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## Managing the politics of piety

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*Muslims In Singapore: Piety, Politics And Policies By Kamaludeen Mohamed Nasir, Alexius A. Pereira and Bryan S. Turner Routledge (2010)*

Singaporeans are generally more religious today than they were a generation ago, and many people are concerned that this will affect society's secular core.

This religiosity has been more noticeable among Muslims, as specific practices like halal dining and wearing headscarves are visible markers of difference.



Some quarters have, in recent years, accused the community of wanting to set itself apart from the rest of society.

The jury is still out as to whether such preferences hinder social cohesion.

But a new book by three sociologists broaches this question: Do pious Muslims choose to exclude themselves from the larger multicultural and secular society to remain religiously pure and uncontaminated?

The answer, they find, is to the contrary: Devout Muslims do make adjustments - some minor, some significant - that go against what they prefer, so that they can mingle with non-Muslim colleagues over lunch or put their children through the public education system.

Such decisions, the authors argue, are made easier because of the Government's policy of 'managing' religions, including Islam, in a bid to achieve harmonious relations between people of different religions.

And although this Singapore approach may seem heavy-handed, they note that it has averted widespread distrust, or worse, inter-ethnic or inter-religious conflicts that have bedevilled many multicultural societies around the world.

It helps, they add, that the Singapore strategy is one that places heavy emphasis on uplifting the educational attainments and economic well-being of Muslims, alongside others.

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The Singapore model is one that a number of countries, including more liberal states in Europe, have sought to learn from in the wake of the danger posed by Islamist extremism and a sense of alienation among their Muslim residents.

Of course, when it comes to deeply personal matters of belief and faith, the final choice of whether or not to mix and mingle beyond one's community, and when, where and how to mix, must be a decision made by believers themselves.

Most of the observant Muslims interviewed for the book make such decisions willingly, even as they admit these go against what instinctively seems natural.

For instance, at dinner banquets, pious Muslims would prefer to be at a separate table, but they do not want to be apart from their non-Muslim friends.

Many are therefore willing to compromise by joining a mixed table if they are assured they would be served individual halal food with different utensils.

In their 128-page book, the authors outline how the economic backwardness of the Malay community evolved into a problem of religion with increased piety among Malay-Muslims in the 1990s.

They then look at specific case studies of how acts of piety are performed in three sectors: dining, Islamic religious education and the role of women.

When it comes to dining, many pious Muslims would prefer to eat in a completely halal environment.

But instead of excluding themselves from a non-halal environment, the Muslims sampled engaged in 'defensive dining', that is, avoiding contamination of their food while engaging with others.

Politicians have commented that such halal consciousness sends a negative signal that Muslims want to be exclusive, but Muslims have insisted on mixing on terms with which they are comfortable.

As for religious education, the authors elaborate on the strong demand for places in the full-time madrasahs, or Islamic religious schools, every year.

For the past few years, no more than 400 pupils can be enrolled in a Primary 1 cohort in the madrasahs.

The authors find that pious Muslim parents preferred to enrol their children in these schools not because they wanted their children to become religious scholars, but because they found the madrasah environment was more conducive than national public schools for being a 'good Muslim'.

The authors feel that if the Government allowed the tudung in schools, many pious Muslims would be less inclined to exit the national school system and their children would thus experience multiracial integration.

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At the same time, they say the quality of madrasah education would rise as these schools can focus on those who are intent on training to be Islamic scholars.

The three authors also explore how highly educated Muslim women viewed the tudung and marriage.

They find that while a sample of 20 middle-class Muslim women described themselves as 'religious' or 'very religious', only 10 wore the tudung. All, however, saw the tudung as a mandatory religious obligation.

Those who donned the tudung, interestingly, saw the wearing of it as a rite of passage marking a transition to a fully committed religious life. But the authors stress this does not mean the women want to be exclusionist.

'Like dining and halal consciousness, it is a defensive strategy that allows them and the non-Muslims to engage with each other, albeit with the 'ground rules' clearly established,' they write.

These rules include marrying only other Muslims, whether born or converts.

The book is a refreshing, novel study of how pious Muslims in Singapore are affected, or afflicted, by policies and politics.

By focusing on how policies affect pious Muslims, however, the authors seem to run into the same danger of enclavement they say state policies engendered.

Many of the potential political minefields where Muslims in Singapore are concerned, after all, come about because of extreme positions adopted by a minority in the community who consider themselves pious, whether it is an overzealous insistence on halal zones or wanting to ensure their young mix largely with fellow Muslims.

The views of Muslims who feel strongly against such tendencies are largely missing from this discussion.

Policies which impinge on piety work because a broad middle in the community, devout or otherwise, understand that something as personal as how they practise their faith must be moderated to the context of their society.

**The book is available at all major bookstores for \$42 (before GST).**