SSA1201 Assignment
Religious Revival Among Chinese in Singapore
Discussion Group: DO6
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Introduction:

      Religious Revivalism is a phenomenon that has arisen over the last few decades in Singapore. Religion is a personal set or institutionalized system of attitudes, beliefs, and practices involving faith, according to the dictionary. Revivalism is the strengthening in constituency and vitality of a religion (Clammer 3). Census data indicating disproportionate conversion among religions have affirmed these trends. Initially only Christianity rose through the 1970s and 1980s, but Buddhism has started rising in the 1990s. These religious trends seem ironic in Singapore, a nominally secular state. Religion has been a sensitive issue in Singapore ever since its pre-independence era when race and religious riots abounded (Hill: 21). Hill provides three reasons for government concern of religious revivalism in the1980s: 1) questions about national loyalty of fundamentalist Islamic Malays, 2) rising influence of evangelical Christianity as a source of potential race and religious conflict among ethnic groups, and 3) emergence of a politically active Catholic sect involved in a "Marxist Plot" to undermine the Singapore government (Hill 2). These events collectively affected the government enough that it commissioned a study on religion and revivalism in Singapore. The study results led to passing of the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act, and the 'Shared Values Policy (Hill: 10, 20).' This paper will explore the reasons for the rise of revivalism among only Chinese people. The data shows that the greatest number of changes in religion has occurred in this race. Census data from the last decades is first presented to illustrate the trends of revivalism. Proposed theories for this revivalism are explained. Four interviewee experiences will then be compared to the trends and profiles observed from census data, and from the proposed theories.

Data and Analysis:

table 1: Resident Population Aged 15 Years and Over by Ethnic Group and Religion
(Table 2: from Singapore Census)

Ethnic Group/Religion		1980	1990	2000
Chinese		**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**
Christianity		10.9	12.9*	16.5
Buddhism		34.3	39.4	53.6
Taoism		38.2	28.4	10.8
Other Religions		0.2	0.3	0.5
No Religion		16.4	17.7	18.6
*Statistic corrected from sampling error				

Census data for the last two decades, taken at 1980, 1990, and 2000 respectively

demonstrate that there have been significant increases in both Christianity and Buddhism

among Chinese People as demonstrated in table 1 above. Christianity has experienced

high growth in the last century, from 1.9% of the Chinese population in 1921 to 10.9% in

1980, increasing by four times over 6 decades (Tong 1992: 199). This is remarkable

because Christianity is not a religion native to the region, but brought to Singapore by

missionary groups from the West about 150 years ago.

table 2: Percentage Change in Age Cohort of Christians in 1980 and 1990
(Table 2.8: from Kuo 1990: 16)

	Total	10-19 yrs	20-29 yrs	30-39 yrs	40-49 yrs	50-59 yrs	60 yrs +
Christianity							
1980	9.9	9.4	10.7	10.4	9.8	9.4	8.3
1990	12.5	11.8	13.7	13.4	12.1	11.2	11.2
(change)			(4.3)	(2.7)	(1.7)	(1.4)	(1.8)
Catholic							
1980	4.5	3.9	4.3	5.3	5.3	4.9	4.0
1990	4.7	4.3	4.1	4.6	5.6	5.5	4.9
(change)			(0.2)	(0.3)	(0.3)	(0.20	(0.9)
Protestants							
1980	5.4	5.5	6.4	5.1	4.5	4.5	4.3
1990	7.8	7.5	9.6	8.8	6.5	5.7	6.3
(change)			(4.1)	(2.4)	(4.1)	(1.2)	(1.8)
**(change) is defined in same cohort across a decade: e.g. Christianity: 4.3 = 1990: 13.7 (20-29 yrs) - 1980: 9.4 (10-19 yrs)							

Converts to Christianity tend to come from the young, educated, English-speaking Chinese generation (Tong 1992: 199). Census data from table 2 corroborates this. The highest number of converts in Christianity, encompassing both Protestants and Catholics, occurred in the age cohort of 10-20 years from 1980 to 1990. Protestant Christianity, which tends to be more proselytizing than Catholicism had most of the change.

Religion has been described as a zero sum game, in which a finite number of people can switch among different religions. Although the proportions may change, overall population size remains the same. Therefore the converts of Christian revivalism must come from other religions (Clammer 1991: 33). The following table 3 shows that the highest number of converts in 1990 came from Buddhism and Taoism.

table 3: Christian Converts by Previous Religion, 1990
(Table 3.2: from Kuo 1990: 31)

Prior Religion	Total	Catholics	Protestants
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
	(75,079)	(19,422)	(55,657)
Buddhism	44	44.5	43.8
Taoism	45.7	37.4	48.6
Christianity	6.7	11.6	5.0
-Catholic	2.8	-	3.7
-Protestant	3.9	11.6	1.3
Islam	0.5	1.1	0.3
Hinduism	3.1	5.3	2.3
Other Religions	-	0.1	

Although in the 1980s there was conversion to Christianity from Buddhism and Taoism, in the 1990s there has been revival of Buddhism. Taoism still continues to decline. The Buddhism revival has not discriminated across age, education or socioeconomic status like Christianity has (Tong 1992, 203). Table 4 below shows the age distribution for several religions in 1990 and 2000.

table 4: Resident Population Aged 15 Years and Over by Religion and Age Group
(Table 4: from Singapore Census)

Religion	15-24		25-34		35-44		45-54		55 & Over	
	1990	2000	1990	2000	1990	2000	1990	2000	1990	2000
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Christianity	13.2	12.8	14.0	15.8	12.7	15.7	11.4	14.4	11.1	13.7
Buddhism	29.1	38.9	29.8	40.2	32.6	41.5	34.2	44.9	32.0	47.4
Taoism	18.9	8.4	18.6	5.6	22.8	6.9	26.6	9.9	29.7	12.7
Islam	17.7	18.6	17.2	15.1	13.2	15.7	12.4	13.0	13.8	12.3
Hinduism	3.6	3.5	3.9	4.6	3.4	4.5	3.6	3.6	4.2	3.5
Other Religions	0.5	0.6	0.6	0.6	0.5	0.7	0.6	0.6	0.6	0.7
No Religion	16.9	17.3	16	18.1	14.8	15	11.2	13.7	8.6	9.8

Christianity and Buddhism show increase in followers, at the expense of Taoism.

According to the 2000 census, Buddhism has spread among the better educated. In table

5, although Christian graduates still constitute a sizeable number in 2000, their numbers

dropped relative to 1990, while the number of Buddhist graduates increased.

table 5: Resident Population Aged 15 Years and Older by Religion and Highest Education
(Table 5: from Singapore Census)

Religion	Total		Full-Time Students		Below Secondary		Secondary		Post Secondary		University	
	1990	2000	1990	2000	1990	2000	1990	2000	1990	2000	1990	2000
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Christianity	12.7	14.6	17.1	14.3	6.3	6.4	16.1	14.6	24.7	20.8	39.3	33.5
Buddhism	31.2	42.5	29	37.3	34.1	51.5	300.3	41.6	25.7	38.3	15.1	23.6
Taoism	22.4	8.5	18.2	8.5	29.4	13.2	14.8	5.8	13.0	5.5	7.4	2.7
Islam	15.3	14.9	12.0	16.2	17.1	17.2	17.3	18.9	8.5	11.2	2.6	3.5
Hinduism	3.7	4	2.9	3.6	3.9	3.5	3.9	4.1	3.1	3.5	3.5	6.9
Other Religions	0.6	0.6	0.5	0.7	0.5	0.5	0.7	0.7	0.7	0.7	0.9	0.9
No Religion	14.1	14.8	20.3	19.3	8.7	7.7	16.9	14.3	24.4	20.0	31.1	28.9

The empirical census data clearly show revivalism of Christianity predominantly taking

effect during the 1980s, now joined and competing with a Buddhist revival of the 1990s.

The Singapore government has socially engineered its citizens for progressive

attitudes to avoid discord of its pre-independence era (Hill 2). Society is nominally

secular to be fair to all. Young Chinese in Singapore are raised and educated in an

environment that emphasizes rational thought (Tong 1992: 199). These people have described traditional folk religions like Buddhism and Taoism as illogical, rooted too much on inherited customs (Goh 1999: 90).

Clammer describes a "modernity" of society makes it deterministic but abstract with reduced human encounters (Clammer 1991: 3). Religion in this context serves as an anti-alienation device and anti-anomie device. It restores a moral basis and human contact to a rational society.

Goh claims that rapid modernization of Singapore has caused a "transcendentalization" of personal consciousness from traditional constraints (Goh 1999: 91). Individuals are taught to logically analyze a dynamic and sometimes irrational world. Society transcends complete personal understanding and controls creating a mental state of dissonance. A search for identity resolves this dissonance resulting in either a transient identity developed on experience, or an adopted transcendent identity of existing cultural tones (Goh 1999: 96-97). Transcendence correlates with religions, preceded by transience that correlates with free-thinkers.

Goh and Clammer's theories lay the foundation for general religious revivalism as an adaptation to society. Goh explains the Christian revival through "Charismatism," a religious system of combining the "rational" and "mystical-magical," compared to illogical and superstitious Chinese religions. Christianity is highly centralized and logical. Its many denominations all derive their beliefs from a common Bible. It emphasizes linear thought and thus is "logical." Buddhism as an institution is decentralized and customary. There are many forms worshipping different deities. Although guiding scriptures and common values exist, there is no universal document

such as the Bible. Rituals also are inherited as traditions and vary too. Its philosophy is holistic and dialectic and hence "illogical."

Although Clammer and Goh's theories explain the Christian revival of the 1980s, they alone cannot explain the Buddhist revival of the 1990s without considering other factors such as exposure, religious structure, and government policy. Christian organizations are usually proselytizing, well structured and well funded. Following Singapore's independence, there was a surplus of manpower and financial resources for protestant churches that had operated with Malaysia (Quah 1989: 49). Global churches had also established schools and youth organizations to educate the young generation about Christianity. Clammer described Christian converts of the 1970s flocking together to familiar fellowships in response to secularization (Clammer 1978: 18, 27). More than half the interviewed converts of the time had little contact with religions outside Christianity (Clammer 1978: 29). Tong reports similarly about converts of the 1980s. They described the positive "insider" common bond of Christians (Tong 1989: 9). Many converted after attending fellowships at schools, and following personal struggles (Tong 1989: 10, 13). Common attributes to the Christian revival are widespread exposure among youth, appeal of fellowship, and logical offering.

In the past Buddhism has been passive and de-centralized. Clammer and Kuo describe Buddhism as low-key and homebound, practiced within the family instead of large congregations (Clammer 1991: 73; Kuo 1989: 59). The decline of Buddhism in the 1980s to the Christian revival is expected given these properties. Christianity could publicize itself to many more English-educated youth than Buddhism. It provided them a

logical religion that complemented their rational education, and also offered fellowship and community.

The mandatory religious education of the 1980s intellectualized Buddhism (Clammer 1991: 74). This helped initiate the Buddhist revival in several ways: 1) creating a logical representation of Buddhism compatible with the rational education of youth, 2) eliminating the superstitious and illogical traditional aspect, and 3) providing greater exposure of Buddhism among a generation secondary school students. Buddhism had the highest enrollment of all 6 religions offered (Kuo 1990: 5). The revival was also supported by the structured and logical Soka Buddhist organization from Japan (Kuo 1990: 6). This "protestant Buddhism" has continued with Buddhist organizations emulating the structure of Christian organizations and taking an active stance. They now publish and distribute literature in English, manage schools and clinics, and provide sermons and talks (Clammer 1991: 96). They also have a distinct advantage over Christian organization among Mandarin speakers as of the year 2000 as seen in table 6 (Singapore Census 7).

table 6: Resident Population Aged 15 Years and Older by Religion and Home Language
(Table 6: from Singapore Census)

Religion	Total		Full-Time Students		Below Secondary		Secondary		Post Secondary		University	
	1990	2000	1990	2000	1990	2000	1990	2000	1990	2000	1990	2000
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Christianity	39.2	39.8	8.2	8.3	8.2	9.9	0.7	0.7	8.2	6.7	11.1	11.1
Buddhism	21.2	24.8	43.1	60.0	43.2	61.0	0.4	0.2	0.1	0.1	3.7	10.3
Taoism	7.2	2.2	26.7	11.2	36.0	15.5	0.2	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.5
Islam	6.1	7.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	98.2	98.8	16.5	17.9	15.2	16.3
Hinduism	5.3	5.4	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.2	0.1	74.7	75.0	38.9	43.6
Other Religions	1.4	1.5	0.1	0.2	0.1	0.2	0.0	0.0	0.2	0.1	26.1	14.7
No Religion	19.5	19.2	21.8	20.3	12.5	13.3	0.3	0.1	0.3	0.2	4.9	3.5

Four people, one middle-aged woman and three university students were interviewed about their religious views. The list of interview questions is attached in the appendix. These interviews are used as case studies to compare individual experiences with the trends observed from data and theory. They are not used to establish the change of revivalism because perception of macro-effects like religious revivalism is difficult for individuals to objectively qualify. The person's network of friends will bias his view. The interviewees all demonstrated different characteristics of the revival. Although from different backgrounds, they shared common attributes: limited knowledge of other religions, tolerance, and personal choice. Most of the interviewers except for Jack did not know much about religions other than their parent's or their own. All were tolerant of other people's choice for religion.

Debra Xiao, a middle-aged female Christian, was raised in a Buddhist household. Her parents were both Buddhist, but converted to Christianity. Passersby introduced Debra to Christianity by informing her of a rally. She converted independently of her parents in 1977 after encountering terrible hardship in her first job, and finding comfort from prayer. She knows little about other religions but feels tolerant and understanding towards them. Deborah falls under the older generation of converts like those in Clammer's 1978 study. Unlike the current young generations she did not seek an intellectualized religion, but she did find transcendence in attempting to rationalize society.

Jack Thao, is a third year male university student and non-practicing Buddhist, leaning towards free-thinker/no religion. Both of his parents are Buddhist too and have not changed faith. He knows enough about other religions to "hold a decent

conversation," and feels tolerant towards them. His role as director of a university student publication brings him in contact with people from diverse cultural backgrounds. He feels calmer, and steadier in his personality because of his beliefs, and feels government policy should be fair across religions. Jack seems relatively uninfluenced by revivalism except for seeking a transient identity through interaction with a diverse number of people to construct his worldview.

Jane Chan is a second year female university student and Christian, raised in a Buddhist household. Her parents remain practicing Buddhist, but act like free-thinkers with no religion. She was introduced to Christianity while attending Christian secondary school and junior college. She converted after attending a church camp with a friend. She feels that Christianity "made the most sense out of all the religions" she knows, and has observed positive changes in the lives of fellow converts. She does not know much about religions except for information in newspapers. Jane is representative of youth seeking fellowship and intellectual rational religion.

Charles Chang is a third year male university student and a free-thinker with no religion. His parents are Taoist, but he does not follow. He seeks a religion and philosophy that suits his personality. He does not know of other religions very well, but does believe that each of them exists "a creation by mankind for the reasons of personal well-being and goodwill, based on personalities of the different cultural groups.... not easily adaptable by another cultural group." Charles might be among those Chinese youth currently seeking an intellectual philosophy, renouncing religion of parents. Like Jack, he is taking the transient approach to resolve dissonance.

Conclusion:

Religious revivalism in Singapore has developed as a combination of unintended consequences of government policy and independent organizations. The social engineering of the Singapore government towards a secular and rational state unexpectedly instilled dissonance within the population. Missionary efforts of Christian organizations started Christian revivalism by offering a logical religion with fellowship. The Religious Knowledge courses implemented by the government during the 1980s to boost moral values among the youth unintentionally aided the Christian revival and initiated the Buddhist revival.

In the future, Christianity and Buddhism will probably compete for converts. Effects of these proselytizing movements upon multiracialism and government policy are important. The strong camaraderie and conviction of Buddhist and Christian organizations could be a divisive force among its constituents. However, the government most likely will intervene via the Religious Harmony Act before serious conflicts emerge. Members of government will also unlikely all come from the same religion, providing balance and plurality. The younger generation of interviewees also seems tolerant despite their religious convictions. If this trend of tolerance continues among converts of the revival, then conflict will be unlikely. The future Singapore will be a nominally secular state with a tolerant multi-religious population.

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Appendix

Interview Questions:

1) What religious denomination do you consider yourself a part? If not a religion, than what kind of philosophy or set of beliefs do you follow?

2) What were your parents' religion/beliefs?

3) Did you change you or your parents change your religion/beliefs? If so, under what circumstances and main reasons for your change?

4) How much do you know about other religions that exist?

5) How do you feel about other religions that exist?

6) How big a role does your religion/beliefs play a role in your life? How does it affect your view of government policy and other practices?