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Title: MAINTENANCE OF RELIGIOUS HARMONY BILL
MPs Speaking: Dr Tay Eng Soon (Senior Minister of State for Education); Encik Sidek Bin Saniff (Senior Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Education); Mr Ong Teng Cheong (Second Deputy Prime Minister); Mr Wong Kan Seng (Minister for Foreign Affairs and Minister for Community Development and Leader of the House); Prof. S. Jayakumar (Minister for Home Affairs); Dr Aline K. Wong; Dr Arthur Beng Kian Lam; Dr Dixie Tan; Dr John Chen Seow Phun; Dr Koh Lam Son; Dr Lee Siew-Choh; Dr Ong Chit Chung; Dr Tan Cheng Bock; Dr Wong Kwei Cheong; Encik Wan Hussin Bin Haji Zohri; Mr Abdullah Tarmugi; Mr Goh Choon Kang; Mr Lau Ping Sum; Mr Loh Meng See; Mr S. Chandra Das; Mr Abdullah Tarmugi (Mr Deputy Speaker); Mr Tan Soo Khoon (Mr Speaker);

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MAINTENANCE OF RELIGIOUS HARMONY BILL

Order for Second Reading read.
1.10 pm

The Minister for Home Affairs (Prof. S. Jayakumar): Mr Speaker, Sir, I beg to move, "That the Bill be now read a Second time."

Sir, the rationale for this Bill has in fact been set out in quite a comprehensive manner in the White Paper entitled "Maintenance of Religious Harmony" which was presented to Parliament dated 26th December 1989. What I propose to do this afternoon is to highlight and reiterate some of the more important points in the White Paper as well as to draw attention to the main scheme in the Bill.

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Perhaps I should start off by reminding ourselves what kind of a society are we, what kind of a nation Singapore is. We are a young nation, small country, densely populated and we are not a homogenous society, because we are made up of different races, languages and religions. As far as religions are concerned, we have in Singapore all the great religions in the world represented - Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Hindu, Sikhism and many denominations of Christianity. No single religion can be said to be the dominant religions, nor is any religion an official religion of the State because Singapore is strictly secular.

We have been fortunate that over the years we have had religious freedom and religious harmony. Is religious freedom and religious harmony just a desirable ideal, a lofty principle to be enshrined in the Constitution? The answer is no. For us, it is vital for our survival as a nation. It is essential for our stability and law and order. But can we be sure that the religious harmony and tolerance that we have had over the years can be preserved? Why does this question arise? It arises if we observe what is happening around the world and if we take note of what is happening in Singapore. First, let us look at the international context. What is happening elsewhere? If we just take the news over a period of two or three months - we do not have to go back much further - it is a sad tale because the news is full of examples of many countries which are experiencing violence, strife, disorder, because of inter-religious tensions and conflicts. In India, Muslims against Hindus, Kashmir and other cities. Elsewhere in India, Hindus against Sikhs. Sri Lanka was once held up as a model of peaceful coexistence of different religions. Now a holy war is taking place there. Fiji, always regarded as a tranquil, idyllic Pacific nation, no one would have imagined any such problems arising there. What happens? Suddenly, Sikh temples, Muslim mosques, fire bombed. Lebanon, we are all familiar with the perennial problems there, not just between different religious groups but within one religion there are different rival groups. Northern Ireland, Protestants and Catholics. Philippines, Muslims and Christians. And Muslims

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against Muslims in the Iran/Iraq war. The list is endless, Sir, with Armenia, Azerbaijan and so on.

Compared to Singapore, these countries are older societies, larger countries and more well-established nations. Yet they have inter-religious strife. They are torn apart by the conflicts. How about us? Singapore, in our tiny corner of the world, what is so special about us that we can assume that we will always be an exception.

Let us consider the local context and there are two factors. First, the heightened religious fervour amongst all religious groups. This heightened fervour and increased competition has made the search for new followers more intense, but this is part of the worldwide trends. We cannot be isolated. But this trend increases the possibility of friction and misunderstanding among different religious groups. Why? Because religion is a deeply felt matter. When religious sensitivities are offended, emotions are quickly aroused and it takes only a few incidents to inflame passions and kindle violence. The second factor, Sir, is that while the majority of religious leaders and the majority of followers of religious groups are conscious of the need to be tolerant, the need to be sensitive in our multi-religious and multi-racial society, there are some persons whose conduct can cause considerable tensions and problems for us. These are listed in the Annexe to the White Paper. For example, you have a Muslim priest denouncing Christianity as the most foolish religion. Surely that is going to upset Christians. Then you have Christian groups pasting posters announcing a forthcoming seminar outside a Hindu temple. Is that wise? Then Protestant pamphlets denigrating the Roman Catholic church and the Pope. Surely they would take great offence and umbrage. So considering what is happening in other parts of the world, taking note of what is happening here, it is obvious that religious harmony is a fragile matter. It needs careful nurturing and it will be a folly to assume that it will always be there. Therefore, conscious efforts are needed by religious groups, religious leaders and

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their followers to ensure that nothing jeopardizes it.

There are really two factors: (1) That followers of different religions must exercise moderation and tolerance, and not to instigate religious enmity or hatred. (2) It is important that religion and politics be kept separate. Let me take the first issue, which is that of religion and religion. As the White Paper highlights, the main problem here is that of insensitive, aggressive religious proselytisation. We all know, Sir, that the Constitution guarantees the freedom to propagate one's religion. The question is, how do we go about it? If we denigrate other faiths, there will be consequences. It is necessary to avoid insensitive and aggressive efforts. There is a need, of course, to point out, in the process of propagating religion, differences between one's religion and another's. But it is an entirely different matter to denounce other religions. For example, as is spelt out in the examples in the Annexe to the White Paper, should one say that another person's religion is a greater threat to mankind than communism? Would you expect the leaders of that religious group to take it calmly? Again another example. To say that the head of the Catholic church, the Pope, is the anti-Christ, will that not upset and provoke strong emotions amongst Catholics?

Next, Religion and Politics. Why we should be concerned, it is spelt out in the White Paper. Sir, we must bear in mind that religious leaders and leaders of religious groups, in the eyes of their followers, have a special status. They are regarded as being closer to God than anyone else. They may be specially anointed or ordained and their words have a tremendous emotional effect on their flock. If religious leaders enter politics, they must view matters from a religious perspective. There will be emotional appeals in the name of religion and their followers will believe them and their words as interpretations from a divine authority above.

Sir, when one religious group involves itself in this way in political issues, it must follow that other groups will do the same. And various groups will want to outdo

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each other. Then again, when that happens, what would the party in power, or for that matter all other political parties, do? Can they be expected to be quiet? Surely they will look for religious groups and their flocks to back them up. The end result surely is obvious. It is inevitable that there will be collision between the different religious groups and the Government leading to instability and conflict. It is extremely important therefore that priests and other religious leaders do not mix religion and politics and mount political campaigns.

The need for legislation. Coming to this Bill, one may ask, why legislate? In turn, I have to pose this question, Sir. Can we assume that everyone will act with prudence, moderation and sensitivity? Because if that is so, then I think we can conclude that there is no need to do anything and no need to legislate. But our problem is not with the majority of religious leaders and not with the majority of members of religious groups. It is a problem of a minority number of mischievous, irresponsible people. The compilation shows you enough examples to demonstrate that this is not a theoretical or hypothetical solution. But though they may be few, they can cause great harm not to just one religious group but to the very fabric of our society. To contemplate passing laws after the harm has been done will be too late because tensions would have arisen, violence might have erupted, people might be killed, deep feelings of resentment and considerable intense wounded feelings would divide our society for a long time.

Sir, we must have some mechanism to curb such elements. It is far better to put in such laws and mechanisms now when relations between religious groups are good than later. And what kind of legislation? What we need is a device that will enable prompt and effective pre-emptive or preventive action to be taken which can quickly defuse a potentially explosive situation. It must be prompt and effective.

Let me now turn to the provisions of the Bill, Sir. I do not intend to go clause by

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clause. Instead I wish to draw attention to the main scheme of the legislation and the Bill really has the five following features. First, it establishes a Presidential Council for Religious Harmony. Second, it sets out the conduct or acts which we should regard as harmful. Third, it enables prohibition orders to be issued. Fourth, it describes the persons against whom such orders can be issued. And fifth, it sets out the procedure which must be followed when such prohibition orders are issued.

First, the Presidential Council. The idea of establishing such a formal body in the law was in fact proposed in the report published by the Ministry of Community Development. The Bill envisages that the composition of the Presidential Council should be a Chairman and a maximum of 15 other members to be drawn from the representatives of the major religions in Singapore, but there would also be persons who can be appointed who have distinguished themselves in public service or community relations. In other words, the Council will have religious leaders plus lay leaders. Why lay leaders? As explained, it is to complement the perspectives of the religious leaders and also to represent the many Singaporeans who do not belong to any organised religious group. There will be a special function as well as a general function. The general function is to consider and give their views on matters generally affecting religious harmony in Singapore which may be referred to it by the Government. The special function it has is with regard to the proposed prohibition orders for any particular individual.

The Bill sets out what is a conduct which it should be concerned with. This is spelt out in clause 8. I will not repeat them verbatim but basically there are four categories. One, where a person causes feelings of enmity or hatred between different religious groups. Second, under the guise of religion or propagating religious activity, one carries out political activities for promoting a political cause or a cause of any political party. Third, carrying out subversive activities under the guise of propagation of religion. Fourth, exciting disaffection against the President

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or the Government of Singapore. I might explain here, Sir, that this term "exciting disaffection" in law is a well-known concept which is found in more than one precedent in Singapore, such as the Sedition Act. It is also to be found in Article 149 of the Constitution and it has many precedents in other Commonwealth countries. Basically, it connotes action taken by anyone to instigate and to provoke the feelings of disloyalty or hatred against an established government.

The third feature of the Bill is the concept of prohibition orders. In other words, what should be done when a person engages in such harmful conduct? Should we detain him immediately under the Internal Security Act? Or should we immediately prosecute him under one or other of the existing laws which could conceivably apply, which must result in a court conviction if he is found guilty, and therefore a sentence of a fine or imprisonment? If the conduct is so serious and so dangerous, perhaps that extreme measure may be necessary. It could be necessary and justified. But in many cases, we think a less severe remedy would suffice. Because what is necessary is prompt action to stop him from repeating that act, conduct or speech. Because if he does so again, then it will only exacerbate matters. There will be further counter-attacks and retaliatory measures, and the situation will get out of hand. Hence, the Bill has this concept of a prohibition order. In other words, it puts him on notice that he should not repeat that act or conduct. And only when he repeats and violates the specific terms of the prohibition order can he be prosecuted in a court of law, in which case the Court will decide whether he is guilty or not guilty of a breach of the prohibition order. In other words, Sir, what has been crafted into this Bill is in fact a more limited measure than either resorting to the Internal Security Act or prosecution in a court of law. We think this will meet the problem.

Against whom can such prohibition orders be issued? This is spelt out in clause 8. Obviously, it must apply to any religious leader of any religious organisation. But it is also possible that a non-member of that religious group, a person

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outside the religious group, could try to cause similar mischief by instigation or manipulation. Therefore, the Bill provides in clause 9 that such persons can also be the subject of a prohibition order.

Next, the Bill provides procedures to be followed. Before making a prohibition order, the Minister must, first of all, serve notice of his intention and he must serve this notice of his intention to the individual concerned as well as to the head of his religious organisation. Both the individual and the head of the religious organisation are to be afforded the opportunity to give their views and representations. For example, the individual can explain or argue why the order should not be made. At the same time, the Minister must also send the proposed notice and notify the Presidential Council for Religious Harmony, which also can give its views. A two weeks' deadline is provided. After receiving the views, the Minister has

to have regard to them before he makes a decision whether to make the order or not. After an order is made, the Minister has still to send the order to the Presidential Council for Religious Harmony, together with all the representations the Minister has received from the individual heads of the organisations. Although the order has been made, the Council can recommend whether it should be modified, completely rescinded or revoked, and the Minister is to have regard to their views.

Sir, the intention is, that the Government seek views and advice from a body, the Presidential Council, which will have considerable moral authority. Because it will not only have representatives of the religious groups from which the individual has come from, but it will be composed of other representatives of other religious groups.

If I may sum up, Sir, I can repeat what I said at the outset. We really have a choice of whether to do something, enact this law or not to enact this law. So the question is: should we do something now or let things be? That is indeed a course of action that is open to us. But of course, Sir, there is a risk and a heavy price to be paid, and many countries are now paying the price. Or is it better to take note of the danger signs and

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put in place now legislative controls and measures which can enable us to nip problems in the bud whenever individuals engage in such irresponsible, senseless acts that endanger our religious harmony?

The Government recommends that we do not take the risk, and that is the approach in the White Paper and in the Bill, because far too much is at stake. Religious harmony is fundamental not just for one or more religious groups. It is vital not just for members of religious groups. It is vital for all Singaporeans because if there is religious strife, all of us are going to be affected.

Finally, Sir, I would like to say that this legislation has not been hastily rushed through. We have been deliberating on the matter for more than 2(r) years. In fact, the first draft of the Bill was prepared in June 1987. This is a delicate and sensitive matter. During this period, we have consulted MPs of different faiths, both in the previous Parliament and in this Parliament. We have consulted religious leaders of different religious groups as well as grassroots leaders on the basis of earlier drafts of the White Paper. In all these discussions, we received many significant suggestions for improvement which we have accepted. What these changes are, some of them are reflected in the White Paper and consequentially in the Bill.

For Members' information, I might point out, for example, changes which are mentioned on page 20 of the White Paper. Originally, in the earlier draft of the White Paper, it was not the Presidential Council for Religious Harmony. It was a National Council of Religious Harmony. In one of the discussions, Archbishop Gregory Yong gave us his suggestion that it should have a higher status - that it should be a Presidential Council for Religious Harmony. We accepted that change and it is now reflected in the Bill.

The Mufti of Singapore, Syed Isa bin Mohd Semait, wanted clarification that the proposed legislation will be consistent with Articles in the Constitution, such as Articles 152, 153. The White Paper accord-

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ingly was suitably amended because there is no inconsistency.

Then, some others from the Methodist, Bethesda (Bedok-Tampines) Church, Dr Benjamin Chew, and Bethesda (Frankel Estate) Church, Prof Ernest Chew, and others recommended that the White Paper should also emphasise the importance of respecting common values and the right of each individual to accept or not to accept a religion. You will find that this has also been incorporated in the White Paper.

Others such as Dr Chan Ban Leong, Chairman of the Christian National Evangelism Commission Board, Mr Sat Pal Khattar, member of the Hindu Advisory Board, proposed that the notice of intended prohibition order should be sent to the Council at the same time it is sent to the individual. The earlier draft of the White Paper, as it then stood, required the Presidential Council to be involved only after the order was made. Now we have changed it so that we have accepted the suggestion and it is referred to the Presidential Council. These are some examples of the changes which were made.

In conclusion, Sir, the Government has not closed its mind to further suggestions for improvements. Therefore, so that there can be further opportunity to receive views on the provisions of the Bill, I would like to say that the Government intends to submit this Bill, to a Select Committee.

Sir, I beg to move.

Question proposed.

Mr S. Chandra Das (Cheng San GRC): Mr Speaker, Sir, this is a very important piece of legislation which we are debating today. I am extremely glad that the Government has obtained and incorporated the views of religious and grassroots leaders before the White Paper, and subsequently this Bill, was introduced in Parliament. What I would like to do in the next few minutes is to inform this House of the many views and suggestions that the Feedback Unit has gathered from a different segment of the population, namely, the professionals and a few other concerned citizens who have written to us. In fact, Sir, I am happy to

inform Members that the Minister himself was present at a dialogue session

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organised by the Unit last week to listen first hand to the views of a group of about 110 professionals. These professionals come from a wide range of professions and practise different religions and faiths.

Sir, most of the professionals agree with the objective and rationale behind this Bill. They all recognise that being a multi-religious society, where the world's great religions are present, it is vital that religious harmony must be maintained at all times. They do submit to the fact that excessive religious fervour or behaviour can lead to grave problems for the nation. Sir, no one quarrels with the need to preserve this fundamental principle in our society.

Mr Speaker, Sir, however, on scrutinising the detailed provisions of the Bill, the professionals have several areas of concerns and misgivings and these worry many of them. I will now attempt to highlight some of these concerns. Firstly, they hope that the introduction of this Bill will not lead to a restriction of the freedom of practice of religion which is guaranteed by the Constitution. People, except for the minority with extreme tendencies, should still be allowed to continue to practise and profess their faith as before and as guaranteed in the Constitution.

Sir, with regard to clauses 8 and 9 of the Bill which spell out the type of behaviour that would merit a prohibition order, many felt that the descriptions of behaviour are too broad and open to interpretation. While they hoped that the Minister will be completely objective in his decision, it may be difficult at times, no matter how objective the Minister is, to draw the line between what is acceptable behaviour and what is not. The framework or guidelines for deciding where the limit has been breached should be clearly spelt out in the legislation.

Similarly, Sir, many of the professionals felt that it is also difficult to draw the line between politics and religion. They were of the opinion that it may not always be possible for religious leaders not to take a position on political issues, especially on matters of conscience. An often cited example where this may happen is when the nation is under an evil regime, like the

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Philippines under Marcos or Uganda under Idi Amin. If such a regime were to gain power here, then by this legislation people will be prevented to speak out or act against the government. Hence, it was felt that some safeguards should be put in place to prevent any possible abuse.

Mr Speaker, Sir, another nagging concern expressed was that the powers given to the Minister may be a little too excessive. They thought that the role of the Minister and Presidential Council should be reversed. The Presidential Council, being composed of a group of people with good knowledge of various religions, would be in a better position to decide on such matters. It should therefore have the final say on when a prohibition order should be issued.

Sir, many felt strongly that the Presidential Council should also be given the authority to raise issues on its own and not act only when directed by the Government. This, they felt, would give the Presidential Council an even greater standing and credibility.

Sir, another common concern aired is the lack of recourse to judicial review or appeal against the Minister's decision. In view of the fact that there could be a fair amount of subjectivity in the decision to place a person under a prohibition order, they felt that there must be an avenue for the decision of the Minister to be reviewed.

Mr Speaker, Sir, a few felt that the objective behind the Bill is fair but are really uncomfortable with the timing of the introduction of this Bill. There are some misgivings about the intention, especially this Bill coming after the arrest of Vincent Cheng and the Marxist group.

Sir, besides legislation, many professionals also felt that in the long term and perhaps a more lasting solution to the issue of preserving religious harmony is really through education. A strong moral education programme in our schools emphasising our multi-religious character will go a long way to achieve religious harmony.

Finally, Sir, there were a few who felt strongly that there is no need for this Bill.

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The reason is that the number of religious incidents that have arisen in the past is rather small and that this Government has been able to handle them with existing legislation.

Sir, over the last few minutes I have tried to broadly list out some of the major concerns expressed regarding this Bill before us. I hope the Minister will give due consideration and respond to these various concerns and misgivings raised. I would specifically urge the Minister to address the nine concerns which I have raised.

Sir, with your permission, I would like to state my own views on this Bill. At the outset, let me say that I accept the Government's rationale for the introduction of this piece of legislation. I strongly believe that in our multi-religious society, it is vital that religious harmony be maintained to ensure our continued survival and prosperity. It is common knowledge that in the recent years there has been a definite increase in religious fervour, missionary zeal and assertiveness among the various religious groups in Singapore. Competition for followers and converts is becoming more intense. More and more Singaporeans are veering towards strongly held exclusive beliefs, rather than the relaxed, tolerant acceptance of and coexistence with other faiths. This trend, as the Minister stated earlier, is not peculiar to Singapore, but part of a world-wide religious revival. If nothing is done now in Singapore, then this trend could increase the possibility of friction and misunderstanding among our religious groups.

Sir, I also accept the fact that we cannot assume that religious harmony will persist indefinitely as a matter of course. A conscious effort is needed by all, especially religious leaders and groups to help maintain our present position. This legislation before us, I believe, will go a long way towards achieving this goal.

Sir, I would like to comment on two specific issues. The first relates to the powers to be given to the Minister, as many have complained that they are excessive and will lead to abuse. I am

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satisfied that the powers given to the Minister will not enable him to play God, but I believe that his role is that of a policeman, one of maintaining religious harmony.

My other point refers to the use of the term "prohibition order". This, in fact, has caused some confusion. It may be worth while for the Minister to consider changing it to "restraining order". The word "prohibition" throws up a number of unnecessary interpretations.

In conclusion, let me add that in addition to this legislation, I would strongly recommend to the Government to pay attention to two other areas, as far as religious harmony is concerned. First, which I mentioned earlier, is actually greater emphasis on maintenance of religious harmony when our new programme for moral education is introduced in the school system. This will really be the long-term solution.

Secondly, I also believe that there must be frank and frequent exchange of views between the political leadership and the religious leaders on various issues affecting us. This should be done quietly and calmly without media attention and sensitive issues can be nipped in the bud. This approach, I feel, will ensure and guarantee national stability and prosperity.

Sir, I welcome and support this Bill.
1.54 pm

The Senior Minister of State for Education (Dr Tay Eng Soon): Mr Speaker, Sir, thank you for allowing me to speak at this debate. I rise in support of the Bill.

Sir, when the concepts of this Bill and the need for the Bill were first discussed some two years ago, I was party to the discussion. I must say that at that time my initial reactions were one of caution and I had some reservations. The questions that went through my mind were: will legislation on a subject concerning religion lead to the curbing of religious freedom or freedom of worship? Secondly, is legislation itself necessary? This is the same concern that I have found expressed by many other people when I discussed the White Paper and the Bill with them.

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Let me return to the basic issues of the Bill first. The Bill addresses two basic issues. The first is how can we continue to preserve harmony amongst the different religious groups in our country? Secondly, how can we prevent religious groups from getting embroiled in the political arena or political parties from exploiting religious sentiments in order to win support or to cause disaffection with the elected government?

The first question is on religious freedom. Religious freedom and harmony amongst religious groups are two inter-related matters. If there is friction and unrest, obviously freedom will be affected. For there to be genuine religious freedom, freedom to worship freely, there must be a degree of harmony in the society. This is true especially in a multi-religious society. We have in Article 15(1) of the Constitution the guarantee that every person in Singapore has the right to profess and practise his religion and to propagate it. To that extent, religious freedom is enshrined in our Constitution. But freedom is not unlimited. Freedom comes with responsibilities. Although it is enshrined in our Constitution that we have religious freedom, we must recognise that it comes with responsibilities. Therefore, preaching, for example, should not be in such a way as to denigrate other religions or people of other religions, nor should the propagation of a religion be carried out with force or with harassment of people of other faiths. It should, in fact, be gracious and sensitive to those who have already embraced other faiths.

When I examined the Bill, Sir, I found that the Bill is narrow and specific in its intent. First, to prevent

actions which are calculated at disrupting harmony between religions and, secondly, to prevent politically motivated actions which are carried out under the guise of religion or in the name of a religion. If the Bill succeeds in doing these two things, it will help keep the peace. And far from curbing religious freedom, it will safeguard freedom. So I am satisfied that the provisions and intentions of the Bill are narrow and specific, that the Bill will prevent a person from saying things which are calculated to cause disaffection. But the Bill will not

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restrain him in any other way, ie, he will continue to be free to act in every other way, including to preach and practise his religion. So when people express fears about the prohibition order, they should understand that it is on specific matters that the person has said or acted upon. But in all other respects, he is a free person to continue to preach and practise his religion.

Sir, I do not agree with those people who say that keeping religion separate from politics is a Western idea. By implication, they are saying that it is all right for us in the East to mix the two. I find this unacceptable. Is this really so that we can mix religion and politics and get away with it? I would ask them to look at a few examples. Take India. Every time there is a run-up to a general elections, hundreds of Indians are killed in the process because politicians on every side try to make use of religion and religious sentiments to gain support for themselves. So in the excitement, there is religious tension, there are fights and there are deaths.

Sri Lanka has been mentioned by the Minister. It is important to reflect upon the fact that Mr Bandaranaike in the Freedom Party came to power because his Party played on the sentiments of Buddhist Singhalese and also on their language. The result of that was that the Tamil Hindus, the minorities, were forced into a corner and they became less and less favoured in many ways. Today we have a civil war in Sri Lanka, a war that has seen no end. Even in Malaysia, some political parties made use of Islamic fundamentalism and they tried to outdo each other. Why? Because they want to use religion to win political support. I do not believe that this leads to greater harmony and stability. Can we, a multi-religious, multi-racial country, afford to let religious pulls come to the fore to determine the shape of politics in Singapore?

Sir, up to now we have enjoyed peace and harmony. Our people are basically tolerant and pragmatic. Religion is not a factor in education, in getting jobs, in housing, in getting promotions, in winning scholarships, etc. Religion has never been a factor in these things. Only in marriage, Sir, is religion a factor. But it is a very

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personal and private matter and if people prefer to marry other people of the same religion and faith, who are we to question their choice? But, Sir, this situation is not so in many other countries where there is a dominant or an official state religion. This influences who gets what jobs, who gets university places. There is a distortion. There is a bias. This would be disastrous in a multi-racial, multi-religious society like ours. The reason why religion is not a factor and has not been allowed to become a divisive factor is that our Government has not allowed it to become one. We have achieved this by scrupulously keeping religion separate from the political arena and keeping it from being able to influence the politics of our country.

But, Sir, we cannot be complacent. There are pressures mounting in many places outside of our country. Many people are seeking more rights, special rights, and even so-called justice on the basis of their religion. Take, for example, in Azerbaijan and Armenia. There is a worldwide revolution taking place. Older forms of Government, for example, communism, or even dictatorship, are being swept aside by uprisings. In their place at the moment there is great jubilation, there is exhilaration, there is even euphoria. But we are yet to see new stable forms of government taking their place. When the lid has been removed, old issues along racial and religious lines which were suppressed are beginning to emerge and resurface. Sir, are we so special that we do not have racial and religious sentiments in our country that cannot be influenced by these powerful changes, nor be exploited by ambitious politicians or religious leaders for their purposes? Some evidence have been provided in the White Paper of incidents to convince me that we are not that special.

Historically, more conflicts in the world have taken place over racial and religious issues than over any other issues. Civil wars, riots, international conflicts. Sir, the mixture is extremely potent. Religion has to do with sacred beliefs and practices and these cannot be challenged by others,

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especially those outside the faith. Politics, on the other hand, has to do with dividing the cake ultimately - the division of incomes, who gets what, university places, fees, etc. Can you imagine what will happen when people seek "justice" or a "better deal" in the name of their religion? Or consider this other scenario. Supposing we have a situation where there are marginal seats in a coming election or, worse, a national situation where there is a marginal situation. Will politicians and political parties in that situation be tempted to seek the support of religious groups in order to win the elections? Or will religions, sensing an opportunity, move in to offer their support to one party or another? After the elections are over, who will have to do favours for whom if the support resulted in victory for one party? Will the religious suspicions and tensions which arose because of the hustings subside after the elections are over? Sir, is this an unlikely scenario? I submit that it is not an unlikely scenario when things are on the margin. Many other

countries have gone down this road. If we go down this road we will go down the road to perdition. There will be permanent distrust and suspicion. There will be tension of a kind that cannot be persuaded to go away.

Sir, no good has ever come out of allowing religion and politics to come together in any form. Dominant groups in such a situation will exert their influence. Minority religious groups will suffer.

Sir, having seen the havoc in history as well as in other countries, I am convinced that we need a simple, narrow Bill as a minimum piece of legislation to maintain religious harmony and to prevent religion and politics from getting mixed up.

Sir, I would like to turn to the question: Is legislation necessary? There is one recurring point which keeps coming up when the White Paper is discussed in various circles. The point is, why do we need to add another piece of legislation? Is not existing legislation sufficient? In one sense there is merit in that point. But, Sir, interestingly, the Sedition Act, the Penal Code, even the Internal Security Act, are all silent on the issue of religion getting involved with politics. They have a lot to say about disturbing the peace, for

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example, denigrating other religions, ie, one group denigrating the other, or subverting the security of the State, which is the main concern of the ISA. But they say nothing about religions and political parties seeking alliances with one another, nor about religious groups seeking the support or criticising political parties or vice versa. If the new Bill can prevent this from happening, I believe it will be worth having.

Sir, I am not anti-religion. In fact, I take my own religious belief very seriously. But the purpose of religion is often misunderstood and, worse, misused by people with political ambitions. What is the purpose of all religions? In my view, it is to help the individual to become a better person, to give him meaning to life and to give him comfort and assurance in times of suffering and death. Religion cuts to the core of the problems of human nature - problems of selfishness, greed, hatred and in its place seeks to make man better. The end purpose is to make parents become better parents, sons and daughters become better sons and daughters, to make a boss a better boss, a worker a better worker and even a citizen a better citizen and a better member of his community.

Sir, this is the noble task of all religions. If they succeed, society will be a better place. In this sense, religion has a profound influence over society and even over the politics in that society. But it does so by changing the individual from within for the better and it does not do so by involving itself directly in politics. Perhaps religious leaders should from time to time examine or re-examine the real purpose of their religion. Is it to influence political affairs or is it to seek to change individual lives towards the good?

I believe the unique role and purpose of all true religions is clear. It is to minister to the personal and spiritual needs of individuals and to make them morally upright. But, Sir, I make a distinction between individuals and their religious organisation getting involved in politics. Sir, I must make this point again as, judging from letters to the newspapers, some writers seem to confuse the two issues. In my view, there is no reason why a person with strong religious principles should not go

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into politics. He should. He has every right as a citizen and he has a contribution to make. We need such men, men who are morally upright and can serve the society. But he cannot and should not go into politics to represent his religion. His electorate is multi-religious. He cannot take sides in this matter and he must serve all of them. It is quite a different thing, Sir, on the other hand, for a religious organisation or its leaders in the name of their religion to make political pronouncements or even to go into the political arena. This is not their place. If they do so this will only result in competition and rivalry from other religious groups who will seek to do the same thing. This will be the beginning of tensions.

Sir, I have met many religious leaders since the publication of the White Paper and have sought to get their views and their feedback on the proposed legislation. Many concur with the basic need to preserve religious harmony although, as I have explained, some expressed the fear that it may lead to the loss of religious freedom. But I have taken great care to explain to them that it will not do so. But there is one fear that they have and that is the possibility of abuse of the power which is given into the hands of the Minister who has to administer this Act.

The Presidential Council for Religious Harmony which has been explained in detail by the Minister is meant to be an advisory committee. But I believe that its role as a watchdog committee can be strengthened. According to the proposed Bill, all correspondence between the Minister and the person who is being warned will be provided to the Council, so they will have sight of it. Furthermore, in clause 11 of the Bill, the Minister will give to the Council documents relating to the case. Sir, I believe that if the Council could have more access to information and be able to call for more background evidence relevant to the issuance of the prohibition order, this would have two salutary effects.

First, the Council will be able to satisfy itself that sufficient evidence exists for the action to be taken, and that the action of the Minister is justifiable.

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Secondly, the Minister, knowing that the Council can call for and scrutinise the evidence, will clearly be more thorough and careful before he acts. This way, Sir, the Council will be able to play its role more effectively as a safeguard against any possible abuse.

Furthermore, Sir, before the prohibition order is issued by the Minister, I would suggest that a number of earlier warning letters and contacts be made with the party concerned. This will give the person a chance to retract what he is doing or saying or to explain himself. And if he continues to disregard the warnings, then the prohibition order can be issued.

Finally, Sir, religious leaders do have views on matters of conscience and morality and on other public issues. This must be recognised by the Government. Therefore, channels for private contact and dialogue must always be kept open. The elected government of the day has the full mandate and responsibility to govern. But it must maintain and open all channels to religious leaders in our multi-religious society if we are to take into account their concerns, just as we maintain channels to many other groups in Singapore.

Finally, Sir, touching on the point raised by Mr Chandra Das, I fully agree with him that in the long term, moral and civic education especially touching upon the area of religious tolerance and more knowledge of one and others' religion should be carried out in the schools. I am happy to inform him that, in fact, this is part of the framework that is being developed, which was mentioned by my Minister earlier this morning.

Sir, I support the Bill.

Dr Arthur Beng Kian Lam (Fengshan): Mr Speaker, Sir, in the interests of national security, law and order, the Government has been in discussion regarding this Bill for more than two years. It opted for the presentation of a White Paper after the consultative process. The views of religious leaders and others were incorporated into the White Paper. The White Paper also included a security perspective

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giving instances of inter-religious tensions, intra-religious tensions, mixing of religion and politics, and religion and subversion. More dialogues followed subsequently. After this debate, the Bill goes to a Select Committee. I am confident that after this exercise, this Bill will indeed be one that will lay the foundation to ensuring the maintenance of religious harmony for generations to come. I hope that this Bill will unite our nation further, not divide it.

Sir, some of the incidents quoted in the White Paper in the security section were unknown even to us, as Members of Parliament. Many members of the public were surprised that these incidents had occurred. It is good that the White Paper has been candid in its presentation of the security perspective. Now all of us, regardless of faith, can see the potential explosiveness of each of the illustrations given.

However, there are some who have expressed that the Government, in wanting to remain secular, is anti-religion. This is a misconception, and it is essential that in a multi-racial, multi-religious society, the Government must remain secular and not be partisan.

Mr Speaker, Sir, on an issue as sensitive as religion, I feel that, difficult as it is, we need to address it now - at a time when we are enjoying a harmonious relationship. It is like a large wealthy extended family which has to discuss and plan for the distribution of wealth. This should be done when all members of the family are on good terms. They can then discuss logically and objectively and not be clouded by selfish desires and personal gains. This, I believe and agree with the Minister, is the correct time to discuss the issue of religious harmony.

Sir, by introducing this White Paper and Bill, the Government is unequivocally stating that (i) it is not anti-religion; (ii) it believes in a secular state; and (iii) it believes that religious harmony should not be taken for granted. I believe in these aims. One should differentiate between religious extremism and sincere committed believers of any faith. I believe that the majority of our religious leaders are virtuous men of great faith who are also responsible citizens, that is, they

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would not want to see strife and bloodshed in Singapore in the name of religion or for any other cause. Sir, because of this faith in our religious leaders, I support this middle-of-the-road approach of this legislation. To use the Penal Code, Sedition Act, or the ISA is too extreme. It is much better that the authorities seek clarification from the religious leaders regarding their acts or speeches, so that any miscommunication or misunderstanding of motives can be clarified.

Sir, on two separate occasions I had informal discussions with two different religious leaders regarding their publications which were of concern to the authorities. Both these religious leaders were surprised that the authorities had interpreted political implications into their writings. After this was explained to them, they gave perfectly acceptable explanations as to their intentions. They subsequently desisted from their trends. Today, both of them are respected leaders in their community.

This spirit of "let us discuss our differences" is the spirit behind the prohibition order. Before the prohibition order is served, the person involved must be put on notice. Another two checks are put into place. The head of the religious group has to be informed and the Presidential Council must also be informed.

Some of the religious leaders that I have discussed this Bill and White Paper with, see another positive factor put into place. This factor is accountability. They feel that in addition to their own disciplinary proceedings within their own religious order, this Bill now places on every religious leader an accountability to the authorities and the head of the religious group. It was also pointed out to me that this accountability factor placed on the heads of the religious groups would mean that no head of organisation can now pander to his group. This is important for us all to understand, as in many religious organisations the head is elected into office for a fixed term. This accountability factor is thus a check against the popular vote.

Those who have expressed doubts regarding the Bill feel that too much power is being put into the Government's hand.

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The Minister, I am sure, will also address this point. All I will say at this point is that the Minister must be a very wise and brave man or a very naive man to disregard the views of the Presidential Council as the major religious groups will be represented on the Council. These very members will go back to their own congregations and will have to explain convincingly to their members regarding the Council's decision. If the Minister cannot convince the Council members, can these men of great faith convince their religious followers?

Sir, at this stage, I would like to reaffirm two main points:

(i) It is the Government's duty to maintain law and order and, in the final analysis, separation of religion and state; and

(ii) This Bill is not against committed believers or against persons who express strong commitment and belief in their faith but against extremism.

With your permission, Sir, I would like to relate two experiences. Mr Speaker, Sir, I have changed the scenario, but the basic facts remain so that the families may remain anonymous and to dilute references to any particular religious groups. This was at their request. Nonetheless, they urged me to present their predicament to Parliament.

Case one. A family with four children all in their teens. One daughter was influenced by a religious group and subsequently brought his brother along. The parents were very distressed for several reasons. The daughter's academic performance fell drastically. The health of their son was deteriorating rapidly as he was unable to cope with the pressure exerted upon him by the religious group. Within months of contact with the group, he had to be placed under psychiatric care. His personality disintegrated. Until today the boy is still under psychiatric care. However, he has recovered well enough to continue normal schooling after severing ties with the religious group. The son has given all his savings amounting to some \$2,000 to the group.

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Case two. A father noticed that the eldest son in the family of five became increasingly rebellious. It came to a point when he could no longer tolerate it. He engaged a private detective to inquire into the child's activities and discovered to his horror that his son was involved in cult-like activities. The son's educational performance dropped drastically and he was estranged from his parents and siblings. After much counselling from the extended family of uncles and aunts and with professional help, the son has been rehabilitated.

What are the common factors in both these cases? (i) The problem was precipitated by over-zealous religious leaders, that is, extremism; (ii) Families were disrupted; (iii) One child will probably suffer permanent disability; (iv) There was, in my opinion, unnecessarily far suffering for both families.

Both families sought help, but refused to make police reports for fear of reprisal and fear of the supernatural. They were indeed distraught. This, I hope, will help to convince those who feel that open court trials would be a better system than that proposed in this Bill.

Are these isolated cases? I have spoken to some of my medical colleagues, and they have also had similar cases and experiences.

Sir, these are but two examples. There are other incidents which have been enumerated in the White Paper. All of these incidents can only convince me of the need for this legislation and for an Advisory Council.

Sir, on to the question of religion and politics. To my mind, that religion and politics should be separate

is unarguable. History teaches us this lesson and the Minister has given us many illustrations this afternoon. Religion deals with the deep questions of who am I, what am I, questions of our existence, and existence of the world around us, questions of how we relate to one another as individuals in an ethical sense. Without any intention of offending any particular religious groups,

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there are as many answers accorded to these questions as there are religious groups. Often they promote a system of ethics or moral values that binds the community together. As such, it complements the goal of politics, namely, to provide a better life for all, to put it very simplistically. Such a complementary relationship can only come about if there is a clear demarcation between religious institutions and the State.

Sir, at this point I would like to seek clarification from the Minister on certain details of the Bill. (1) What is the principle that will be followed regarding representation on the Presidential Council? Will it be proportionate to the number of devotees in the population? Or would the aim be to allow a broad spectrum of representation, ie, the smaller groups can also be represented? (2) Will there be a limit to the number of times a prohibition order can be extended? (3) Will a system evolve so that the Minister is also obliged to give reasons if he disregards the advice of the Presidential Council? (4) Will the Minister consider widening the terms of reference of the Presidential Council so that he can take a pro-active role in leading the nation towards greater religious harmony?

In conclusion, Mr Speaker, Sir, I feel that in the last 25 years of independence, we have harped on the theme of religious tolerance. Today, with a better educated nation and the mass media available, we should take another bold step forward towards understanding. The Oxford dictionary defines "tolerance" as "the action or practice of enduring or sustaining pain or hardship". There is something unpleasant about it. In understanding intelligence, the capability of judging with knowledge is present in the overtones. And when it comes to the good understanding, the dictionary refers this to as an "amicable or friendly relations between persons".

The Government, especially the Ministry of Community Development, can do much towards fostering understanding. I agree with my colleagues that the moral education programme can also do more. When there is an understanding and an acceptance of one another for what the other is,

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the ground is removed beneath those who stray towards religious extremism.

Mr Speaker, Sir, I support the Bill.

Dr Aline K. Wong (Tampines GRC): Mr Speaker, Sir, I support the Bill because the principles behind it are sound principles. In a pluralistic society like ours, I think no one would doubt the need for inter-religious harmony, nor the wisdom of separating religion from politics. I am also satisfied that this Bill has gone through a number of careful drafts and that discussions have been held with religious leaders. And there might also be public hearings if a Select Committee is appointed.

Here, I only wish to concentrate on several points about the Bill itself which the Minister might want to reconsider. Like the Members from Cheng San GRC and Fengshan, I think first and foremost we should note the wide-ranging powers given to the Minister. In fact, he has the absolute power to decide who would be deemed as mixing religion with politics or causing religious disharmony. It is to be noted that the functions of the Presidential Council for Religious Harmony are purely advisory. The Minister is not bound by its recommendations and not even the courts can question the Minister's decision. The courts, in fact, can only decide on the penalty to be given out. Thus, in my opinion, even though this Bill is much less severe than the Internal Security Act, a fact which makes this Bill more palatable to many concerned people, yet it is still the case that the power of the courts is extremely limited.

The Bill does not provide checks and balances in case the Minister abuses his powers. It may be said that the Presidential Council's deliberations on the evidences presented to it by the Minister are some kind of safeguard so that the Minister's decisions and actions are not out of misconception or even out of his prejudice. But then the proceedings of the Council are to be kept secret. So the question is how the public can be convinced that the evidences and the Minister's decisions are just and fair? I would also imagine where the case in point touches on inter-religious harmony only, the Minister would have

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more regard for the Council members' views, because the members are religious leaders themselves. On the other hand, where the case touches on politics so as to "excite disaffection against the President or the Government", I really do not know whether the religious leaders' opinions would be considered relevant.

For the Council to be credible, members of the Council must be seen to represent all the major religious groups in Singapore. In addition to the Chairman, there will only be 15 other members including an unspecified number of persons who are not representing any religious group. Apart from their own religious views, are these lay persons really in a position to make recommendations on religious issues? Matters would be made more complicated if such persons are staunch non-believers and are strongly against any

attempts at proselytising by any religious group. The Council's discussions then may turn into a debate over "territorial rights" between "religionists" and non-religionists". Again, in the case of mixing religion with politics, would such lay persons also have anything to say? I thus urge the Minister to reconsider the representation of lay persons.

As for the other members who are religious leaders, how are they are going to be selected so as to ensure fair representation of all the major religions in Singapore? I think a particular problem would arise within Christianity itself. There are many different Protestant churches. One estimate is that there are over 500 churches and parachurch organisations within the Protestant community. And that on the national level, only four organisations can claim fairly extensive support from these churches. How then can the diversity within the Protestant community be represented on the Presidential Council? Will this lead to an exclusion of representatives of the smaller, independent churches?

Sir, had this Bill been aimed only at inter-religious harmony, I have little doubt that it will be widely supported by the religious groups. Even those groups which believe that active evangelising is part of their religious duty would support the Bill,

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because they understand the need for judicious restraint within our local context. However, where the Bill touches on politics and religion, and this is a significant half of the Bill, opinions are bound to differ widely between the secular and the religious authorities. Both Islam and Christianity hold comprehensive world views. To them, there is no possibility of separating moral responsibility from social responsibility. I shall not belabour this point. But we cannot ignore the widespread anxiety, especially among the Catholics and Protestants, that this Bill may be used by the Government as an instrument to quash political dissent that stems from moral convictions.

Morals are not just matters of private conscience. They are part and parcel of a collective conscience that makes society possible in the first place. And when expressed in religious beliefs, what may appear to be private conscience becomes part of the collective conscience of the religious followers. Hence, the line dividing private conscience and collective conscience cannot be drawn. So far, the Government has only allowed religious dissent on the issue of abortion. This is taking too narrow a view of religious conscience. Other examples of moral conscience that have deep religious overtones include questions of social justice, human rights, stewardship of the earth's resources, chemical and nuclear weaponry, and biotechnology. Are these moral issues? Are these political issues? Will it be permissible for religious leaders to speak only on issues which have no relevance to Singapore?

Sir, much anxiety has been generated among religious groups here because of the perception that this Bill may mean a strict policing of individual thought and action. Some of these feedback have already been given by Mr Chandra Das. Although the law is right in insisting that religious leaders should not use their positions of authority to sway their flocks towards their own political views, yet the law is equally applicable to any other person within the group. Is it not possible for the Government to consider allowing

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religious leaders to restrain their own followers, as is the customary practice in the past? Will we not be undermining the authority of religious leaders within their own groups? I think the Minister will have to clarify this point, ie, the need to apply this law equally to followers as to leaders of religious groups.

Finally, Sir, some Christian groups tend to perceive this Bill as the Government's reaction to the Marxist plot in 1987. I believe they should look at the Bill from a broader and longer perspective. They should have faith in what the Government has repeatedly said, that it is not against the Church or any religious groups. In fact, it is highly appreciative of what the religious groups have done in providing educational, welfare and other social services to the country. The feelings of religious groups aside, the Government should be aware of the reaction of some intellectuals who view this Bill as yet another layer of control by the Government. Perhaps these people should realise that this Bill is a far kinder, gentler approach and the Minister will only exercise his powers in keeping good faith with the people. Indeed it would be very foolish if the Minister does not exercise his powers with extreme caution in matters so sensitive as religion. What is needed is for the Minister to assure the country, the people, that this Bill indeed is to safeguard the long-term interests of the country and that the Minister himself or Ministers after him will actually exercise their powers with the most extreme caution.

2.45 pm

Mr Abdullah Tarmugi (Siglap): Sir, this Bill is indeed a very important and sensitive one and I am glad to hear the Minister assure us that it will be sent to a Select Committee for deliberations.

I think it is important for us to address two fundamental issues and I will therefore touch on the basic principles of this Bill rather than on the specifics. One fundamental issue is whether this piece of legislation is required at all and, secondly, whether it will curtail religious freedom in this country. Initially, Sir, I had doubts whether we need this Bill at all, whether, as some have mentioned, we are increas-

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ing the restrictions on our citizens burdened as they already are with numerous rules and regulations which

govern a large part of their lives. I have thought, Sir, as those who oppose the Bill do, that existing laws were more than sufficient and adequate to handle the issues and problems addressed by the Bill. And indeed they are, Sir, in many respects. Take the Penal Code for instance. It is a crime for anyone to utter words to deliberately wound the religious feelings of any person. The ISA empowers the Government to detain anyone whose religious activity is likely to set religious groups against one another or to heighten differences and intolerance between religions. I found it difficult, Sir, if not futile, to argue that these provisions could not do the job we want in this Bill except, as pointed out by the Senior Minister of State for Education, on the question of religion and politics.

Sir, one of the premises which prompted the introduction of this Bill is the growing religious fervour and missionary zeal in the population. As a person with a religion, I personally have no quarrel with this trend of Singaporeans being more religious as religions generally teach people to be good human beings even if theological definitions of virtue and piety differ among the faiths. But such zeal and fervour could push some of us to preach and proselytize in ways which transgress the religious sensitivities of others. Some could even go to any length to project and propagate their faiths. In our context, Sir, this could be explosive business, as it is natural that every action invites a reaction, more so when it comes to beliefs. If this trend continues, how do we deal with it? Sure, we can appeal for good sense. Sure, we can appeal for moderation. We can educate, we can persuade. But how do we argue against actions and attitudes which are based on and motivated by faith and the promise of eternal salvation? Or do we in the interest of the public or public order and stability begin to use the Sedition Act, the Penal Code and even the ISA liberally and wantonly? Surely, Sir, this is not what we want.

On closer examination, I see this Bill more as a preventive measure than a

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punitive one. It enables us to act promptly and without much fuss before a situation becomes ugly and out of control. If a prohibition order is issued and complied with, then that is the end of the whole story and no further penalty need to be meted out. We must be clear that the Bill does not refute divine truths and theological precepts. Rather it is the recognition of the realities that we in Singapore live in and as a Government it cannot turn its face away from these realities and the adaptations that are needed to live with them. Had we been a society with a single religion or a dominant religion, the story would have been totally different. Would this curtail our religious freedom? Frankly, Sir, it depends on how freedom is defined. If by this freedom we mean the right to choose and practise one's religion, build houses of worship, proselytize and accumulate merit for doing charity, social and community work, then religious freedom is untouched and undiminished. But if freedom is theologically defined where it encompasses not only the spiritual but the socio-economic and political spheres as well, as Christians and Muslims do, then this freedom may be perceived as being modified somewhat. And for good reasons.

The intent is not to stifle religious practice, however defined, or from preventing citizens to take part in politics. Neither is it to deny the inseparability of religion and politics as propounded by some faiths. It is to prevent the misuse of religion for political purposes and objectives. Indeed, Sir, if a government is so corrupt, so rotten, so unbearable, then it is the duty of every citizen, not only of any religion, to bring that government down. The Penal Code, Sedition Act, ISA, will not stop the tide.

There is, however, one possible consequence to the Bill that we should look into. This Bill should be viewed in its right and proper perspective. By this I mean we should not decrease our tolerance by being over-sensitive and over-suspicious, always on the look out for the slightest perceived infraction. To do so would be counter-productive and against the spirit and intent of the Bill. Neither should we be so withdrawn and so fearful and cowered

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that we become resentful of the restraints that are introduced and necessary.

On this, Sir, the Government has a very large part to play. As of now, our people are still unsure of what they can do in terms of their religion without breaking the provisions of the Bill. How far can proselytization go, for example? What words, what deeds, would be construed to be offending others or to be dabbling in politics? What can be said in religious sermons, in religious speeches? The Government must ensure that the people fully understand the ramifications of the Bill. A lot of explanation and clarification would be needed to clear the confusion and misunderstanding among our people and to ensure that our religious leaders and officials can play their roles properly and do their jobs without difficulty. I hope the Minister will consider this request seriously.

Religious harmony is something that we have enjoyed and something we should cherish. It is indeed paradoxical that the religious freedom we enjoy is possible because of the moderation, because of the restraints displayed by the various religions. Maybe this is the only way.

I support the Bill.

Mr Speaker: Order. I suspend the Sitting and will take the Chair again at 3.15 pm.

*Sitting accordingly suspended
at 2.53 pm until 3.15 pm.*

Sitting resumed at 3.15 pm

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

MAINTENANCE OF RELIGIOUS HARMONY BILL

Debate resumed.

The Senior Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Education (Encik Sidek bin Saniff) (*In Malay*): Mr Speaker, discussing the White Paper on Maintenance of Religious Harmony requires an openness of mind and a deep sense of awareness. Syncretism and emotions must be cast

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away as far as we can, because what we are discussing is not an issue of ideology or philosophy alone. This concerns things that have always been very close to the heart of mankind, ever since the dawn of human history - the issues of race and religious belief. And in the Singapore context, the two are also inter-twined, because religious identity in Singapore is inherent in racial or community identity, and vice versa. This makes the issue even more sensitive and complex.

We can find examples in Lebanon, Northern Ireland, Sri Lanka, Fiji, South America, with its liberation theology movement, not to mention the Middle East and the Balkan countries. Conflict takes place between nationalistic idiosyncrasies and religious dogma. Religion and race are in constant friction and the heat has now begun to be felt in other countries too, including ours. This is even more apparent as we, in forging our own history, come out with new perspectives on things. First, for example, we decided that we are more inclined to the concept of Singapore as a "hotch-potch of different cultures" rather than a "melting pot". Second, we decided that every minority community, in particular the Malays and the Indians, must have representation in Parliament. This led to the creation of the GRCs.

The first concept, the hotch-potch of different cultures, has generally been found acceptable, as it would, at the end of the day, lead to the creation of one nation, the Nation of Singapore. But the second, the idea of GRCs, has met with some difficulty - as we have seen from the debate in this House - as it requires society to entrench communal or racial interests without accepting or succumbing to communalism. This is a difficult separation, and hence the syncretists and those who fail to understand the issue continue to wallow in the muck of its political exploitation.

Why does this happen? I believe this is because we are haunted by our own successes. We have been relieved of political conflicts, whether communalist or communist-induced, and we are free of economic poverty. Besides, our educational standards have progressively

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improved. People have more questions to ask, examining the rationale and necessity of measures and policies. Economic comforts have given them the comfort of being able to venture into the world of intellectual analysis, and yet rationality and intellectual analysis require experience, something that cannot be achieved through high education alone.

At the same time, one reality that must be appreciated is that the solutions of the future change with the times. The "Club of Rome" made a unique conclusion in this regard when it said "The future is no more the simple continuity of today. It is the direct consequence of today." The measures we have taken through the White Paper and this Bill are, of course, based on the direct consequences of what is happening today. For we simply cannot solve the problems of today using yesterday's formulae, just as today's formulae cannot be used to solve the problems of tomorrow. Tomorrow and the future require tomorrow's formulae and approaches.

The White Paper and the Bill before us point to a problem and a formula for today and for tomorrow. But because they concern religion and were tabled by a Government that has openly declared itself secular, the wheels of history are now turning again.

Let us see how history viewed secularism and religion. I quote from the Encyclopaedia Britannica. What does it say about secularism? It says:

'A movement in society directed away from other-worldliness to this-worldliness. In the medieval period there was a strong tendency for religious persons to despise human affairs and to meditate on God and the after-life. As a reaction to this medieval tendency, secularism, at the time of the Renaissance, exhibited itself in the development of humanism, when man began to show more interest in human cultural achievements and the possibilities of fulfilment in this world. The movement towards secularism has been in progress during the entire course of modern history and has often been viewed as being anti-Christian and anti-religious. In the latter half of the 20th century, however, a number of theologians began advocating secular Christianity should be concerned not only with the sacred and the other world, but rather that man should find in the secular world the opportunity to promote Christian values. These

theologians maintain that the real message of Jesus can be discovered and fulfilled in the everyday affairs of secular urban living.'

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In the same context, the same developments took place, for example, in the Islamic world. During their rule, the Umayyads were considered to have very secular tendencies, because of its secular outlook when a new dynasty came into the picture the Abbasids, she revert back to closely follow the Caliphate or fundamentalists, though their fundamentalism was not the same fundamentalism understood by the West today. Their fundamentalism was based on equality, liberty, fraternity, social justice and toleration towards other faiths, and incorporated one principle enjoined in the Quran, that believers should not denigrate or, worse still, abuse other religions.

Let us see now how Muslims, specifically, view this issue of secularism today. In "Faces of Islam - Conversation and Contemporary Issues", edited by Zainuddin Sadar and Merry Wyn Davies, doubts and concerns were raised by the two participants over secularism. The first participant spoke of the "Secular Outlook" that distances itself completely from religious belief and belief in Divine-revealed science. He also asked those of traditional and religious outlook not to reject totally the importance of modern secular knowledge. He was not very comfortable with this artificial separation. The other writer was concerned that we might be trapped in the so-called "concept of tragedy".

Mr Speaker, this "concept of tragedy" arises in all probability because those entrusted with power misused their powers and the trust of the people. In Annex B, I quote Dr Amir Hasan Siddiqi in his book "Studies in Islamic History" who traced the problem to this.

The White Paper and the Bill are correct when they say that Islam and Christianity do not separate between religion and politics.

For Muslims, it has been said that "Islam is not a mere religious creed. It is not mere dogmas or tenets. It is a complete code of life". Prof. Gibb, in his book "Whither Islam" expressed his concurrence. And this concept brings with it the other fundamentals, such as the importance of truth,

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referred to by Dr Tay Eng Soon earlier, placing the rights of others above one's own rights, tolerance, neighbourliness and a sense of responsibility towards other religions.

And let us see how tolerance between religions was effected in ancient times - the tolerance that we are now discussing as if it no longer exists. I quote now what a Nestorian Bishop once said of Muslims who came to his land:

'These Tayites (ie the Arabs) to whom God has accorded domination in our days, have also become our masters; yet they do not combat at all the Christian religion: on the contrary, respect our priests and our saints and make donation to our churches and our convents.'

Something we would find strange today - non-Muslims feeling safe under the banner of Islam.

The question today is whether we can accept this White Paper and the Bill, which require, and I quote, that "Religion must be kept vigourously separate from politics" (page 1 of the White Paper). Can Muslims and Christians keep the two separate? There are divided views on this.

To answer the question, we have to analyze the White Paper and the Bill and scrutinize the track record of this secular government of ours. Firstly, I think these documents are directed at those who misuse religion and/or politics and they form a small segment of the society. This paper is tabled in order that the greater majority of us would be safe from the problems the small minority seeks to cause.

Secondly, in the more than three decades it has been in power, this Government has not shown itself to be anti-religion. In fact, it has been the very opposite. The progress achieved by religious groups and the proliferation of religious activities in Singapore are clear evidence of the positive attitude of the Government in this respect. Its appreciation of the contributions of religious adherents in Singapore cannot be denied.

At the same time, I am sure no one can fault the basic concepts and aims of the

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White Paper and the Bill: 1) that every religious group and its followers must respect and be sensitive to every other religious group in this multi-racial society; 2) that the choice of religion is the right of every individual and there must be no compulsion; 3) that religious leaders should not misuse their position and use their religious following as a political platform - if this happens, conflict would ensue, with dire consequences; 4) that the creation of the Presidential Council for Religious Harmony is aimed at forging harmony and reducing friction; it is a more appropriate measure compared with existing legislation such as

the ISA.

I am sure, Mr Speaker, there are grey areas and areas of concern to the population in this, as in every issue. These matters should be raised as specific issues by adherents of every religious group when the Bill is deliberated by the Select Committee. For example, questions have been raised, and assumptions made, on the issue of cremation. Firstly, I do not think a comprehensive proposal on this would be made. If at all, I do not believe it would be directed at, say, the Muslims. Secondly, I believe Muslims would be able to come up with solutions to this problem. It involves the problem of our limited size. God willing, a suitable solution would be found that would not prejudice the laws of Islam and at the same time solve the problem faced by the Government.

Finally, Mr Speaker, and more fundamental to this discussion is the fear that there might one day be a government that misuses the powers under this Bill to such an extent that religious adherents would feel straitjacketed. I believe this will not be so, but two things can happen if this is ever the case.

Firstly, religious adherents can convey their views through channels leading finally to the government, say, through their Members of Parliament or privately. Or if the issues are more serious, they could perhaps join a political party or even form a political party and work under the existing ground rules, ie through the ballot box.

Secondly, if the government of the day happened to be really corrupt, ruling with

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an iron fist, oppressive, I think the final answer would be revolution. If the Eastern European peoples, who generally do not hold any religious belief, are able to bring down their unjust governments, I think it is impossible for the religious not to be able to do the same.

This is in line with the teachings of many religions, including Islam. Believers would only submit to the rule of a just government. Prophet Muhammad, for instance, once told his followers to go to Abyssinia to seek refuge under the protection of Emperor Negus, who was not a Muslim but, rather, a Christian. Why? Why would they go to a non-Muslim country where the king was not a Muslim king? Because that king was just, whereas the Qureish in Mecca, people of the same stock as the Muslims, people of the same homeland, were persecuting the Muslims. They were unjust and, eventually, the unjust must be taken to battle until justice was achieved for all, regardless of race or belief. This ideal was declared in the Medina Declaration, a very appropriate declaration for a multi-racial, multi-religious society, and it was welcomed by all the different communities of Medina then, including the Jews with their own religion, and the Christians.

The ignorance of a society used to inter-communal strife was thereby overcome. But today, we find this ignorance rearing its head again. The negligent, the forgetful nature that is inherent and synonymous to mankind has resurfaced all over the world. We are not free of its heat. If at all any fault is to be found, I think the fault is our own. We, the believers, we have forgotten what our religions really demand of us, to the extent that we become over-zealous trying to propagate our religions, thereby unwittingly bringing ourselves into an arena where we denigrate each other's beliefs. Of course, the consequences would be very grave indeed. We, the majority who are moderates, are unable to control the smaller segments of our groups who have gone out of line. Their over-zealousness has blotted out tolerance and the true sense of religious responsibility.

I think if we could appreciate all this, I am sure the White Paper and the Bill, once

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passed, would lead to all of us who profess a religion to conduct ourselves with equanimity and a high sense of toleration and understanding. Peace, God willing, would be achieved. Political stability would be sustained. Economic prosperity will be enhanced. Happiness will be gained.

Mr Speaker, I support the Bill.

The Minister for Foreign Affairs and Minister for Community Development (Mr Wong Kan Seng): Mr Speaker, Sir, I support this Bill for the simple reason that I believe in the right of all Singaporeans to practise the religion of their choice and the need for a person's religion or his freedom not to have one to be respected and not interfered with by another person. These are the cardinal principles for which religious harmony in Singapore has been preserved and if we need a law to protect this, then let us have the law.

Sir, although what I have just said may sound like truism to some, it is in fact the very danger that these principles may be violated that the Bill was moved. The recent events in Singapore have been well laid out in the White Paper, and the Minister for Home Affairs mentioned problems of religion versus religion, the problems of mixing politics and religions in several countries earlier on.

Allow me, Sir, just to discuss the events in two of these countries during the last few years to share with you the threat to a community when religion and the pulpit were used to arouse feelings and ended with the cause of religion serving political ends.

The first case took place on an island paradise that was once a model of social, political integration in the South Pacific. That island is Fiji. Its tourist promotion slogan was "The World As It Should Be". Pope John Paul, when he was there in 1986, proclaimed it as a symbol of hope in the world. He spoke seven months too soon. The takeover by a military man and Christian lay preacher, Colonel Rabuka, drew heavily on his religious supporters to kick out a democratically elected government.

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The seed of the problem in Fiji was racial which coincidentally also split along religious lines. Native Fijians against Indian immigrants. Christians against Hindus and Muslims. Mosques and temples were fire-bombed. The radical Christian supporters of Colonel Rabuka wanted the Methodist religion installed as the state religion. On several Sundays, Fijians manned street barricades stopping traffic, fire-bombing offices and sugar mills, attacking anyone found working on the Sabbath. Such is the face of intolerance when racial and religious bigotry got mixed up. People die, peace is broken and a paradise destroyed.

The second case revolves around a mosque built more than 500 years ago in India. The Hindus believe that the site of the Babri Masjid in the northern Indian town of Ayodhya was the birthplace of the deity called Rama. The Muslims said that the Babri Masjid is the shrine to the Moghul Emperor Babar. The Hindus wanted to tear down the mosque to build a temple. 200 people lost their lives in bitter fighting. Thousands of Muslims and Hindus congregated near the site ready to kill one another. Hindu extremists used the temple issue as a rallying cry for rights for the majority Hindu population in India. They accused Mr Rajiv Gandhi's Congress Party of giving too many rights to the Muslims. The Muslims blamed the religious antagonism on Mr Gandhi. Criticisms against Mr Gandhi were levelled from the mosques during Friday prayers. Pakistan, India's Muslim neighbour, weighed in to support the Muslims. The case remains unresolved.

Among the many reasons that accounted for the fall of Mr Gandhi's government was the dissatisfaction by both parties to settle the dispute in their favour. In particular, in the state of Uttar Pradesh where Ayodhya is, the Congress Party, which won 83 out of 85 seats in the 1984 elections, only managed to get 15 seats. Now, the new government in Delhi is in a no-win situation. The government cannot satisfy both and will end up satisfying neither. There obviously, Sir, needs to be a compromise but this is unlikely

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when the positions of the two sides have been taken to the extreme.

Sir, I recall these two incidents to make three points.

Firstly, when religion is the cause of a dispute, the tone of the debate loses all temperance and rationality. Each individual, each group, cannot accept anything other than the complete vindication for its side since divine is involved; indeed, in some cases, evoked.

Secondly, the name of religion is often used to hide the real cause of a problem.

In each of these two cases, you can find the underlying economic and social causes, racial bigotry and indeed remembered hurts from many years ago behind the disputes.

Thirdly, the pronouncements by religious leaders or speeches in the name of the divine take on an authority beyond that of mortal man. The voice from the pulpit is a persuasive power. Whereas religious leaders are accepted as authorities in things holy, it is not entirely certain that they become authoritative in other matters as well.

Mr Speaker, Sir, both the Archbishop of the Catholic church and the Mufti stated that there should be a clearer definition of politics as many areas on religion and politics overlap. I have no problem with their statements. In many ways it is so.

Mr Speaker, Sir, I would like, however, to make this distinction. A doctor, a lawyer or even a priest, may wish to hold a particular political opinion. That is their right to do so as citizens of a state. But these opinions are important only in so far as they are the opinions of a citizen. The opinion should not take on a greater weight just because he is a doctor, a lawyer or a priest. As members of a profession, they have professional opinions which carry more weight in those areas than yours or mine. But they should, indeed they must, not use their position to espouse opinions to lend the opinion extra credibility. This is the concern, especially when the word comes from the pulpit and carries a divine ring.

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Two weeks ago, Mr Speaker, Sir, the Evangelical Fellowship of Singapore held a forum to discuss this Bill. The next day the Straits Times published the comments of a pastor that disturbed me. The pastor was quoted as saying:

"The Bill would curb one's constitutional freedom to proselytise as most religions held the view that others 'are false or not as true as the one being preached'".

I am disturbed, Sir, that a religious leader can think that his constitutional right is curbed just because he is urged by the Government to be sensitive to assertive proselytisation.

Article 15 of the Singapore Constitution indeed guarantees the right to profess and practise one's religion and to propagate it. But a reasonable interpretation of this clause in the context of Singapore must be that a propagator has to take into account the sensitivities of the other religious groups. In fact, the Constitution explicitly states three caveats which govern this freedom.

One caveat is that the profession, practice or propagation of one's religion must not be contrary to any law relating to public order. Put in simple terms, one's freedom of action stops where one's neighbour's nose begins. As Dr Tay himself said earlier, freedom comes with responsibility.

The White Paper has captured the spirit of the conditions necessary for religious harmony in Singapore best. It stated that "so long as all Singaporeans understand that they have to live and let live, and show respect and tolerance for other faiths, harmony should prevail".

To achieve these conditions, therefore it is necessary to have this Bill.

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MAINTENANCE OF RELIGIOUS HARMONY BILL

Debate resumed.

The Second Deputy Prime Minister (Mr Ong Teng Cheong) (*In Mandarin*): Mr Speaker, Sir, I would like to stress in simple terms the two main objectives that the Bill seeks to achieve: One, the maintenance of harmonious relationship among all the religions, and the second, to ensure the separation of religion and politics.

Why do we want to maintain harmonious and peaceful relations among all the religions? To many ordinary people who do not have any religious belief or who do not have very strong religious consciousness, they can hardly imagine that in such a peaceful and quiet small country like Singapore there could be any religious conflict or turmoil. However, in fact, from the White Paper, we can all see that certain religious followers have taken certain actions offensive to the other religions, sometimes resorting to tactics of proselytizing people of other faiths leading to mutual slandering and attacks. Sometimes added with race factor the tense relationship between different religions would be further intensified. Not only there could be unpleasant events between different religions, even among the followers of the same religion there could be conflicts and frictions.

In a plural society if followers of different religions could not live in harmony, then there would certainly be political and social instability and disorder for a long time. And if this religious relationship is mixed with racial sentiments, then the tragic situation would become even worse, such as the tragic religious and racial conflicts and wars taking place in Lebanon and Sri Lanka which are very real and terrible examples for us to see.

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Therefore, we believe all those people who love peace and wish to live in a peaceful and stable society will not question the promise of our Government's honest intention in wishing to maintain peace and harmony among the religious groups.

Why should we ensure the separation of religion and politics? Basically, politics is secular, it is concerned with the reality of life, the necessities of daily life and the living conditions of the people. Whereas religion is something that touches upon our spiritual life and serves to console our mental conditions and relates to our spiritual side of affairs. So they are of two entirely different spheres. Just look around the world and you will find many regions and countries where there are religious and political mix-ups of roles and affairs which should be distinctive to their separate spheres in the first place where the people are drawn in conflict and wars with dire consequences and sufferings to many innocent people.

For example, the strife between the Catholics and the Protestants in Northern Ireland has turned into a separatist movement. In Lebanon the sharp conflict between the Muslims and the Christians has caused them to come to blows each other for many years splitting up the country in many ways. In India, the Sikhs and the Hindus attack and kill each other. All these examples show that when you mix politics with religion, it would bring about very terrible consequences.

The purpose of separating religion from politics is not to prevent any religious followers from exercising their legal right of raising questions of social concern. It also does not mean that we want to pass

judgment on the religious tenets or moral precepts of certain religion that relate to social concern to say whether they are correct or wrong or to make certain comparison, but rather to promote peaceful and harmonious relationships among all our religions, seeking similarities among diversities and peaceful co-existence.

Although we all may not have any difference as regards the premises of separ-

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ation of religion and politics, we may not fully agree on what is meant by "Interference of religion in politics", as we may have different views.

Some religions may feel that their talks and actions are only expression of social concern, not interfering in politics. If every religion or the followers of every religion want to solve social problems according to their own formulas or tenets or what they believe and promote as the only way, then how can a secular elected government or the government which has the mandate of all the people going to carry out its policies or to maintain its administration?

In fact, in principle, the democratic system has given all the people whether they are religionists or followers of any particular religion or non-religious people the rights of participation and airing in politics. They all have a part in the government through our democratic system which is the appropriate and correct channel. There is no need at all to influence politics through religious channel, even less, and should not, make use of the church or temple or mosque to instigate the followers and fan up anybody's sentiments against the government or to carry out subversive activities, particularly in a plural society no one religion is in a dominating position. Should any one religion try it, this will surely call for certain strong reactions from other religious groups for self defence or to launch counter attacks. Of course, the Muslims would not allow Christians to be on a domineering and leading position in political arena. And likewise the Christians would not allow Muslims or any other religious groups to be on a domineering position in political field to dictate their wishes to all people or to achieve their religious political objectives. So we can figure out the situation for ourselves, we have no choice, because we are in a plural society, therefore the government must necessarily be a non-religious and a secular government.

I hope the passage of this Bill will promote better communication and understanding between the religious leaders and the political leaders and will facilitate better contact and consultation between

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them for speedier solution of any highly sensitive issues that should arise in future and promoting harmony among our various people.

The Presidential Council for Religious Harmony is a good way to achieve this purpose. Our secular Government has all along respected all religious faiths, freedom of belief and religious faith and their equality. I hope all religious leaders and followers can understand the difficulties and constraints of a Government in a plural society and the duties it has to fulfil in achieving this objective and give it support.

Sir, I support this motion.

Mr Goh Choon Kang (Braddell Heights) *(In Mandarin)*: Mr Speaker, Sir, I feel that the introduction of this Bill is necessary and timely.

A Report on Religion and Religious Revivalism in Singapore published by the NUS scholars highlighted the alarming trends of development in this connection. The Government's White Paper entitled "Maintenance of Religious Harmony" stated,

"In recent years there has been a definite increase in religious fervour, missionary zeal and assertiveness among the Christians, Muslims, Buddhists and other religious groups in Singapore. Competition for followers and converts is becoming sharper and more intense. More Singaporeans of many religions are inclining towards strongly held exclusive beliefs rather than the relaxed, tolerant, acceptance of and co-existence with other faiths ... And this trend increases the possibility of friction and misunderstanding among the different religious groups in Singapore."

Mr Speaker, Sir, unless the actual situation is contrary to that mentioned above, there will be a need to legislate in order to control activities which go beyond the religious confines, in order to maintain religious harmony. Appropriate measures must be taken before the situation becomes too serious to contain and such measures are therefore timely. Some people feel that by legislating, it may arouse the disapproval of some people. Some may even think that this is a measure by the Government to suppress those who oppose it. There are also people who feel that by legislating, it may give rise to extremists seizing the opportunity to test the law to enhance their personal

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image and to give them a chance to propagate themselves and to portray themselves as a "champion of human rights".

Mr Speaker, Sir, of course, we cannot deny the existence of such possibility. However, are we going to give up this legislation because of this? If we do so, then I would say this is indeed an unacceptable excuse. I think we must, first of all, be very clear as to whether or not such an issue exists. If there is such a problem, then what we have to study is our solutions to these problems.

The White Paper has already pointed out that the existing legislation such as the ISA is inadequate to effectively tackle the new situation. From my observations, all those who oppose the legislation have, up to this date, been unable to provide an alternative to the "legislation to set down" some basic rules for all to observe in maintaining religious harmony. In other words, legislation is the best alternative open to us at this moment.

As pointed out in the White Paper, in order to maintain religious harmony, there are two basic conditions. First of all, the believers of the different religions must practise mutual tolerance and respect, to avoid any hostilities or animosity among the different religions. Secondly, religion and politics must be kept separate. Some religious leaders and some believers feel that it is very difficult to have a clear demarcation or separation between religion and politics. But that does not mean that we are unable to formulate a set of basic rules for all to follow. I believe in a plural and multi-religious society like ours, such basic rules are very important. There is no need for us to engage ourselves in heated arguments on whether or not there is a clear separation or demarcation between religion and politics and ignore the basic problem. What then is the basic problem? The basic problem is: How are we going to maintain religious harmony? How are we going to ensure that the existing religious harmony will not be undermined?

I believe that to maintain harmony we must accept certain confines of activity. That is to say that we must have a set of basic rules which can be accepted by all

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and observed by all when we carry out our religious activity so that everybody will have a clear idea as to what they can do and what they cannot do. What activities are considered to be within the confines of religious activities and what are outside the confines? In the event of someone straying beyond the confines of religious activities, we could effectively restrain him or mete out appropriate punishments against him. As such, I believe that it will be more meaningful for us to concentrate our debate on the relevant provisions of the Bill. In Part III of the Bill, an attempt is made to spell out the prohibitions, ie, activities that are deemed to be harmful or capable of undermining our religious harmony. These include four broad categories.

The first one is creating mutual hatred and enmity between different religious groups; second, engaging in political activities under the guise of religious activities; third, to engage in subversive activities under the guise of religious activities, and, fourth, exciting disaffection against the President or the Government. Among the four categories, I believe the fourth category is one which gives rise to more debate or argument. Some people say that if the Government is corrupt and incompetent, then is it wrong for the people to voice their discontent or to oppose it? Sir, in a democratic society, if the Government becomes so corrupt and incompetent or tyrannical, it will be overthrown by the people through general elections and there is no need for the religious body to take such an action. Some living examples are the Marcos regime of the Philippines and the Ceausescu regime of Romania. What can a mere legislation do to curb the people's power? However, under normal circumstances, I maintain the principle as what Jesus said in the Bible: "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's". But what belongs to God and what belongs to Caesar? We cannot make a clear distinction in this. But I believe we could at least make a clear distinction as to what are Government's affairs and what are religious affairs? What are the things that could be done through religious

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means and what are the things that must be done according to proper political channel? In this way, religion will not be made use of by people with ulterior motives to become their political tools and there will not be conflicts between religion and politics.

In a democratic country, we must accept the fact that a government elected through proper democratic procedure must be vested with the supreme authority under the Constitution to govern the country. There are various restraining mechanism under the democratic system to prevent the Government or the Ministers to abuse the power vested in them, such as the division of the legislation, judiciary and law enforcement and the holding of general elections at regular intervals. It should not be done through interference by any particular organisation or body. In normal circumstances, religious leaders or religious groups should not interfere in the Government's affairs. I feel this may be the true meaning of returning what is Caesar's to Caesar and what is God's to God.

Sir, some people feel that the legislation will give the Minister too great a power and they fear that such power may be abused because the Minister can make the final decision in this matter. Such a worry is quite similar to the worries that people have for the Internal Security Act. I feel that in any legislation there is always a possibility of its being misused. So the best protection does not lie in not having this legislation but it lies in the uprightness, honesty and integrity of the people implementing these laws. It is because of this factor that the Internal Security Act has not been misused and not because of any other factor.

Generally speaking, if this legislation is passed, we would have a set of basic rules acceptable by our

people for them to carry out religious or political activities. By so doing, it will greatly prevent our religious harmony from being undermined and also it would reduce the possibility of conflicts between religion and politics. However, if we want to continue enjoying religious harmony that we have enjoyed for the past 20 to 30 years, it is not adequate to depend on this Bill alone. We have to continue to maintain the status of a secular state, that

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is to say, we cannot be a religious country. In other words, the various religions must continue to remain on an equal status and be treated equally. The State shall not interfere with our people's freedom on religions. Secondly, we need to continue having a fair and firm Government with an impartial policy towards the various religions. We must also take stern actions against anyone who attempts to undermine our religious harmony. Thirdly, the major religions and religious leaders must continue to exert their influence in leading their congregations and believers into the right path whereby mutual tolerance and respect are practised.

Sir, I support the Bill.

Dr Wong Kwei Cheong (Cairnhill): Mr Speaker, Sir, I speak in support of the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Bill.

The purpose of the Bill is to maintain religious tolerance and harmony. This is vital to the future survival and prosperity of Singapore as we live in a multi-religious and multi-racial society, and we must be sensitive to the religious beliefs, practices and cultural heritage of Singaporeans of different religions and races.

The Government in its White Paper on Maintenance of Religious Harmony has given many examples of how inter-religious tensions can arise when persons try to promote their own religious beliefs without adequately considering the sensitiveness of other religious groups in Singapore. I do not intend to repeat these examples but may I refer to a very popular practice in Singapore, and that is, the use of HDB void decks for funeral wakes.

Sir, many of us have attended funeral wakes out of respect of the deceased; and some of us, as MPs, have also received complaints at the Meet-the-People sessions about the noise, especially at night, created at such funeral wakes.

Sir, what if a person, say, a Muslim, complains to the Minister that such funeral wakes violated clause 8(1)(a) of the Bill as they cause feelings of ill-will or hostility? Will the Minister issue a prohibition order requiring monks to refrain from conducting funeral wakes, as required under clause 9(1) of the Bill?

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I know the Minister is unlikely to take such action, but the point I wish to make is that the phrase "causing feelings of enmity, hatred, ill-will or hostility" as defined in clause 8(1) of the Bill connotes a subjective view of a person who feels offended and complains to the Minister. I hope the Minister can consider this point and replace clause 8(1)(a) with words which connote the objective view of a reasonable person.

A second point which I hope the Minister will consider is that it is quite easy for a religious group to violate clause 8(1)(b) of the Bill, ie, to be seen promoting a political cause. This is because some religious causes may also be regarded as political causes that happened to be taken up by opposition political parties. For example, there are churches which feel that foreign workers in Singapore are poorly treated by their employers and have set up facilities to cater to their emotional and physical needs. The Workers Party, for example, used to take up in Parliament the problems of foreign workers, especially when they have difficulties marrying Singaporeans. Would the Minister regard such causes as religious causes or political causes?

This is one example of moral and social issues which are not only political but also religious in nature. These issues belong to both the political and religious domains. It is therefore necessary for the Bill to define what is to be considered improper conduct more precisely so that the line between political and religious issues can be drawn carefully. This will ensure that only genuine cases of political activism in the guise of religious activity conducted by one religious group against the government are prohibited.

My third point concerns the establishment of a Presidential Council for Religious Harmony under clause 3(1) of the Bill. I give full support to such an establishment as the Presidential Council will assist the Minister on matters affecting the maintenance of religious harmony in Singapore. However, the proposed Presidential Council as defined in the Bill is purely advisory in nature, and have no powers to delay or invoke Ministerial decisions.

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Under clauses 8(4) and 9(4) of the Bill, before the Minister can make a prohibition order, he must inform the Presidential Council which will then make written representations within 14 days of the Minister's notice. The Minister is only required to have regard to such representations before making the prohibition order. However, once the Minister has decided to issue the prohibition order, it is almost irrevocable, as clause 11(4) of the Bill states that the Presidential Council can only recommend that the order be continued, revoked or varied in any manner. If the Minister disagrees with the Council's recommendations, there is no provision in the Bill that the decision be reconsidered. In short, the Minister's decision is final.

Sir, under our present Government, our Ministers, especially our Minister for Home Affairs, are just and fair. I am confident that the powers provided under the Bill will not be abused by the Minister.

However, there is always the possibility that sometime in the future, Singapore may not be so lucky as to have fair and just Ministers. May I suggest, Sir, that the Minister provide more checks and balances into the Bill, for example, by giving more powers to the Presidential Council. In cases where serious disagreement arises between the Minister and the Presidential Council, such cases can perhaps be referred to the Judiciary.

Sir, may I commend the Government for coming out with a well-reasoned White Paper and a Bill on Religious Harmony. As the Bill will be referred to a Select Committee, I am sure that there will be widespread support by most religious leaders in Singapore.

On this note, I support the Bill.

Dr Koh Lam Son (Telok Blangah): Mr Speaker, Sir, I support this Bill on the Maintenance of Religious Harmony.

Religion has been and will always be an important national institution to promote the social, educational and spiritual well-being of Singaporeans. We have seen many contributions from religious institutions, including the building and operation

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of many aided schools. Religious institutions have also played a key role in tackling social issues like drug abuse, and have helped many former addicts find meaning and purpose in life.

However, it must be emphasised that our political stability hinges on the secularity of our State. This is fundamental and crucial to our survival. Our history has examples of bloodshed as a result of racial and religious strife. We cannot permit such a situation to recur. Our pledge clearly says, "regardless of race, language, or religion".

Today, we do not have a dominant religion in Singapore. But even if we do, the Government must remain secular. Just as the Chinese, being the dominant race in the country, do not impose itself on the other races, likewise we cannot afford to have a government that favours any particular religion. To do so would be to destroy the delicate structure of our society and all that we have painstakingly built over the years. Singapore is a multi-racial country with people of many different religious faiths. We must exercise tolerance and respect the religious beliefs of our fellow Singaporeans.

The Bill is aimed at safeguarding the secularity of the Government as well as the maintenance of religious harmony among religious organisations. Further, by clarifying the roles of the religious institutions, individuals will not be able to carry out subversive activities or to promote a political cause under the cover of such organisations. Of course, we cannot permit this because in the longer term we will end up with a collision between the Government and the religious institutions or between different religious organisations. Sir, a church is a church, a mosque is a mosque, and a temple is a temple. These institutions have a primary function and must not double up as political entities.

Sir, the Bill will also help to protect these religious organisations from manipulation by politicians for political ends. Having said this, I think it is important to note that this Bill does not violate the right of the individual as enshrined in the Constitution. The individual has the freedom and right to choose and practise his faith as well as

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to participate in the political process. But obviously, there is the right time and the right place to do the right thing. In fact, any individual, regardless of his religious belief or affiliation, who has the interest, the energy and inclination to participate in the political process should do so. We will certainly encourage such persons because ultimately their participation and contribution will benefit the country.

Sir, the objectives of the Bill are indeed noble. However, it places a very heavy responsibility on the Minister. This is so because the Minister will have to seriously consider all representations from individuals on whom the intention to serve a prohibition order has been made and also the recommendations made by the Presidential Council. Moreover, should the prohibition order become necessary, this may actually aggravate the situation further, especially if the person adopts a martyr's mentality. If that person is committed to carrying out his motive, he can also resort to other acts of mischief which may not be

covered by the Bill. For example, he can spread by word of mouth to his congregation to incite emotions against the Government or other religious bodies. In such cases, will the Bill be effective and can it really deter the individual?

The proposed Bill states in clause 8(1), among other things, that individuals may be brought to task if they cause feelings of enmity, hatred, ill-will or hostility between different religious groups. Sir, many religions are founded upon different and, in some cases, conflicting doctrinal basis. So this, as the speaker before me has stated, may become a very subjective issue. Likewise, acts that will cause disaffection against the Government must be clearly defined, if possible. I would like the Minister to clarify on this.

Finally, the White Paper has recommended that the Inter-Religious Council assumes a proactive role of promoting religious harmony. To me, such a role has merit because it will prevent unpleasant situations from developing. The role of the Presidential Council for Religious Harmony, as stipulated in the proposed Bill, appears to be passive in that it will only consider matters that are referred to the Council. Perhaps the Minister can

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explain why the recommendations of the White Paper are not incorporated into this Bill in this instance.

Sir, in conclusion, it is clear that today we have social harmony in Singapore. There is no religious or racial discontent. We are progressing well, and can be likened to a symphony orchestra with a brilliant conductor directing an extraordinary musical piece with great harmony from distinct sounds by different players. This Bill will ensure that this remains the case into the future.

Dr Lee Siew-Choh: Mr Speaker, Sir, first let me say that my Party is in full agreement with the principle that religious tolerance and harmony be maintained at all times. It is especially important in our multi-racial, multi-religious Singapore. Except for the Maria-Hertogh riots (which were due to unusual circumstances) and the 1964 racial riots (which had special political overtones, which the Prime Minister will confirm), it can be said that by and large we have enjoyed religious tolerance and harmony in Singapore for many years. This is largely due to our people's good sense in the practice of racial and religious tolerance, helped by the Government's policy of maintenance of religious harmony in a secular state.

Nevertheless, we have before us a Government White Paper and a Bill to maintain religious tolerance and harmony that already exists in Singapore, as stressed by the last speaker. Why is it necessary to do that? And why, at the present juncture when all is quiet, and when there is no inter-religious tension whatsoever?

Government has stated its case in the White Paper, and now again in the House. The Minister has spoken about the main scheme of the Bill, giving instances. In substance, Government argues that a definite increase in religious fervour also increases the possibility of friction and misunderstanding among different religious groups and, that, I quote, "it is better to act now to pre-empt future difficulties."

Ministers have quoted what has happened in Sri Lanka, Fiji and India with

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supportive evidence of religious friction. But, Mr Speaker, Sir, circumstances are different in the three countries from those in Singapore.

In the case of Sri Lanka, trouble started because of extreme political and social inequality and discrimination as well as inadequate political representation, not because of religion or religious friction per se. In the case of Fiji, the problems were also political and social. In the case of India, different circumstances again. Religious clashes have occurred regularly for tens and hundreds of years in India. Therefore, examples of these countries should not be used to justify legislation of the Bill in Singapore.

That such a possibility of religious friction and misunderstanding exists in Singapore cannot be denied. It has always existed in any multi-racial and multi-religious society. Nevertheless, some of the instances of what is called "aggressive and insensitive evangelism" listed in the White Paper would appear to be somewhat isolated instances. And they could easily have been dealt with under the existing statutes, like the Sedition Act and the Penal Code, or the Public Order Act, or even the laws of defamation.

Therefore, the question must again be asked: Why legislate? The Minister says there is fear that certain individuals get out of line. But are there more important reasons so far unsaid by the PAP? Let us try to find out from the facts of history.

From what has been said by Government Ministers, the first reason would appear to be that Government is apprehensive and is indeed fearful of the rapid recent growth of certain religious, especially Christian, groups referred to in the White Paper. These groups are mostly English-speaking and (to quote from the Report on Religion and Religious Revivalism, prepared by the MCD) "younger in age, better educated". "They are exerting an influence politically, socially and economically, far greater than the number they represent in the population".

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Sir, this Report does not sound like sweet music in the ears of PAP leaders. And what is more important is that these younger English-speaking groups are today often associated with growing democratic trends, are more articulate, and are quite vociferous in their support for the struggle for justice, democracy, and for human rights.

Legislation in what the Government called "overall national interest" would certainly help strengthen the hands of Government in guaranteeing freedom of religion on the one hand, while at the same time containing such, to quote the Government again, "heightened religious fervour", which if unchecked could, and possibly would, work to the political disadvantage of the PAP. Hence the Bill is introduced to dampen and contain religious revivalism in Singapore.

That is the first reason - not so much the fear of individuals getting out of line as the fear of religious groups criticising undemocratic policies of the Government. Mr Abdullah Tarmugi has mentioned this earlier on.

What is the second reason? The second reason is somewhat linked to the first, and is concerned with what Government has called the "mixing of religion and politics". The question is: Is there evidence of such mixing of religion and politics? Which political party has used religious sentiments to garner popular support? Which religious group has ventured into politics?

First on the political parties. Among opposition parties which contested the elections in 1988, so far as I know, the Singapore Democratic Party did not play up religion to garner popular support. Neither did the Workers' Party, which advocates racial equality and equal respect for all religions. Nor the National Solidarity Party. Nor the PKMS, although its party membership is almost all from individuals of the Malay ethnic stock. And what about the ruling PAP? I believe it too did not play up religion during the last elections. But does the PAP make use of religion and religious occasions to garner political support for itself? I say that it does. For example, PAP MPs make politi-

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cal speeches before gatherings in the Seventh Moon celebrations. Complaints have also been made that PAP MPs are made "advisors" to religious organisations, temples and mosques. What "advice" can the PAP advisors give to these organisations other than political advice? Thus, it would appear, Sir, that it is the PAP itself that is in a way mixing religion with politics.

Next, on the religious groups. Have religious groups ventured into politics? The White Paper has given instances of lectures by Muslim Theologians from abroad, far back in 1973, 1982, 1984 and recently 1986. But the only government action considered necessary concerning them was to ban the three lecturers from re-entering Singapore. And that was sufficient.

Regarding the Hindu and Sikh organisations, these were isolated instances which had been brought about by events in India. The only action needed was for Government to give a warning. And that was again good enough.

The White Paper quotes some concrete instances connected with the Catholic priests. Government alleges that the priests have ventured into politics, that para-religious groups have gone into "radical social action" and so on. But have they really done so? What are the facts again?

I believe that the instances quoted in the White Paper have been somewhat taken out of context. There is no explanation as to how these incidents have come about. There is no explanation whatsoever. Those instances quoted are therefore more or less half-truths.

It must be emphasised that until today, the reasons given by Government for the arrests of the so-called Marxists in May 1987 have not been really accepted by most of the people, not even by PAP's strongest supporters, both inside and outside Singapore.

Those who were arrested have repeatedly denied that they are Marxists, and the Government has not dared to charge them in open court. It knows only too well that its so-called evidence will not

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be able to stand up to the slightest scrutiny.

Those arbitrarily arrested in 1987 all belong to a para-religious group. In the circumstances, it was not unexpected that some form of protests would come from the religious leaders who were connected in some way with the work of those arrested, just like what is done by political leaders when party members are arbitrarily arrested. Indeed, in the face of grave injustice done to their flocks, it would have been most unnatural for them not to have made any protests at all.

It must also not be forgotten that a strong people's movement in the quest for justice, democracy,

freedom and human rights is sweeping across the world today. And priests and religious leaders in Singapore, like other people elsewhere, cannot but be affected in some way by such momentous events. Therefore, if circumstances had caused them to speak up for their flocks, that does not mean that the Catholic priests have ventured into politics.

Religious leaders all over the world have made similar protests against injustice on a variety of moral and social issues. Although such protests have political overtones, nevertheless, they are by and large isolated incidents and are merely protests on issues of "legitimate concern". That should not be construed as "venturing into politics" as alleged.

Let me stress that we support in principle that religion be separated from politics. But the big question is, how do we separate the two so that everyone is clear as to what is religion and what is politics? Social welfare, care for the aged, education, public health, morality and justice are all issues of legitimate concern to both religion and politics.

One religious leader has said that "Islam and politics cannot be separated because Islam embraces all aspects of life." Another religious leader said (and I quote from the Straits Times of 8th February 1990) "drew from the Bible to show that Christianity was a holistic faith which touched on all aspects of life, including politics." Archbishop Gregory Yong has

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spoken of confusion and added (I quote again from the Straits Times dated 11th January 1990), "To say that religion and politics can be separated is, at best, an ambiguous statement."

How then are we to separate religion from politics? I would say that, more often than not, it is well-nigh impossible. But it would appear that Government's way to stop mixing religion and politics is to lay down its own ground rules, which we have not yet seen, and then arbitrarily interpret them according to how religious groups and individuals react to certain policies of Government.

Would it mean that if religious groups and individuals react favourably to Government policies, then they do not mix religion and politics? Whereas if they react unfavourably to Government policies, then they mix religion and politics and are to be penalised in some way? Is that how the PAP would stop the mixing of religion and politics?

Sir, as is well known, how people normally react would of course depend on whether Government policies are democratic and caring or otherwise, and on how these policies affect their livelihood. It must be emphasised that Government has enacted many undemocratic and uncaring policies which have caused considerable hardships to many people. And Government has been forced to amend or completely revoke some of its policies in recent years. That is why Government has itself admitted in the White Paper that "the Government does not claim that it is always right in its policies, or that it is always deserving of support."

So if religious leaders or groups express their legitimate concern for those who have suffered hardships and injustice as a result of uncaring and undemocratic policies of Government, they have not really been "promoting a political cause or a cause of any political party" or taken up any so-called "radical social action."

Sir, it has to be emphasised also that freedom from arbitrary arrest is a basic human right enshrined in the Universal

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Declaration of Human Rights. It is a key element of democracy. Detention without trial is accepted only in times of war and grave national emergencies. But in Singapore, more often than not, such arbitrary arrests and detentions without trial have repeatedly been used in times of peace, and when there is no national emergency whatever, all in order to get rid of political opponents and critics of the PAP.

Moreover, such Government action is often dependent on reports made by the secret police. And it is a well-known fact that the secret police is no paragon of the truth. In the circumstances, may I ask, is it wrong to speak of "the fears that innocent people could be easily fixed through false or fabricated information?"

Therefore, the instances given in the White Paper to support Government's contention that religious leaders have indulged in politics, and that Marxists have exploited religion for subversive purposes, are far from convincing, and they cannot be accepted by fair-minded people.

Now it is easier to understand the second reason why the Government has put up the White Paper and the present Bill. As is well known, the arbitrary arrests of the so-called Marxists have been most unpopular. Protests have come from far and wide, so much so the Government has been compelled to release the so-called Marxists, one batch after another, in a comparatively short time. Only two of them, Vincent Cheng and Teo Soh Lung, still remain under detention. But despite strenuous efforts by Government propaganda on TV, radio and the press to present the Government's case, to this very day, very few people have accepted Government's explanation for the arrests. And that too, with a big grain of salt! Why? Simply

because many people know that the arrests were directed at political opponents and would-be opposition election candidates before the elections. Such "pre-emptive" arrests of political opponents have become the hallmark of PAP rule, "nipping of the dangers in the bud" according to the Minister. And they were carried out before the general elections in 1963, in 1972, in 1976, in 1980, in 1984 and again in 1988. These pre-emptive

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arrests were to nip trouble for the PAP in the bud.

The Bill before us today is therefore introduced not only because of the first reason that I have, said but also because of another reason: it is an attempt, a belated attempt, by Government to justify the arrests of the so-called Marxists. As we now learn, the Bill was first drafted in June 1987 soon after the arrests of the Marxists were carried out in May 1987. Dr Aline Wong has touched on this.

At the same time, of course, the Bill also allows Government to seize the opportunity to make provisions to prevent and suppress all future show of discontent by religious and para-religious groups against Government's undemocratic policies and the misuse or abuse of powers by the authorities. Such are the unspoken motivations behind the Bill.

With the passing of the Bill, the PAP hopes to be able to stifle all dissent from religious and para-religious groups. Would the PAP care to admit that what I have said is correct and true?

Let me now touch briefly on the establishment of the Presidential Council and the provision for prohibition orders. The Bill explains:

'All prohibition orders made by the Minister are to be referred to the Council ... The Council may recommend that the order be continued, revoked or varied in any manner.'

Sir, the big question is: what sort of regard will the Minister have to the Council's recommendations, or to the written representations of the person concerned?

Clause 14 states that, "All orders and decisions of the Minister ... shall be final and shall not be called in question in any court." If the Minister disagrees with the recommendations or representations, and proceeds to impose the prohibition order regardless, won't that make a mockery of the deliberations of the Council?

Indeed, clause 14 contradicts the much-talked-about-principle of "resolving major issues through consensus instead of contention" of PAP's so-called National Ideology. It is arbitrary and dictatorial, and is diametrically opposed to the spirit of

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consultation as implied in the provision of the Presidential Council. Clause 14 thus exposes the fact that the Presidential Council is a mere facade of democracy. If we must have the Presidential Council, then it must not be purely advisory. It must be given some teeth, so that it may play a meaningful watchdog role. If the majority views of the Council should disagree with the views of the Minister, then the Minister must not ride roughshod over the recommendations of the Council.

And whatever the final decision of the Minister, it should be open to challenge in a court of law, and provisions to that effect should be made in the Bill. Will the Minister then take heed of our positive suggestions?

Sir, from what I have said, it should be abundantly clear that what is considered to be so-called "activities to promote a political cause or a cause of any political party" or what is considered to be "subversive activities" could be very controversial. It all depends on the viewpoints of different people and different parties. Since the Presidential Council's recommendations may or may not be accepted by the Government, clause 14 in effect tells us that the Council is nothing more than an instrument to be used as a shield against any criticism that may be levelled at Government for whatever arbitrary action it may take against any religious group or person, as in the case against the so-called communists and Marxists under the ISA.

To summarise, Sir, the Bill ostensibly aims to provide for maintenance of religious harmony in Singapore. But it is in fact an instrument intended, first, to dampen and contain religious revivalism that could adversely affect PAP's political interests. Second, to justify the arbitrary arrests of so-called Marxists and to suppress any future public show of discontent against Government policies, however, patently unjust and undemocratic, on the one hand, and to make use of the Presidential Council as a shield against legitimate criticism of such unjust and undemocratic policies, on the other. Therefore, the Workers Party cannot support such a Bill.

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Prof. Jayakumar: Point of clarification. If the NCMP felt so strongly that the Marxists' arrests were so unpopular with the people of Singapore, why did he not take up the invitation of the Government that he or any other political party make it an election issue before the September 1988 elections? We asked them to make it an issue. His party did not make it an issue. And also, every other previous arrests before an election, does he not know that the PAP fought it as an election issue and won the mandate of the people?

Dr Lee Siew-Choh: Sir, the explanation can be very simple. In an election you fight on a multitude of issues. If the Government wants to know whether people support the Government on the Marxist issue or on the ISA or on conscription, let the Government hold a referendum, singly on one issue and one issue alone. Then we will know whether the Government has really got the support of the people. You will not know if you just link everything up. To give a good example. In the old days, when we in the Opposition asked for an election, the PAP wanted to hold a referendum. Why? When was that? There was a White Paper about the Merger proposals. Because the Government knew that it was going to lose in an election. But in a referendum, even if the Government lost, they would not have to resign. They could just carry on as the Government. Now in this particular case, I wish the Minister would go back to history and read what Dr Goh Keng Swee had once said.

Prof. Jayakumar: Sir, this is a new line. Why did not his Workers Party say that they wanted a referendum on the Marxist arrests at that time?

Dr Lee Siew-Choh: Is the Minister issuing a challenge? I ask the Government to hold a referendum now. Will Government do it?

Mr Lau Ping Sum (Yio Chu Kang): Mr Speaker, Sir, Singapore has enjoyed a longish period of peace and harmony. The visible signs of inter-religious harmony are everywhere - mosques, churches and temples of various descriptions can be found in most if not all housing estates.

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But, more importantly, behind this external facade of peace and harmony, Singaporeans have come to terms with the fact that we profess and practise different religions and are free to propagate our faiths. This happy state of affairs has been brought about by a vigilant ISD because fanatical and extremist preachers have been expelled and barred from entry. In addition, a relatively relaxed and sensible attitude has prevailed among the followers of various religions in Singapore.

It is of course the duty of all Singaporeans to protect the peace and harmony in our society not only for ourselves but also for future generations. The recent emergence of fundamentalist revival can be due to various factors. Perhaps it is due to the rapid modernisation and urban development. Perhaps it is a sense of insecurity, a fear of failure and a compensation for difficulties in competing with others in secular pursuits.

Religious polarisation must not be allowed to emerge for it will lead to violence and bloodshed. For example, the Catholics and Protestants in Ireland, the Sunnis, the Druzes and the Maronites in Lebanon.

A number of guiding principles are of fundamental importance. We should cultivate a willingness to show respect to one another. Tolerance is not sufficient for tolerance connotes a half-hearted acceptance of a disagreeable situation. It is one-sided. Mutual respect, on the other hand, shows a two-way process, a more positive attitude. It has to be developed and nurtured from young. A second principle is that we should refrain from condemning other religions. We should respect the right of others not to share our beliefs. Some religions claim exclusivity, ie, that they represent the only path to truth and the Almighty. They are of course entitled to their views. Nevertheless, they should not criticise and highlight the negative aspects of other religions. Perhaps they could take a leaf from IBM where the sales representatives are trained from day one to sing the praises of all the wonderful and even unique features of the IBM system architecture but never to pass derogatory remarks about the competitors' equipment.

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A third principle is that we should all try to learn more about various religions. Inter-religious conflicts are often caused by ignorance and prejudice. We live in an environment where the major religions of the world are practised. We cannot afford to take a blinkered view. The subject "World Religions" should be taught to all our students to impart knowledge but not to propagate a certain faith. I see no contradiction in this with the fact that Singapore is a secular state. On the contrary, the removal of ignorance and prejudice will strengthen the foundation for religious harmony in Singapore.

All religions have a certain unity in terms of universal and ethical values. It is not merely a belief in justice, honesty, equality, human dignity, but also a belief in spiritual terms, the concept of an everlasting life, the repugnance of materialism, the importance of moderate living and family ties.

For all the great spiritual ideals upheld by all religions, human behaviour unfortunately often falls short of these ideals. In the final analysis, we are judged not by what we say, but by what we do.

To reinforce faith in the common ethical values, it is necessary for religions to establish constant contact

and consultation. This process will enhance mutual understanding and lessen the likelihood of conflict between different religions.

The proposed Presidential Council for Religious Harmony should widen its functions. It should not be confined to matters affecting the maintenance of religious harmony referred to it by the Minister or by Parliament. Apart from these matters, it should actively examine and review the existing inter-religious relations and recommend measures to strengthen mutual understanding. Where various religions are represented, is there sufficient dialogue and communication among the different groups? There is much the Council can do for Singapore to continue as a shining example of a multi-religious society.

Sir, clause 8 1(b) empowers the Minister to make a prohibition order against a person for promoting a political cause and

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clause 8(1)(d) for exciting disaffection against the President or the Government of Singapore.

Some reservations have been expressed in these two areas. These provisions are general and perhaps capable of different interpretations. For example, if a church leader were of the view that all children should be given equal opportunities to be admitted into schools regardless of their mothers' educational qualifications, would this have been considered as exciting disaffection if the policy had continued?

If a religious leader told his congregation that more help should be given by the Government and the people of Singapore to the poor and needy in terms of financial assistance and infrastructural support, would this be promoting a political cause because the opposition parties held the same view?

There is a certain gray area in these instances. I think these reservations and issues should be explained fully by the Minister. The prohibition orders are designed to protect the long term stability of the country and not to suppress viewpoints not in line with official policies. There are some who have yet to be convinced of the rationale for the legislation and a full and frank debate and well-informed discussions at all levels are necessary for an insight into this fundamental issue.
4.55 pm

[Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Abdullah Tarmugi) in the Chair]

Mr Loh Meng See (Kampong Glam): Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Bill standing in the name of the Minister for Home Affairs aims to deal with the two issues of inter-religious harmony and the separation of religion from politics.

Sir, I would have preferred the part on inter-religious harmony to have come under the Ministry of Community Development because this will then signify and reflect our purpose and intention in wanting to build up our community of different races, languages and religions in

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Singapore. Obviously there are adverse perceptions when matters come under the Home Affairs Ministry and perhaps it has to do with policing and sentences. But I can appreciate that under the circumstances as explained by the Minister for Home Affairs, it is at best to be under his Ministry.

In the Internal Security Act, the Minister makes the decision in detaining certain persons after having relied on the professionals in the Internal Security Department for their investigations and assessment as to whether the individuals concerned pose security risks to the country. In matters of inter-religious strife and the encroachment of religion into politics, I wonder who are those that the Minister will be relying on for information in deciding to issue prohibition orders. What and whose evidence are being acted on? Possibly the Minister would like to clarify.

On the proposed Presidential Council for Religious Harmony, there is the question of composition, how the members are to be selected, and who do they represent. I think this is important because the appointees should have standing from among their own members. They should be men of credibility. The Presidential Council can only be effective if the highest ranking and most influential religious leaders serve in it. As to having people with no religion to sit in the Presidential Council, I am not so sure whether this is a good thing. Is an agnostic competent to discuss, comment and sit in judgement on a religious matter between two conflicting parties? I would suggest that a tribunal or a panel system be adopted instead to resolve the differences on religious issues. As my previous colleagues have said, I think the role and scope of the Presidential Council could be enlarged. It could be empowered to play a more proactive role.

There is only one concern that I would like to express because not too long ago we have been told that the teaching of Religious Knowledge in schools was a mistake, and the reason given was the unintended effects that arose from starting Religious Knowledge classes. And I

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sincerely hope that this does not occur after the passing of the this Bill because if the same occurrence takes place, then it will not be a good thing for us.

This Bill may also identify and separate the real believers who will fight their cause. But also it will cause religious leaders to be more circumspect.

I would disagree with Dr Lee Siew-Choh. I believe that we cannot afford to be complacent. The fact that there has been peace and tranquillity, we cannot take things for granted. In fact, there can be no better time than now to discuss and debate on the means to maintain religious harmony in Singapore. It is a controversial issue. It is highly emotional, especially to believers. But I can see the merits of the Bill. And so long as we are able to sort out the difficulties which have been addressed by Members of this House, I am very sure that we will be able to continue to enjoy religious harmony, peace and political stability in Singapore for many years to come.

Notwithstanding what I have said earlier, Sir, I support the Bill.

Dr Ong Chit Chung (Bukit Batok): Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, I rise in support of the Bill.

No one, Sir, can quarrel with the laudable aim of this Government. All, I am sure, would agree that we must maintain religious harmony in a multi-racial and multi-religious society such as ours, lest we be swept away by the cross-currents of the world-wide surge of religions. Indeed, both the Government and the people must work together to ensure that there is peace in our land. Without this peace, nothing else is possible. The question is, how do we go about maintaining religious harmony?

The Bill before us is one additional means, enabling the Government to warn and curtail activities that would lead to serious troubles and thereby tear apart the fabric of our society. It may otherwise be too little, too late. It is put in place as a preventive measure and need not be used at all if all is well. The very existence of the law may have, on the other hand, a posi-

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tive effect on would-be wayward or fanatical elements.

Sir, the Government, as the keeper of law and order, has to play the moderating role, very much like a neutral referee. It may not be a popular task. But who else but the Government could, and indeed must, fulfil this difficult role.

Some accept that there is a place for such a Bill, but have queries and reservations. These are genuine and legitimate concerns, and I suggest the Government address the problems and consider these views seriously. Otherwise, much goodwill will be lost. I will here highlight some areas of concern.

The definition of an undesirable act as "causing feelings of enmity, hatred, ill-will or hostility or prejudicing the maintenance of harmony" is vague and subject to wide interpretation. Many things which one does wittingly or unwittingly could be perceived to be causing feelings of enmity or ill-will.

Further, where are the "working rules" contemplated in paragraph 27 of the White Paper? The Minister should, I think, spell out these rules clearly so that all will know what is permissible and what is not.

The Bill prohibits the promotion of a political cause or subversive activities under the guise of religious practices. But what constitute a political cause or subversive activities, many would ask. The White Paper states that religious groups can preach that abortion is morally wrong, but must not oppose National Service. What about other issues? Where is the dividing line? The Government, I think, should give clear guidelines.

The Bill provides for a Presidential Council for Religious Harmony. But the Council, as it stands, may look more like the handmaiden of the Minister, rather than a watchdog. And if it is a watchdog, it is a watchdog that has no bark and no bite. It has no initiative of its own. It cannot consider any item unless asked by the Minister or Parliament. It cannot on its own initiate a discussion on a topic, even if some of its Members think it is pertinent.

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Further, I suggest that the Council be strengthened by allowing it to appoint sub-committees or resource panels to advise on matters pertaining to the practices of particular religions. This, I believe, will allow the Council to be more representative and be in closer contact with wider sections of the various religious communities.

The Bill also does not specify that the prohibition order must be served personally on the person concerned. He therefore may not be aware that he is under prohibition, and this, I believe, is a breach of the rules of natural justice.

The Bill provides for referral to the Council on the first occasion when the prohibition order is served or

issued. But thereafter, there is no specific provision for further consultation with the Council. Theoretically, the prohibition order could be extended every two years on an indefinite basis, without further reference to the Council.

Finally, I suggest the Government consider incorporating some checks and balances, perhaps even allowing for judicial review, of the prohibition orders.

To the Government, I urge it to use this proposed law sparingly, prudently and wisely.

To the people, I urge them to take the Bill in the right spirit. Give the Government a chance to prove that it operates for the greatest good of all, and that it is not against religions in general or any particular religion.

Dr Dixie Tan (Ulu Pandan): Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, I wish, first of all, to commend the Minister on the careful and painstaking manner in which this Bill has been introduced with prior groundwork in the form of the White Paper and very wide participation by members of the public in the discussions on the White Paper.

Many pertinent points have been made and I shall not repeat them. There is no doubt that religious harmony is imperative for peace and progress in Singapore.

I would like to comment on the Presidential Council. This is in Part II, clause 7, and

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it enjoins secrecy on the proceedings of the Council. I think that the proceedings themselves should be secret, but that the results of the proceedings, such as the opinions of the Council and its recommendations to the Minister, should be made public. Only in this way can the public know where the Council stands on any particular issue. If the decisions of the Council are shrouded in secrecy, there is no way for the public to know whether the Council agrees or disagrees with the Minister on any particular issue, or whether the Council is in fact playing a useful role. Some may even surmise that it is a "rubber-stamp" Council.

The point, Sir, is that the Council should have credibility, and it should be seen to have it. And the only way I can see that we can show this to be so is for its decisions and its recommendations to be publicly announced.

With this reservation, Sir, I support the Bill.

Encik Wan Hussin bin Haji Zoonri (Aljunied GRC) *(In Malay)*: Mr Deputy Speaker, in debating this Bill, we have to refer to the Government White Paper on Maintenance of Religious Harmony. The Introduction to the White Paper stated that it is proposing a law to maintain religious tolerance and harmony in Singapore and to establish a Presidential Council for Religious Harmony. To achieve these objectives, the White Paper continued, two conditions must be observed.

First, the adherents of all religions must practise moderation and tolerance and should not do anything that might lead to hatred and enmity between religious groups. Secondly, politics and religion must be rigorously kept separate.

I think the first condition is acceptable to all. As for the second condition - the separation of politics and religion - viewed in the wider sense, there exists no absolute dividing line between religion and politics in the eyes of Islam. This is because Muslims regard Islam as the only way of life for them. Islam encompasses all aspects of a Muslim's life - from birth

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to death. Politics is therefore an integral part of the Islamic way of life and, hence, there can be no separation between religion and politics.

Nevertheless, Mr Deputy Speaker, in my understanding, politics as intended in the White Paper has a more specific meaning, ie in the sense of the authority or mandate to govern and administer a country. Since the mandate to rule has been entrusted, for a specific term of office, by the people upon the Government, it is incumbent upon the Government to discharge this responsibility with wisdom and justice. If the Government senses any potential threat to the prevailing climate of religious harmony, the Government has the power to act in order to prevent disorder. And, viewed from this specific angle, it would be more accurate to say that the Bill requires the separation of religion and politics as a means to prevent the misuse of religion or politics for undesirable ends. This is what "separation of religion and politics" really means here.

Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, since the publication of the White Paper and the introduction of this Bill, various comments and concerns have been expressed by the general public. Some are concerned as to how this legislation, once passed, is to be implemented. Some have expressed the fear that this law will stifle religious freedom. They wondered whether what they have been doing all this time is going to be subjected to some new limitations. Such concern and uneasiness are understandable, because this is the first time a

Bill of such nature is introduced.

In my view, it is not the aim of the Bill to inhibit the practices and work of the various religious groups here, which so far have been carried out in an orderly manner. In other words, the status quo will be maintained. No 'ustaz' or Muslim missionary should be so psychologically or emotionally distressed by this Bill that the work they have been doing peacefully all this time is affected. If, thus far, they have not done anything to put themselves in the categories of people or activities cited in the White Paper, then they should have no fears. It is my hope that Muslim preachers and the various Muslim bodies

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would keep up and, indeed, better the good work they have long been doing, and they can do so as long as they have regard to the sort of activities referred to in the White Paper. In this connection, I would like to appeal to the Muslim Religious Council to play a role by explaining further the true perspective of this Bill to the other Muslim bodies. This will help to allay any negative perceptions about it. Other Muslim organisations can do the same too.

Concerning the Presidential Council for Religious Harmony, I welcome its establishment. One of its functions, as set out in Part II Clause 4 (1) (a), is, and I quote:

'to consider and report to the Minister on matters affecting the maintenance of religious harmony in Singapore which are referred to the Council by the Minister or by Parliament;'

Since the maintenance of religious harmony is a matter of concern to both sides, the people and the Government, I wonder if the Minister could consider the possibility of allowing the Council to consider the same matters but which are referred to it by other than the Minister and Parliament. In other words, matters concerning the maintenance of religious harmony that may be referred to the Council by religious organisations and the public.

I refer now to Clause 5 on the proceedings and recommendations of the Council. No details have been given as to how the Council is to arrive at its decisions. Should it be by consensus, or should it be simply by majority vote? What about minority views? Should it also be conveyed to the Minister? I hope the Minister could clarify these points.

Concerning the powers of the Minister, one of the concerns expressed by the public is on the wide powers vested in the Minister in the enforcement of this law. It would appear that the fortunes and future of any pastor, priest or imam or other missionary are going to be left in his hands. They are going to be dependant on whether the Minister is satisfied that they have committed an offence under Clause 8 (1) (a) to (d). Some have said the Minister's judgement in this respect is going to be very subjective.

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In response, let me say that it is no simple task for the Minister to make a decision. He must be fully satisfied that the person concerned has, without doubt, committed one of the offences. In my opinion, the current Minister for Law is not someone known for making arbitrary decisions. I have confidence in his integrity, honesty and sense of justice. Nevertheless, to allay the fears of the public about the powers in his hands, the Minister should, I think, give further hypothetical examples, besides those instances already cited in the White Paper, to show the kind of situations that tend to lead to religious friction.

In my view, there are many factors to be considered before a prohibition order is issued. Among these, it would be necessary to consider the background of the person concerned, to examine whether his/her speeches reflect a negative trend or line, and to identify his/her style, techniques, tone, language and terms used, as well as conduct when making the speeches. And, of course, consideration must also be given to the kind of audience he/she is speaking to, and the place where it is made, whether it is a mosque, a public rally or an academic forum. The important question the Minister has to ask is whether the actions of the person constitute any of the offences under Clause 8 (1) (a) to (d). If this factor stands out clear above all others, then, but only then, for the sake of religious harmony, should the prohibition order be imposed.

In this connection, I would like to appeal to the Minister to consider issuing a warning letter to the person, if the contravention is not so serious as to warrant a prohibition order. This is considering (1) that the person might not be aware of having committed any of the four offences; (2) that the person or other concerned parties might not be in full agreement with the Minister's interpretation of what happened; (3) that a warning letter might be sufficiently effective to alert and caution the person of his/her mistake; (4) that the person would thereby have the opportunity to rectify his/her mistake; (5) that the objective of this exercise is not to punish but to rectify an error; and (6) that

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the effect of a warning letter on the person would not be as serious or harsh as a prohibition order.

I now move on to the two-year period of the prohibition order. Some have expressed the view that it is

too long. I would like a clarification as to the rationale behind this length. Could the Minister not shorten it to one year? In my view, receiving the prohibition order alone would be enough to alert the person of the dangers of his/her actions or speech, if he/she truly appreciates the multi-religious, multi-racial nature and social climate of Singapore. Thus, a short period of prohibition order should be adequate.

Mr Deputy Speaker, in conclusion, the introduction of this Bill can be likened to thatching our roof before rain comes. We can also look at it as a set of directional signs in a Singapore garden of religions. By observing these signs, we can prevent ourselves from being hurt by the thorns in the garden. By following the signs, we will be able to enjoy the growth and the greening of this lovely garden, which has long been blessed with the flowers of religions hailing from all points of the compass.

Before I take my seat, I would like to bring to the attention of the Minister paragraph 9 of the Annex to the White Paper, on page 14. Let me read out the first sentence:

'Muslims and Ahmadis: There is a long-standing dispute between orthodox local Muslim organisations and the Ahmadiyya Muslim Mission.'

Mr Deputy Speaker, some of my constituents have brought my attention to the use of the term "Ahmadiyya Muslim Mission" here. They felt that the use of this term in the White Paper can be construed to mean that the Government recognizes the Ahmadis as a Muslim movement. To Muslims, the Ahmadis are out of the fold of Islam. So, I would like to urge that the Minister seek the advice of MUIS as to whether the use of the term "Ahmadiyya Muslim Mission" is correct in the Singapore context.

On that note, I support the Bill.

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Dr Tan Cheng Bock (Ayer Rajah): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, for allowing me to join in this debate.

I rise to support the Bill standing in the name of the Minister for Home Affairs. I support this Bill for the simple reason that as there are many religious practices taking place in this country, some form of guidance and control must be in place to ensure that anyone practising his or her faith knows the limitations of his practice. This is because practising religion in a multi-religious country requires not just understanding, tact and tolerance but more than that. While it is clear that our Constitution allows that religious freedom is guaranteed, one cannot assume that religious freedom can be practised without some degree of responsibility. If this is not so, this freedom will lead to chaos and havoc. We have witnessed these daily on our television screen and read in the newspapers.

In other words, we cannot practise our faith in isolation. We cannot ignore the fact that as a practising Taoist or Buddhist, there are amongst us Singaporeans, many practising Christianity, Hinduism and Islam. To ignore this is to court trouble. Thus, while it is the right of Christians, for example, to distribute leaflets to Hindus coming out of a Hindu temple. after their prayers, it may not be wise to spread their faith in such a manner. Thus, some constraints, some sacrifice may have to be asked of the many religious bodies to ensure that the devastating effects of religion and racial conflicts do not come to our shores.

In Singapore, race and religion are synonymous because if you are a Muslim very likely you are a Malay. So also, if you are an Indian it is very likely that you belong to the Hindu faith. And if you are a Chinese, very likely you are a Taoist or a Buddhist. Thus, a religious conflict in Singapore will lead to a racial conflict and we must take the trouble to see that this will not happen.

Look at this Bill as one of the ways to ensure this peace. Do not be prejudiced by recent past events like the Marxist arrests. Look at Singapore in the context of this mix of people with this mix of religions

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and think of what has happened in other parts of the world where governments are afraid to make such a move in case of being voted out of Parliament. On the contrary, they use religion to serve their ends and probably end up worse off. It takes a lot of courage and planning to introduce this legislation.

This Bill could be challenged by many as unnecessary and uncalled for because we have religious harmony for years. But I do not believe in chance. One can never tell what will happen in the future. Do not liken our religious bodies with those in China and Soviet Russia if this legislation is passed, as pointed out by a Straits Times reader. I appeal to the religious bodies to view this as a preventive measure, as pointed out by our Deputy Speaker earlier on. I understand their fears of the powers of the Minister and this is shared by many of my parliamentary colleagues and the heads of many religious bodies. This main point of contention must be solved. How the religious council has to work with the Minister must be worked out at the Select Committee to let our main stream religious bodies feel comfortable that the intention of this Bill is not to curb their practice but to ensure their survival and continuance. For example, if the Council is to have weight, it must be given quasi judicial powers such as conducting inquiry with powers to summon witnesses and to hear evidence under oath.

Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, I used to appeal to Singaporeans to be tolerant of each other's religious belief. But now I think tolerance, to me, is a weak foundation for religious harmony. It implies blind acceptance and blind acceptance can break down easily. What if one day I decide not to be tolerant? We must go beyond that and this is where moral education in schools is important and where a chapter must be devoted to an appreciation and understanding of the main stream religions. This together with this legislation on the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Bill will put this very important pillar of society on a more sound footing.

I support this Bill.

Dr John Chen Seow Phun (Hong Kah GRC): Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, Singapore

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is a multi-racial and multi-religious country. Our founding leaders have rightly made Singapore a secular state to ensure religious and racial harmony without which we will never be able to survive as one nation. Singapore is thus governed by a secular Constitution from which the Government derives its political authority. The Constitution, however, guarantees freedom of religion as long as the exercise of this freedom does not threaten the overall national interest.

The Government therefore accords the same legal status to all religions and publicly stated time and again that it will always remain neutral towards the various religious groups. We have no reason to doubt the Government's position. This is because the Government realises too well that if it is not neutral or even if it is perceived to be not neutral, religious sentiments could easily be aroused and temperatures could quickly rise. This could lead to conflict and tension between religious groups or between the Government and the unhappy religious groups. Under such circumstances, political parties are also likely to exploit the situation in the hope of discrediting and overthrowing the Government. The end result could be public disorder and political instability.

Sir, there will be no problem if Singaporeans respect and take care of the sensitivity of each other's faith when propagating their own faith, and if religious groups do not lend themselves to the political process of the country. The problem comes when a person or a religious group steps out of bound either by attacking the faith of another person or another group, or by making use of religion and religious activities for his or their venture into politics. When this happens, the Government must step in to prevent the damage it may cost to our society.

But when the Government acts, it runs the risk of being accused of attacking the religious group against whose members action has been taken. In other words, religious groups might then not accept that the Government is neutral and this may lead to disastrous consequences.

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Such possibilities may not happen if people in general are not interested in religion. However, recent survey has shown that there has been heightened religious fervour among the various religious groups in Singapore. This increases the probability of conflict tremendously especially when over-zealous followers of the different faiths come into contact with each other. In the university, most religions are represented among student clubs. On matriculation day, we have seen these religious clubs competing for attention from the new students in an attempt to promote their activities and to get more members. To avoid troubles, we have laid down some rules pertaining to the physical sizes of banners and orientation booths to prevent competition from turning into conflict.

Likewise, at the national level, a set of ground rules governing what can and cannot be done by religious and political leaders and which are understood and hopefully agreed by all are necessary. These ground rules must be in the form of an effective and comprehensive piece of legislation which will enable the Government to take appropriate and prompt action against offenders. I agree with the White Paper that although existing laws such as the Sedition Act, the Penal Code and the Internal Security Act can handle some of the offences, they are not designed for the effective maintenance of religious harmony. Offences under the Sedition Act and the Penal Code will usually carry a more severe punishment. A Court trial may be too late to stop a person from causing irreparable damages. The judicial proceedings and the judgment may themselves arouse religious passions. The ISA, on the other hand, was designed primarily to combat subversion. It is a crude instrument for the maintenance of religious harmony. Its use may often result in an overkill. If not, much harm may also be done before it is invoked.

The proposed legislation therefore allows the Minister to issue the offender with a prohibition order to prevent him from repeating the offence. Only if he

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continues the offending act will he be charged in Court. This is a quicker and finer instrument compared to the existing laws and therefore a more effective way of maintaining peace and harmony.

Sir, the major concern of most people regarding this Bill is why the Minister should be given the power

to decide on the prohibition order and where the safeguards are against the abuse of power by the Minister.

Generally, the power to decide on the prohibition order can be vested in either the Court, the proposed Presidential Council for Religious Harmony or the Minister or the Cabinet. If the power is vested in the Court, I see the same difficulties which I have expressed earlier concerning the problems of Court trial. Furthermore, the offending act can be so delicate and subtle that the evidence produced may not be admissible in the Court nor sufficient for conviction. But that does not mean that the alleged offence will never undermine religious harmony and never have political sensitivities. Fundamentally, I see the difficulty for a secular court to decide on religious matters. Secular courts and their judgment appeal to the natural and rational norms of a society whereas a religious person appeals to the super-natural, and what is rational to him may not be rational to another person. That is why I see a secular court deciding on religious disputes as explosive.

If the power is vested in the Presidential Council, the Council will also have difficulty to be the final arbiter on religious disputes because of its multi-racial and multi-religious nature. A Muslim member of the Council may not want to pass judgment on the dispute between, say, the Hindus and the Christians. Furthermore, minor religions or denominations may not be represented in the Council and who will speak on their behalf and protect their interests? Can the Council decide on issues which require political judgment? The Council must therefore play an advisory role.

It is therefore obvious that in order for the legislation to work, the Minister or maybe the Cabinet must take up the power and the responsibility which is entrusted

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to them by the electorate, to decide on prohibition orders in the interest of the nation as long as there are reasonable safeguards against the abuse of power. The Presidential Council for Religious Harmony and the prosecution in court for it to decide whether the person has breached the Minister's prohibition order provide some safeguards. I am glad to note from the White Paper that these provisions are results of Government consultation with the Government Parliamentary Committees, MPs, community and religious leaders. I believe more views and representations will be received once this Bill is committed to a Select Committee after it is passed in this reading, so as to further fine-tune this piece of legislation. Perhaps the Government should consider altering the Bill to give the Cabinet the power to decide on the prohibition order, instead of the Minister alone, for I think this is a better safeguard in that the Cabinet itself is multi-racial and it should provide a better analysis and decision.

However, Sir, the greatest safeguard, in my view, is the ultimate judgment of the people of Singapore. The Government cannot expect to abuse its power in religious matters and get away with it. On the other hand, to deny the Government this power because of possible abuse is to ask for a more treacherous tendency for disharmony and not less. For nothing else can be as effective in the maintenance of religious harmony in Singapore.

Having supported strongly the necessity of this legislation and the necessity of giving the Government the power to decide on prohibition order, I would like to suggest a modification for the Minister to consider.

According to the proposed Bill, when a person receives a notice of the Minister's intention to issue a prohibition order, he

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can only seek representation by written statements. He has no right to appear before the Minister or the Council for an oral hearing. He has no way of getting a response from the Minister or the Council except the final decision. In other words, he has no opportunity to argue his case as carefully and effectively as one would in an oral hearing. I can understand the difficulty for the Minister to hear everyone out personally. But surely it is not impossible nor undesirable for the Council to hear the appeal of the person concerned personally.

Finally, Sir, I would like to ask the Minister whether the prohibition orders, the recommendations of the Council and the judgment of the Court in a conviction will be made known to the public. I believe the Bill is silent on those points and I would appreciate the Minister's clarification because there are important implications.

Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, I support the Bill.

Resolved,

"That the debate be now adjourned." - [Mr Wong Kan Seng].

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Debate to be resumed what day?

Prof. Jayakumar: Tomorrow, Sir.

Mr Deputy Speaker: So be it.

ADJOURNMENT

Resolved,

"That Parliament do now adjourn." - [Mr Wong Kan Seng].

Adjourned accordingly at
Eleven Minutes to Six o'clock pm.

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