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Parallel spaces of migrant (non-)integration in Singapore: Latent politics of distance and difference within a diverse Christian community

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Parallel spaces of migrant (non-)integration in Singapore: Latent politics of distance and difference within a diverse Christian community

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how the spatial practices of churches can lead to the (non-)integration of migrant communities. Whilst churches bring migrants and non-migrants together in space and time, so too can they cause them to become divided along ethnic, national, linguistic and/or class-based lines. In such cases, migrants can become integrated into a community of other migrants, which can discourage integration into the church-at-large, or into society more generally. These practices of (non-)integration give rise to parallel spaces of Christian praxis that can lead to the reproduction of distance and difference between (and within) migrant and non-migrant communities. To illustrate these ideas, we draw on 106 in-depth interviews conducted between November 2017 and February 2018 with Christian migrants from six Asian countries currently living in Singapore, with Singaporean Christians, and with Singapore-based church leaders. The data reveal how the integrative potential of Christianity can be undermined (or negated) by the spatial exclusion of migrant communities within places of religious praxis. To conclude, we highlight the need for research to explore the ways in which religious groups may contribute to the (non-)management of ethno-national diversity in the contemporary world.

KEYWORDS: Migrant communities, parallel spaces, ethno-national diversity, Christianity, Singapore

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Introduction

Whilst the negotiation and management of difference has provided a dominant theme within social scientific research for many years, it finds renewed resonance in the contemporary era of migration and social intermixing. Migration adds complexity to socio-spatial landscapes, whilst these 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; after Blunt 2007). In response, geographers in particular have advanced understandings of how space can mediate encounters with difference (Amin 2002; Blunt 2007; Valentine 2008; Ye 2017), and have explored how patterns of social exclusion can be reproduced through space (Herbert 2008). Religion also plays an important role in mediating encounters, as the practice of religion can bring migrants and non-migrants

together in space and time. It is through such close and regular physical contact that religion can lead to differences being enforced, and potentially also overcome (Kong 2010; Ehrkamp and Nagel 2012, 2014). Accordingly, and in view of the fact that more work needs to be done to understand how 'transnational dynamics influence traditional [religious] institutions' (Kong 2010: 761), this paper explores Christian spaces of migrant (non-)integration in Singapore.

Our argument is twofold. One, the integrative *potential* of religion is often undermined, if not negated, by the spatial exclusion of migrant communities within places of religious praxis. Two, these practices can problematise national-level integration efforts, and therefore offer nuanced insight into the barriers affecting migrant integration and social cohesion in the contemporary world. By making these arguments, we highlight how religion can contribute to the non-integration of migrant[1] communities in Singapore through the development of parallel spaces of religious praxis. This often involves nationally defined (but sometimes also *ethno*-nationally defined) migrant groups carving out autonomous spaces that enable them to practice religion separately from their Singaporean counterparts. In this sense, the formation of parallel spaces of religion is a phenomenon that engages with scholarship on migration politics (Blunt 2007), and more specifically, the spatial divisions within and between religious communities (Olson 2008; Ehrkamp and Nagel 2012, 2014; Gomes 2017). Indeed, in view of the fact that 'space is central in the production, perpetuation, and lived experience of assimilation discourses at multiple scales' (Ehrkamp 2006: 1688), this paper contributes an understanding of how 'Christian ideals of welcome come up against, and must contend with, worldly social boundaries of race, class and legal status' (Ehrkamp and Nagel 2014: 321; see also Kong and Woods 2019; Woods and Kong 2019). The formation of parallel spaces of migrant (non-)integration encapsulates this tension – articulated here as 'latent politics of distance and difference' – and provides an alternative perspective on the management of ethno-national diversity in Singapore.

Understanding the role of religion in migrant politics hold not just academic value, but more applied value as well. International migration is a defining feature of contemporary society, and as 'polities seek to attain an elusive multicultural ideal, suspicion is continually cast at ethnic newcomers' (Herbert 2008: 661). Moreover, as much as criticism has been pointed at geographers for not engaging in 'more effective ways' with political debates in migration in order to create a 'more impactful sub-discipline' (Smith 2018: 1), so too has the important (yet often underplayed) potential of religion been overlooked. Whilst this is true of regions like Europe and the United States that are at the forefront of debates surrounding the integration of migrant communities, so too can these debates be usefully expanded by drawing on insights from other regions. This is particularly true in Asian contexts like Singapore, where both rapidly ageing populations are creating hitherto unprecedented demands for migrant workers to fill skills gaps, and where increasing levels of intra-Asian migration mean that putative ethno-religious similarities can give way to cultural differences that are rooted in different national upbringings. As much as migrants are needed to ensure Singapore's ongoing economic growth, so too do they foreground the emergence and consolidation of identity politics that arise from the negotiation of sameness and difference (or, more specifically, difference *within* sameness). This paper therefore offers insight into the spatial formations of 'new' diasporic communities in Singapore (Liu 2014), the ongoing – and increasingly politicised – interplay between migrant

communities and the host societies in which they live, and the mediatory potential of religion (specifically, Christianity) therein.

This paper comprises three sections. The first considers the emergence of parallel spatial formations of migrant and non-migrant communities, and the bridging and buttressing roles of religion in helping to overcome and enforce differences between them. The second introduces the empirical context of Singapore, provides an overview of methodology. The third draws on empirical data provided by the churches included in our sample to explore the ways in which segregated church spaces and outsourced church spaces are used to reproduce various forms of inclusion and exclusion, which in turn contributes to latent politics of distance and difference.

Negotiating Difference in a Globalised World

The intermixing of people has brought about sustained interest in how societies evolve in response to encounters with difference. As new channels of migration open up, and as some (once considered) migrant families are reproduced through their second and subsequent generations, the assumption that migrants will assimilate into the host society has since given way to more nuanced understandings of how difference is negotiated. Difference is not an absolute category, but intersects with the multi-faceted nature of identity in various ways. Negotiating these intersections is a daily occurrence for many, and each encounter with difference creates 'the potential for misunderstanding, but also collaboration and understanding' (Kong 2010: 769; see also Sheringham 2010; Ye 2017; Kong and Woods 2016, 2018). As much as religion provides a cultural bridge that integrates people of different ethnic, racial, national and linguistic groups into a single faith community, so too can it act as a buttress through which identity can be asserted and differences enforced (after Putnam 2001). Spaces of religion have the potential to reflect and mediate these negotiations, and, in doing so, to shape the ways in which difference is encountered and understood. Accordingly, there have been calls for research to 'focus on the role of the religion in the everyday lives of migrants, as well as the places they create, inhabit and connect' (Sheringham 2010: 1679) in order to better understand how religion can contribute to the (un)making of communities. Accordingly, the following subsections consider existing work on the parallelism that emerges as an outcome of difference, and the (re)productive role of religion therein.

The Parallel Lives of Migrants and Non-migrants

Difference manifests in various ways. It can be observed through clothing, physiology and behaviour, heard through language, or interpreted through attitudes and values. It can also be constructed through socio-spatial practices, such as the clustering of people into spatially defined communities. The spaces occupied and reproduced by migrants and non-migrants can (dis)enable encounters with other communities, and can set the terms of engagement between them. Scholars of transnational studies in particular have shown how difference can be reproduced through transnational social fields – the construction and maintenance of ties with home-country communities – and how they can, in turn, create and exacerbate divisions between communities (Glick Schiller et al. 1995; Mitchell 1997), thus leading to the formation of 'parallel

lives'. Social parallelism often foregrounds spatial parallelism, as difference can easily and often unthinkingly provide a basis for division. These processes become more acute in the context of migration, as migrants can 'impos[e] seemingly "invasive" norms, lifestyles, living arrangements and ways of life within the[ir] neighbourhoods' (Smith 2018: 2). More than that, in many countries the physical manifestations of migrant communities – through, for example, the presence of dedicated housing enclaves, or socio-cultural infrastructures associated with migrant communities – can be viewed as transgressions that undermine the authority and identity of the host society. In other words, the othering of migrants is projected onto the othering of spaces that they occupy as well, thus creating what Clark (2019) describes with regard to the Singapore case, a 'city of villages'. Ehrkamp and Leitner (2006: 1591) explain the emergence of such practices of spatial splintering:

space is deeply implicated in public and political discourses about immigration; how migrants create new symbolic spaces of belonging in sometimes hostile host societies; how migrants transform material spaces and places in contemporary cities into sites and stakes of struggles for rights and citizenship; and how transnational social spaces emerge as migrants express their political identities and commitments across national borders.

The important point here is that concentrations of otherness enforce the parallelism of migrant and non-migrant communities, but they also provide migrants with a position of strength from which they can begin to negotiate the terms by which they engage with mainstream society. Building on this idea, Ehrkamp (2006) shows how the spaces occupied by Turkish migrants in Germany are part of a broader strategy of negotiating a presence on 'foreign' soil, which enables them to pursue integration on their own terms. Space can therefore play an emancipatory role for migrant communities, as it can grant them a 'right to belong and participate in a public realm' (Fernandez 2011: 417). In many countries, this has contributed to a new 'politics of presence' (Darling 2017) that is enacted through the demarcation and ordering of migrant spaces. As we can begin to see, religion can play both a bridging and buttressing role in the positioning of migrant communities within host societies.

The Bridging and Buttressing Roles of Religion

Religion plays a multi-faceted role in the lives of migrants. Amongst other things, it can provide a framework of belief, a source of identity, a sense of belonging to an 'imagined' faith community, and a point of entry into a more tangible community of like-minded believers (Anderson 1983; Ehrkamp and Nagel 2012). To the extent that spaces of religion serve as spaces of encounter wherein differences are revealed and negotiated (Valentine 2008), so too can they become spaces of disassociation and exclusivity. By focussing on these spaces, research has started to explore the bridging and buttressing roles of religion for migrants. In this sense, the 'bridging' role of religion refers to its potential to overcome difference; the 'buttressing' role refers to its potential to enforce it. Recognition of the buttressing role of religion can be seen to expand existing understandings of 'bridging' and 'bonding' social capital by recognising the intersectionality of identity, and how complexity can result in differences being simultaneously overcome *and* enforced (Putnam 2001). In this view, whilst religions like Christianity can be seen to bridge differences between people, so too can they

cause differences in ethnicity, nationality or class to become more entrenched through spatial distancing.

Religion is just one aspect of a much more wide-ranging assortment of identifiers that migrants must balance and negotiate when encountering difference. Most noticeably, the role that religion plays in migrants' lives is often mediated by the extent to which the (ethno-)national group to which they belong is accepted by society in general, or by other groups more specifically. Whilst religion can bring people together, ethnicity – or other facets of identity – can keep them apart. The intersectionality of migrant identities reveals how they 'do not fit easily inside boxes, either metaphorical or spatial' (Herbert 2008: 663), with places of worship constituting important sites wherein 'social groups experience membership and/or marginalisation in society' (Ehrkamp and Nagel 2012: 628). Through spaces of religious practice, the bridging and buttressing roles of religion can therefore be observed. For example, Korean migrant churches in America have been shown to reproduce the stereotype of Koreans as a 'model minority' (Ecklund 2005), with spaces of Christianity helping to bridge the gap between Korean migrant and American non-migrant communities by reproducing the positive associations of each. Conversely, mosques have been shown to be spaces of alterity that empower Muslim migrants to negotiate their otherwise marginal positions in the socio-political fabrics of Europe (Klausen 2005) and Australia (Mansouri et al. 2006). As such, spaces of Islam can act as buttresses that provide a point of difference from which integration can be resisted and Muslim identity asserted.

Whilst bridging and buttressing represent two ways in which religion can enable migrants to negotiate – and sometimes enforce – difference, more recently there have been efforts to uncover the 'alternative geographies' of migrant religion. These alternative geographies provide another way of negotiating difference. Notably, Haugen's (2013: 81) study of African Pentecostals in Guangzhou, China, shows how African migrants 'operate out of autonomous buildings under informal and fragile agreements with law enforcement officers', which lead to the creation of 'alternative geographies where the migrants take center stage'. Alternative geographies can thus be seen to avoid, whilst simultaneously reproduce, a politics of presence. They provide a way of understanding how migrant groups reproduce their parallel lives through religious spaces, and, in doing so, how they neither seek membership of, nor marginalisation from, mainstream society; they seek separation from it instead. In other words, religion can not only provide a means of bridging or buttressing the differences between migrant and non-migrant communities, but as a means of avoiding them through separation. Separation leads to the creation of new spaces of migrant religion, and foregrounds the emergence of latent politics of distance and difference. These processes and politics are now explored through an examination of Christian migrants in Singapore.

Empirical Context and Methodology

Singapore is an island city–state that can be defined by its multi-ethnic and multi-religious population, its small size, and its growing reliance on foreigners to fill the skills gaps created by an ageing population. Singapore is represented by four main ethnic groups – Chinese, Malays, Indians and Others – although Chinese form a majority of the resident population[2] at 74.3 per cent (SingStat 2017). Complicating this is the fact

that the dominant ethnic categories used to classify people in Singapore also tend to be multi-national, meaning, for example, the ethnically Chinese population could come from Singapore, China, or another country. This complication is found – to greater or lesser degrees – within all ethnic groups, which underpins the need for ethnicity to be understood in the context of national identification as well. Complicating this further is the role of class-based divisions within and between ethno-national groups, with the dynamics explained below being most pronounced amongst socio-economically marginalised migrant groups. In terms of religion, Christianity (including Catholicism) is the second-largest religious group in Singapore, at 18.8 per cent of the population (SingStat 2015), and is unique in that it is not associated with just one ethnic group, but spans all. In this sense, whilst ethnic and religious commonalities can provide opportunities for inclusion, it is often national-level differences (and, broadly speaking, those between migrants and non-migrants) that are increasingly becoming the basis for division (Gomes and Tan 2015; Gomes 2017; Clark 2019; Kong and Woods 2019; Woods and Kong 2019).

Compounding this picture of ethno-religious diversity is the fact that in 2017, nearly 40 per cent of the total population of 5.6 million consisted of non-Singaporeans (SingStat 2017). The large proportion of migrants reflects both the ageing of the Singaporean population and falling birth rates. Indeed, whilst immigration has been the primary source of Singapore's population growth for decades, a growing dependence on migrants to provide key skills and services has caused it to become a divisive issue in recent years. It has contributed to the emergence of a 'diversity of ethnicities and culture never before seen' (Gomes and Tan 2015: 217), and has caused the (non-)integration of communities to become a foremost issue of socio-political concern. In response, in 2009 the government established a National Integration Council to manage the latent politics between migrant and non-migrant communities (see Liu 2014 for a review of government efforts to integrate migrants). In many respects, this initiative can be seen to pre-empt the publishing of a government white paper in 2013, entitled *A Sustainable Population for a Dynamic Singapore*, which projected that the total population would reach between 6.5 and 6.9 million by 2030, driven mostly by immigration and naturalisation programmes (Population White Paper 2013). The white paper was much criticised, sparking public debate concerning social cohesion and the integration of foreigners. Within this context of ethno-national diversity and concern surrounding the integration of migrant communities, Christian groups can be seen to play an important – yet mostly under-realised – role in bridging differences between migrants and non-migrants (and the ethno-linguistic nuances therein), and fostering a common sense of religiously defined community.

To explore this role in more detail, between November 2017 and February 2018 we conducted 106 interviews with various Christian communities in Singapore. 55 interviews were conducted with Christian migrants from Burma, China, India, Indonesia, South Korea and the Philippines; 28 interviews with Singaporean Christians; and 23 interviews with Singapore-based clergy and church-leaders. The churches included in our sample reflect, to a certain extent, the diversity of Christianity in Singapore. In total, 45 different churches were included in the sample, representing denominational Catholic and Protestant (Anglican, Baptist, Methodist and Presbyterian), and nondenominational (or independent), churches. To be clear, the empirical analysis below is indicative of the dynamics observed within our sample only;

it is not necessarily representative of Singapore's broader Christian community, although general inferences regarding the spatial (non-)integration of migrants can be made. Where appropriate, we have indicated below which church the respondent is from. Whilst the interviews were approached in different ways for each church and sampling subgroup therein, they converged around the topic of how being Christian in general (and being part of a church-based community more specifically) may contribute to the (non-)integration of migrant and non-migrant communities. An area of particular interest was in exploring the spatial modalities of migrant (non-)integration through religion. At the most generalisable level, we found that the parallel lives of migrants and non-migrants were reproduced through spaces of Christianity, with such parallelism leading to the formation of alternative (and often autonomous) geographies of migrant religion in Singapore. Such geographies were often constructed along (ethno-)national lines, which both minimise the potential for migrant integration whilst simultaneously reproducing latent politics of distance and difference.

Parallel Spaces of Migrant (Non-)integration in Singapore

Most migrants encounter various forms of exclusion throughout their day-to-day lives. These forms can range from negotiating socio-cultural differences and misunderstandings, to more divisive expressions of prejudice and discrimination. Spaces of inclusion can therefore hold an expanded sense of meaning for migrants, and the extent to which churches are able to 'incorporate immigrants into congregational life' (Ehrkamp and Nagel 2014: 320) can influence the ways in which they feel they have 'incorporated' into the host country as well. That said, we found that as a potential channel of integration, churches would often reproduce patterns of 'differential inclusion' (Ye 2017) instead. These patterns are symptomatic of what one Singaporean bible facilitator described as a 'deeper, embedded kind of racism [in Singapore] … There is this, kind of, systemic categorisation of people, whether intentionally or unconsciously, categorising people whether they are superior or inferior to you'. Whilst churches are imbued with the *potential* to challenge and overcome these categorisations, often they would reproduce them instead. The Singapore case therefore highlights how the racism and segregation within society-at-large is reproduced within churches. This reveals a paradox within the Christian community, wherein the potential (or the claimed religious desire) for integration is there, but various (often secularising) forces prevent it from being realised. Specifically, the spatial practices of churches would perpetuate a dialectic of Christian inclusion but ethno-national exclusion; or, of integration into an ethno-nationally defined community of Christian migrants, whilst simultaneously being excluded from the wider church community of Singaporean (and other ethnically and/or nationally defined groups of) Christians. In this capacity, church spaces reproduce the parallel lives of migrant and non-migrant communities in Singapore (after Gomes 2017; Kong and Woods 2019; Woods and Kong 2019). Two modalities of spatial parallelism were observed: the segregation of migrant church space, and the outsourcing of migrant church space.

Segregated Church Spaces: Exclusion Through Inclusion

Many churches in Singapore manage multiple congregations – often divided along linguistic, national, or demographic lines – within a single church space. However, in cases where different communities are represented within a single congregation – for example, when migrant and non-migrants alike attend the main English-language service, or when Singaporean Chinese and non-Singaporean Chinese migrants attend a Mandarin service – the space they occupy would often be segregated along national lines. In other words, different communities would often sit together, but in mutually exclusive groups that did not typically interact. Through these processes of division, church spaces become mosaics of different, (ethno-)nationally defined communities, all worshipping at the same time, within the same shared building. For example, the elder of a Baptist church recalled how 'sometimes I get a group of Filipinos sitting at the corner near the door, so I just sa[y] "why are you sitting there? Come on in!"', whilst a Singaporean pastor reiterated this sentiment, stating how 'they [Filipinos] tend to go together … even in the service, they are grouped together'. Patterns of segregation like this tended to become formalised over time, which would result in clearer divisions between communities. Indeed, many churches in Singapore now operate multiple congregations that are divided by ethno-linguistic, and sometimes class-based, affiliations. This would ensure a degree of cohesion and inclusion within the group, but mutual exclusion from other groups. For example, an Indonesian migrant spoke of how 'we don't mix [with] the whole big church, but we have our separate services'. The elder quoted above described the process of physically carving out spaces for different worship communities:

What we've done is we have internally divided … a big room. We have a partition across which we have built in, that is not cheap either because they are very sound proof, so we can knock in this room and no-one can hear.

In this sense, spatio-temporal segregation can be seen to create a dialectic of exclusion *through* inclusion. Migrant groups are excluded in the sense that they are spatially (and, as highlighted here, sonically) removed from the main, English-language, Singaporean-dominated congregation. Yet, in doing so, they are technically included within the church. The inclusive aspect of segregated church spaces thus serves to bridge the gap between migrant and non-migrant communities, whilst the exclusive aspect serves to buttress positions of migrant difference. Over time, however, inclusion often leads to the strengthening of migrant communities, which further isolates them from other groups within the church. The elder went on to explain the effects of such separation on the Indonesian and Chinese congregations:

The Indonesians are welcome to worship with us [the main, English-language congregation] on Sunday at 9.15 under one roof, but instead they have their small worship in the room downstairs in the same building. The Chinese are also downstairs in the basement. They prefer to worship in the basement, separately.

Despite being invited to worship 'under one roof' with the main congregation, their exclusive space 'in the basement, separately' is preferred. He went on to perceptively observe how this resulted in a situation whereby 'the Indonesians joined with us at the beginning of this year, but in fact they haven't joined' because 'they go straight to their

[Indonesian] service, they don't come [to the main church service], it [the main service] is not their scene, as it were'. This situation of joining, but not *really* joining the church encapsulates the notion that including a minority group within church space can actually be a way of enforcing their separation from the main church body. This dynamic was most pronounced amongst socio-economically marginal migrant groups, especially domestic helpers. A Filipino domestic helper who attended a Catholic church explained how Singaporean churchgoers will 'look down on you because this is what you do' which in turn encouraged her to 'keep my distance' from the Singaporean congregation. A Singaporean church work expressed similar sentiment, explaining how 'Singaporeans want people to do work [for them], but Singaporeans … do not want to come so close to them … that's why they are in different groups, we separate them because of this'. In this case, separation can be seen as a strategy to mitigate against potential problems arising from inter-group encounters within the church. In doing so, church spaces can be seen to both reflect and reproduce the prejudices of Singapore society. That said, whilst many of the churches in our sample excluded migrants from the main congregation in a bid to include them into a specific community that is physically located within the church, in other cases migrant communities were excluded from the church itself in order to foster inclusion. Such processes involve the outsourcing of church spaces, which foregrounded processes of inclusion through exclusion.

Outsourced Church Spaces: Inclusion Through Exclusion

As a continuation of the process of segregating space within the church, some migrant groups would be included through the creation of community-specific spaces of Christianity outside of the church. This is what we term the 'outsourcing' of space – the (re)location of migrant spaces outside of the church building. Practices like these were also more common amongst marginal migrant groups, for whom the greater social, economic and cultural distance between themselves and Singaporeans, and other, more socially acceptable migrant groups, made the outsourcing of space a preferred option. For example, Filipino ministries would sometimes be located around Orchard Road,[3] a place where Filipino domestic helpers tend to congregate during their days off. A Singaporean pastor of a Protestant church explained how 'you go to the marketplace where all the Filipinos are saturated – Lucky Plaza and Botanic Gardens', whilst a Singaporean churchgoer recalled how his church 'ha[s] a small space in Orchard that we are renting, so they [the Filipinos] usually meet in [that space in] Orchard'. Practices like these strengthen the ethno-national exclusivity of migrant groups, whilst weakening their attachment to the main church body. Outsourcing space can therefore be seen as a strategy by which churches can *avoid* addressing, managing and potentially overcoming the politics embedded within heterogeneous congregations. The elder quoted above was critical of such outsourced spatial arrangements, sharing how similar practices at his church were a 'problem' that directly undermined the 'current vision for the church [which] is to be a church for all nations, and the intention to pursue that is to integrate the church as far as possible'. To this end, outsourced church spaces are similar to alterior sites of migrant religion in the US, such as the mosque or temple, which Yang and Ebaugh (2001: 274) describe as 'secluded place[s] where they can be comfortable with each other and do their own thing'. Yet, the outsourcing of church space in Singapore comes from a point

of religious sameness rather than difference, causing actual points of difference – in this case ethno-nationality overlaid with socio-economic marginality – to be more acutely felt.

The logic of churches outsourcing worship space to the areas in which migrants' cluster also extends to communities of Chinese migrant workers.[4] This dynamic was particularly interesting, as these groups could technically attend Chinese-language services at the main church, but their more marginal socio-economic status made outsourcing a preferred option. A Singaporean pastor of a non-denominational church explained the problems associated with trying to get such Chinese migrant workers to attend services with Singaporeans, as 'they will usually sit behind, or quietly go off … [there] are some barriers, whether Singaporeans want to befriend them, or whether they can be accepted by Singaporeans'. In response, outsourcing church spaces is a preferred alternative. Chinese migrant workers tend to congregate in an area called Geylang during their days off, with many churches locating their Chinese migrant worker ministries there in in order to minimise the barriers to attendance. A Singaporean churchgoer explained how the Chinese migrant worker ministry is 'held in a church, but it's not in our main church auditorium … it's around Geylang area … the foreign workers always go to Geylang to eat, so it's actually easier to reach out to them [there]'. This sentiment was echoed by a Singaporean pastor, who went on to explain how 'they are used to the environment and they know who these people are, so I think it's more a sense of belonging [in Geylang]'. In these cases, therefore, space is outsourced so as to keep a degree of distance between Singaporean Chinese and non-Singaporean Chinese communities, but to also promote inclusion into the overarching church structure.

This logic of removing the barriers to church attendance by locating migrant ministries in places that are often frequented by their target groups was sometimes extended to the dormitories in which large numbers of migrant construction workers are housed. Dormitories are often located close to Singapore's industrial zones in the non-central areas, or on the sites of construction projects themselves. Compounding this is the restricted mobility of migrant workers, which means that long travel times (to a more central location, for example) could prove to be a barrier to church attendance. Often, services would be located close to their dormitories, as recalled by a Singaporean female: '[our] Telugu[5] service is held at Sembawang, Tuas and Toh Guan,[6] I guess it's because their congregation is quite big, and the locations are near their dormitories'. In some cases, however, this strategy of spatial outsourcing was replicated within close proximity to the main church itself, with the same Singaporean female explaining how some Telugu 'cell groups are outside [the church], on the grass'. Supporting this assertion was another Singaporean, who recalled how 'around my church area there are a lot of building projects, and they recently converted an old hospital that is near our church to dormitories for migrant workers'. In response, the church established a migrant worker ministry close to the dormitories, but not within the church, despite the two being 'close'. In these cases, inclusion within the church is based on an understanding that such marginalised groups will be accommodated outside of the church building. Doing so is to mitigate against the risk of potentially disrupting the main church body. Creating such 'alternative geographies' of migrant religion (Sheringham 2010; Haugen 2013) thus contributes to latent politics of distance and difference.

Latent Politics of Distance and Difference

As the previous two subsections have shown, migrants and non-migrants tend to occupy parallel church spaces in Singapore. This is primarily driven by the logic of being able to better cater to the specific needs of each community through separation. Yet, separation can also fuel exclusionary behaviours; it encourages the formation of what the Canadian pastor of a Baptist church interpreted as 'little ghetto communities' that undermine the aim to 'mov[e] together' as one, unified, body. In doing so, they foreground the negotiation of community belonging and Christian belief, and latent politics of distance and difference. These politics are 'latent' in the sense that they are subtle and nuanced, and often obfuscated by the overarching logic for separation. Instances where churches have attempted to *undo* separation through spatial (re)integration do, however, cause these politics to manifest. For example, the Singaporean pastor of a non-denominational church recalled how attempts to combine the otherwise separated English and Filipino services lasted 'only three months, three months later we lost about 30-40% of members, who stopped coming'. In this case, integration led to members leaving the church in search of more exclusive – and thus preferred – spatial arrangements. Similarly, a Singaporean pastor of a different non-denominational church explained how his attempts to integrate the otherwise separated English and Chinese-language congregations into one, dual-language service 'were not well-received' and soon abandoned. As both of these examples suggest, church leaders are disincentivised from integrating their congregations, as doing so could result in a decline in congregation numbers. Rather, separation is encouraged as it enables church leaders to meet the plurality of demand in a way that does not negatively impinge on the size, and therefore the financial power and sustainability, of the church. Given the high competition for, and cost of, church space, non-integration can therefore be seen to serve the economic logics that increasingly underpin the organisation and praxis of Christianity in Singapore (see Woods 2018, 2019).

In other instances, sharing space – and thus reducing the distance between groups – could lead to differences becoming manifest, and divisions enforced. In this sense, churches do not necessarily lead to the 'invent[ion of] new modes of social engagement' which can be 'surprisingly progressive' (Chong and Goh 2014: 403); rather, they can be seen to reproduce pre-existing fissures within society. The Singaporean pastor of a non-denominational church recalled how, even when Singaporean and migrant congregations were brought together for church-wide social events, they 'hardly interact … the [Singaporean] adults group don't really interact with people from different nationalities', whilst a Singaporean female reiterated this sentiment and attributed blame to the host society, stating that 'it's the English [language; i.e. Singaporean] congregation that's to be blamed, they don't open up'. Here we can see how divisions between congregations are not just defined by the divergent spaces of worship, but by the reinforcement of pre-existing notions of difference as well. Whilst this example highlights the social separation of congregants, politics of separation came to light when space was shared. The pastor of a Methodist church, for example, recalled the frictions that emerged when two separate congregations – one English-speaking/Singaporean, the other Tamil-speaking/Indian – shared the same space but used it at different times:

We like to have our things fixed [in place] … we like our drum sets, keyboards, drum sticks, everything to be there, and the wires to be all connected. But the Indians tend to like to shift things around … So, the drum set may be disappeared, they transferred it to another room, or the wires get disappeared … So, while we're learning to love the foreigners … they always give us this kind of issue.

The claim that the presence of migrant communities negatively disrupts the status quo underscores the need to create distance between communities. By creating distance, however, the discriminatory logics found throughout Singapore society are reproduced in and by the church. Thus, whilst the segregation of communities for the purposes of worship can be explained in practical terms (in that it enables migrant groups to worship in their native language), its effects were often more broadly felt. Distance contributes to a 'politics of invisibility' (Ehrkamp and Nagel 2014) that involves disassociating worship communities from each other. Given that such distance is reproduced on such a regular basis, the tendency is for it to become insurmountable over space and time. A Singaporean Catholic explained how 'I know for a fact that my church has quite a lot of Filipinos, we have a Filipino community in my church … We do know of their presence, but we don't really acknowledge each other'. A Catholic Filipino migrant agreed with this idea, and used it to lament the fact that 'they [i.e. Singaporeans] could have done more in terms of reaching out [to the Filipino congregation]'. This sentiment was echoed by many migrant communities – not just Filipino – who both *wanted* to be part of a more integrative Christian community, but who also saw the local/host society as being responsible for driving inclusion. The failures of many churches to do so, and to unify otherwise heterogeneous congregations through shared belief can, then, be seen as a missed opportunity to promote everyday forms of integration. Given the broader political landscape of integration in Singapore, the importance of public institutions like churches and other religious organisations in fostering integration will only become more pronounced.

Blame for this lack of desire on the part of Singaporeans was, in some cases, attributed to Singaporean pastors. One Singaporean female admitted that pastors could sometimes reproduce the prejudices that underpin the categorisation, and therefore the division, of migrant and Singaporean communities, claiming that sometimes they 'make very, very generic and sweeping comments about PRCs [i.e. migrants from China]'. These sorts of practices can be seen to structure and shape the terms of engagement through which congregants engage (or not) with each other. This sentiment was reiterated by a Korean pastor, who was sent to Singapore to service the Korean ministry of a well-established Protestant church. He spoke with candour about the problems he encountered when trying to work with Singaporean pastors, who 'doesn't [*sic*] know much the intention, the meaning, of being part of this [integrated] church … they are just doing [things] together and preserving their own identity and their own culture'. In this view, the non-integration of the church can be seen as deliberate attempts on behalf of church leadership to preserve the status quo, rather than define a new, more inclusive standard for intra-Christian interactions. To the extent that the spatial segregation of minorities can 'actively prevent … integration into receiving societies' (Fabos and Kibreab 2007: 5), the church in general – and the church leadership in particular – can be seen to play a role in reproducing such segregationist logics. Whilst migrants may or may not move to Singapore with the intention of remaining within their own communities, the parallel spaces of Christianity

within which they become embedded can reproduce them. These reproductions ‘draw people and places together in a common spatial and temporal matrix’ (Antonisch 2017: 3), but in doing so, it also pulls them apart from the other communities in which they may be implicated. The challenge, then, for migrant-dependent societies like Singapore, and for potentially integrative social structures like religious groups, is to dismantle the divisions between migrant and non-migrant spaces, and to lead efforts to reimagine the public domain as one of constructive diversity rather than parallelism.

Conclusions

This paper has explored the ways in which Christian spaces serve to reproduce and thus reinforce the parallel lives of migrant and non-migrant communities in Singapore. Specifically, it has demonstrated how, through the segregation and outsourcing of church space, Christian groups foster patterns of exclusion through inclusion, and inclusion through exclusion. Practices like these underpin the latent politics of distance and difference, which in turn can hinder cohesiveness between migrant and non-migrant groups. In doing so, this paper engages with Wright et al.’s (2014; see also Ye 2017) observation that diversity and segregation are not end points on a continuum of outcomes, nor are they oppositional constructs. Instead, they are co-constitutive and inter-related phenomena that are defined in relation to each other. Given that such definitions and reproductions occur within Christian spaces adds an extra layer of meaning, as within such spaces ‘narratives of morality and community are enacted and become intertwined with – or come up against – wider narratives and understandings of societal belonging’ (Ehrkamp and Nagel 2012: 625). Thus, whilst Christianity promotes an overarching vision of one, globally integrated community, Christian groups in Singapore practice integration in ways that inculcate a sense of belonging to a specific ethno-national community rather than a more boundary-crossing (or boundary-transcending) faith community. This has clear ramifications for migrant-dependent countries like that of Singapore, as such divisions will only become more pronounced over time, and in response to growing diversity within the population.

With this in mind, there is an ongoing need to promote dialogue and understanding of the potential of religious groups in managing diversity. Whilst this need primarily relates to Christian groups that are more likely to work with multiple, overlapping, and sometimes conflicting communities, it is relevant for all religious groups. In promoting such understanding and dialogue, the challenge lies in finding a balance between doing what may be beneficial for the church or religious group, and what is beneficial for society more broadly. Whilst the British elder quoted above admitted that ‘all the people I’ve spoken to, the senior church leaders and the senior seminary leaders have all said that it [integration within the church] is not going to work’, such pessimism stems from a lack of understanding of how integration could or should work. Lack of understanding is often compounded by the fact that many religious groups are driven by the need to retain their relevance in and to society by fostering a sense of inclusion amongst their followers. In doing so, however, they may be reproducing an isolated sense of inclusion that is divorced from, and possibly even detrimental to, other groups. Finding a balance is needed if religious groups are to play an expanded role in structuring everyday encounters with, and management of, difference, and in therefore promoting a more cohesive society in Singapore and beyond.

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Notes

1 Note that ‘migrant’ is a relatively opaque identifier in Singapore, as the naturalisation of ‘migrants’ into citizens has contributed significantly to national development and population growth since the Singapore Citizenship Ordinance of 1957 (*The Straits Times* 2017).

2 The ‘resident’ population comprises Singapore Citizens and Permanent Residents.

3 Orchard Road is a shopping district in Singapore. It is home to Lucky Plaza – a shopping mall that primarily serves the Filipino community, and which is a common destination for Filipinos during the weekend.

4 The term ‘Chinese migrant workers’ has a specific meaning in Singapore, and refers to low-income groups that are often employed in the construction and engineering industries on short-term contracts. They are distinct from other, highly skilled, Chinese migrants who are either students or working professionals.

5 Telugu is the language shared by people from the southern Indian state of Andhra Pradesh.

6 These are mostly industrial areas located in the far north (Sembawang), far west (Tuas) and centre-west (Toh Guan) of Singapore.

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