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Negotiating conceptions of 'sacred space': a case study of religious buildings in Singapore

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I approach the study of religious place from a re-theorized cultural geographical stance. Using multi-religious Singapore as a case study, I examine the tensions which arise over the meanings and values associated with religious buildings because of the conflict between state hegemony on the one hand and the oppositional meanings and values of religious groups and individuals on the other. I also examine the ways in which individuals negotiate their conceptions of sacred space in order to cope with changes imposed on their religious places by the state. Primarily, my argument is that conflict is avoided because individuals have found ways of adapting and 'negotiating' the meanings they invest in religious buildings. However, there are instances of resistance and I discuss those circumstances where, instead of adaptation, people resist in both material and symbolic ways.

KEY WORDS: Singapore, State, Religion, Sacred space, Cultural politics, Resistance, Adaptation

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, cultural geography has undergone a re-appraisal and calls for a re-theorized cultural geography are by now well-established (Cosgrove and Jackson, 1987; Jackson, 1989; Barnes and Duncan, 1992; Anderson and Gale, 1992). Amongst other directions, this re-orientation has entailed the adoption of a more expansive definition of culture encompassing the cultures of socially marginal groups as well as dominant elite groups, popular cultures and vernacular styles, local and regional subcultures. This more expansive definition of culture is reflected in the greater consideration of issues such as 'popular culture and the politics of class', 'gender and sexuality', 'languages of racism' and 'the politics of language' (all chapter titles in Jackson's (1989) *Maps of meaning: an introduction to cultural geography*). In this recent re-theorization of cultural geography, the study of religion and religious landscapes has unfortunately been relatively neglected. Unlike attention to issues of race, class and gender, little has been done to expand the frontiers of religious geography concomitantly with the development of cultural geography as a whole (see, however, Kong, 1990 and Cooper,

1992). As Jackson (1989, x) himself acknowledges, this is one most 'obvious omission' from his *Maps of meaning*.

The possibilities of approaching religion and religious landscapes from a re-theorized cultural geographical stance are varied. I have argued elsewhere (Kong, 1990) that there is a need to consider the individuality of personal religious experiences as well as the social and material relations pertinent to such experiences. The interaction between the political and the 'spiritual', consensually or in conflict, also deserves attention, particularly in relation to the allocation of meanings to particular places. In another vein, Cooper (1990) has suggested the need to examine the reciprocal relationships between religious experience and interpretations of place and landscape.

In this paper, I propose to address some of these issues by focusing on underlying tensions which arise because of the oppositional meanings and values invested in religious buildings by individuals on the one hand and the state on the other. I also propose to examine the ways in which individuals negotiate their conceptions of sacred space in order to cope with changes imposed on their religious places by the state. I will examine these using multi-religious but

officially secular Singapore as a case study. My specific objectives are three-fold. First, I will explore the nexus between the state and religious individuals and groups by spelling out in explicit terms the tensions which arise between individuals who experience these places as 'insiders' and the state which adopts the perspective of 'outsiders'. Secondly, I will discuss possible reasons why there have not been major collisions between state and religious groups despite these tensions. Primarily, I argue that conflict is avoided because individuals have found ways of adapting and 'negotiating' the meanings they invest in religious buildings. Thirdly, I will focus on those circumstances where, instead of adaptation, people resist. I aim to explore some of the material and symbolic acts of resistance against state actions by both individuals and groups.

By acknowledging that sacred places are as much invested with symbolic meanings and values by individuals as they are by more impersonal forces (such as the state and its planning agencies), I will be addressing in an empirical way the interaction between human agency and wider political and economic structures, as well as the interaction between the political and the religious. Such an analysis will situate my work within broader developments within cultural geography which acknowledge the significance of cultural politics.

THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Given that my work is anchored in an analysis of the Singapore state, my treatment of the concept of 'state' requires clarification. I use the term 'state' to refer to the supreme, central power which exercises rule over a people (Hall, 1984, 14) and which comprises a set of institutions including the government, the legislature, the bureaucracy, the judiciary, police and armed forces (Miliband, 1969, 46; Dear, 1986, 456–7). Of specific interest is the government and in particular the Cabinet which, either independently or on the advice of senior civil servants, identifies the policy needs in Singapore, thus constituting the chief policy formulating body of the state (Chan, 1985, 75). Also relevant to my discussion is the bureaucracy, in particular two statutory boards, the Housing and Development Board (HDB) and the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA), both of which have significant roles to play in implementing many state policies of interest here. While I risk reifying and abstracting the state by treating it as a central power

in policy-making and implementation, I will stress that the state is realized through the real institutions of the state machinery (Hall, 1984, 19). These institutions in turn comprise real people who run the machinery. On the other hand, I would also emphasize that at all times my focus is on the institutions and the public offices rather than the office-holders. I will not be exploring the private views of office-holders and how they may influence public actions.

In seeking to understand the interaction between the state and religious groups and individuals, the concepts of hegemony and resistance provide useful frameworks. Gramsci (1973) characterized hegemony as that form of domination that does not involve controls which are clearly recognizable as constraints in the traditional coercive sense. Instead, hegemonic controls involve a set of ideals and values which the majority are persuaded to adopt as their own. In specific terms, to stay in power a ruling group must persuade people that it is working for the general good of the country, defined in its terms. Members of the ruling group must also persuade people that their methods of attaining this 'public good' are the most natural, that they are common sense. If policies and actions are supported, the power of the ruling group is uncontested. However, Gramsci (1973) also made clear that such hegemony is never fully achieved. In other words, those seeking to gain and/or maintain power will always be challenged in some way by other groups in society. Resistance may be overt and material but it could also be latent and symbolic. In other words, while resistance represents political action, it can often be conveyed in cultural terms, for example through the appropriation and transformation of the material culture of the dominating group (see, for example, Hall and Jefferson, 1976; CCCS, 1982; and Hall *et al.*, 1978). In the present context, I will argue that the state attempts to persuade Singaporeans by using hegemonic arguments that its treatment of religious buildings is simply common sense and for the 'public good'. At the same time, religious groups and individuals respond by adapting or resisting. While the former response illustrates in part the success of the hegemonic process, the latter lends support to Gramsci's view that hegemony is never fully achieved.

With these concepts to frame my later discussion, some brief words can now be said about my methodology. A questionnaire survey was conducted between May and June 1989, involving 500 randomly selected respondents from Clementi (a public housing estate) and the surrounding private housing

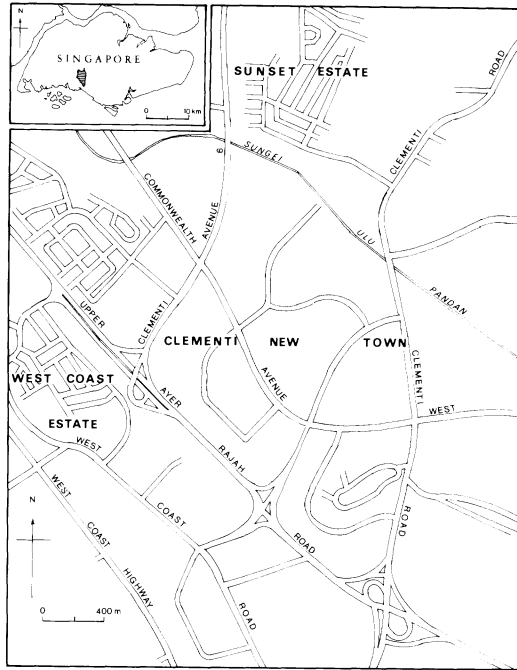


FIGURE 1. The study area

estates, such as the West Coast area and the Sunset Way vicinity (Fig. 1). These two types of housing estates were chosen with the aim of capturing a cross-section of Singapore society. The questionnaire was wide-ranging, including questions which deal with issues not covered in this paper. Readers may refer to a fuller report in Kong (1991). In addition to the survey, in-depth interviews were conducted with 23 interviewees from the various major religious groups for more detailed, personal information on their religious lives and their relationships with religious places. The relevant characteristics of these interviewees are also reported in Kong (1991). All interviews cited in this paper were conducted in English; they were taped with the interviewees' consent and later transcribed. Such interview material provided information which supplemented and complemented that collected from the open and closed questions in the questionnaire survey.

SINGAPORE: SECULAR STATE; MULTI-RELIGIOUS SHOWCASE

Singapore is characterized by a high degree of religious heterogeneity, with the population comprising in 1988 Chinese religionists¹ (41.7 per cent);

Christians (18.7 per cent); Muslims (16.0 per cent); and Hindus (4.9 per cent). In addition, 1.1 per cent of the population adhere to other religions (such as Sikhism and the Bahai religion), while 17.6 per cent have no religion (Kuo and Quah, 1988, 2). Because of such variation, the state has adopted a secular position characterized by four specific tenets:

- Singapore is a secular state in the sense that there is no official state religion;
- the state allows for freedom of worship;
- there is official commitment to multi-culturalism² where all cultural groups and, in this instance, all religious groups are treated fairly without prejudice to any group in particular, whether they are majority or minority groups;
- religion and politics must be kept strictly separate. Religious groups should not venture into politics and political parties should not use religious sentiments to gather popular support.

The Maintenance of Religious Harmony Bill, passed in November 1990, is designed to ensure that this is so. The need for such a law was emphasized at the turn of the decade as a consequence of a crisis in 1987 when a group of Marxists were alleged to be plotting an overthrow of the government, using church organizations as a front (White Paper on Maintenance of Religious Harmony, 1989, 15–6). The politically provocative actions of other religious groups have also been cited as examples of situations which the law will address (White Paper on Maintenance of Religious Harmony, 1989, 16–9). It was thus to emphasize the hitherto unwritten rule that politics and religion should be kept separate that the Bill was passed. It allows the relevant Minister to issue prohibition orders should any individual engage in any of four categories of harmful conduct. These include causing feelings of enmity or hatred between different religious groups; engaging in political activities for promoting a political cause or the cause of any political party under the guise of religion or of propagating religious activity; carrying out subversive activities under the guise of propagation of religion; and instigating and provoking feelings of disloyalty or hatred against the President or the government.

While laws pertaining directly to religion are clearly pertinent to my discussion, it is in the spirit of a re-theorized cultural geography that an understanding of the wider socio-political context is made equally necessary. In this light, the political culture in Singapore deserves attention. For a long time (1966–

1981) Singapore had the distinction of having only one party in parliament (the People's Action Party or PAP), governing in a regime at times described as 'benevolent' and 'paternalistic', at others 'authoritarian'. There were few signs of serious political opposition and even today there are a mere four opposition members in an 81-seat parliament. At another level, there was also little public input in policy matters and still less resistance to state policies and actions. In characterizing Singapore as an administrative state, Chan (1975, 55) described it as one which

believes that time spent by groups and counter-groups to lobby, influence and change policy outcomes are a waste of time that detract from the swift implementation of the plan and programme.

Such an administrative state also engages actively in depoliticizing the citizenry (Chan, 1989, 78). Her argument that participation is allowed only if it is directed through 'approved channels' parallels Cockburn's (1977) view that public participation in planning in Britain during the 1960s was permissible only if the terms of participation were dictated by the authorities. In the context of Singapore, approved channels may be grouped roughly into two categories: those which allow public attempts to shape and influence decisions by actively inviting feedback and ideas (such as the Feedback Unit and Government Parliamentary Committees); and those which participate by mobilizing support for decided causes (such as Citizens' Consultative Committees and Residents' Committees). Even groups like the Feedback Unit and Government Parliamentary Committees represent a tardy recognition by the government that an increasingly educated population demands a more active voice in decision-making. It is in this context of negligible organized opposition and non-resistance that the actions of religious individuals and groups must be viewed.

Moving from this general setting, specific attention must also be given to those laws which have a bearing on religious landscapes in material terms. In this respect, I will focus particularly on the Land Acquisition Act (1966). Compulsory land acquisition is the practice of expropriating private rights in land titles for public purposes. In Singapore, the government was empowered to acquire land for public purposes in 1854, although the first Land Acquisition Ordinance was enacted in 1920. After several amendments, the Land Acquisition Act of 1966, brought into operation in 1967, conferred great power upon the state to

acquire land through compulsory purchase (Yeung, 1973, 38). The Minister for National Development can evoke the Act if a piece of private land is needed

for any public purpose; by any person, corporation or statutory board, for any work or undertaking which, in the opinion of the Minister, is of public benefit or of public utility or in the public interest; for any residential commercial or industrial purposes. (Land Acquisition Act, 1985 edn.)

Generally, acquisition has taken place to make way for public housing, industrial estates and urban renewal (Lim and Motha, 1980, 163). Landowners affected are compensated monetarily though the amount awarded is much lower than market values (Lim *et al.*, 1988, 98). Owners also have no way of appealing against the decision to acquire their land, given that in section 5(3) of the Land Acquisition Act, the notification issued by the President is considered 'conclusive evidence' of the land being needed for the purpose specified. The only Appeals Board that exists considers appeals in relation to the compensation award (section 19, Land Acquisition Act, 1985 edn.). This is one example of planning from above, with minimal channels for public participation and negotiation. With this context in mind, I will discuss in the next section the precise tensions that arise between the state and religious groups and individuals.

'INSIDERS' AND 'OUTSIDERS': OPPOSITIONAL MEANINGS AND VALUES AND RESULTANT TENSIONS

I felt it was holy. You can't put your finger on it, but it was a sense of serenity – very calm, very peaceful kind of feeling.

(Cheng, a Methodist interviewee describing his feelings upon entering churches)

Religious individuals and groups in Singapore invest their religious buildings with sacred meanings, recognizing that they are sacred centres where concentrations of religious activities take place. As I have illustrated elsewhere (Kong, 1992), these sacred centres are places where one's god(s) may be found and where one may undergo a sacred experience, including a gamut of emotions from serenity and protection to fear and the sense of being overwhelmed. Some of these experiences correspond to Otto's (1917) notion of the 'numinous', which involves two

feelings. In the presence of sacred power one feels fragile and transient: this is 'creature feeling'. At the same time, there is also an awareness of *mysterium tremendum*. With *mysterium*, there is fascination and the acknowledgement that there is this 'Wholly Other' who attracts and repels simultaneously. *Tremendum* is at the same time a fear of God; a sense of *majestas* (overpowering and regal authority); and an urgency, a sense of the 'energy' of the numinous object.

While individuals relate at this personal level, the state, on the other hand, invests in religious buildings a different set of meanings and values. For example, the state takes a functionalist approach to religious places setting aside sites for churches, temples and mosques as they would for housing, schools, public recreational facilities and so forth. At the same time, the state periodically demolishes and relocates religious buildings to make way for public projects, a reflection of how pragmatism, efficiency and orderliness are emphasized over other values, such as the sacred meanings which adherents invest in religious places. Only rarely, and only in recent years, have alternative values such as historical significance and architectural merit been recognized (Kong, 1993). The state, in other words, is driven by material concerns in its treatment of religious buildings. As a result of the oppositional conceptions of 'sacred space', tensions exist between religious individuals and groups and the state, sometimes latently, at other times more overtly. These tensions often crystallize over specific issues, such as the establishment, preservation, relocation and demolition of religious buildings.

In the establishment of religious buildings, potentially divisive tensions are apparent in various ways. The religious building sometimes embodies tension between state regulation and divine will. For example, in the setting up of religious places, Cheng, a Methodist, recognizes that the state is guided by 'rationality' and 'pragmatic planning'. However in his view one should really do as the spirit guides, for it is faith that underlies the setting up of churches and which 'sweep(s) [people] to do as the spirit leads them'. The tension arises particularly when the two differing ideological systems embodied in pragmatic planning and divine guidance pull in different directions. For example, a group may seek to establish a building for worship because it feels that it is divine will and that the community is ready for it and needs it. The state, on the other hand, is guided by 'rational' and 'pragmatic' planning principles, and does not

offer any sites for use. Many church groups find themselves in this position and have turned to the use of hotel function rooms, school halls, house-churches and the like as substitutes. To cite a specific example, Wong (1986), in *The building of a dream*, chronicled the way in which the Mount Carmel group felt that divine guidance led them to set up a church building (today the Clementi Bible Centre) and how planning procedures made it difficult for their efforts to be realised quickly. For instance, in the planning blueprints, there were 'no designated religious sites available' in the place the group requested; subsequently, in following the planning regulations, the group lost the tender for a site in Pasir Panjang Road. The disappointments and frustrations experienced by the group are clearly documented by Wong (1986) and while there was no overt ill-will against the state, the case study illustrates the potential conflicts between state and religious individuals/groups.

Such tensions were also obvious in comments by some of my interviewees who recognized state power in directing the establishment and growth of places of worship. Their comments reveal a strong sense of resignation and powerlessness. Typical responses which illustrate such resigned acceptance of state actions include, for example,

HDB (Housing and Development Board) holds all the power. What right do we have?

Beggars can't be choosers.

If it is in the Master Plan³, there is nothing we can do about it. We have to accept it.

Such instances of people's perceptions of divine will guiding them in one direction while state regulations pull in another are also evident in other situations where there has occasionally been more overt resistance. For example, some Jehovah's Witnesses refuse to do any military duty in the compulsory two-and-a-half year National Service for males or even to wear uniforms because their religion claims a neutral position in times of war and because the doctrine of the sect is that 'Satan and its dispensation are responsible for all organized Government and religion' (Ministry of Home Affairs Press Statement, 14 January 1972). In this instance, the state responded by de-registering the Jehovah's Witnesses⁴ and asking the group's missionary to leave Singapore.

In the establishment of religious buildings, there is also tension between the state with its particular set of values ('pragmatism', 'rational' planning, 'efficient' use of land) and religious groups which have a different

set of perceived needs. This tension is expressed by Kumar, a Hindu interviewee, in his analysis of locations of Hindu temples:

The trouble is we don't get land where we want it, and they offer us where there is no need for a temple, and if you do go and build a temple, and it's not frequented, it'll just be a white elephant.

Furthermore, the way in which religious buildings are set up is also cited by interviewees as tangible evidence of the state's discriminatory behaviour towards different groups which fosters tension not only between state and religion but also between different religious groups. On the one hand, the state is keen to portray its commitment to multi-culturalism and to multi-religiosity in particular. As Brigadier-General Lee Hsien Loong (then Minister for Trade and Industry and Second Minister for Defence) acknowledged, any treatment on the part of the state that is less than even-handed will have dire consequences:

... should any group feel threatened ... because they receive less than even-handed treatment from the Government, then that group too must respond by mobilizing themselves to protect their interests, if necessary militantly. Tensions will build up, and there will be trouble for all. (30 April 1989)

Despite express commitment to multi-culturalism, individuals do not always perceive the policy to be put into practice. For example, Kumar points to the 'ubiquitous' and 'imposing' mosques which have been, and are being, constructed as evidence of a certain discrimination in favour of the Muslim community:

... we all get the feeling that we all see a mosque everywhere; in every town you see a mosque, a real imposing structure, but you don't get to see a temple and all that ... the temples that are being built nowadays are being built in real out-of-the-way places.

This resentment, he feels, is potentially dangerous because it builds up unhappiness between religious groups. For Prema, a Hindu, the only way not to create or exacerbate such tensions is to ensure that all groups are treated equally:

I think it's got to be all or nothing. Either we have a separation of church and state or we don't. And I think that particularly, and again, this is very dangerous ground, but singling out one particular racial or religious

group, for benefit or otherwise, can only work to that group's disadvantage, because what that means is everyone else is going to resent them. And, understandably, it's been done all along to protect them [the Malays] and to protect the preservation of their culture, and to make sure they didn't get swallowed up by the rest of us, because they were here first. But after, what we've got [is] a couple of hundred years of history, it's enough. And I think the real problem that we have here now is that everyone else is going to resent it so much, in the sense that, don't the rest of us have a culture that is worth preserving?

In the preservation of religious places, it would appear that little tension may be generated between the state and individuals and groups. Ostensibly, the preservation of such buildings also means that places cherished by individuals and communities have not been destroyed. However, preservation does not ensure that the meanings invested in these places remain the same. In fact, religious buildings which become recognized as 'national monuments' take on other meanings, as historical and cultural artifacts and as tourist attractions. In other words, these places are appropriated and their meanings are re-defined by the Preservation of Monuments Board and the tourist authorities. Certainly, the meanings invested in these buildings by tourists are often different from the meanings invested by religious adherents who worship at these places. Such appropriation and re-definition are not totally rejected by the individuals and communities affected, for some accept that tourists may like to visit their places of worship. However, there are reservations which indicate potential underlying tensions. For example, some believe the private, personal relationship between an individual and a deity becomes open to the public eye and made an object of curiosity through tourism. There is also another view that shrines, statues and the like become treated as pieces of art. For some interviewees, such shrines and statues are imbued with a sacredness, indicating a god's presence. It is the height of insult and affront when tourists begin to put their arms around the statue of a god for a photograph. Such tensions revolving around conservation efforts reflect broader arguments within the literature on heritage (such as Binney and Hanna, 1978; and Lowenthal, 1985), which address questions such as who decides whose heritage is conserved and for whose benefit.

A corollary to the redefinition of religious places (from a place of worship to a tourist destination) is the encouragement of a tourist souvenir trade within the compounds of religious places. Buying and selling in

religious places are often considered inappropriate by interviewees. The atmosphere and the sacredness of religious places are intruded upon and the original functions of the places compromised for profit. Given such views, it is not surprising that most interviewees believe tourism should not be encouraged unless religious leaders are themselves able and willing to set certain rules. As one interviewee put it, tourism should not be encouraged by external groups for it is not their religious places and religious activities which are invaded. In other words, the power of definition should be given back to the respective religious groups or at least to their respective religious leaders.

In a paper on 'valued environments', Burgess and Gold (1982, 2) suggested 'the strength of attachment to ordinary places and landscapes frequently only emerges when they are threatened by change'. Such change often takes the drastic form of destruction, or 'topocide' as Porteous (1988) termed it. In my context, it is also true that the attachments to and meanings of religious buildings for individuals become particularly heightened when these places are threatened with relocation and demolition. In this sense, relocation and demolition prove to be the most sensitive and potentially the most divisive state actions, since places which are of great value and importance to people are being destroyed. It is here that the tension between the 'rationality' and 'pragmatism' of the state clashes head-on with the individual's conceptions of sacredness and sacred space. The 'objective' outsider mentality conflicts with the 'subjective' and intense insider experiences, leaving insiders (individuals) feeling a sense of 'anger and resentment', 'a sense of loss and deprivation', 'like something was suddenly taken away from you'. Intense reactions are expressed by Prema who sees the Hindu temple as 'almost like God's embassy'. Destroying a temple is like tearing down God and

... that is painful, particularly when you put something that's steel and chrome up. You're not quite sure that on sacred ground they're treating it as holy.

It would seem that such actions are particularly unacceptable because symbols of 'modernity' ('steel and chrome') are put in place of the old and the treasured. Not only would it be tearing down God, it was to Prema also like tearing a part of herself down. Her comments illustrate the intensity of emotions that can be aroused and which must be dealt with when religious places are demolished. Such displays of

intense emotions are not surprising. They parallel Foster's (1981) discussion of the emotions evoked when disused churches in rural central southern Minnesota were threatened with non-religious use. He suggested that the closure of churches as religious buildings was difficult to accept for some because of strong personal feelings towards the church. Several generations of family had attended that church and had been baptised, married and buried there. As one individual put it, 'It's like losing a member of the family' (Foster, 1981, 6).

NEGOTIATING CONCEPTIONS OF 'SACRED SPACE': FORMS OF ADAPTATION

Despite the fact that many individuals cherish their religious buildings and perceive and treat them as sacrosanct, they have coped with the destruction of these buildings. This, I suggest, is because individuals deal with destruction through emotional and behavioural adaptation; people erect defences to protect themselves from the anger and pain of seeing their sacred places demolished or to comfort themselves if they should feel the resentment. I will deal with adaptations in two ways: the first demonstrates the line of least resistance whereby individuals accept state actions; the second involves an investment in alternative notions of the sacred.

Acceptance of state actions

Acceptance of state action occurs at two levels: acceptance at an ideological level, illustrating the success of the state's hegemonic arguments; and acceptance of state actions, without the concomitant acceptance of state ideology. In the former instance, at least some interviewees from every religious group displayed acceptance of state ideology, arguing that state actions are 'rational' and 'necessary'. As I have illustrated elsewhere (Kong, 1993, 39), the hegemonic arguments of the state are imbibed by some interviewees:

... some suggest that there are religious buildings which have to go because they are old and in a bad state anyway. To them, rehabilitation does not seem to be an option. Others point out that the old are replaced with new and better buildings. Demands are still met. Some buildings are unused or underused and do not deserve to remain standing. Demolition is all part of 'pragmatic' planning and will contribute to more efficient use of space. Growth and change are inevitable. All these reflect the adoption of modernist arguments in planning

which recognize the observable functions of places but not the often intangible meanings and values invested. There are even those who deny the sacredness of religious places and refuse to demarcate space as sacred or profane.

This last case is best illustrated in the example of Kumar, a Hindu, who suggested that 'rationally' the temple is but 'sand and stone' and thus meaningless in itself. Yet this goes against Hindu beliefs in which the temples are not meaningless structures. In fact, the buildings and all they house are extremely significant symbolically. For example, temples are built with great precision according to a blend of religious concepts and mathematical principles so they can function in harmony with the environment and the universe. Even the size and proportions of statues and figures of gods and goddesses are measured with extreme precision according to set rules. While Kumar may not have known the exact symbolism of every facet of Hindu temples, he was well aware that they harboured symbolic meanings. Despite this knowledge, the fact that he could still suggest that they were merely 'sand and stone' indicates that the state's arguments about the meaninglessness of buildings in themselves have been successful in this case.

While in the above instance political arguments differ from religious principles, there are cases when political and religious principles seem to reinforce each another. In these instances, the state's use of ideological arguments receives a boost; it becomes that much easier to persuade people of the naturalness of state actions. For example, Cheng, a Methodist, argued that if a religious building had to give way so that a road could be widened to ease traffic congestion it was for the benefit of all and, as a Christian testimony, 'we should do something good for the country and not think of ourselves first'. Such an attitude would have been Machiavelli's explanation of why earlier peoples seemed to be more fond of liberty than his contemporaries. To him, it was because of the particular conception of religion which 'glorified humble and contemplative men, rather than men of action' (Larrain, 1979, 18). Such a conception placed great premium on humility and abnegation. As a result, the world was full of people who were concerned with 'how to bear, rather than how best to avenge, their injuries', a frame of mind which allowed others to rule over them securely and successfully (Larrain, 1979, 18). In the present context, if denying oneself a religious place of immense meaning is for a perceived larger good, then it is a supreme example

of abnegation to which good Christians should aspire. It is precisely this sense of sacrifice for the 'larger good' to which the state appeals. Their attempts at persuasion become that much easier because their arguments strike a chord with certain religious teachings.

At a second level, there is acceptance of and compliance with state actions, whether in land allocation and establishment of religious buildings, or relocation and demolition, but without concomitantly imbibing state ideology. These interviewees do not necessarily agree with state arguments nor engage in the rhetoric. However, instead of resisting, they adapt by either finding refuge in religious teachings, keeping faith in divine intervention, or rationalizing their sacred experiences. For example, Christians find refuge in their religious teachings and invoke biblical teachings to help them deal with the demolition of their churches. As Pauline, a Catholic, argued, if the land belonged to the state, then 'render unto Caesar what belongs to Caesar' [*sic*]. In turn, Buddhists invoke the doctrine which encourages detachment from earthly things including buildings, even if they are religious buildings. Apart from invoking religious teachings, there are also those who can accept state actions because they have faith in divine intervention. When asked for his views on the demolition of religious buildings, the immediate and unequivocal response of Mr Tan, an old traditional Chinese religionist, was that there would be divine retribution for meddling with sacred places of the gods. A less grim and perhaps more hopeful response came from Anne, a Methodist, who thought that if God did not want the place to be destroyed, he would provide a way for it to be saved. But if it was his will, then Christians should accept demolition as part of God's larger cosmic plan. For those who seek to establish their religious places but find that state regulations either prevent or make it difficult for them to do so, they too have been able to accept state action by finding refuge in faith. For example, the Mount Carmel group cited above had several applications for a site rejected on planning grounds. In order to cope with their repeated disappointments and frustrations, the safety valve for the group was a belief that it was not God's will that they obtain each particular site. In this sense, the potential resentment and anger against the planning machinery was averted. This parallels Prorok's (1986, 135) findings in her study of the Hare Krishna in West Virginia. In their choice of a site for a temple, practical considerations included easy availability and low costs and, when they found one that fulfilled those conditions, the

group interpreted it as a direct sign from Krishna that the site should be designated as a sacred place.

Acceptance of state actions is also made possible because some interviewees rationalize their sacred experiences by explaining the feeling evoked when they are in churches, temples and/or mosques. In other words, they apply logic or reason to their feelings. Reverend Lim, for example, argues that the settings in churches may convey the *sense* of a divine presence, or the sense of sacredness, but it does not imply that the place is in and of itself sacred. Prema suggests that the feelings of peace and quiet and the sense of appropriate behaviour may be 'learned behaviour', rather like 'Pavlov's dog'. But this, she argues, does not necessarily imply in any way that the place is sacred. Wen Mei (a non-denominational Christian), in turn, tries to provide a rational understanding of her feelings when she enters churches:

Maybe it's the coldness of the stone; maybe it's the fact that people always whisper in churches; maybe it's the ... architecture ... high roofs always make any sound in there ... very quiet anyway.

There were also those who attempted to rationalize and separate sacredness, personal ties and experience from place. For example, Prema always felt particularly comfortable in the Sri Krishnan Temple. It was also the temple that her late grandmother, to whom she was particularly close, used to go to. Prema's love for her grandmother and her relationship with her gods were undoubtedly intense and often bound up with her favourite temple, but she tried to make a separation of all these elements rationally:

I think I couldn't tell you that tearing it down meant you were taking away my grandmother, you were taking away god. That would continue.

Emotionally, her relationships with others (her grandmother) and the 'Other' (God) were closely intertwined with place (the temple), but intellectually she tried to separate them into distinct elements.

Alternative notions of sacred places

Apart from acceptance of state actions, another set of adaptations involves individuals investing in alternative notions of sacredness and sacred places. In other words, sacredness resides in more than just religious buildings, extending beyond them into other realms. In some instances these alternative notions of the sacred are derived from religious teachings though this need not always be so. First, a Roman Catholic

priest stressed that God himself is sacred first and foremost. As long as God is present there is sacredness and the place is immaterial. This stems from Hebrew thought in which holy places have no innate sanctity (Houston, 1978, 229). Instead, reverence for a sacred place is a 'celebration of events' rather than a reverence of primordial holiness *per se*. ... Without Yahweh there could be no holiness, no people, no land. A triadic relationship bound Yahweh in covenant with his people and the promised land'. Secondly, extending from the view that God is sacred, Reverend Vuyk (a Roman Catholic priest) also argues that other things are sacred insofar as they are related to God. Hence, in his view, 'Man' [*sic*] is sacred because 'in us, God's presence can be known'. Similarly, Anne, a Methodist, suggests, 'The real temple of God is within us'. This reflects biblical teachings that 'we are the temple of the living god' (2 Corinthians 6:16). This reference to humans as sacred is also echoed by a recently-converted Buddhist, Hock Lim, who declares, 'A person is sacred if he or she practises mindfulness'. Further, many Christians see the church to be the 'community of believers'. A Methodist pastor suggests that the 'divine place' is a place where a community gathers in the name of God and to worship him. By thus relegating the specific place to secondary importance, these interviewees are in effect providing themselves with a way of accepting the destruction of specific religious places. Relatedly, some Christian interviewees also stress the view that the community is the church and that the community is in itself sacred. As Joseph, a Catholic, pointed out, 'What is important is the people, the church ... the people are the church'. Biblical references can be cited to support this. For instance, in the first letter of Saint Paul to the Corinthians, it is written:

Didn't you realize that you were God's temple and that the Spirit of God was living among you? ... the temple of God is sacred: and you are that temple. (1 Corinthians, 3: 16-17)

Aside from seeing sacredness in God and humans, interviewees also invested in a third notion of sacred places. They deny that sacredness is exclusive to religious places and argue instead that God is everywhere. There is no reason why one place should be more sacred than another. A fourth way in which interviewees deny that the overtly religious place has a monopoly of sacredness is to argue that sacredness involves 'experiencing God's presence', as a Catholic priest puts it. He argues that one can undergo this

experience in different places. For example, standing by the seaside and watching the sunset could be a sacred experience for some; or as Wen Mei suggests, standing on top of a mountain and looking out to sea evokes the same kind of feeling for her. This is akin to James' (1902, 27) argument, 'religious awe is the same organic thrill which we feel in a forest at twilight, or in a mountain gorge'. In short, sacredness is an experience and the experience is not confined to any one particular place. By looking at it thus, people can deal with the demolition of churches, temples and mosques, because they also invest sacredness in other places. In a paper on the Niagara Falls, McGreevy (1985) illustrated the investment of sacred meaning in nature. He argued that the Niagara Falls was the 'creator's shrine' because, in creating Niagara, God had given a glimpse of his power and majesty. Indeed, Pope Pius IX had established a 'pilgrim's shrine' at the Falls in 1861, in response to a request by Archbishop Lynch who felt that Niagara was too fantastic to have been brought about by chance. God must have put it there for a special purpose and he should be adored 'on the spot in which He manifests himself in such incomparable majesty and grandeur'.⁵

Fifthly, some respondents suggest that their god(s) are with them all the time because they carry with them pictures, small sculptures, crosses and so forth which, more often than not, have been 'blessed'. To borrow Maier's (1975) concept, these are like the 'movable Torah' for the Jews. Maier (1975) argued that the Torah⁶ symbolized the centre of home territory for the Jews in diaspora. Even though the community had to move, the centre remained with them. As he put it, 'The role of Torah as movable territory developed as a substitute and in compensation for the loss of actual territory'. As a parallel, 'holy' pictures, sculptures, crosses and so forth seem to act to some degree as substitutes for religious places which may be destroyed under the 'power of others' (Eyles, 1988). The idea is also similar to one view of holy relics that was common in Renaissance cities. As Muir and Weissman (1989, 94–5) pointed out, for some Catholics then, it was theologically legitimate for holiness to be attributed to relics. The space around an object was also considered a hallowed zone. When the object was moved, so did its holiness and that of the zone around it.

Finally, people have invested in their dwelling places certain religious meanings which render them an alternative to public religious buildings, albeit a limited one. Unlike the latter, over which individuals have little control, the house is a place where the

individual can define and invest meanings with little interference from others. In the next sub-section, I will discuss how the home is sacred for many people and how it also helps individuals deal with their lack of control over public religious buildings and their loss of these buildings.

The house as a religious place

Although in contemporary society there are few communities for whom the primary purpose of the house is religious,⁷ there is no doubt that religious activities are often still carried out at home. They range from reading the scriptures or religious books to incense-burning; from saying grace before meals to burning joss-sticks and joss-paper and to daily supplication to the gods with flowers and food (usually fruits and less often cooked food) (see Kuo and Quah, 1988, 42–3; and Tong, 1988, 21). In my case studies, the house as a private place of prayer offers individuals an alternative to their public religious buildings. Great store is placed by the sanctifying of the house or particular parts thereof. Care is taken to observe certain codes of behaviour in the sanctified areas of the dwelling place and a vast majority of respondents perform some form of religious activity very frequently at home.

The house is sometimes sanctified by ritual. For example, Kumar described the Hindu ritual of house blessing:

A special day is chosen . . . If you have a new house, you're not supposed to live in the house until these prayers and rituals are conducted. So . . . they look at the calendar and they decide what is a good day and a good time and then they call a priest down, and then what is known as a blessing ceremony [takes place] – we go through all that . . . [the priest] chants prayers and there is this sacrificial fire where he sort of throws in certain items to please the gods. Things like some fruits and this and that; some things my mother has made. Sort of to bless the house; a kind of sacrifice, to drive away the evil spirits and get in the good spirits. And then he showers sacred water all over the place; and then the lady of the house . . . boils a pot of milk; milk is supposed to be very sacred. She boils it and then she dishes it out to all who are present. It's sacred.

At the same time, parts of the house are sometimes designated as special areas. They may take a variety of forms. It could be a room set aside for prayers, some space atop a bookcase or a specially constructed altar, which could vary in size, location and complexity of the structure. Wherever the precise areas may be, they are clearly special. Areas are cleaned with particular

care. Catholic interviewees setting up home altars also have their crosses and/or statues of Christ, Mary or any of the saints blessed by a priest. Hindu interviewees and traditional Chinese religionist interviewees ceremonially invite their deities to dwell in the statues at their home altars. Furthermore, altars are replete with symbolism. For example, in setting up a Hindu home altar, the height at which it is constructed is symbolic. As Kumar points out, it should ordinarily be at eye-level, so that one is not looking down at the gods when one prays. If it has to be at ground level, then individuals would have to sit down to say their prayers at the altar. If at all possible, the altar would be set up facing the east for the same reason that the temple is: the first rays of the sun will strike the deities, the power infused and subsequently radiated to the family. The altar is never to be found in or near the kitchen or toilets because these areas would defile the sacred spots. As Knott (1982, 107) found in the case of Hindus in Leeds, the home altar (or domestic *mandir*⁸ as she termed it) is always treated with respect and is often curtained off when not in use.

In discussing the designation of sacred spots in the house, the case of Muslims and 'Other Christians' deserve particular attention. Muslims depart from all the other groups in that they do not have altars, statues or pictures. Yet, it is not true to say that for them the house is not connected in any way with sacredness in a religious sense. Even while religious teachings advocate that they can pray anywhere, most Muslims appear to have their own special places in the house. These can be a prayer room or a particular area in one's bedroom which is regularly used for prayer, especially once the prayer mat is laid out. At the same time, like the Hindu home altars, these Muslim places of prayer are never found in or near kitchens or toilets to avoid defilement. They are also kept particularly clean. Thus, even while Muslims' sacred spots at home differ in form from those of the other groups, they nonetheless exist.

In the case of 'Other Christians', I draw attention particularly to the more charismatic groups who emphasize a close knowledge of the Word of God and a more literal translation of the Bible and who generally eschew the rituals and symbolism of Catholicism and High Anglicanism. Given that in many of their churches there is a conscious tendency not to be heavily gilded and not to have too many statues, crosses and the like, one would expect that the house as a place of prayer would be equally devoid of religious symbols. Yet it was clear that many

charismatic Christians in Singapore still set aside corners, alcoves, desk tops and so forth for a collection of religious paraphernalia. Seldom are there statues, as is the case with Catholics, but there are crosses, verses and posters, for instance. Often, in the course of fieldwork, interviewees would show me these spots, set up in parts of the house where they like to sit and read the Bible and spend a little 'quiet time' reflecting. Thus, despite a theological position which de-emphasizes the significance of places and material, tangible religious symbols, a certain degree of importance is still attached to them at the lay level.

Another way in which it is evident that the dwelling place functions as a religious and sacred place is the care with which certain codes of behaviour are observed. These codes include generally shared ones as well as others which are more peculiar to particular individuals and families. For example, interviewees across religions agree that components of the altar should not be tampered with. Neither should one place 'all sorts of things' in front of altars. There is, in other words, a demarcation of space around altars, whether consciously or otherwise. This space, for all intents and purposes, appears to some degree to be a 'hallowed zone'. There are also other codes which are peculiar to individuals and their families. For example, Soo Ling, a Chinese religionist, talks of how it is considered disrespectful to sneeze or yawn in front of the home altar, just as Karen (a Catholic) does not like people to stand with their backs to the altar. In addition, there are also ways of maintaining the sanctity of religious places. Principally, cleanliness is a prerequisite across religions. Even the cleaning of the altar may be laden with symbolism. For example, when Joan's Catholic family cleans the altar, the statues are washed in holy water. The washing is also usually done in time for Easter, a period of rebirth and new hope.

Finally, the frequency at which individuals pray at home would also indicate that it is significant as a place of religious activity. Table I illustrates this clearly. The vast majority of respondents in my questionnaire survey indicated that they pray at home more than once a week, often every day. In the case of Muslims, the proportion of those who pray more than once a week is 93.9 per cent; for Catholics it is 84.6 per cent; for 'Other Christians' 91.8 per cent; for Hindus 81.4 per cent; and for Chinese religionists 66.7 per cent.

In short, whether it is in the religious activities that take place in the house, the frequency with which they occur, the code of behaviour, or the symbolism

TABLE I. Frequency at which respondents pray at home

Frequency	Muslims	Catholics	Other Christians	Hindus	Chinese Religionists
More than once a week	93.9% (92)	84.6% (49)	91.8% (67)	81.4% (35)	66.7% (152)
Once a week	— (—)	— (—)	— (—)	— (—)	3.1% (7)
Once every 2-3 weeks	— (—)	1.7% (1)	— (—)	— (—)	7.5% (17)
Once a month	— (—)	— (—)	— (—)	— (—)	1.7% (4)
A few times a year or less	— (—)	3.4% (2)	1.4% (1)	— (—)	8.3% (19)
Never	6.1% (6)	10.3% (6)	6.8% (5)	18.6% (8)	12.7% (29)
Total	100.0% (98)	100.0% (58)	100.0% (73)	100.0% (43)	100.0% (228)

of form and actions, it is evident that the house, or parts of it, are treated as sacred places. Public religious buildings, therefore, do not have a monopoly on sacredness, since the dwelling place (among others) also provides alternative notions of sacredness and sacred places. Among all the various alternative notions I have discussed, I would argue that the house as a place of worship is of paramount importance. This is because it is a place over which individuals have access to and a certain degree of control, in the sense that individuals and families can create and define their sacred places within the house. Having this alternative helps people to cope with the fact that their churches, temples or mosques may disappear. If they had absolutely no other place in which they could pray and in which they could invest some form of sacred meaning, then the destruction of their sacred churches, temples or mosques would probably be far less acceptable. As it is, the house acts as a sort of buffer.

However, despite the importance of the house as a place of worship, it is not a sufficient alternative to churches, temples and mosques. For the Chinese religionists in particular, the house is essentially for regular routine prayers while the temple is for special prayers. Further, while the house is suitable for personal, private prayers, churches, mosques, Hindu and Buddhist temples are for public, communal worship, which in some cases is obligatory. Finally, there is a notion of a hierarchy of sacredness where the public

religious building is more sacred than the house. Zakir, a Muslim, for instance, speaks of the greater grace one gains by praying at the mosque in comparison to the house, while Joan, a Catholic, suggests that the sense of sacredness and concomitantly of transgression, is greater in church than at a house altar. Although houses cannot totally replace churches, temples and mosques, the limited 'privatization' of worship is nonetheless favourable to the state. This is because attention is then not focused solely on public places of worship and some of the communality has been diffused. To a certain degree, any potential forms of organized resistance are then fractured.

With these various forms of adaptation, it would appear that individuals have bridged the chasm between their notions of the sacred and their attachments to religious places on the one hand and, amongst other things, the 'pragmatism' and 'rationality' of a planned city on the other. However, the real tension emerges when the same person will say the place is sacred and important, that a sense of loss will be felt when it is ripped down but then goes on to transfer sacredness to other places, deny the sacredness of religious buildings and/or rationalize sacred experiences. The contradictions do not suggest that these places were not really sacred to them in the first place. What it illustrates is an 'elasticity' of meanings (Muir and Weissman, 1988, 99) and the shifting positions adopted by individuals to cope with contextual

constraints. It is this shifting of positions that is precisely what I mean by 'negotiating conceptions of sacred space'.

MATERIAL AND SYMBOLIC 'STRATEGIES OF RESISTANCE'

The notion of 'negotiation' also carries with it a sense of bargaining and, relatedly, resistance. Apart from the varied forms of adaptation, religious individuals and groups have also negotiated with the state in the more oppositional sense of the word. The clearest examples of this occur when individuals and groups employ strategies of resistance against the state when their religious buildings are threatened with relocation or demolition. Three cases can be cited to illustrate how different groups have reacted when informed of state intentions to relocate or demolish their respective buildings. Their reactions constitute deliberate acts of resistance in the hope of reversing the decisions to relocate or demolish, or at least of ameliorating the consequences of such actions. Such resistance indicates that the state is not always entirely successful in its attempt at hegemonic control. Even if these acts of resistance have not been successful in that demolition and relocation eventually takes place, they nonetheless reveal the fact that there are groups and individuals who do not accept unquestioningly that the state's actions are the 'natural' and 'rational' way of doing things.

In the case of a Chinese temple, the *Tang Suahn Kiong San Soh Hoo Chu* Buddhist Temple, previously in Henderson Road, the site was required for a swimming pool to be built by the HDB as part of the Bukit Merah Town Centre development project. *The Gazette* notification for acquiring the temple site was made in April 1973 and the site was acquired in April 1975 at a compensation payment of S\$184,000. The HDB repeatedly made offers to the trustees to combine with other similar resettlement cases to build a new temple on sites offered by the Board. However, by January 1978, the trustees of the 120 year old temple were still insisting on the retention of the temple at the existing site. Their argument was that the temple was very popular with worshippers and was full of valuable artifacts which they felt should be preserved. The HDB, on the other hand, felt that the geographical location of the temple was highly undesirable because the elevation of the surrounding land was higher by between eight and ten metres. It was also argued that the temple's artifacts could be removed and preserved at another site and not

destroyed with the shell of the temple, 'which is a simple brick structure' (quoted in *The Straits Times*, 7 January 1978). Despite the arguments put up by the temple trustees and their initial refusal to move, they still had to vacate the premises eventually because the Land Acquisition Act (1966) was invoked.

A second example is a Catholic church recently caught in the process of relocation. The Church of Our Lady Star of the Sea in Sembawang Road stood on land which was on a yearly lease from the HDB. In November 1987 a clearance notice was issued to the church to vacate the premises by 31 December 1988, though they were actually allowed to stay on until they found a suitable site. The clearance was part of a redevelopment exercise in the Sembawang area. The church did not resist the move. This was possibly because the surrounding housing areas were also being redeveloped and parishioners were moving out as well. Instead of resisting the move *per se*, part of the church's strategy was to make the best of the situation by doing three things. First, they appealed to the HDB and to various Members of Parliament (Catholic MPs and their own constituency MP) for a relocation site to be offered to them at market price, thus saving them from competition at the bidding table. Secondly, they also applied for compensation. Both appeals were rejected, since the land on which the church stood was not being compulsorily acquired – instead the lease was not being extended. Thus the Church, as ex-lessee of the land, qualified for neither dispensation. The church, therefore, had to tender for a site in Yishun that had been offered to 'public tender' for any Christian group. As it turned out, the church happened to be the only group to bid for the site. It is, however, not entirely happy with the conditions of the site. It is small (3850 square metres); only 35 per cent of the land can be built up and the construction must not exceed 10.8 metres high. The view is that it will be difficult to accommodate what the Church sees as a growing Catholic population in the area. As a result, the third part of the church's strategy was to appeal against the limitations. But in spite of repeated efforts to bring their needs to the HDB's attention, the 'HDB is ALMIGHTY' and there is 'NO QUESTION of our requirements, needs, expectations, requests . . .' being met (correspondence with informant, 30 November 1988 and 11 February 1989).

In contrast to the strategy adopted by the Catholic church cited above, the Sikh community reacted with a greater show of resistance to the HDB's acquisition of the Central Sikh Temple site in Queen Street for re-

development in 1977. The land was to be compulsorily acquired to make way for public housing. Although there is no compulsion for the government or its agency, the HDB, to provide alternative sites for religious buildings affected by public projects, it made an exception in this case since the temple was the main Sikh temple catering to all sects in Singapore. The government, therefore, offered two possible sites but both were rejected (*The Straits Times*, 17 January 1978). Instead, 750 members of the community attended a meeting, at the end of which three resolutions were passed. The first was that the state should preserve the temple as evidence that it was treating all religious groups even-handedly. The second urged the government to protect the religious rights and interests of the Sikh community. The third was a unanimous resolution that the temple should remain on the Queen Street site and that there was, therefore, no question of accepting an alternative site, or of selling or exchanging it (*The Straits Times*, 9 February 1978). The resolutions were sent to the then President, Henry B. Shares, and the then Prime minister, Lee Kuan Yew. In May 1978 the Prime Minister met with nine Sikh community leaders and stressed two points. One was that all religions were and would continue to be treated equally. Another was that Singapore's 'progress through redevelopment must go on', meaning that the 'old must give way to new – and this covered churches, temples, mosques and so on' (quoted in *The Straits Times*, 18 May 1978). After the meeting, a spokesperson for the group agreed that there had been no discrimination against the community in Singapore and expressed confidence that the matter would be resolved amicably soon 'as the Sikh community wants also to contribute to the progress of the nation' (*The Straits Times*, 18 May 1978). Eventually, the community moved out of their premises into temporary buildings until 1986 when they moved into their new temple in Towner Road.

Aside from such appeals, meetings and resolutions which, though unsuccessful, constitute material strategies of resistance, there are also symbolic acts of resistance to state power by using religious buildings. This is uncommon but in a few instances interviewees suggest how, through their religious buildings, they could register some resistance against the state. For example, religious buildings can become a symbol of resistance when they are perceived as potential bargaining chips. So for one Muslim interviewee,

If the Masjid Sultan⁹ were to be demolished by the government, I don't think I'll vote for PAP.

Furthermore, another interviewee cited arguments in some quarters that religious authorities should not themselves close down religious buildings (for example, if they were underused) because that would be a signal to the state that the community itself did not consider the building to be sacred. The state could then, in another time and context, easily demolish the building and the community would not be able to defend it on the grounds of sacredness. In this sense, some religious buildings may have been kept standing not because they are needed but because they have become symbols of resistance to potential state power.

CONCLUSIONS

What I have illustrated in this paper are the possibilities of examining the individuality of personal religious experiences within the broader political context of Singapore. Unlike previous treatments of religion within geography (for example, Sopher, 1967) where the focus has been on the material aspects of religion and where a homogeneous culture group is assumed (hence leading to an apolitical perspective), I have attempted to deal with symbolic meanings and values within the context of a heterogeneity of religious and secular cultures, recognizing the politics of culture. Whereas previous approaches have been largely descriptive and atheoretical, I have instead anchored my work within broader theoretical debates in cultural geography. Whereas the 'personal' used to be rejected as a valid level of analysis (Sopher, 1967, 1), one of my anchors in this paper is precisely an analysis of personal meanings and values.

In the context of Singapore, the conflict between the sacred and the secular is evident in the different conceptions of religious places: as functional places on the one hand and as sacred places on the other. To address this conflict, the state has used hegemonic arguments, sometimes successfully. However, hegemony is never fully achieved. Domination is never total nor static, but always contested and there have been resistances. Yet, these resistances have been mostly ineffectual for various reasons. First, religious functionaries, in particular the Christian priests and pastors and Buddhist nuns, tended to de-emphasize the sacredness of religious places, arguing that religious buildings do not have a monopoly of sacredness. They spoke, for instance, of how sacredness is in God, in human beings and in the community. They spoke too of how one could undergo a sacred experience at the seaside and while watching the sunset. They argued that the sense of a

divine presence did not mean the place was in and of itself sacred. They also suggested that at the end of the day, all material things, including buildings, were transient and therefore unimportant. Because these religious leaders adopt such views, sometimes in line with their respective theological positions and at others reflecting their personal positions, they do not become the rallying point for resistance. In the case of Hindus, the lack of such rallying points is received with frustration by some individuals. For example, Kumar spoke of how there are no mediatory channels between them and the state, because the official religious representatives (Hindu Endowments Board and the Hindu Advisory Board) are 'lame ducks' with 'toothless title(s)' – 'they can't do anything'.

Secondly, the view that the community itself is the real 'temple' is important, because people then feel that as long as the community is not destroyed, they can cope with the loss of their places. This reflects Fried's (1965, 367) findings in his study of the relocation of homes, where grief at having to move out is heightened when individuals have to leave their neighbours. Conversely, the grief and sense of loss is decreased when the community as a whole is moved. All this has implications for the degree of resistance. If sacredness is seen to reside in the community, the meanings attached to churches, temples and mosques are then devolved to a personal level. There is thus less likelihood of collective action to oppose demolition.

Thirdly, the lack of a coordinated voice has sometimes also contributed to the lack of effective resistance to state power. This is best exemplified in the history of the Gothic chapel in the compounds of the Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus. The schools and chapel in Victoria Street stood on expensive prime real estate and the land was acquired for redevelopment. The schools moved out in 1984 and some of the buildings were demolished while the French Gothic chapel stood with its exact fate unknown for a while. There was no doubt that a significant degree of public agreement existed that the chapel should remain.

For example, ex-students of the schools interviewed by the press expressed a variety of opinions. Some felt it was a 'symbol of solidarity to thousands of old girls'. Others felt it a 'pity to destroy the fine architecture'. Some spoke of more personal moments: 'We went there for consolation, during sadness or when we were happy. And as I stood there sometime last year in December I could feel these many emotions running through me as I recalled my school days' (quoted in *The Straits Times*, 30 November 1981). However, despite such views and attachments,

the state received no appeals against what was then likely demolition. The lack of a coordinated voice was because there was then no old-girls' association which could speak on behalf of the many individuals who felt strongly about the chapel. In this particular instance, later consciousness about preservation saved the chapel from demolition. The Urban Redevelopment Authority undertook to preserve the building but has since decided that it is not viable for them to do so. It has, therefore, invited commercial developers to undertake the project, while giving the assurance that they will see to the preservation of the general ambience of serenity in the chapel and its surrounding buildings. A petition has been circulated by the 'old girls' to oppose the commercial development of the place and to appeal for the chapel to remain a religious place. The whole episode provides abundant case material for further research on questions of preservation, state power, commercial interests and personal meanings and values.

Fourthly, the lack of effectual resistance can be attributed to the poor bargaining positions of those affected. As Simmie (1974, 140) pointed out, groups with different beliefs may be prevented from taking up a valid bargaining position because the power groups set the rules and the procedures. Hence, as I have suggested, in the case of compulsory land acquisition groups cannot appeal against the decision to acquire their land.

In view of such generally ineffectual resistance, individuals and groups have responded to state actions primarily by adaptation, albeit sometimes grudgingly. Thus, what would appear to be an uncommon relative harmony in a multi-religious society is in effect a veneer that conceals tensions and dissatisfactions.

NOTES

1. I use the term 'Chinese religionist' to include Buddhists, Taoists, Confucianists and those who subscribe to a syncretic mix of these religions. Where reference is made in this paper to the last group in particular, the term 'traditional' or 'syncretic' Chinese religionist will be used.
2. Various versions of this concept have been discussed by sociologists. For example, Benjamin (1976, 115) discussed the concept of 'multiracialism' in the context of Singapore as the 'ideology that accords equal status to the cultures and ethnic identities of the various "races" that are regarded as comprising the population of a plural society'. Siddique (1989) discussed the '4Ms': multiracialism, multilingualism, multiculturalism and

- multireligiosity. To her, multireligiosity 'acknowledges a societal situation in which a number of religions are practised, but none is officially recognized as paramount'. It is distinguished by a 'religious populism supportive of moral order' (Siddique, 1989, 565).
3. The Master Plan was drawn up between 1952 and 1955, approved by the Government in 1958, made a statutory document and adopted in 1959. It coordinates physical development by the public and private sectors within the country. It is also in this document that adequate and appropriate sites are reserved through zoning for the different commercial, industrial, residential and social needs of the community.
 4. Religious groups in Singapore are required to register themselves with the Registry of Societies.
 5. Niagara Falls has, of course, been invested with other meanings. For example, it has been regarded as the Honeymoon Capital of North America (Shields, 1990) and as the landscape of death (McGreevy, 1992).
 6. The Torah refers to the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Hebrew Bible or sometimes to the whole of the Hebrew Bible. The Jews have a handwritten parchment scroll of the Pentateuch known as a sefer Torah (or Book of the Torah). Every Sabbath, the community removes it from its ark and places it in the centre of the synagogue for all the people to hear and to see.
 7. This is in contrast to the past where the house was often a shrine as well. Deffontaines' (1953) examples from pre-industrial societies illustrate this. For the early Romans, there was no other temple but the house. In the ancient Chinese house, everything was sacred, from the roof to the walls to the door and well. In fact, for the majority, the only temple was the altar inside the house. For the Annamites of the Tonkin Delta in Indo-China, the dwelling is primarily meant to shelter ancestral tablets. There is no difference in plan between temple and dwelling.
 8. Literally, the *mandir* means an 'abiding place' or 'dwelling', and is regarded as the dwelling place of the deity. It is often used to refer to the temple.
 9. The Masjid Sultan is often regarded as the principal mosque in Singapore.

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