor’s degree programmes at NUS. While the Studies in Interreligious Relations in Plural Societies Programme (SRP), at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), NTU, has been the first research group specifically focused on religion in Singapore’s public universities, but its teaching is only at graduate level and remains a small and new programme, launched only in 2014. Comparative religion is also an area of teaching at the new Yale-NUS liberal arts campus. In addition to the universities, there are some faith based institutes of higher learning, perhaps most notably Trinity Theological College which was founded as an Anglican institute but is now an ecumenical Protestant seminary, and the MUIS Academy of the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS). Scholars from both, as well as independent scholars and those from other institutions, have interests in the areas reviewed here.
Select Bibliography


---

2 A fascinating study of how Singapore’s secularism may work against religions in the long run, despite its claims to be a religious friendly form of secularism.

3 In some ways a much older and out-of-place piece on this list, however, the integration of spirit-medium shrines into HDBs makes it a real social issue, and a study of their contemporary manifestations is surely long overdue.

4 Though 10 years old at the time of initial compilation, this book remains ‘the Bible’ for anyone wanting to understand the state of interfaith relations and religious diversity in Singapore.


Hedges, Paul, 2018, ‘Can Interreligious Dialogue Provide a New Space for Deliberative Democracy in the Public Sphere?: Philosophical Perspectives from the Examples of the UK and Singapore’, *Interreligious Studies and Intercultural Theology* 2.1, .


Lee, Yvonne C., 2008, “‘Don’t ever take a fence down until you know the reason it was put up” – Singapore Communitarianism and the Case for Conserving 377A’, *Singapore Journal of Legal Studies* December 2008, 347-94.


---

5 It is suggested that the style of management Hill describes no longer applies, though some may debate this. Certainly it is worth reading for its point of view.

6 A good overview to get a sense of how things stand in the various related essays.


