

Religions in Singapore: A Historical Overview
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National Museum of Singapore, Gallery Theatre
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Introduction

Associate Professor Bruce Lockhart presented a talk on “Religions in Singapore: A Historical Overview”. He structured his presentation into three broad stages: Communities Established (1819–1867), Communities Consolidated and Expanded (1867–1965), and Communities Diversified (1965–present).

He found that the historical records were on the histories of the buildings rather than the religions themselves. His approach was therefore to look at the communities that practised the religions. The colonial government had grouped the different ethnic communities into different *kampongs* (“villages” in Malay) and hence religions might also be grouped according to these communities.

While A/P Lockhart spoke on major and minor religions in Singapore, this report will focus on the major ones due to the brevity of the publication. His focus, however, was not simply on the religions, but on their characteristics seen in each of the three periods.

Communities Established (1819–1867)

Communities and Religion in Early Singapore

One might imagine missionaries streaming in with the trading companies during the colonial period, but this was not the case. The East India Company (EIC), which Sir Stamford Raffles represented, prioritised trade. In fact, many of the trading companies had mixed feelings about missionaries and were not concerned whether locals were converted.

In Singapore, the EIC did not support religion but was not against it either. After Sir Stamford Raffles signed the treaty allowing the EIC to set up a trading post in Singapore, immigrants flowing into Singapore brought their own religions with them. With a tolerant colonial regime, anyone could set up a religious community.

The characteristics of religions of this time are seen in three areas. First, religions corresponded to specific ethnic or dialect groups, and religious centres also became community centres. Second, this grouping reflected the fragmented society since races were grouped. Third, much of the religious activity was driven by missionaries.

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Nascent Religions

Chinese Syncretic Religion

A/P Lockhart defined the Chinese religion as a syncretic one. The term “Taoism,” which people in the present time sometimes use to describe Chinese religion in the past, is not necessarily what the people inside that tradition would have represented themselves as part of. At that point, temple patrons did not call themselves Taoists but rather followers of the particular Chinese deity they worshipped.

Temple patrons, however, could worship both Taoist and Buddhist deities as the statues for both groups of deities co-existed side by side in temples. There were no Buddhist temples and no clear line between the Buddhist and Taoist sides even though almost all the early temples were linked to specific dialect groups.

Islam

There is very little information about Islam in Singapore during this period. Historical records do show two substantial groups of the Johor royal family clustered at Kampong Glam and Telok Blangah. Since these areas had a critical mass of Malays, A/P Lockhart assumed that there must have been mosques in the vicinity.

One of the very earliest structures is the Nagore Dargah Shrine (see Figure 1) dedicated to an Indian Muslim saint. This indicates a strong Muslim Indian presence here since the beginning of the colony. Other mosques include the Masjid Omar Kampong Melaka, Masjid Jamae and Masjid Sultan.



[Figure 1] Nagore Dargah Shrine.
Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

Hinduism

There was a strong Indian presence in the colony and they were divided between Muslims and Hindus.

During this period, many religions were supported by influential and usually wealthy individuals who contributed to their religious communities. Hinduism was no exception.

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Narayana Pillai, who was an employee of Raffles, helped to set up one of the earliest Hindu temples – Sri Mariamman Temple (see Figure 2).

Like Taoism, however, the term ‘Hinduism’ was a label later placed on the religion. The temples were not dedicated to a specific religion per se, but to a particular deity.



[Figure 2] Sri Mariamman Temple.
Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

Catholicism

From the earliest decades of Singapore’s history, there was a very strong Catholic presence. Catholicism was broken into two groups: the Portuguese and the French.

While the Portuguese built St. Joseph’s Church at Victoria Street and others, the Church of the Good Shepherd (today Cathedral of the Good Shepherd, see Figure 3) and the Church of St. Joseph at Bukit Timah (see Figure 4) were built by the French missionary group, the Missions Étrangères de Paris (MEP) or the Foreign Missions of Paris.

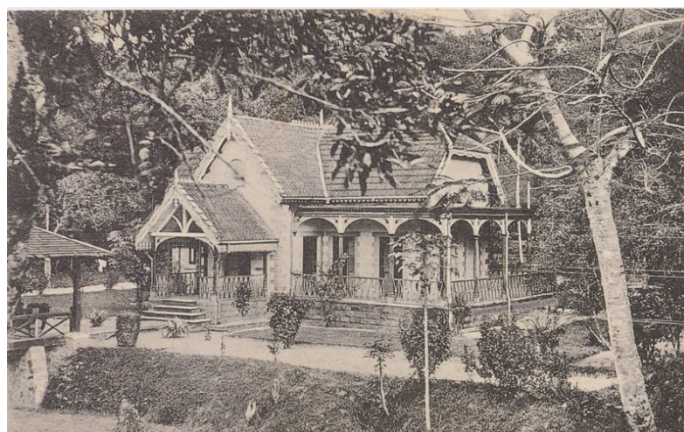
As time went by, the churches started to venture into the wilds of the Singapore jungle. Many of them catered to specific communities. The mission that became the Church of St. Joseph was largely focused on Teochew planters and Teochew-speaking Catholics who worked in the forests and plantations.

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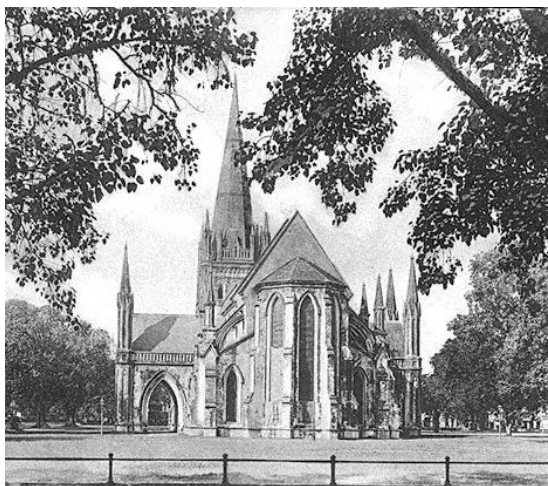
[Figure 3] Church of the Good Shepherd.
Lim Kheng Chye Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.



[Figure 4] Church of St. Joseph at Bukit Timah.
Collection of Singapore Philatelic Museum. Donated by Prof Cheah Jin Seng.

Protestantism

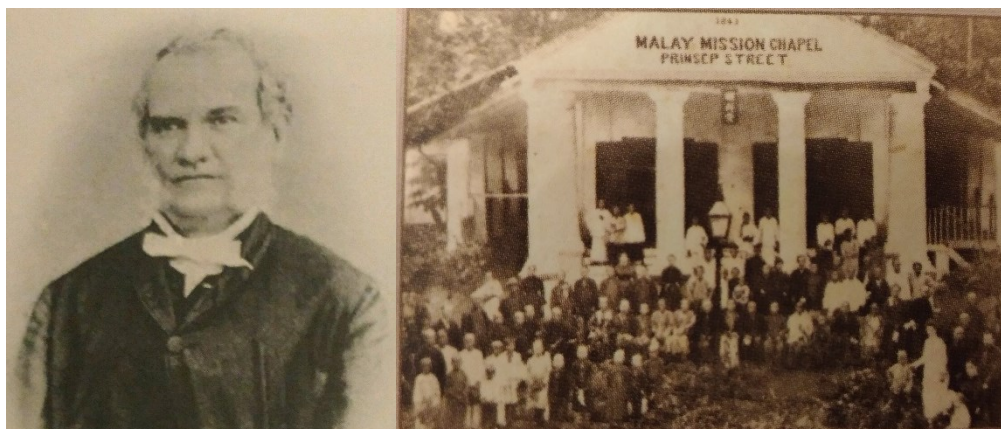
One of the earliest Protestant churches was the Anglican Church, built in 1837. The famous St. Andrew's Church (today St. Andrew's Cathedral, see Figure 5) was built in 1862. When St. Andrew's was built, it focused on the Europeans and was not as mission-minded as some of the other denominations.



[Figure 5] St. Andrew's Cathedral.
Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

The most famous of the early missionaries was Benjamin Keasberry and his church, the Malay Chapel (see Figure 6).¹ Most of his congregation were Peranakans who had moved down from Malacca and Penang and spoke Malay.

Interestingly, many of the Protestant missionaries came to Singapore and Malacca to study the Asian languages and were biding their time for China to open up. Once this happened, many left colonial Malaya for China. Keasberry was one who stayed.



[Figure 6] Benjamin Keasberry and Malay Chapel.

Images from Prinsep Street Presbyterian Church, *Prinsep Street Presbyterian Church [1848-2013]: Celebrating 170 Years of God's Faithfulness* (Singapore: Prinsep Street Presbyterian Church, 2013).

¹ "Malay" referred to the language, not the ethnicity. The "Malay" Church today is the Prinsep Street Presbyterian Church.

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Communities Consolidated and Expanded (1867–1965)

During this period, the colonial regime continued to exercise religious tolerance. As all of the communities began to multiply and expand, a shift from missionaries to local religious leadership could be seen, although it was not yet prevalent.

This period also saw the various religions starting to engage with the currents of change and reform that were going on in the rest of the world.

Growing Religions

Buddhism

Buddhism came into its own with solely Buddhist temples and monasteries being built. One of the oldest monasteries was connected with the Siong Lim Temple (see Figure 7), while the oldest full-fledged Buddhist temple in Singapore was a Theravada Buddhist temple.



[Figure 7] Siong Lim Temple.

Arshak C Galstaun Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

A group of mostly Hokkien-speaking monks from China would spend extended periods of time in Singapore to support the local communities. One such monk was the Venerable Zhuan Dao from Fujian, China, who was directly linked to the founding of the Kong Meng San Phor Kark Zhen See Monastery. There were probably not yet any Singaporean monks at the time.

By the interwar period (1918 to 1939), there was a very strong network of temples in Singapore and Buddhism was established enough that lay associations such as the Chinese Buddhist Association and Singapore Buddhist Lodge were set up.

Islam

Immigrants continued coming into Singapore. In 1962, a new ethnically distinct mosque was set up: the Masjid Malabar for Malabars, who were the Malayalis from southwestern India. Although these immigrants had been in Singapore for a while, it was only then that they had their own mosques.

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At the start of the 20th century, madrasahs were also being built. Prior to that, there were only small, traditional Muslim schools. Many argued that Islam needed to be modernised intellectually and to be reformed to cope better with the changes going on in the world.

Syed Sheikh Ahmad Al-Hadi was a key figure who believed that Islam needed to be modernised, and founded Madrasah Al-Iqbal in 1907. However, it only lasted for two years as the Malay community was generally not accepting of new ideas and thought madrasahs too liberal because they taught both secular and Islamic education.

Catholicism

The expanding Catholicism community saw break-away groups founding new churches to support their needs. One example is the Church of Saints Peter and Paul (see Figure 9) that was founded for Chinese and Indians. To support the growing congregation, the Tamil speakers set up their own church, Church of Our Lady of Lourdes, in 1888.

Some of the Catholic churches also started becoming associated with different Chinese dialects. Mandarin was not commonly used then as it was a minor dialect and was not a prevalent mode of communication.

The later part of this period saw local priests being ordained. Father Michael Seet may have been the first Singaporean priest at the time. This period also saw more missionary groups coming into Singapore and setting up mission schools.



[Figure 8] Church of Saints Peter and Paul.
Courtesy of the National Museum of Singapore.

Protestantism

Protestantism also continued to diversify and there were English-speaking and Chinese-speaking Protestants. Chinese-speaking Protestants, in particular, were taking the initiative to have their own churches and leaders, and had a strong Methodist community.

Like the Buddhist community, the different denominations also set up organisations, such as the Singapore Chinese Christian Inter-Church Union and Singapore Christian Evangelistic League. These were largely driven by locals with very little missionary involvement.

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Examples of Asian involvement were the famous Chinese evangelist John Sung, who was a catalyst and an encouragement for much of Protestant activity, and Leona Wu, Sung's interpreter, who helped set up a woman's Bible school which exists today as a seminary, the Chin Lien Women's Bible School.

Communities Diversified (1965–Present)

Religious leadership is now mostly led by local Singaporeans or Malaysians, although some churches might still have foreign missionaries and a few temples might still have monks born in China.

As globalisation affects Singapore, every religion has undergone significant change. Yet, the change is not one of secularisation. Instead, globalisation has produced religious diversification and allowed new ideas, trends and tendencies to reinforce religion with ease.

Established Religions

Buddhism and Taoism

One phenomenon is the way Buddhism has developed in Singapore. Many Singaporean Chinese are becoming interested in Theravada Buddhism, which is usually practised in Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Burma (present-day Myanmar) and Sri Lanka.

Theravada is thus becoming localised as activities are now conducted in English and Chinese. This is an evident way in which globalisation and diversification are taking place and reinforcing the religion, by becoming more adapted to suit the locals.

Taoism is even stronger now than before in an urbanised Singapore. These grassroots practices even see the deities being transported on lorries, enabling the devout to worship them with greater ease.

Islam

Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura (MUIS), also known as the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore, was founded in 1968. It is a statutory board that represents the relationship between the State and a religion in Singapore.

MUIS is also sending their religious leaders overseas to acquire international experience so that they may come back to serve the community with a wider perspective. It is partly an investment of government and also an investment of people within the religion. This is a stark difference between the weary but tolerant colonial government and the present Singapore government.

Hinduism

In an example for Hinduism, A/P Lockhart looked at a temple dedicated to the deity Muneeswaran, who has become more popular for Hindus overseas than Hindus in India. In Singapore, Muneeswaran is particularly venerated and a number of temples are dedicated to him.

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Catholicism

Representative of the shift from a fully missionary leadership in the early days to today's fully local leadership, the picture of the 120th Anniversary of the Canossian Sisters shows almost everybody to be local. The Archbishop in the photo is the third local archbishop. The only foreigners are the envoy from the Vatican and elderly nuns. Almost all religious organisations are now staffed largely by locals.

Protestantism

One phenomenon seen among Protestants is the rise of the mega church. The reverend at New Creation Church is well-known by many Americans, who may have little knowledge about Singapore itself. This is a characteristic of globalisation of religion: ideas, beliefs and practices are not just coming in from the outside but are also flowing outwards.

Conclusion

As someone who is a Protestant, who teaches history of religion of Buddhism and of Catholicism to students of different backgrounds, and who is a church leader, A/P Lockhart takes religious harmony extremely seriously.

He tells his students that one of the best ways to get rid of prejudice is to replace ignorance with knowledge. This was one main takeaway of his lecture. He hopes that everyone may learn more about the religions of others and that this understanding will also make for greater harmony in general.

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About the Speaker



Bruce Lockhart is Associate Professor in the History Department at the National University of Singapore. His area of specialisation is the history of mainland Southeast Asia, particularly Vietnam, Thailand and Laos. One of his strong interests is teaching the history of Asian culture and religion; he offers undergraduate courses in the history of Southeast Asian Buddhism and global Christianity.

About HistoriaSG

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