Disjunctures of belonging and belief: Christian migrants and the bordering of identity in Singapore

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Abstract

Migration results in people that are different from one another living in closer physical proximity. Proximity increases the chances of encountering difference, and can lead to both the formation of new communities, and the strengthening of old. As a religion that claims to integrate people into a trans-ethnic, trans-territorial faith community, Christianity encourages such encounters, whilst Christian groups play an important role in mediating them. Disjunctures of belonging and belief are the outcomes that arise from encounters with difference within spaces of Christianity. Drawing on 100 interviews conducted between August 2017 and February 2018, this paper unravels these disjunctures through a focus on the interplay between migrant and non-migrant Christian communities in Singapore. Whilst Christian groups have the potential to be agents of integration, we consider the ways in which they encourage the 'bordering of identity' by serving to divide communities rather than unite them.

Keywords: Christianity, Singapore, migration, difference, bordering of identity

Introduction

Migration results in people that are – in various ways, and to varying degrees – different from one another living in close(r) physical proximity. This brings about an intermixing of peoples, the overlapping of practices, and the (re)negotiation of identities. To the extent that identity is an "ensemble of subject positions" (Levitt, 2008: 787; after Mouffe, 1992; Wimmer and Glick Schiller, 2003), migration can lead to dialectics of integration and disintegration, of inclusion and exclusion. These dialectics are sharpened when religion is a defining aspect of identity, as religion provides "grist for imagining memberships beyond the nation" but can be undermined by the reality that "everyone belongs to social groups, networks and culture" (Levitt, 2008: 766, 785; see also Yang and Ebaugh, 2001; Haugen, 2013; Kong and Woods, 2018). Thus, not only can the realities of 'belonging' undermine or even contradict the ideals of 'belief', but so too can the practice of belief bring people into contact with groups to which they may not feel that they belong. Given that "separation and hostility between existing and newly arrived groups are key current social and political issues of concern" (Askins and Pain, 2011: 803), the outcomes that arise from encounters with difference "need to be understood if more differentiated and nuanced ways of management are to be developed" (Kong, 2010: 769). This paper theorises these outcomes through an examination of Christian migrants in Singapore.

Our argument is that as much as religion can be a force for the crossing of national borders and dissolution – or at least diminution – of ethno-cultural boundaries, so too can it serve to reproduce them in various and often paradoxical ways. Religion helps to overcome the problematic alignment of "a spatial segregation of communities with lack of social integration" (Askins and Pain, 2011: 805) by bringing diverse communities together through

worship. Yet, whilst religion has the potential to connect communities through a unifying, 'imagined' community of believers (Anderson, 1983), ethno-cultural differences can divide them, creating an enduring tension between what people believe in, and where they feel they belong. A critical reading of the purported inclusiveness of religion is needed, as "overstating religion's positive impact steers us away from confronting how religious practices contribute to patriarchy, racism, nationalism, militarism, and a host of other social and political ills" (Cadge et al., 2011: 442). Specifically, the congregation-based nature of Christian worship, coupled with the trans-ethnic character of many churches – *especially* those in Singapore – means that churches and other spaces of Christian praxis provide opportunities for ethno-national divisions and exclusions to manifest (Gomes and Tan, 2015). Indeed, as much as Christianity strives to bring people together in ways that unify and align, so too can physical proximity cause differences to be highlighted, boundaries to be more clearly defined, and 'parallel societies' (Gomes, 2017) to be formed.

With this in mind, we seek to understand the ways in which practices within Christian groups can divide communities. Through practices of socio-spatial separation, Christian groups encourage what we call the 'bordering of identity'. The bordering of identity builds on recent efforts to reinterpret borders as "symbols of the processes of social binding and exclusion that are both constructed or produced in society" (Laine, 2016: 469-470; see also Collyer and King, 2015; Darling, 2017). Engaging with this line of thought, our conceptualisation of the bordering of identity considers *how* such processes play out through interactions between migrant and nonmigrant communities. Bordering begins as an attitude, then manifests as a behaviour, and is then formalised through socio-spatial organisation. By "attitude" we mean the mental maps that people use to structure and understand the social worlds in which they live. As symbols of difference, the presence of migrant communities within Christian spaces

can cause ethno-national divisions between communities to be more acutely felt (Lamont and Molnár, 2002). This, in turn, can cause Christian spaces to become spaces of division where "limits are marked and lines are drawn" (Wilson, 2017: 456), and where identities become more essentialised and differences more entrenched. Thus, as much as Christianity functions as a 'culture of mobility' for migrants in Singapore (Gomes and Tan, 2015), the spaces of Singapore's Christian communities have evolved to reproduce ethno-national divisions in tangible and often exclusionary ways. Moreover, many churches in Singapore are ill-equipped to cope with the challenges of integration; in many instances, they unintentionally aggravate them instead.

From here, this paper is divided into three sections. The first reviews two bodies of literature – one related to the role of religion in (dis)enabling migrant belonging, the other related to how border theory can provide insight into the workings of everyday society – that frame our theoretical argument. The second section is empirical, and considers how Christian groups can perpetuate the socio-spatial cleaving of ethno-national communities in Singapore, and how these cleavages can undermine the integrative potential of Christianity. The third section concludes and identifies avenues for further research.

Migrant (dis)integration in the contemporary world

A globalised world is not a borderless world. Whilst processes of globalisation may have brought about the intermixing of people and communities, they have also caused societies to become increasingly bordered. Borders have been reimagined and rebuilt in response to greater levels of socio-cultural pluralism; they have shifted scales, and become more specific, everyday, and socially reproduced than ever before. Balibar (2002) believes that borders are

now 'everywhere'. This observation foregrounds recent calls to develop 'multiperspectival' understandings of borders (see Rumford, 2012; Collyer and King, 2015; Laine, 2016; Darling, 2017), and the acts of encounter that occur within and across them (Valentine and Waite, 2012; Wilson, 2017). Migrants can help develop such a perspective, as their cross-border movement invariably results in the encountering of difference. The negotiation of difference can, in turn, influence the extent to which migrants are integrated into host country society and/or integrated into migrant (or other) communities, and the extent to which these two forms of integration may or may not be aligned. Religion can aid the processes of migrant integration, providing a bridge that connects migrant and non-migrant groups. But religion can also create new points of difference and distinction, and can therefore create disconnections as well (see, for example, Warner, 1997; Yang, 1999; Yang and Ebaugh, 2001; Kong and Woods, 2018). Accordingly, understanding the ways in which borders are reproduced within spaces of religion can contribute new understandings of migrant (dis)integration in the contemporary world.

The following two subsections explore these issues in more detail. First, we consider the evolving role of religion in scholarship on migration and transnationalism, and the need for more critically-attuned scholarship on the disintegrative nature of migrant and nonmigrant communities that exist within the same framework of religious belief. Second, we discuss recent developments in the study of borders, and how processes of decoupling and rescaling can contribute to new understandings of migrant (dis)integration.

New modalities of migrant belonging

Over the past three decades, the study of transnational migration has undergone a shift away

from treating the nation-state as the 'container' of society; instead, research has explored

more globally integrated understandings of how power can circulate and settle with the

movement of people (Wimmer and Glick Schiller, 2003). For example, the concept of 'social

fields' has been developed to show how "social relationships are structured by power", and

that relationships can cause those implicated within social fields to be "joined in a struggle

for social position" (Glick Schiller, 2005: 442; see also Glick Schiller, 2008; Levitt, 2012;

Kong and Woods, 2018). Social fields demonstrate the ways in which migrants do not

necessarily develop strong or lasting ties with their host societies, but construct and maintain

ties with home-country (or other cross-border) communities instead. Gomes (2017: 185), for

example, notes how "being transient" provides a "common experience" that can strengthen

migrant communities whilst distancing them from the host society. Migrants have been

shown to be implicated within various social fields, which coalesce in time and space to form

and reinforce patterns of inclusion and exclusion; of identity and belonging. As part of these

developments, there have been concerted efforts to look beyond ethnicity to explore the

intersectionality of migrant identities and, more broadly, categorisation instead. Religion

arguably provides a more nuanced facet of migrant identity and belonging, and has provided

a focus of research in recent years.

To this end, research has explored how religion has enabled migrant communities to pursue

various strategies of (dis)integration, with noticeably different outcomes. These outcomes

are, by and large, a function of the types of social fields that they are able to construct with

each other, with their home countries, and with other, nonmigrant groups. For example, Ng

(2002) has explored how Chinese migrants to the US adopt Christian practices in order to

facilitate their assimilation into mainstream American society, whereas Ley (2006: 2066)

shows how the churches of Chinese migrant communities in Vancouver, Canada, serve to

"reproduc[e] a mono-cultural institution" that connects new migrants to the Chinese diaspora.

In other instances, migrant disintegration has been shown to be based on the principal of

pluralism, rather than assimilation. For example, Ugba (2008: 97) shows how African

Pentecostal churches in Ireland enable a sense of belonging amongst African migrants, yet

also serve to construct a "sociocultural and moral universe that conflicts with the dominant

culture and society", whilst Haugen (2013: 99) offers a more extreme example of how an

African Pentecostal church in Guangzhou, China "promotes the withdrawal, rather than the

integration, of African migrants into Chinese society". Migrants' social fields are a reflection

of the ethno-religious groups to which they belong, and can serve to disable or enable a sense

of belonging within the host country.

Despite these notable developments, research has failed to explicitly explore the migrant-

non-migrant nexus. Whilst the abovementioned studies have explored the various degrees of

migrant (dis)integration within the context of the host society, they exclusively offer a

migrant-centric perspective. They reflect the strategies of community-building – what Glick

Schiller (2008: 10) terms the "multiple modes of incorporation" – that are deployed by

migrants to cope with situations of unbelonging, but they do not consider the ways in such

strategies are recursively defined by migrant *and* non-migrant communities alike. Nor do

they offer comparisons of different ethnically-defined migrant groups within one,

overarching framework of religion (see, however, Levitt, 2003). Given that "feelings of

communality are defined in opposition to the perceived identity of other… groups" (Lamont

and Molnár, 2002: 174), this imbalance has prevented the development of more relational

theorisations of (non)migrant religious communities as "contingent clusters that come

together within to-be-determined spaces that are riddled by power and interests" (Levitt,

2012: 495). Such theorisation will help to reveal new modalities of migrant belonging, and will contribute to more holistic understandings of the ways in which migrant and non-migrant communities reproduce various forms of inclusion and exclusion. Borders play a prominent role in such theorising, as they delineate fundamental forms of difference that are being reproduced in new, and increasingly self-serving ways.

The decoupling and rescaling of borders

In recent years, borders have been shown to reproduce new forms of exclusion. Cross-border migration and socio-cultural intermixing has led to the creation of spaces wherein "all kinds of unlike things can knock up against each other in all kinds of ways" (Amin et al., 2003: 6; see also Gupta and Ferguson, 1992; Lamont and Molnár, 2002; Rovisco, 2010). Whereas such interactions were once viewed in a mostly positive light – with globalisation giving rise to "mobile patterns that facilitate overlapping loyalties" (Beck, 2000: 51-52) – they have since been interpreted more critically. Valentine (2008), for example, criticises the assumption of cosmopolitanism that is embedded in the idea that tolerant and inclusive cities and societies can arise from mundane, everyday encounters with diversity. Building on this, Darling (2017: 183) shows how the border 'within' has caused cities to reflect the "diversification of borders into everyday life". Increasingly, therefore, the "overlapping loyalties" which Beck speaks of are less likely to be integrated into one cohesive framework of identity and belonging, but to be juxtaposed and fragmented in exclusionary ways. This has contributed to a "cultural politics of global cities and their migrants" (Glick Schiller, 2008: 8), as borders are constantly crossed and boundaries redrawn.

Interactions like these have caused borders to be decoupled from the territorial demarcations of the nation-state, and rescaled in ways that have caused "very different types of border[s to] emerg[e]" (Rumford, 2012: 888; after Balibar, 2002). Combined, these developments underpin Rumford's (2012) call for a more 'multiperspectival' border studies that is sensitive to the workings of cultural encounters in space. These encounters can help to reveal both the ubiquity of borders in daily life, and also their important role in reproducing various forms of socio-cultural division. In terms of division, Popescu (2012: 2) notes how the *effects* of borders are often long-lasting, as "patterns of social interaction in space leave lasting memories, and borders are only slowly erased by people's mental maps". This dynamic becomes more loaded with the potential to reproduce old – but also forge new – forms of socio-cultural awareness and understanding, as their ubiquity means that borders are constantly being made, crossed, negotiated and remade by everybody and anybody. They are the "efforts of ordinary people" (Rumford, 2012: 897; after Sibley, 1995) that lead to the formation and strengthening of social communities through relational interactions with those deemed 'other'. Contact with the 'other' can, in turn, reveal how "difference is negotiated, constructed and legitimated within the contingent moment of encounter" (Wilson, 2017: 454). Thus, as much as borders serve to demarcate otherness, so too can they be deployed in ways that can help it to be overcome.

With this in mind, we propose that the bordering of identity provides a new way to understand the divisions that emerge between and within migrant and non-migrant communities. In recognising the fact that "we live divided along cultural, economic, political, and social lines, in a world of territorial borders whose main purpose is to mark differences in space" (Popescu, 2012: 1), the bordering of identity refers to the ways in which various practices of spatial exclusion influence the reproduction of identity, and the sense of

belonging therein. Such exclusions are often deployed as strategies to reify differences in

society, and can in turn lead to the othering of communities. In this sense, the bordering of

identity is both a cause and outcome of difference, and provides a conceptual vehicle to help

us better understand how differences can become more entrenched on the one hand, and

minimised or overcome on the other. The concept builds on the observation that "spatial

proximity on its own is not enough to bring about social transformation… [in fact, it] might

actually breed defensiveness and the bounding of identities and communities" (Valentine and

Waite, 2012: 476; after Young, 1990; Amin, 2002). To the extent that "border making is a

power strategy that uses difference to assert control over space by inscribing difference in

space" (Popescu, 2012: 8), the bordering of identity can often be deployed as a strategy of

socio-spatial reclamation and purification. In turn, it can aid or abet the sense of belonging to

an identity-based community. With this in mind, churches are empirically fertile sites in

which the concept of bordering of identity can be applied, observed and advanced, as they

must often negotiate the socio-spatial juxtaposition of difference within an overarching

structure of belief-based sameness.

Whereas religion has long been recognised as an integrative force that "skillfully ignor[es]

and circumvent[s] national boundaries" (Cadge et al., 2011: 440), its role in community

formation must be seen as increasingly paradoxical in a world in which national differences

are becoming more obviously – and sometimes more aggressively – asserted. Migration may

involve the crossing of boundaries and the intermixing of peoples, but national borders

continue to be "a marker of difference, on the opposite side of which different modes of

belongingness are acted out in the frame of the respective nation-state" (Laine, 2016: 469). In

such cases, belonging can be juxtaposed with belief, creating situations whereby hitherto

separate communities are brought into close contact with each other through belief, yet such

contact may serve to further reify the exclusions that may already arise from different notions

of belonging. In this sense, churches can be construed as "social spaces where different

cultural groups meet and interact, often in conflict" (Askins and Pain, 2011: 805), or as sites

where the disjunctures of belonging and belief can be observed. This is certainly true of

churches in Singapore, where social diversity has resulted in a situation where difference is

often encountered, but not necessarily overcome.

Disjunctures of belonging and belief amongst Christian migrants in Singapore

Singapore is characterised by its multi-ethnic and multi-religious population, its small size,

and reliance on foreigners to fill the skills gaps created by the ageing of the domestic

population. Singapore is officially represented by four main ethnic groups – Chinese, Malays,

Indians and Others – with the Chinese forming a majority of the resident population[1] at

74.3% (SingStat, 2017). Christianity (including Catholicism) is the second largest religious

group, at 18.8% of the population (SingStat, 2015), and spans ethnic groups. In 2017, nearly

40% of the total population of 5.6 million consisted of non-Singaporeans (SingStat, 2017),

which has 'contribut[ed] to a diversity of ethnicities and cultures never before seen' (Gomes

and Tan, 2015: 217). To manage the ethno-religious diversity that is endemic to Singapore,

the government actively promotes racial (and religious) harmony through, for example, the

celebration of racial harmony in schools, the imposition of ethnic quotas on public housing,

and the establishment of a National Integration Council in 2009 (see Liu, 2014: 1231-1233

for a review of government attempts to integrate migrants). Moreover, Singapore's small

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[1] The "resident" population comprises Singapore Citizens and Permanent Residents.

size[2] means that encounters with difference are commonplace (see Woods 2018a, 2018b).

Accordingly, many churches have large, multi-ethnic and, for some, even multi-national, congregations that attend English-language services, and smaller, more ethnically/nationally homogeneous congregations that attend services in their native languages. The fragmentation of congregations within a single church is a defining characteristic of Singapore churches, which are spaces wherein difference is reproduced within an overarching structure of togetherness. In this sense, the Singapore case provides a counterpoint to more positivist, US-based narratives, that show churches to be spaces wherein inter-ethnic relations can be strengthened (e.g. Yang and Ebaugh, 2001; Ecklund, 2005; Ehrkamp and Nagel, 2014).

The following subsections draw on qualitative research conducted between August 2017 and February 2018. The research was part of a wide-ranging project exploring the role of Christianity in helping migrants integrate (or not) into Singapore society. 100 interviews were conducted with various Christian populations in Singapore, including mainline (i.e. Anglicans, Methodists, Baptists and Presbyterians) and non-mainline (i.e. Assemblies of God, Pentecostal and independent churches) Protestants, and Catholics. 49 interviews were conducted with Christian migrants from Asia: Burma, China, India, Indonesia, South Korea and the Philippines; 28 with Singaporean Christians; and 23 with Singapore-based clergy and church-leaders. Before fieldwork commenced, a database of all churches in Singapore was compiled and populated with basic information outlining key contacts, contact details and congregation structure. The database served as a starting point for sampling amongst clergy and church-leaders, and enabled us to ensure a degree of representation amongst the leadership of all denominations. Sampling amongst the two lay groups – Christian

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[2] Approximately 720 km[2].

Singaporeans and Christian migrants – started with personal contacts, from which we snowballed. When snowballing, we took measures to ensure representation of target nationality groups (for the migrant group), and to ensure a spread of ages and genders (for both groups). Whilst there was diversity in age, nationality and socio-economic status within each group, both were skewed towards younger (i.e. age 20-40) Christians, and skilled professionals. In itself, these skews are reflective of both the Christian and migrant populations in Singapore. Amongst the migrant group, a unifying factor was that few had large networks of extended family in Singapore; most were single, or living with spouses, siblings or parents/children. Without such networks, the desire for community-building and integration was arguably more pronounced.

All interviews were conducted face-to-face by the second author – a migrant and long-term resident of Singapore – and/or a Chinese Singaporean research assistant, neither of whom identify as Christian. That said, the second author grew up in an ostensibly Christian environment, and could therefore appreciate the cross-border differences in religious praxis that many of our migrant interviewees faced. The vast majority of interviews were conducted at a location chosen by the interviewee – typically their home, or a venue close to their workplace. All interviews were conducted in English or Mandarin (especially for Chinese migrants, and older Singaporean Christians), and all were audio recorded and transcribed in English. Themes were identified and developed throughout the fieldwork period; the quotations presented below were chosen based on how representative they are of the group or subgroup that they represent. The interviews were approached in slightly different ways for each sampling group, but they converged around the topic of how being Christian in general (and being part of a church-based community more specifically) may disable or enable the integration of migrant and non-migrant communities within Singapore. In a general sense,

there were minimal differences between Christian denominations, meaning the insights

presented below were observed – to varying degrees, and in various ways – by all

participants we interviewed. This is largely due to the homogenising primacy of other points

of difference (such as nationality, upbringing and class). Where there were differences

between churches and/or denominations, disjunctures of belonging and belief tended to be

more acutely felt by those attending non-mainline (i.e. independent) churches. These

churches are often more growth-oriented, and more commonly associated with Singaporean

and non-Singaporean converts to Christianity. Accordingly, their congregations can be seen

to be more volatile, and more liable to division.

In the three subsections that follow, we first identify the division between the Singaporean

and non-Singaporean communities. We then consider how these divisions are reproduced

through Christian spaces. Finally, we focus specifically on how the bordering of identity can

lead to a rethinking of the integrative potential of Christianity in Singapore.

The cleaving of communities in Singapore

In Singapore, the relationship between Christian migrants and Christian Singaporeans is often

a paradoxical one. Christianity provides a bridge that brings people together in space, time,

and belief. Yet, differences in belonging can cause disjunctures within the Christian

community. Accordingly, there is a need to understand "the value of encounters, what

potential they might hold for catalysing change and what might be said about their politics

and spatio-temporality" (Wilson, 2017: 451). In Singapore, Christian spaces have evolved to

divide communities along ethno-linguistic lines. These divisions both reflect, and are

aggravated by, the deep-rooted sense of difference felt between Singaporeans and non-

Singaporeans in their daily lives. Ironically, migrants from China and India – that may, at first glance, be more easily integrated into their respective Singaporean ethnic groups – were often more likely to experience disjuncture than their less proximate counterparts; a dynamic that reflects how "xenophobia takes place even though… [Asian migrants] are ethnic and cultural cousins of Singaporeans themselves" (Gomes and Tan, 2015: 220-221; see also Liu, 2014). In general terms, therefore, we found that ethnic proximity often leads to the construction of clearer boundaries and more apparent forms of separation, whereas ethnic distance often leads to more opaque boundaries and acceptance. This reveals the complexity of the Singapore case, as many Christian migrants from China and India find themselves in the position of being similar to Singaporean Christians in ethno-religious terms, yet excluded on the basis of differences in nationality, upbringing and (perceived) class. In itself, this suggests that these latter factors are more likely to be points of exclusion, irrespective of ethno-religious similarities. It also highlights the complex intersectionality of subject positions that is reflective of the historical and geographical specificities of Singapore.

Around the world, the presence of migrant communities can trigger a sense of insecurity amongst local ones (Sanchez, 1997; Rustenbach, 2010). Most commonly, insecurity stems from the fact that migrants represent a source of competition within domestic labour and education markets. Compounding this is the fact that they are often motivated to work hard(er) in order to justify the upheaval of migration, and to make the most of opportunities that are availed to them. For example, a Filipino accountant commented that, since moving to Singapore, she has been "more driven to do what I have to do, which in this case is work", whilst an Indonesian male recalled his time at a Junior College in Singapore, when the Singaporean students "kind of see us [migrant scholars] as their competitors". An underlying sense of competition between Singaporeans and migrants causes disassociative *attitudes* to

manifest, with Singaporeans constructing migrants in a negative light. A Singaporean woman

in her 60s reflected that "the sad part about Singaporeans is… [they] think that they are above

anybody else", whilst a Filipino female claimed that "they [Singaporeans] really think that

nationalities from my country are low, and they look down on you". Attitudes like these

would often drive disassociative *behaviours*, with the Indonesian male quoted above recalling

how, at Junior College, "when there is a discussion or a group work, we will end up with the

[international] scholars being in one group, and Singaporeans in another group". These

examples show how attitudes can manifest as behaviours, which, through the bordering of

identity, can result in the cleaving of communities and the creation of 'parallel societies'

(Gomes, 2017).

The sense of insecurity created by migrants was most acutely observed amongst younger

Singaporeans. One Singaporean in her early 20s admitted that "they are just here to snatch

rice bowls from Singaporeans… I don't really have a positive feeling towards foreigners",

whilst another, also in her early 20s, admitted that "we're xenophobic, I think PRC-wise, we

generally view them, the general view of Singaporeans, well, I think the resentment is we

resent them as a community". This divide was also observed by a Canadian pastor, who

explained how younger Singaporeans "tend to judge them [migrants] based upon never

having experienced what they have experienced". The younger generation of Singaporeans

were especially strong in expressing such attitudes and behaviours. Born into a situation of

socio-political stability and economic opportunity, there appears to be a pervasive feeling of

entitlement and defensiveness towards what are perceived to be destabilising foreign

elements. In less tangible terms, however, the presence of foreigners also contributed to a

sense of insecurity surrounding the dilution and feared loss of a distinctive Singaporean

identity. As a middle-aged Singaporean admitted: "I can't tell anymore, I think right now, in

Singapore, I can't tell who is Singaporean and who is not… We lost our identity, I feel, in terms of looks and appearances". In the face of this sense of "loss", Singaporean identities are often reasserted through various socio-spatial practices within the church. We elaborate below.

Aggravating this sense of division is the transience of migrant communities in Singapore. This reduces the incentives for interaction and cross-community engagement (Wood and Waite, 2011), and in turn can cause both migrant and non-migrant communities to exist in isolation of each other. A Singaporean university student explained how:

> I think in terms of day-to-day interaction, it's much easier to relate to a Singaporean than a non-Singaporean. We can relate to a non-Singaporean, but maybe, I don't know… The thing is, they are here for a short while, after that they will go back to their own country. I mean, we still talk, but it's different.

The net effect of such "difference" is that Singapore is a country that, to a large extent, cleaves into mutually-exclusive, identity-based communities, at best, superficially interacting. An Indian migrant recalled how "I've never seen the neighbour concept in Singapore… [of] everyone coming together as a community, as human actually", whilst another Indian migrant reiterated this sentiment in his observation that "everyone is behind all their own friends and relatives, so it's very hard to go beyond that; similar things happen in the religious setup as well". This idea that the "religious setup" recreates the divisions of Singapore society was further reiterated by a Singaporean female, who observed that, even within the church, "we're very socialised to think of them [foreigners] in a certain way, so even the slightest thing, you will confirm think 'that's my stereotype of them', you know?".

As institutions that transgress the divisions of everyday life, churches provide spaces wherein

such communities can potentially be reformed in a more integrated mould. Often, however,

they serve to reproduce them instead.

Segregated spaces, bordered identities

The divisions in Singapore society are often replicated within churches, and Christian spaces

more generally. Thus, whilst churches in Singapore do act as spaces of migrant integration,

they often fostered integration into nationally- and/or linguistically-oriented worship

communities that resulted in what one church elder describesd as "*ecclesia* within *ecclesia*; a

church within a church". Migrants become integrated into a specific ethno-linguistic

community within their church, which would often be socio-spatially distinct from the

Singaporean and/or English-language worship community. These distinctions served to

minimise interactions between groups, which, over time enforced the mental distinctions

between self and other (Askins, 2015; Kong and Woods, 2016). For example, a second-

generation Indonesian migrant recounted how her mother, upon first moving to Singapore,

joined an Indonesian congregation, as "being able to find Indonesian friends through church

was, I think, something that helped her grow in confidence" and thus cope with the upheaval

of migration. Yet, the strength of the Indonesian community to which she belongs meant that

"she hasn't really searched for Singaporean friends outside her circle of [Indonesian]

friends", despite having now lived in Singapore for nearly two decades. With such isolated

communities worshipping within the same organisational structure, churches in Singapore

can be viewed as spaces of 'throwntogetherness' (after Massey, 2005) that represent the

juxtaposition of difference within an apparent structure of religious sameness.

This juxtaposition of difference does not just result in a mosaic of different communities operating within the same church structure, but can serve to actively distantiate communities from one another as well. An Indian migrant spoke of how "here, sometimes, they do speak in Chinese knowing that there is an Indian next to you, that's the sad part of it", suggesting that differences are enforced, irrespective of spatial proximity. This gives an idea of the extent to which "encounters *make* difference" (Wilson, 2017: 455, original emphasis; see also Dunn, 2010), as opportunities to bring people together in space and time can be undermined by the practice of exclusionary behaviours. People can at once be physically proximate, but socially distant. Indeed, whilst "there are no natural borders to separate human beings in space" (Popescu, 2012: 8), markers of human difference – physiological characteristics, languages spoken, everyday practices – provide the raw building blocks from which borders are constructed and communities divided. The bordering of identity starts with the individual, and is replicated, strengthened and formalised through various group and organisational dynamics. In this sense, bordering is deployed as a strategic tool to demarcate the "political, discursive, symbolic, and material orders that reflect the transformation of space into territory by various social groups and actors" (Laine, 2016: 466). These borders separate communities over space and time, and result in three modalities of segregation that can be summarised as splitting, substitution and specialisation.

Splitting involves one's ethno-national group separating itself from the main congregation, but remaining within the overarching church structure. For example, a Singaporean pastor explained how the Filipino congregation split from the main Singaporean congregation because they "caused a lot of displeasure among Singaporeans", whilst a Filipino explained that "the way they [Singaporeans] act, they don't want to be near to other races or cultures". Splitting can therefore be viewed as an outcome of the "tensions that emerge as different

constituents – guest and host – lay claim to the same space(s)" (Ehrkamp and Nagel, 2014:

320). Substitution involves one ethno-linguistic community being replaced by another over

time. For example, in one church a Tamil service for Singaporean Indians slowly evolved

into a Tamil service for Indian migrants; a process of substitution that was described by an

Indian migrant as a result of "discreet or obvious… discrimination" on the part of

Singaporean Indians. In a similar vein, a Catholic priest spoke of how a large inflow of

Filipinos into the English-language congregation of his church brought about an outflow of

Singaporeans, as "some Singaporeans don't want to go to the church because it's full of

Filipinos". Specialisation involves the formation of isolated migrant churches that cater

specifically to just one ethno-linguistic/national group. For example, the founder of a Chinese

migrant church recalled how its establishment was a result of his frustration attending

Singaporean Mandarin services, as they are "actually for the not very well educated person".

By meeting the specific linguistic needs of a community, a church that excluded other

communities was thus formed.

These forms of socio-spatial segregation within churches highlight the specificities of the

Singapore case. Whilst immigrant churches in the US, for example, have been shown to

"incorporat[e] people from diverse national origins" (Yang and Ebaugh, 2001: 282; see also

Ecklund, 2005) and have become places of 'welcome' for migrants within a more broad-

based context of socio-legal hostility (Ehrkamp and Nagel, 2014), the socio-spatial

segregation found within churches in Singapore can minimise the potential for inter-group

integration, and maximise the potential for inter-group categorisation and othering. For

example, a Singaporean female described how "I can draw boundaries very clearly, even if

it's unconsciously", whilst a bible study facilitator explained how:

It also has to do with the deeper, more embedded kind of racism… There is this, kind of, systemic categorisation of people whether intentionally or unconsciously, categorising people whether they are superior or inferior to you. So, unfortunately, the Chinese and Indians [migrants] fall under the less superior [category].

Such categorisations can lead to the formalisation of difference, as "judg[ing] people based on the colour of their skin… is still here in Singapore… we still have these, kind of, ethnic silos here" (Canadian pastor). Socio-spatial segregation within the church further enforces these categorisations, causing identities to become bordered, stereotypes to be reproduced, and an associated "transformation of fluid categories of difference into fixed species of otherness" (Silverstein, 2005: 364; see also Ehrkamp, 2006). These practices of segregation have "profound structuring effects on societies" as they reproduce understandings of "who belongs where, who is an insider and who is an outsider, who is part of us and who is part of them" (Popescu, 2012: 8). In this sense, the exclusion of certain communities can serve to 'ground' the more conceptual categorisation of otherness (see Collyer and King, 2015), causing the bordering of identity to be both cause and effect of the segregation of Christian space.

Rethinking the integrative potential of Christianity

Whilst both belonging and belief can be a source of identification (the latter often linked to religion, the former a more complex matrix of socio-cultural factors that include, but are not limited to, religion), the bordering of identity often fuels disjunctures between them. As an outcome of the bordering of identity, many migrants are forced to negotiate situations of exclusion (or a lack of belonging) within an overarching framework of inclusion (their

beliefs). Such negotiations reveal how borders are not fixed, but ever-shifting, and constantly

in the process of being (re)made. Indeed, whilst efforts were sometimes made by churches to

overcome such exclusions and integrate different ethno-national communities into one, united

worship community, they were often aborted due to the fact that doing so is an unrealistic

goal. Even when different groups were brought together in space and time, they would

remain polarised: "they hardly interact… the adults group don't really interact with people

from different nationalities" (Singaporean pastor). In this case, religious belonging does not

supplant national belonging; rather, the reverse is observed (see Anderson, 1983). The

integrative potential of Christianity is often juxtaposed against the non-integrative nature of

society, revealing how the latter often overrides the former.

Whilst churches have the potential to overcome divisions within society, our research shows

that they often fail to do so. A Singaporean youth worker revealed the structural barrier to

integration within churches: "there hasn't been a concerted effort to try and integrate them

[migrants] because the church has never seen integration as their role". Clergy and the

leadership of a church would often play an active (or a conspicuously absent) role in allowing

these forms of division to perpetuate. In some instances, migrants thought that clergy could

do more to cultivate the integrationist potential of the church – "I feel like they could have

done more in terms of reaching out to [us]" (Filipino female) – whereas others believed that

they reproduced the biases and prejudices of Singapore society. A Singaporean female

admitted that "sometimes they [pastors] will make very, very generic and sweeping

comments about PRCs, about China, or whatever", thus causing racial stereotypes to

perpetuate. These stereotypes could directly shape the day-to-day interactions between

migrants and church leadership. An Indian migrant spoke of how her husband's involvement

in a church committee was limited by the fact that "when we comment on certain things, they

[the Singaporeans] will say 'no, this is not India, it cannot happen here'... 'you don't tell us, this is Singapore'". She went on to admit that such experiences "sadden[ed] us", and brought about a questioning of why "this happens, even in a church?". Through such questioning, the ideal of integration is cast against the reality of everyday, exclusionary experiences within the church. Experiences like these caused some to distance themselves from either their beliefs and/or the church. We return to these ideas below.

Sentiment like this was reified by the experiences of a Korean pastor, who was sent to Singapore to service the Korean ministry of a well-established church. He candidly spoke of the troubles he faced in trying to work with his Singaporean counterparts to promote the idea of one, integrated church:

> Before I came here, the [Singapore church] leadership doesn't know much the intention, the meaning of being part of this [integrated] church. They are still trying to do their own [thing], they want to keep their independence. And even [if] they do something together with this [Korean] church, it doesn't come from the identity that we are one, but they are just doing together and preserving their own identity and their own culture.

This idea of "preserving their own identity and… culture" is observed at the levels of both the community, and church leadership, and can create a self-reinforcing barrier to realising a more integrated church. This rejection of the integrative potential of Christianity was widely felt, and caused many migrants to retreat into their own ethno-cultural communities. Taken to the extreme, this critical, and more contextually-nuanced interpretation of the Christian faith resulted in a rejection of the church. An Indian migrant admitted how a lack of belonging in

the church in Singapore made her distance herself from the church, and from her beliefs more

generally:

> I never felt a sense of belonging in the church or the church community [in
>
> Singapore], I never had a sense of belonging… It's not just about the priest, it's about
>
> the community, I think. I don't know if they are all Singaporeans, maybe they have
>
> Filipinos or Indonesians, I am not very sure. I think they have a group within
>
> themselves, so I think they are pretty much comfortable in them[selves]… Everyone
>
> gets into themselves… Whereas in India, everybody has a chance to be involved.

In this case, the lack of involvement with the church meant that "I could never really connect

to the church here or the Christian community here… I grew out of it". Beyond growing out

of her beliefs, this experience had a more wide-ranging impact on her worldview, as "now I

am questioning everything". This sentiment was reiterated by an Indian male, who claimed

that his experiences with churches in Singapore actually served to exacerbate – rather than

overcome – the sense of dislocation that he felt as a foreigner. He explained how "here, it's

like you're in a foreign land and… sometimes you are, like, just alone in the church, you

don't see anyone… you feel stranded, alone". For both migrants, comparing their experiences

of church attendance in Singapore to those in India brought them into a framework of

comparison that left them feeling dissatisfied and isolated from their religion. For many, a

sense of belonging provides validation of belief, whilst a lack of this sense can cause beliefs

to be reappraised, and sometimes rejected.

Belonging can be seen as a form of rootedness that is attached to a place of community,

whereas Christian belief is a form of transcendence that traverses places, communities and

the differences found therein. An Indian migrant living in Singapore for 22 years explained

how:

> Being a Christian is different from being a practicing Christian. So, even here [in
>
> Singapore], people can attend church because they are part of a Christian family, [but]
>
> that's different from being faithful to God. So that particular thing is, it may or may
>
> not be influenced by the church service in different lands, it depends.

Here, "faithful[ness] to God" – belief – is interpreted in a way that may or may not intersect

with the sense of belonging that comes from being a "practicing Christian" attending a

"church service in different lands". In his view, belief is constant, whereas belonging is a

more nuanced, more relational, and more place-based expression of religious community.

These ideas were echoed by a Filipino female, who described how "providence has brought

me to this situation where I don't need to be church-bound for me to be doing what God

wants me to do". Distancing herself from "church-bound" forms of religious practice reveals

how her beliefs – or "providence" – are decoupled from the need to belong to a church-based

community. Given that she came to such a realisation over the course of the past decade spent

in Singapore, it appears that a lack of belonging within the church brought about the

rationalisation for distancing from it.

Conclusion

Migration adds complexity to socio-cultural landscapes, whilst socio-cultural landscapes both

reflect and mediate the presence of different migrant groups. Recent debates surrounding the

integration of migrants and the relative successes of efforts to achieve more cosmopolitan

societies have "raised questions about the spaces of interaction that may enable meaningful and lasting encounters between different social groups" (Askins, 2015: 471). Religious groups – *especially* ethno-nationally diverse Christian groups – have the ideological and spatial tools to promote such encounters. Yet, in this paper we have demonstrated how Christian groups reproduce the divisions that are found within Singapore society. They encourage a restricted form of integration; one that encourages integration into – and identification with – an ethno-national community, but not with other communities, or even with Singapore society-at-large. In doing so, they facilitate the bordering of identities that emerge from encounters with, and the non-management of, difference. Thus, rather than helping governments and civil society to manage the realities of hyper-diversity, Christian groups can actually aggravate pre-existing social divisions.

The rhetoric of inclusion that is reproduced by governments throughout the world is often mediated by individual attitudes and behaviours. These attitudes and behaviours are often reflective of, and reinforced by, the communities to which an individual belongs. Given that positive change begins with individuals "deconstruct[ing] dominant discourses that essentialise minorities as only different" (Askins, 2015: 473), it is clear that religious groups can play a more proactive role in fostering a sense of belonging that privileges shared belief over encultured forms of division. The fact that messages of inclusion are undermined by acts of exclusion within Christian spaces suggests that Christian groups can intervene more directly in the spatial management, and ideological overcoming, of difference. Without such interventions, individuals will not have the impetus to embrace the discomforting reality of experiencing otherness on a more regular basis. In this sense, the challenge lies in finding a balance between doing what may be beneficial for the group, and what is beneficial for society more broadly. Working towards greater alignment between different scales of

ideology and action – from the state, to the group, to the individual – is a necessary first step

towards managing the challenges of hyper-diversity now, and in years to come.

With these ideas in mind, we recommend two overlapping areas for further research. The first

relates to the need to reconcile differences *within* religious groups with differences *between*

religions. Whilst the project from which this paper is derived focuses on the former dynamic,

we acknowledge that Christians, and Christian groups, operate within a much more complex

matrix of identification and belonging. Evaluating the impact of religion relative to other

facets of migrant and non-migrant identity could help to explain the disjunctures outlined

above. Likewise, exploring how other religious groups compare or contrast with the Christian

case outlined here will help to expand existing understandings of how different religious

groups cope with the challenges of social diversity. The second relates to the need to

understand how governments and governing bodies shape (or not) the practices and operation

of religious groups in their management of diversity. Doing so will yield insight into the

ways in which the ideologies that underpin the management of civil society intersect with

religious belief and organisation. Research is needed to identify and understand where

religious governance and praxis diverge, and how they can be aligned so as to contribute to

more ideologically integrated communities in the future.

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