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DRAFT

**The Teaching of Religious Knowledge in a Plural Society:
The Case for Singapore**

Charlene Tan

Abstract:

This paper discusses the issues and challenges in the teaching of religious knowledge in Singapore schools. Religious knowledge, under the phenomenological approach, is taught in a historical, descriptive, and non-evaluative fashion in Singapore schools. The government in Singapore hopes that the teaching of religious knowledge will help to inculcate moral values and promote religious harmony in the students. This paper points out the problems associated with the phenomenological approach in the teaching of religious knowledge in Singapore schools. It argues that such an approach may not be effective in helping the government achieve its educational objectives. The discussion adds to the existing literature on the concerns and problems faced by governments in plural societies in their attempts to teach religious knowledge in schools.

Key Words:

plural society; religious knowledge; Singapore schools; teaching

Introduction

In recent years, there has been an increased interest in religious education, particularly in the context of a plural society (e.g. Stålsett, Sturla and Leirvik 2000; [Miedema 2000](#); Heimbrock 2001; Heimbrock, Scheilke and Schreiner 2001; Schreiner, Spinder, Taylor, and Westerman 2002; Ziebertz 2003; [Jackson 2004](#)). In the wake of events such as the September 11 2001 airliner attack on the New York Trade Center, the 2002 and 2005 Bali attacks and the 2005 London bomb blasts, there is a perceived urgency to promote religious harmony and understanding through education. For example, the Council of Europe is advocating the teaching of religious diversity in intercultural education across Europe as a direct response to the September 11 event (Jackson and Steele 2004). The United Nations General Assembly highlights the growth and persistence of religious extremism that accompanies the global trend towards increasing contacts in the social, cultural and economic spheres (UN General Assembly 2000). There is a global need for governments, religious bodies and other groups to create educational programs to build a culture of tolerance, understanding and respect among people of diverse beliefs (The Oslo Declaration 1998; Lindholm, Durham and Tahzib-Lies 2004). As the school is an integral part of the education system, it is an essential and preferred vehicle for the prevention of religious intolerance (UNESCO 2004). The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights of the United Nations states that the “[p]rovision of religious education, provided it is neutral and objective, can make a real contribution to the

prevention of intolerance and discrimination by helping pupils realise their own individual and communal cultural identity and provide ethical guidance” (United Nations 2001).

Governments in different countries have supported the introduction of religious education in schools. Examples are the cases in England and Wales (Hand and White 2004), Norway (Leganger-Krogstad 2003), Pretoria (Department of Education 2001) and the People’s Republic of China, Taiwan Province (Ng and Chan 2001). In a 2001 study conducted by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights of the United Nations, 35 countries indicated that their state schools provide religious education throughout primary and secondary school (United Nations 2001). The study further reports that nearly half of the responding countries (62 countries) have introduced some multi-religious education in their schools. But the teaching of religious knowledge in schools is by no means a straightforward and uncontroversial matter, given the sensitive and potentially explosive nature of religion. This is especially so in a plural society which is characterized by an overt religious and cultural diversity resulting mainly from the migration of peoples (Jackson 2004). It is therefore pertinent to study the issues and challenges in the teaching of religious knowledge in plural societies like Singapore.

As a city-state with more than 4 million people, Singapore is a multi-ethnic, multicultural and multi-religious society comprising Chinese (78%), Malays (14%), Indians (7%) and other races (1%) (Department of Statistics 2000). The 2000 census reports that a majority of the population are Buddhists (42.5%), followed by Muslims (14.9%), Christians (14.6%), Taoists (8.5%), Hindus (4.0%), adherents of other religions (0.6%), and those who profess to have no religion (14.8%). This paper focuses on the phenomenological approach used by the government in the teaching of religious knowledge in Singapore schools. The paper explores the motivations for the government to adopt this approach, and assesses the extent to which such an approach has helped the government achieve its educational objectives. I have chosen not to use the term “religious education” to refer to the situation in Singapore, preferring instead the phrase “the teaching of religious knowledge”. This is because apart from a short-lived Religious Knowledge (RK) subject (1984 – 1989), there has been no specific subject or program devoted to the teaching of religions in schools. By “religious knowledge”, I refer to information about the history, main teachings, beliefs and practices of the religion. This is consistent with the explanations given by the government officials in Singapore in their speeches and statements, as we shall see later. This generic term (“religious knowledge”) should not be confused with “Religious Knowledge” or RK which is a compulsory subject introduced to all upper secondary students in Singapore during the period 1984-1989.

A theoretical framework: the phenomenological approach

The phenomenological approach has been adopted by the Singapore government in the teaching of religious knowledge in schools. The approach is also known as “religious knowledge” (as contrasted to “religious instruction”), “teaching about religion” (as contrasted to “teaching religion”), “teaching about religion” (as contrasted to “teaching of religion”), and “study in religion” (as contrasted to “study of religion”). The government in Singapore explains that religious knowledge aims to inform the students “about the religion, its founder or its origins and the universal moral teachings and main beliefs of the religion” (quoted in Tan 2000: 86). Gopinathan notes that the government chooses the “educational tradition” (as contrasted to “ecclesiastical tradition”) to refer to the teaching of religion “as a social science subject, aimed at promoting understanding of religion as a distinctive way of interpreting experience” (1999: 22). The phenomenological approach originated as a counter-response to the confessional approach (Carr 1996). The latter, traditionally used in both ancient and

present-day churches, has been aspersed as indoctrinating the learners with religious beliefs which are not scientifically justified (Kazepides 1983). Rejecting this approach, the phenomenological approach abstains from leading students to embrace a religion and experience religious conviction. Characterized as informational, descriptive and neutral, this approach concentrates on the different social and cultural expressions of spirituality (Grimmitt 2001; Carr 1996). While the phenomenological approach usually involves the teaching of multiple religions, it can involve the teaching of one religion as long as the aim is to teach religious phenomena in a factual, objective and detached manner.

The phenomenological approach is especially popular in societies where neutrality, openness and pluralism are valued. For example, this approach became the dominant approach in England in the 1970s and 1980s (Bates 1996). The 1994 OFSTED report recommends the introduction of religious education through the phenomenological approach in England (OFSTED 1994). Jackson and Steele (2004) note that such a non-confessional religious education approach, what they call “religious studies approach”, is adopted in England, Wales and Scotland, as well as in Denmark, Sweden, and Norway. At the United States, the Supreme Court in the 1963 *Schempp/Murray* case ruled against the teaching of religion in favor of teaching about religion in public schools. This is grounded on the distinction that the latter involves a historical and comparative approach while the former entails a dogmatic indoctrination of children in promoting only one religion as true (Bartkowiak 1999). The First Amendment Centre in America, in its publication *Finding Common Ground*, supports the neutrality in the phenomenological approach: “Public schools may teach about the various religious and nonreligious perspectives concerning the many complex moral issues confronting society, but such perspectives must be presented without adopting, sponsoring or denigrating one view against another” (Haynes and Thomas 2001: 102, quoted in Kunzman 2003: 260).

At this juncture, it is important to distinguish the theory of the phenomenological approach from its practice. The phenomenological approach, as conceptualized by Ninian Smart, aims to “develop an empathetic awareness of the major world religions as living phenomena by means of imaginative projection into believers’ perspectives and experiences” (Bates 1996: 94; also see Bolton 1997: 200-201). Grimmitt (2001) explains that this approach seeks to involve students studying the religion’s self-understanding in an empathetic and non-evaluative manner, acquiring certain capacities to understand the religion, and engaging in a reflective process. However, he points out that “in popular understanding of the ‘phenomenological approach’, the broad, liberal educational value that the model attributes to the study of religion, including its capacity to address the personal and existential concerns of the pupil, is largely absent and that it has become a by word for a narrowly descriptive and content-centered approach devoid of pedagogical sensitivity” (Grimmitt 2001: 6). This is concurred by Carr (1996) who describes this approach as predominantly informational. The phenomenological approach has met with a number of objections. The most common criticism is that it does not represent the true character of religion in its Herculean quest to avoid any religious point of view. Such an approach reduces religious learning to “a bland process of listing and labeling” (Wright 2001: 48). The result is that “scraps and fragments of different religious traditions” are presented which are meaningless, superficial and distortive of any real understanding of religion (Carr 1996: 171; also see Carr 1999: 453). Pointing out that one cannot fully understand religion without a minimum level of personal interest in it, Moran (1994) argues that the idea of teaching about religion creates an artificial notion of objectivity which is futile. A historical approach in religious education merely describes a “museum version of religions, inert and fixed, and fails to recognize that religions as observed (or, increasingly, not observed) at home are often very different from the picture given at school” (Mason 2001: 66). Hull (2001) notes that this approach tends not to grapple

with the life-world of the pupil, and often makes little or no explicit contribution to the pupils' search for moral and spiritual values. The pitfalls of the phenomenological approach prompted Bob Jackson and researchers in the "Warwick RE Project" to introduce the "Interpretative Approach" within the phenomenological tradition (Jackson 1977, 1995). The Interpretative Approach attempts to "move beyond the insights of phenomenology via an ethnography which is capable of doing justice to the richness and complexity of religious phenomena, seeks to avoid reification by rooting religious representation in the concrete life-worlds of actual religious believers, and employs an interpretative hermeneutic that transcends mere ostensible description" (Wright 2001: 49). In view of the above development, Erricker (2000) identifies two types of phenomenological approach: Descriptivist and Interpretative. The former, also known as empirical or morphological, aims to systematically classify religious phenomena. The second type, the interpretative or hermeneutical approach, focuses on the philosophical implications involved in understanding the phenomenon, leading to a transformative discovery for the enquirer. Throughout this paper, the phenomenological approach referred to in the teaching of religious knowledge in Singapore schools is the descriptivist approach.

Background on the teaching of religious knowledge in Singapore schools

A subject known as Religious Knowledge (henceforth RK) was introduced to all Upper Secondary students (15-17 years old) in Singapore from 1984 to 1989. Former Deputy Prime Minister Goh Keng Swee stated that religious knowledge would provide the "intellectual basis which will bind the various moral qualities we deem desirable into a consistent system of thought" (quoted in Ong 1979: iii). Students have a total of six options: Bible Knowledge (in English), Islamic Religious Knowledge (in English and Malay), Buddhist Studies (in Chinese and English), Confucian Ethics (in Chinese and English), Hindu Studies (in English), and Sikh Studies (in English). Given the sensitive nature of religion, the government was acutely aware of the potential problems associated with the teaching of RK. The government stated categorically that there should be no attempt by RK teachers to preach, proselytize, or engage in other religious activities. The phenomenological approach was chosen where the aim was for students to receive "religious knowledge" and not "religious instruction" (CPD 1988). The prescribed textbooks discussed the various religions in a historical, objective and detached manner (Hill and Lian 1995; Kuah 1991; Gopinathan 1999; Tan 2000; Tan, in press). As RK was meant to support the moral values the government wanted to inculcate in the young, there was a strong emphasis on the moral aspects. For example, the textbook for Buddhist Studies highlights the practical aspects of the religion such as doing good works and downplays the ritualistic aspects. RK only lasted until 1989 where it was withdrawn and finally replaced by a common Civics and Moral Education (CME) course in 1992.

There were a few reasons for its withdrawal. The government explained that the teaching of religious knowledge (RK) "had the unintended consequence of emphasizing religious differences and proselytization" (Remaking Singapore Committee 2004: 2). Contextually, there were religious revivalism and shifts in the 1980s which led to fears of inter-religious tensions among adherents of different religions (Chua 1985). The fact that students had to choose one religion, and that they could choose to study it in their ethnic mother tongues (Chinese or Malay) for some of the RK subjects, further increased the ethnic segregation and added to the racial tensions in schools (Chew 1998).

The teaching of religious knowledge through Civics and Moral Education (CME)

The new CME that is currently in place is compulsory for all students but it is not taken as an examination subject. Factual knowledge of the religions covered in RK is now incorporated into the secondary syllabus, although in a less detailed and potentially less divisive manner (Chew 1998). The government's new approach towards religious education was articulated by Senior Parliamentary Secretary Hawazi Daipi. In a 2005 parliamentary debate, a Member of Parliament Dr Ong Seh Hong suggested that Religious Knowledge be introduced to primary school pupils to promote racial harmony. Rejecting this suggestion, Mr Hawazi, replied as follows:

We agree with Dr Ong on the need to promote racial harmony in school. This is currently done through Civics and Moral Education, or CME in short, where students are exposed to the different religious and cultural customs, beliefs and practices in Singapore. The purpose is to foster the value of respect for others in our students from the primary to pre-university level, rather than impart religious beliefs to them, which should not be the role of our schools. As a secular state, we feel that this approach is more appropriate and coherent in promoting racial harmony (Hawazi 2005).

There is a shift from the careful study of one religion under RK to an overview of the major religions in Singapore under CME. The new policy aims to de-emphasize religious differences, diffuse religious undercurrents, and direct the students' attention to the importance of religious harmony and appreciation. It is worthwhile taking a closer look at how religious knowledge is taught in the current CME syllabus. One of the modules for CME is Community Spirit where the aim is: "Fostering a greater sense of belonging to and care for the community, as well as cultural and religious appreciation". Specifically, the textbook states that the materials aim to help students learn the following (CPDD 2001: 33):

- (1) the importance of maintaining unity in diversity by being aware of the beliefs and customs of the major racial and religious groups in our multicultural and multireligious society;
- (2) some aspects of the major systems of beliefs in Singapore and some common values that can be found in the teachings of these systems of beliefs;
- (3) the significance of some festivals celebrated by various racial and religious groups in Singapore;
- (4) some desirable attitudes and behavior that promote harmonious living in our harmonious living in our multicultural and multireligious society; and
- (5) some ways of enhancing racial and religious harmony.

As was the case for RK, the phenomenological approach is used in the teaching of religious knowledge for CME (Tan 2007). The purpose is to inform students about the various belief systems, and not to impart religious faith or induce religious experience to the students. This can be seen in the objective, neutral and crisp way in which the religious beliefs and practices are introduced. One of the sections, "Thinking Through", encourages students to be aware of the various religious beliefs and practices in Singapore. Activities include asking students to factually identify the religions associated with the respective places of worship, understand the various religious symbols, complete a crossword puzzle to know more about the major systems of beliefs in Singapore, and fill in the blanks to know more about the religious festivals in Singapore. The festivals selected are Baisakji, Christmas, Deepavali, Hari Raya Puasa, Qing Ming, Vesak, Zhong Yuan Jie. The objective is to highlight the commonality among the various religions: "Each system of beliefs may be based on different fundamental

beliefs and practices, but ALL emphasize universal values” (CPDD 2001: 21, the capitalization is in the original text). That the section’s focus is on racial and religious harmony, rather than a personal search for religious fulfillment, is seen in the concluding activity. Students are asked to think of a festival that they celebrate with a friend of a different racial or religious background, and reflect on how that celebration has helped them to know their friend (not the religion!) better. Another section, “Putting into Action”, is essentially an etiquette guide on certain important customs and rules of behavior which apply to members of the various racial and religious groups in Singapore. The aim is to help students to be sensitive in their interactions with people of other races and religions, and to foster harmony and goodwill among adherents of the various religions. Topics covered are diet and meal etiquette, gifts, weddings, funerals, and places of worship of the various races and religions. The description is brief and does not explain the rationale behind the “dos” and “don’ts”.

Information about the seven belief systems (Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism, Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism, and Taoism) is provided in the Reference section (ibid.: 41-61). In line with the phenomenological approach, the treatment of the various religions is highly descriptive, and exclusive and controversial claims are omitted. For example, there is no mention of sensitive and potentially offensive words and issues like hell, condemnation, and the fate of those who subscribe to other religions. The various religious beliefs are left vague and abstract, leaving a number of questions unanswered. For example, the following paragraph explains the Christian view of judgement day:

Christians believe in a time, at the end of the world, when God will judge all people. Life after death is a fulfilment of all hopes and beliefs; a perfect union with God and a completeness which is lacking in life on earth. At the end of time when Jesus Christ returns, their bodies will be resurrected in a totally new way and their closeness to God will bring them eternal happiness (ibid.: 45).

There is no mention of heaven or hell – metaphysical concepts which are essential to Christian eschatology. It is also unclear whose bodies will be resurrected (“Christians” or “all people”?) and what happens to those who are not “Christians”. The same vagueness applies to the write-up on Islam where there is also no reference to heaven or hell (Tan 2007). The notes state that those who live good lives will be rewarded and those who are evil will face punishment (CPDD 2001: 53). But there is no elaboration of what the reward and punishment entail. For Buddhism, the textbook writers simply assert that “suffering is a fact of life”, and that “ignorance, hatred and craving are the main causes of suffering” (ibid.: 41). But there is no clarification on why suffering is a fact of life, and what “ignorance, hatred and craving” exactly mean. In the case for Taoism, students are told that “Taoists are always urged to accumulate virtues” but they are not given any religious reason why Taoists should do so, apart from the this-worldly reason that they will have a long and healthy life (ibid.: 59). The notes for Hinduism state that Hindus believe that a “soul that is liberated attains union with the Supreme Soul (Paramatma)” (ibid.: 49). Again, there is no elaboration of the “Supreme Soul”, and what this union is about.

The teaching of religious knowledge through National Education (NE)

CME is not the only avenue whereby religious knowledge is taught in schools. The government explains that the promotion of greater understanding of different races and religions is achieved by infusing it into the formal curriculum through subjects such as Civics and Moral Education, Social Studies and History, as well as outside the classroom via co-

curricular activities and enrichment programs (Remaking Singapore Committee 2004). This integrated approach to the teaching of religious knowledge with the purpose of citizenship training is part of National Education (henceforth NE) which was launched in 1997. NE aims to develop in all Singaporeans national cohesion, the instinct for survival and confidence in the future (Ministry of Education 2005). One of six messages of NE is the preservation of racial and religious harmony. From primary schools to the tertiary institutions, NE is incorporated into the formal and informal curriculum, both in and outside the schools.

Unsurprisingly, there is a conflation of cultural and religious beliefs and practices on the NE website. For example, the website on “Racial Harmony” lists the Chinese cultural practice of using chopsticks and celebrating Chinese New Year together with the litany of religious festivals such as Vesak Day, Deepavali, Easter and Hari Raya Puasa (Ministry of Education 2002). In the description on the Hungry Ghosts Festival, the website explains that the Chinese believe that during the seventh month of the lunar calendar, the gates of hell are opened and all spirits are free to roam the earth and visit their living relatives for a month. This is inaccurate as not all Chinese subscribe to this festival which is more accurately described as a religious festival commemorated by Taoists who need not be Chinese.

The website also includes write-ups of different religious festivals such as Ramadan, Hari Raya Puasa, the Hungry Ghosts Festival, Easter, and Deepavali. Again, the phenomenological approach is adopted to describe the various religious beliefs and practices. The notes on the different religious festivals are highly historical and informational, giving facts on “What”, “Who”, “Where”, “Why”, and “How”. For example, in the description of Deepavali, the website explains the meaning of the word (Deepavali, also known as Diwali, literally means “row or garland of lights”), what the festival represents (represents a symbolic victory of good over evil), who celebrates it (is celebrated by most Hindus the world over), why it is celebrated (highlights the victory of Lord Krishna, one of the deities of the Hindu pantheon, over the Demon King, Naraka), and when it is celebrated (usually falls around late October or early November on the New Moon day). The reader is not provided with more information of the deities mentioned, or the religious significance of the occasion for the believers. The website furnishes a number of useful links on these festivals and they are left to interested teachers and students to explore them on their own. Again, these links have been scrupulously screened to ensure that the phenomenological perspective is presented – this means no prescriptive contents, exclusive truth claims, moving testimonies of converts, or polemics against other religions. Outside the schools, the government, through its grassroots organizations, Community Development Councils, and other affiliated groups, runs public religious education programs to promote religious harmony and appreciation. For example, the Community Development Councils partner with the schools to organize events such as the annual Racial Harmony Week Celebrations.

Discussion

The adoption of the phenomenological approach is consistent with the ruling ideology of pragmatism in Singapore (Chua 1985; Tan 2005; Tan and Ng 2007). Religion is part of the cultural curriculum used to promote national unity and enhance political loyalty to the state (Tan 1994; Gopinathan 1999). Tong (2004) argues that the rationalisation of religion is a deliberate attempt by the government to serve the social needs of the country. Referring to Buddhist Studies which was taught as one of the subjects under Religious Knowledge (RK) in Singapore in the 1980s, he explains:

The Buddhist Studies programme, for example, was geared towards the production of secular social and moral values. Only those Buddhist values which were of direct

relevance to the stated aims of the Ministry of Education were highlighted and given a practical redefinition to suit (Tong 2004: 303).

But here the government is caught in a bind. The government has initially turned to religion in RK to provide the intellectual basis and driving force for students to be imbued with moral values. However, this is only possible if the students fully understand and appreciate the religious beliefs and practices of the RK subject. Otherwise, how else can the religion provide an authentic, substantive and sustainable framework of meaning for the students? For example, the superficial and intellectual knowledge of doing good works in Buddhism will hold no water if a student does not personally believe in the Buddhist doctrine of *karma* (cause and effect). Likewise, a student will not be motivated to “love thy neighbour as thyself” if he or she is not convinced that the words are commanded by the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Given the informational and emotionally detached treatment of religion under the phenomenological approach, it is questionable whether this approach is effective in bringing about moral conviction in the students.

The same problems plague the current policy of teaching religious knowledge through CME and NE in order to promote religious harmony and appreciation among the students. In a review of the CME programme in Singapore, Tan and Chew affirm that it is “a training of students towards imbibing pragmatic values deemed to be important for Singapore’s achieving social cohesion and economic success, rather than moral education as a developing towards intrinsic commitment to and habituation in the practice of values defended on autonomous moral considerations and not mere national expediency” (2004: 597; also see Chew 1998). It is doubtful that the phenomenological approach for CME is helpful in promoting religious appreciation. Knowing certain facts about a religion is not the same as appreciating the religion. The teaching materials for CME and NE are not sufficient for the students to develop an empathetic awareness and reflective approach towards the various religions. Recall that the module for CME aims to help students gain “religious appreciation” through the five objectives. Objectives (1), (2) and (5) are more attainable and measurable as they refer to the factual knowledge of religious beliefs, customs and values, and practical ways to promote religious harmony. But the promotion of religious appreciation would require, on top of the earlier objectives, objectives (3) and (4). But it is difficult for the students to grasp “the significance of some festivals” as stated in (3) when the festivals are presented in a clinical and piece-meal manner. Similarly for (4), it is an uphill task to inculcate “desirable attitudes” that promote harmonious living through the phenomenological approach. For example, it is likely for a non-Taoist student who does not have a clear understanding of Taoism to dismiss Taoist rituals like chanting and burning of incense as superstitious and illogical. Such a person may manifest the desirable behavior (e.g. he puts up with the chanting at a Taoist funeral in his or her neighborhood) but not does possess the desirable attitude (e.g. he continues to despise the Taoist rituals and Taoists). On the other hand, a person who has the desirable attitude would respect the Taoist chanting, knowing that the Taoists believe that this ritual will help the deceased in his or her afterlife. The limited success of the phenomenological approach in promoting religious harmony and appreciation in Singapore schools is confirmed by a research study done by Chew (2005) on 2779 students aged 12–18 in six educational institutions (cited in Tan 2007). Her research findings showed that the average adolescent in Singapore knows very little about religions in Singapore, despite learning about religions during the CME period. She also pointed out that the religious tolerance of many students is based on ignorance and fear rather than an appreciation of the different faiths in Singapore.

Concluding Thoughts

This paper has discussed the dilemmas and problems associated with the phenomenological approach in the teaching of religious knowledge in Singapore schools. It has been pointed out that such an approach may not be effective in helping the government achieve its educational objectives of using religious knowledge to inculcate moral values and promote religious harmony and appreciation. The discussion adds to the existing literature on the concerns and problems faced by governments in plural societies in their attempts to teach religious knowledge in schools. [Streib \(2001\)](#) notes that the religious education today tends to be teacher-centered and focuses on giving information about various religions which are regarded as “foreign”. This has led to the objectification of the other’s (and one’s own) religion without an authentic understanding of the true nature and significance of the religion.

For the teaching of religious knowledge to be truly meaningful and morally beneficial, it is necessary for students to see the relevance of the religious teachings in their everyday lives, and be given the opportunity to discuss, debate, reflect, imagine and empathize. What is recommended is a real “culture of tolerance” where the teaching of religious knowledge takes place in an open and enquiring way. The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights of the United Nations explains that such a culture puts an emphasis on the “comparative experiences, encouraging the dialogue, hence developing each person's identity in a wider, richer context, characterized by different identities, backgrounds and perspectives, all equally stimulating” (United Nations 2001).

If the phenomenological approach in the teaching of religious knowledge is eschewed, how then can religious knowledge be taught in an effective and meaningful way that is contextually suitable in plural societies? I have elsewhere argued for the introduction of Spiritual Education (SE) in schools in Singapore (Tan, in press). SE aims to help students acquire insights into their personal existence which are of enduring worth, attribute meaning to their life experiences, and value a non-material and transcendental dimension to life ([Hill 1989](#); [Minney 1991](#); [NCC 1993](#); [OFSTED 1994](#); [Haydon 1997](#)). Schools can promote SE through all areas of their curriculum, ethos and climate, and incorporate religious content across the curriculum especially in subjects such as the arts – literature, poetry, drama, painting and music. There is a close relationship between SE and religion as the search for a wider framework of meaning for SE usually leads one to explore religious beliefs and practices. SE could include religious understanding and appreciation, albeit in a less formal and structured way. Instead of teaching religions in their institutionalized form, religious beliefs and practices can be presented with the aim to develop an empathetic awareness of and reflective approach towards the various religions. This is in line with the survey result of 1025 Singaporeans by Community Development Feedback Group (*The Straits Times*, 17 January 2004). While many Singaporeans are happy that there was no overt religious conflict in Singapore, they felt that more could be done to bring down the barriers. They suggested genuine understanding of and interest in other religions, and more informal interactions and openhearted communication to clear any misconceptions or finger pointing of another religion. This is particularly relevant in the aftermath of recent terrorist attacks in the world where certain religious groups are blamed for being militant and extremist. As SE is not confined to any particular set of religious beliefs and institutionalized belief systems, it may avoid the practical problems and challenges associated with Religious Knowledge (RK) introduced in Singapore in 1980s.

There is a continual need for governments of plural societies to teach religious knowledge in schools so as to promote moral development and religious appreciation. But as the world becomes more interconnected and complex, the challenges in teaching religious knowledge in plural societies grow more acute. In the case of Singapore, the government is

faced with the daunting challenge of using religious knowledge to teach moral values and promote religious appreciation while not accentuating religious differences and causing inter-religious problems at the same time. The pluralistic composition of Singapore means that these issues and challenges will continue to be significant in Singapore, and their implications will have ripple effects beyond the walls of the school compound.

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