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Abstract

This paper reframes the theory of religious economy by developing an understanding of the effects of transnational religious influence on religious marketplaces. In doing so, it highlights the need to rethink the role of regulation in shaping the ways in which religious marketplaces operate. By reinterpreting regulation as the ability of the state to control the extent to which religious groups are able to access resources, it argues that transnational religious networks can enable access to extraneous resources, which, in turn, can enable religious groups to subvert the regulatory prescriptions of the state. Transnational religious influences therefore highlight the porosity of religious economies, and the problem of regulating religious marketplaces. Qualitative data are used to demonstrate how Singapore-based churches create and strengthen transnational religious networks with their counterparts in China. These networks enable religious groups to operate with a degree of independence, and to overcome regulatory restrictions on (and other limitations to) religious praxis.

Keywords

Religious economy, religious networks, regulation, Singapore, China.

Introduction

Over the past three decades, the theory of religious economy has engaged the interest of a wide variety of scholars from different disciplinary standpoints. It has been applied to different religious marketplaces around the world, and the value of understanding the inter-relationships between religious regulation, competition and pluralism has been proven time and again. Despite such an embrace, the theory has also been shown to be inflexible and restrictive in its conceptualisation of religious marketplaces as bounded entities that are self-determining in their outcomes. Existing scholarship has been criticised for interpreting religious marketplaces as "isolated systems of analysis", and for "fail[ing] to situate them within international systems of religious power and influence" (Woods 2012a:217; after Glick Schiller 2005). Accordingly, this paper is a direct response to the call to "dislodg[e] the theorization of religious systems from the safe confines of clearly bounded analysis" and to advance a "more universally applicable, and critically engaged, understanding of religious change that cuts across geographies, religious traditions, and the systems of power inherent to each" (Woods 2012a:217). It reframes religious economy in a way that goes beyond the state as the 'container' of society (after Castells 1996; Rudolph and Piscatori 1996; Beck 2000; Glick Schiller 2005) and advances a more transnational understanding that recognises the interconnected, and therefore porous, nature of religious marketplaces instead (Grim and Finke 2006). Indeed, in view of the fact that "every country, regardless of how conventionally powerful it is, is penetrated by external actors and forces" (Haynes 2001:146), it is apparent that such reframing is overdue.

Academic theorising has long been influenced by "the pervasiveness of… secular world culture" (Bush 2007:1645; see also Gill 2001), the effects of which continue to be felt. Calls

to bridge more globally-oriented theorisations of society with local-level analyses of religion were first made over three decades ago (see Wallerstein 1987; Csordas 1992; Rudolph and Piscatori 1996), but made little impact on the theoretical trajectory of religious economy. That said, framing religious economies – and religious marketplaces – within the putative boundaries of the state is increasingly anachronistic as the sociology of religion responds to the fact that "if we want to make sense of religion today… we simply must think of religions more as cultural systems and less as religious markets" (Casanova 2000:427; see also Vásquez 2008; Cadge et al. 2011; Cornwall 2011; Edgell 2012; Woods 2018a). Whilst the state may be the foremost regulator of religion at the national level, its regulatory efficacy is relative to other factors. These factors vary, but are most problematic when local actors – including religious groups – are embedded within international systems of influence. The supply-side approach of religious economy helpfully locates religion within organisational and state-centred regulatory dynamics (Finke and Stark 1992; Finke and Iannaccone 1993), but, until relatively recently, has tended not to locate religious groups within such international systems of influence. In response, then, to Wuthnow and Offutt's (2008:209) observation that "religion is not only instantiated in local communities and national societies, but is also linked with networks that span societal borders", I explore how networks can mediate the interplay between local religious economies and global religious systems.

With these ideas in mind, this paper advances a new understanding of how religious regulation can be relativised by transnational religious influences. By engaging with Grim and Finke's (2006:6) observation that "some of the most powerful effects of religious regulation have been on the practice of religion itself", I explore the ways in which regulation can bring about new patterns of resource acquisition. I view 'regulation' as the power to restrict the ability of religious groups to access the resources (such as funds, land, public

presence, other forms of symbolic capital, and, of course, people) that they need in order to operate and grow. These restrictions can be understood as derivative of normative understandings of regulation, which tend to focus on the denial – or at least the restriction – of religious freedoms (Mataic 2018). By providing access to extra-territorial resources that can be leveraged to counteract regulatory power, transnational religious networks can cause religious economies to become porous; that is, when territorially-dispersed religious players on both the supply and demand sides of the resource equation seek each other out in order to overcome the *effects* of regulation. Transnational religious networks are the diffuse webs of formal and informal connections between religious organisations operating in territorially-distinct religious marketplaces (after Beyer 1998). Resources flow through these networks, which can disrupt the interplay between religious regulation and competitive outcomes. I illustrate these ideas through an empirical focus on the influence of Singapore-based churches on the religious marketplace of China. By leveraging a shared Chinese ethnicity and language, Singapore-based churches are able to develop and strengthen such networks with their China-based counterparts, and to render the regulation of religion in China less effective.

China is a paradigmatic example of a highly regulated religious marketplace, and can therefore provide insight into the challenges of regulating religion. For a long time, religion has been depicted as detrimental to socio-political stability and progress in China, and, as a result, suppressed through both formal and informal regulation. Suppression was most clearly demonstrated during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), when religious sites were closed and various other attempts were made to remove religion from China's socio-cultural landscape (see Ma et al. 2019). Religious tolerance was formally reinstated in 1982, yet the practice of religion remains severely restricted, as the government "proscribes proselytizing

outside of approved religious premises, and directs that atheist propaganda must be carried out unremittingly, but not inside religious venues" (Yang 2006:101). Despite such concessions, the operations of religious groups continue to be highly regulated, and public displays of religious identification frowned upon. Indeed, Finke et al. (2017:725) argue that the formal registration of religious groups in China is "clearly used as a mechanism for government control", which suggests that informal forms of religious praxis are strategies through which control can be circumvented. By seeking greater – and more critical – understanding of the scope and efficacy of such regulations, this paper thus contributes to a small but growing body of research that considers the influence of overseas Chinese Christian communities in promoting religiously-motivated 'transnational activism' within China (e.g. Cheong and Poon 2009; Lau 2017; Wang 2018). In doing so, and in linking the religious marketplace of China to that of Singapore, it also offers an alternative perspective that goes beyond the US-centricity of religious economy theorisation (Wuthnow and Offutt 2008).

This paper is divided into three sections. The first takes stock of existing approaches to religious economy, focussing specifically on existing understandings of religious regulation and territoriality. The second draws on learnings from transnational studies and geography to show how sensitivity to the effects of boundaries and scale can help bring about a reframing of the theory. The third section provides an overview of the methodology, and then draws on empirical data to show how an understanding of the transnational religious networks that are forged between churches in Singapore and China underpins the need for religious regulation to be rethought. To conclude, I propose avenues for further research.

Evolving Conceptual Framings of Religious Economy

Religious economy was formulated with a specific purpose in mind: to theorise religious vitality in the US, and, in doing so, to provide a counterpoint to the Eurocentric secularisation thesis. As a rebuttal of prevailing orthodoxies, it became the cornerstone of the 'new' paradigm in the sociology of religion (Finke and Stark 1988, 1989, 1992; Warner 1993; Stark and Iannaccone 1994; Finke 1997; Gill 2001; see also Bruce 2000, 2002). These oppositional origins are important, as they reveal the motivations and biases that are embedded with the conceptual framing of religious economy, and the territorially-confined nature of its original claim to be a 'general' theory of religion (Stark and Bainbridge 1987). Conceptually, religious economy attempts to explain the interplay between religious regulation, religious pluralism and inter-religious competition. 'Normative' models of religious economy (Woods 2018a) posit that "to the extent that pluralism or regulation are adequate inferential measures of competition, the overall level of religiousness will be higher where pluralism is greater or where regulation is lower" (Stark and Finke 2000:219; see also Finke and Stark 1988, 1989; Fox and Tabory 2008). The regulation of religion is therefore believed to play a pivotal role in determining the growth or decline of religious groups within a given marketplace.

Over the years, this framework has been applied to various religious marketplaces around the world. It has been challenged when applied to the US (Breault 1989; Olson 1999; Voas et al. 2002), and to certain European markets, such as the UK (Bruce 2000, 2003, 2013; Voas and Crockett 2005; Crockett and Voas 2006; Voas 2006); and has been adapted to explain religious changes in former Soviet Republics (Froese and Pfaff 2001; Froese 2004a, 2004b; Sarkissian 2009), China (Yang 2005, 2006, 2010), Sri Lanka (Woods 2012a) and Singapore (Woods 2018a). These challenges and adaptations have served to highlight the shortcomings of normative framings of religious economy, with Voas et al. (2002:212; see also Olson 1999) asserting that "there is no compelling evidence that religious pluralism has any effect

on religious participation". In response, more critical and expansive theoretical directions have been forged, which build on the premise that "restrictions change how organizations operate and alter the structure of a market" (Finke 2013:305). For example, recent work has explored how restricted access to religious space in Singapore can lead to practices of spatial and organisational boundary-crossing amongst the fastest-growing religious groups (Kong and Woods 2016; Woods 2018a, 2019). In this case, the regulation of religious space causes religious groups to operate through secular spaces, and as secular organisations, respectively.

Building on these ideas, this paper calls for a rethinking of the effects of regulation on religious marketplaces. Understandings of regulation have expanded over the past decade or so, with research exploring the effects of non-state regulatory agents, such as society and religious 'cartels', and their respective roles in "determining market dynamics" (Woods 2012a:205; after Grim and Finke 2006). In order to develop these understandings of religious regulation further, I build on Finke and Martin's (2014:690) observation that "religious institutions are in competition for resources, including the resources of the state", and propose that regulation is the extent to which regulators control access to the resources that religious groups need in order to operate and grow. Whilst I agree that "regulated religions will face increased entry and operating costs and will not compete on equal footing with religion condoned by the state" (Grime and Finke 2007:636; see also Olson 1999), I contend that they can remain agentic due to the extent to which they are embedded within networks of transnational religious influence, and are therefore able to leverage resources from outside a religious marketplace. Whilst past work has shown how missionary activity is often more "productive" in areas where levels of inter-religious competition are higher (Gallego and Woodberry 2010; see also Sarkissian 2009; Woodberry 2012), I add that the extra resources from missionary activities can also be more needed in areas where the regulation of religion

is higher; or, in other words, where there is either greater competition for resources, or where access to resources is locally restricted.

By enabling access to extraneous resources, transnational religious networks can therefore be seen to disrupt the regulatory power of the state. Disruption can have potentially profound consequences for religious economy theorising, as it *decouples* the demand for, and supply of, religion from the effects of regulation. This idea of decoupling provides an important point of departure from existing understandings of the interplay between religious regulation and the supply of/demand for religion, which tend to be synchronous. This is shown, for example, in Froese (2004b) and Sarkissian's (2009) explorations of the ebb and flow of local and foreign religious groups in response to a changeable regulatory context of post-Soviet Russia/Eastern Europe. Transnational religious networks can therefore foreground new understandings of the antagonistic formations of, and alliances between, religion, the state and society in the contemporary world.

My definition of resources takes Iannaccone et al.'s (1995) initial delineation of time and money as the most important factors for organisational growth, and expands it to include the tangible and intangible inputs needed to facilitate *both* the operation *and* growth of religious groups. They can range from 'foundational' inputs such as access to capital, land and trained clergy that are needed to establish and sustain an organisation, to more organisation-specific 'differential' inputs such as access to specialised equipment, ideas and skills that can create competitive advantages. Importantly, resources can come from various sources, some of which are easier to regulate than others. These include the resources of the state (easier), to those originating from outside the boundaries used to demarcate the extent of the regulatory power of the state (harder). The value of this more conceptual understanding of regulation is

that it can move the discourse beyond the idiosyncrasies of specific religious marketplaces (and their regulatory frameworks), and embrace cross-border challenges to state power. Put differently, whilst regulation can lead to a strengthening of boundaries, it does not necessarily result in boundaries becoming any less liable to crossing by extra-territorial actors. This dynamic underpins the porosity of religious economies, which I elaborate on below.

Whilst the developments described above have helped to localise the theory in response to global variance, they still tend to be framed by the putative boundaries of the country (or marketplace) of application. They replicate the discursive parochialism of religious economy rather than challenge it, and "accept unreflectively the politically defined unit of the modern state to act as proxy for the discipline's core concept, society" (Beyer 2003:153). Recently, however, these assumptions have started to be questioned. Mataic (2018:221), for example, has demonstrated how "governmental restrictions on religious are spatially clustered, not independent from neighbouring countries, and that increases in a country's level of [religious] restrictions reflect similar changes in bordering countries". By recognising the interlinked, and mutually-constitutive nature, of religious marketplaces, we can begin to see how they are no longer contiguous with the territorial boundaries of the state (or other regulatory body), but can be trans-territorial as well. Continuing this theoretical trajectory, I argue that coupling state and society has increasingly been viewed as problematic, as the state is territorially static, whereas people are constantly on the move. Religion moves with people and is formalised through organisation, meaning the global movement and settlement of people drives the circulation and appropriation of religion (Kong and Woods 2018). In view of the fact that "we miss seeing the larger picture and the relationships among these various processes… by considering each in isolation from the others" (Wuthnow and Offutt

2008:210; see also Mataic 2018), these observations have direct implications for the workings and theorisation of religious economies in the contemporary world.

Porous Religious Economies in a Globalised World

Normative understandings of religious economy are based on the premise that religions are fixed within a given territory. In a globalised world of movement and intermixing, such an assumption is anachronistic, and can be seen to limit the theoretical development of religious economy. This oversight has not gone unnoticed. In a broad sense, Cadge et al. (2011:44) argue, "rather than assuming that religious life stays primarily within contained spaces… we might gain analytic purchase by starting from the assumption of circulation and connection", whilst, in a more specific sense, Mataic (2018:221) observes how religious economy theorisations continue to "isolate countries from the influence of factors outside a country's border". Indeed, this latter observation can be read as a recent reminder of Grim and Finke's (2006:2) more enduring criticism that "cross-national research on religion has been lacking". Religion is a function of the people that identify with it, meaning the movement of people induces the movement of religion. Religion is not bounded by territory, but the presence of religion *within* territory is an outcome of the fact that "religious bodies, objects, and ideas are often and unabashedly on the move, skilfully ignoring and circumventing national boundaries" (Cadge et al. 2011:44; see also Vásquez 2008; Finke 2013; Kong and Woods 2018). For example, Crockett and Voas (2006:579; see also Voas and Fleischmann 2012) describe migrants in the UK as "far more religiously active than the national average" and, are therefore depicted as an important 'modulator' that counterbalances the effects of more widespread religious decline. This example reveals how the movement of religion can undermine the "solid territorial embeddedness of all social phenomena under the sovereign

jurisdiction of the state", and instead "dissolve [it] into more fluid conditions" (Casanova 2000:429; see also Basch et al. 1994). This section explores these ideas in more detail, first by identifying the enduring legacy of methodological nationalism on the development of sociological theory, and then by considering how scalar sensitivity can lead to a rethinking of the state's regulatory power.

Methodological Nationalism and the Overcoming of Boundaries

For a long time, sociological theorising has privileged the nation-state as the foremost 'container' of society, and, by extension, religion as well. Often, this has been to the exclusion of other patterns of socio-cultural formation. Whilst the realities of a globalised world have disrupted such logic, its legacies remain. Conflating society and nation-state has been described as 'methodological nationalism' as it reflects "an intellectual orientation that assumes national borders to be the natural unit of study, equates society with the nation-state, and conflates national interests with the purposes of social science" (Glick Schiller 2005:440; see also Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2003; Glick Schiller et al. 2006). As an American counterpoint to secularisation theory, religious economy is an example of methodological nationalism in practice. It reflects the 'classical' approach to sociological theory-building that assumes a "culturally cohesive and sequestered national society" (Robertson 1990:16; see also Appadurai 1996) that is contained within the borders of a nation-state. Ironically, however, the enduring territoriality of religious economy evokes the distinctly European merging of church and state, which results in monopolistic claims to territory (after Weber 1978; see also Sarkissian 2009). Indeed, Grim and Finke (2007:635) use this logic to critique Huntington's (1996) 'clash of civilizations' thesis for assuming that "religions are intrinsically tied to specific societies and cultures" and thus ignoring the complexity of

boundary-(un)making processes. Whilst the state invariably plays *a* role in determining religious praxis, framing religion within the boundaries of the nation-state is "outmoded and increasingly irrelevant" (Casanova 2000:425) in a world defined by transnational networks of religious influence.

As a counterpoint to methodological nationalism, transnational perspectives can help to reconcile the epistemological limitations of religious economy. This can be done by "jettison[ing] the assumption that the nation-state is the natural, logical container where social life takes place and begi[nning] instead with a world with no set borders and boundaries" (Levitt 2007:105). Assuming a world without preconceived boundaries can refocus analysis on where new boundaries are being created, by whom, and for what purposes, and, in doing so, will lead to a repositioning of the state within global networks of power and influence. The state may set the terms of religious competition by privileging one religion at the expense of others (monopoly), or above others (oligopoly), or not (free market), but its regulatory power will always be relativised by the global circulation of people, ideas and capital. As Casanova (2000:425) puts it: "by undermining the territorially-based fusion of state, market, nation, and civil society, globalization also undermines the model of territorially based national religion or culture". Beyond 'undermin[ing]' the territorial basis of religious marketplaces, globalisation also brings about "various ambiguities and is fraught with contestation of all sorts" (Beyer 2003:151). This, in turn, serves to undermine the mechanistic relationship between religious regulation and competition upon which existing understandings of religious economy are based. Through processes of boundary-crossing, transnational religious networks play an integral role in undermining such a relationship, and in subverting regulatory restrictions on religious praxis.

Whilst the theory of religious economy has hitherto been framed by the territorial boundaries of the nation-state, processes of globalisation have, over many decades, led to a critical re-evaluation of the strength and porosity of such boundaries. Globalisation has, therefore, created a new reality that is based on the understanding that "all boundaries are socially structured and socially reproduced" (Chase-Dunn and Grimes 1995:389). As much as religious economies are 'bounded' by the regulatory power of the state, so too can such boundaries be crossed by extra-state forces. Reinterpreting the boundaries of the religious economy from a transnational perspective has profound implications for understanding the workings and outcomes of religious marketplaces. As Wuthnow and Offutt (2008:209) put it, "although [religion] exists in local communities and is distinctively influenced by a national cultural and political context, it has connections with the wider world and is influenced by these relations". Specifically, transnational perspectives recognise how "globalization limits and relativizes state sovereignty; [it] frees [religious] market[s] and civil society from its territorial-juridical embeddedness in state and nation" (Casanova 2000:423; see also Robbins 2003, 2004). This relativised interpretation of state sovereignty calls into question its efficacy as the determining regulator of religion – not least because transnationalism, by definition, theorises the "*flows* of people, goods, information, and other resources across national boundaries" (Wuthnow and Offutt 2008:211, original emphasis) – and situates the state within a much broader assemblage of influences that implicate the day-to-day workings of religious groups.

Scalar Dynamism and Hierarchies of Power

Understanding the socially constructed nature of boundaries will sensitise religious economy to the implications of the level at which analysis is undertaken, and how different levels of

analysis can lead to different understandings of religious marketplaces around the world. As the problem of methodological nationalism suggests, scale is often conceptualised in terms that are either fixed, or that privilege one scale of analysis over another. Generally speaking, the "national and global have achieved a privileged status as the geographical scales at which politics is said to be determined" (Tan-Mullins et al. 2007:329), with theories like religious economy reflecting a national level, and others – Wallerstein's (1987) world systems theory, for instance – reflecting a global one. Importantly, moving up the scalar hierarchy – from the local to the global – has traditionally been shown to be equated with higher degrees of secularisation, with Robertson (1985:348) going so far as to suggest that world systems theory "represents the absolute high point of the secularization thesis". Such scalar exclusivity is often, however, a distortion of reality, and theory should reflect a degree of scalar dynamism rather than stasis. Dynamism considers the "intersection of processes *across* scales rather than the singular dominance of one particular scale" (Tan-Mullins et al. 2007:329, emphasis added; cf. Beyer 2003). Sensitivity to scalar dynamism will encourage research to embrace the full complexity of hierarchies of power and influence that arise at the confluence of forces operating at different scalar logics. In terms of religious economy, scalar dynamism will reveal how power does not just reside within the state or religious monopolies, but can be subverted and reproduced by extraneous religious forces as well. In doing so, the discourse can be expanded by exploring how, when it comes to the regulation of religion, "the issue of greater or lesser monopoly is relevant but not the most crucial one" (Casanova 2000:427).

Reframing religious economy in scalar terms provides recourse to the observation that "the capacity of religion to thrive in rationalized environments is underestimated" (Bush 2007:1649), and therefore provides a productive counterpoint to the scalar fixity that has

limited the development of religious economy theorisation. Through relativisation, a situation is realised in which "the equation is no longer simple, as the interplay between actors is cross-scalar and inter-group", which in turn necessitates the "theorization of a dynamic and fluid interaction between different groups… who may be situated at particular scales but who act or operate across scales" (Tan-Mullins et al. 2007:329). Globalisation is paradoxical in that it simultaneously equalises through relativisation, yet disequalises through integration. In more applied terms, what this means is that global forces help to relativise the state-led regulation of religion (thus serving to equalise), but in doing so they also reproduce new hierarchies of power that are contingent upon the extent to which a religious group is globally integrated. Global integration can have emancipatory effects for religious groups that may be marginalised within a religious marketplace, but it can also cause such groups to be liable to new logics of regulation and competition. Importantly, therefore, the globalisation of religion does not nullify the role of the state; it relativises it. As Vásquez (2008:173) recognises, "one of the distinctive aspects of contemporary mobile religion is its relation to the restructured but still binding modern nation-state". The principles of religious economy ground the effects of global religion in context. Such grounding provides a new, "more complex and, arguably, more compelling" (Howell 2003:223) way of understanding how transnational religious networks can alter the dynamics of religious marketplaces at the local level by embedding them within global systems of competition, power and influence.

Problematising the Regulation of China's Religious Marketplace

As much as religious organisations are individually located within specific religious marketplaces, so too can they be connected to other religious organisations located in other religious marketplaces. Not only that, but such connections do not just exist between

organisations, but between individuals and other, religiously-motivated groups (such as charities and non-governmental organisations) as well. These connections become networks when they are leveraged for a specific purpose, and to yield a desired outcome. Transnational religious influence is therefore the highest-level, and most generalisable outcome of such networks (Marshall-Fratani 1998; Haynes 2001). Networks are inherently agentic as they enable the supply of, and demand for, religion to become decoupled from the regulatory prescriptions of a given context; agency can be translated into competitive advantage (or, at least, resilience) within a religious marketplace. They can be used to subvert the regulatory power of the state, or to compete against the hegemonic influence of religious monopolies. Religious networks can therefore yield a variety of outcomes. By undermining the regulatory prescriptions of the state, the effects of regulation become more nuanced. Existing models of religious economy have theorised how "restrictions change the incentives and opportunities both for religious producers and for consumers", exploring specifically how "at the organizational and market level, the restrictions change how organizations operate and alter the structure of the market" (Finke 2013:305). I do not dispute these claims, but I do contend that the 'structure' of a market is not just a function of influences from within, but of those from without as well.

Methodology and empirical context

To validate these ideas, the subsections that follow draw on qualitative data from Singapore-based Christians to show how transnational religious influence is used to overcome the regulation of religion in China. Qualitative approaches are still relatively novel amongst religious economy theorists, yet their value is that they help to reveal not just the "importance of cultural influences, other religions, and other organizations for regulating religion" (Grim

and Finke 2006:5; see also Woods 2012a, 2018a, 2019), but cross-border, territorially-removed actors as well. Indeed, such value is most pronounced when considering cross-border religious phenomena, as "transnational religious connections cannot be summarized in numeric indices" (Wuthnow and Offutt 2008:213). Qualitative approaches also hold value when studying the religious marketplace of China, as accurate quantitative datasets are not forthcoming. Indeed, the problem of data 'distortion' (Olson 1999) is notable in China, especially given the self-censorship that can occur when reporting (illicit) religious activity. For example, it is claimed that there are approximately 500 'officially registered' South Korean missionaries in China, yet alternative sources claim that the actual number is over 2,000 (*Christianity Today* 08.03.17). Qualitative data may lack the scalability of quantitative data, but their value is that they can reveal patterns of informal praxis and regulatory subversion at play.

The data are derived from a wide-ranging project into the lives of Christian migrants in Singapore. Fieldwork was conducted between November 2017 and February 2018, and consisted of 116 in-depth interviews with three overlapping sampling groups: (1) migrants from six Asian countries (Burma, China, India, Indonesia, the Philippines and South Korea); (2) Singaporean Christians, and; (3) Singapore-based Christian clergy and church workers. All interviews were conducted in Singapore, in either English or Mandarin, and lasted 45-60 minutes. All interviews were audio recorded, transcribed and coded for themes. The interviews primarily focussed on the role of the church in helping Christian migrants integrate into Singapore, but also considered the ways in which Singapore-based churches forge ties with churches based in migrant-sending countries, and with migrants themselves. The data presented below are derived from each of the three sampling groups, and focus specifically on the Chinese migrant community (26 interviews), and the ways in which

Singapore-based churches (22 interviews) and Singaporean churchgoers (28 interviews) work with China-based churches. This focus is intentional. China presents a paradigmatic example of a highly regulated religious economy (Yang 2005, 2006, 2010), but is also a country that has strong cultural, social and economic ties with Singapore. Indeed, given that 74.3% of Singapore's resident population is ethnically Chinese (SingStat 2017), it is understandable that many Singapore-based churches focus their missionary efforts on China. These efforts involve both direct intervention (i.e. sending church members to China for missionary purposes), and more indirect influencing (i.e. working through Chinese members of the congregation, or through partner organisations located in China). Accordingly, the data provide insight into how Singapore-based churches develop and sustain transnational religious networks with their China-based counterparts, and how such networks help subvert the strict regulations that restrict the praxis and growth of religion in China.

China's religious marketplace can be conceptualised as a secular/atheist monopoly whereby only a restricted number of religious groups are officially recognised by the government. Most are outlawed, and many operate in what Yang (2006) describes as a 'grey' market that is defined by informal praxis, underground operation and "fuzzy and fluid" (Grim and Finke 2007:639) boundaries. At a general level, religious "practice and organization must be restricted for the purpose of maintaining social harmony" (Yang 2013:11), with the price for operating as an unregistered group, or in ways that defy government restrictions, purportedly resulting in "beating, jail, fines, destruction of property and other horrific abuses" (Homer 2010:55). The point is that religion in general is closely regulated, and often subject to "coercive and punitive state action" (Bays 2003:492; see also Grim and Finke 2007; Finke and Martin 2014; Yang 2018). At a more granular level, however, there is a variability with which these restrictions are applied, with Buddhist groups being more likely to be

accommodated than their Christian or Muslim counterparts (Ashiwa and Wank 2006). In many respects, these accommodations are underpinned by geopolitical logics, as Buddhism provides a link that can be used to foster greater cooperation within Greater China in general, and between China and Taiwan more specifically (Ashiwa and Wank 2005; Laliberté 2011, 2013). In this sense, understanding the intersecting dynamics of the state's power to regulate registered religious groups operating in China (especially those deemed unfavourable, such as Christian); the opening up of China's market economy to outside economic, social and cultural influences; and the ongoing operations of foreign religious groups in China provides a fertile avenue of theoretical expansion. Specifically, exploring how these dynamics moderate each other can help to reveal the effects of market and regulatory porosity on the growth and decline of religious groups within religious marketplaces.

The restrictions on religious praxis translate to restricted access to the resources needed to support organisational growth. In China, resources such as people, skills, ideas and funds are noticeably lacking, meaning networks of transnational religious linkages play an important role in providing access to extraneous resources. Singapore-based churches readily meet this need, as many have congregations that are majority ethnically Chinese, and many have recently started to pursue more 'export-oriented' models of evangelical outreach (*Reuters* 06.03.14; see also Gallego and Woodberry 2010; Woodberry 2012; Kong and Woods 2019). In this sense, these networks constitute a more nuanced interpretation of what Ong and Nonini (1997) term "modern Chinese transnationalism", whereby Chinese Buddhism is exported to the world (Ashiwa and Wank 2005). Rather, they reflect Singapore's emerging status as a "religious hub" (Poon et al. 2012:1970) for the spread of religion throughout Asia and beyond. The significance of such ethno-cultural congruence is not to be underestimated, given recent revisions to the regulation of religious affairs in China, the shift towards a

"sinicization" of Christianity, and the associated tightening of restrictions on outside (or non-Chinese) religious influence (*Christianity Today* 20.03.19). With these contextual factors in mind, the following subsections explore how the formation of transnational religious networks enable Singapore-based churches to exert influence in China's religious marketplace, and how competing claims to territory can lead to the subversion of religious regulation.

Migration and the Movement of Religion

Singapore has a majority ethnically Chinese population, as well as a large population of migrants from mainland China. These two factors are self-reinforcing, meaning the ethno-cultural congruence identified above can facilitate the flow of people between China and Singapore (and vice versa). In turn, this can lead to the formation and strengthening of socio-religious networks between the different Chinese communities in Singapore, and, by extension, between Singapore and China. Whilst the Singapore government does not release statistics pertaining to the inflow and outflow of migrants from different countries to and from Singapore, Liu (2014; see also Kong and Woods 2019) estimates that more than 400,000 Chinese migrants have settled in Singapore – a country of now just under six million people – since the early 1990s. Singapore-based Chinese migrants provide a focus of Christian outreach efforts, as their connections to China – and, in most cases, their eventual return to China – facilitates the creation, maintenance and strengthening of transnational religious networks over time. For example, the Singaporean pastor of a Chinese foreign

worker[1] ministry estimated that over the past few years "there are 2,000 to 3,000 people going back to China after baptising them", with a youth pastor going on to explain how such dedicated migrant ministries are intended to "actually build them up strong so when they go back to China, they are able to start a community over there as well". The conversion of Chinese migrants to Christianity, coupled with their eventual return to China, provides a steady supply of Christians to China's religious marketplace, and, over time (and, eventually, generations) can be seen to have a modulating effect on religious restrictions in China (after Crockett and Voas 2006). Whilst return migration reveals a passive and, perhaps, circumstantial form of outside influence on China's religious marketplace, it also provides tangible points of leverage from which Singapore-based churches can start to build more organisationally-oriented, and thus influential, networks. The same pastor of the Chinese foreign worker ministry went on to describe the ongoing involvement of the church in the lives of return migrants:

> We ask them [return migrants], 'why don't you get together with three, five people to start a fellowship [in China]?'… [In the] last few years, one of the church, I don't know which part of China, started exactly what we do down here [in Singapore]. They have ice-breaking [events], we supply them food and drinks and sing songs, and fellowship. Exactly our model.

Involvement like this was especially strong amongst dedicated Chinese migrant churches in Singapore. An attendee of one such church described how her churches' "advantage is that

[1] In Singapore, the term 'foreign workers' often refers to low-skilled or manual workers that typically come from China or the Indian subcontinent on fixed-term contracts of 1-2 years.

we are all mainland Chinese, we have experience here and we all have connections back to China, and so our church basically reach those people from mainland China from here". She went on to explain how the pastor of the church – who himself was from mainland China – would actively encourage such connections, as he "has a lot of connecting with the pastors in China, so he will suggest the people [i.e. return migrants] to the church [in China] … They always do that". In this case, not only do return migrants serve to bolster the presence of religious minorities, but they also act as important nodes in the web of connections that lead to the forging of transnational religious networks.

Transnational Religious Influences

Transnational religious networks enable religious groups embedded within local religious marketplaces to access extraneous resources, and, in doing so, to generate competitive advantages. As Iannaccone et al. (1995:706) note, "a religious organization cannot survive, much less grow, unless it obtains sufficient resources from the environment". When such resources are not forthcoming, organisations are forced to look beyond the immediate 'environment', with territorially-removed suppliers providing access to a new marketplace from which resources can be obtained. Whilst the idea of 'external support' is not necessarily new (Iannaccone et al. 1995), the fact that such support can originate from outside a given religious marketplace can affect the workings of a religious economy in new, and potentially disruptive ways. This dynamic is, by now, pervasive, and is amplified when networks connect groups in less developed countries to those in more developed countries, or when networks connect groups in relatively deregulated marketplaces to those in more regulated marketplaces.

With these ideas in mind, the influence of transnational religious networks tends to be greater in localities where the demand for resources is higher. This logic applies to both the demand and supply sides of the resource equation. On the demand side, people will be more likely to look beyond their immediate environment for employment, meaning the demand for resources can lead to (international) migration. In many respects, this explains the inflow (and return outflow) of Chinese foreign workers into Singapore. In addition, religious groups operating in such areas will be more likely to look beyond their immediate environments for resources, thus reflecting a degree of "openness" to outside influence. On the supply side, outside religious groups have become adept at searching for, and aligning themselves with, such openings, and for working through return migrants. Accordingly, transnational religious networks tend to be most effective when both the demand and supply sides of the resource equation are aligned. A Singaporean pastor illuminated this dynamic when he explained in a general sense how his church supports a web of churches located in other countries in Southeast Asia and China:

> In every pioneering group, resources is a key thing – financial resources, training, we train the people, looking for places, venues. Most of them started from their homes, after that they go to the community hall… We will help them, little by little, until they are established… The initial period, we are so close to them and they are dependent on us for resources and our commitment will play a major part.

Resources provide tangible forms of support that may directly or indirectly influence religious competitiveness and growth. Direct influences range from the financing of operations, to the provision of goods (such as bibles, musical and audio equipment, books and other religious paraphernalia). Indirect influences include "social ministries" that involve

ostensibly non-religious engagement with society – through, for example, the provision of education, healthcare or other forms of socio-economic support. In some contexts, indirect influences can be provided by religious organisations themselves, whereas in other contexts, like China, they must operate through partner organisations or in a more discrete capacity in order to avoid surveillance (see below). Indeed, these indirect influences are often more effective in contexts in which the regulation of religion is extreme, and the provision of direct influence may be subject to surveillance and curtailment (see Woods 2013, 2018b for discussion of the Sri Lanka case). Beyond the provision of tangible resources, transnational religious networks are also deployed to generate more intangible forms of advantage as well. These can include the training of clergy, and the imparting of softer skills related to organisational management that may not necessarily be available within a given religious marketplace. The founder of the Chinese migrant church in Singapore, introduced above, explained how:

> Now we focus on restructuring the church in China. Because what is the good point of Singapore churches – they are more organised, everything is in order, so what do we do? Here, we learnt a lot of things about organisation, especially the megachurches, they taught us a lot of management skills. So, we know how to organise a church.

In this case, the networks connecting his church in Singapore with those in China enable the flow of knowledge and 'management skills' needed to facilitate church growth. This, combined with more tangible forms of resource and the flow of return migrants, serves to relativise the regulatory restrictions on church growth in China, and provides the resources needed to support organisational growth. The circulation of power through transnational religious networks reveals how "power is everywhere… it comes from everywhere"

(Foucault 1978:93), and its application often circumvents the workings of the regulatory role of the state. Existing understandings of religious economy emphasise how the regulatory prescriptions of the state can serve to restrict competition by "determin[ing] who can enter" a religious market, and "inflat[ing] operating costs" (Finke 2013:306) for groups within a religious marketplace. Yet, transnational religious networks enable groups to circumvent such restrictions by providing new channels of access, and, in doing so, can alter the terms of competition within a marketplace. Transnational networks therefore reveal how it is not just religious groups that are territorially-embedded within a religious marketplace that are implicated within a religious economy, but territorially-removed ones as well. In other words, extra-territorial groups make claims to domestic religious marketplaces, causing competition to occur not just *within* marketplaces, but also *between* them. Competition can take various forms, but at the most generalisable level it involves competing claims to territory. By claiming territory, extra-territorial groups not only cross boundaries, but help to undermine them as well.

Competing Claims to Territory

Transnational religious networks enable the creation and circulation of power, and thus pose a challenge to territorially-defined understandings of the regulation of religion. Extra-territorial religious groups often make symbolic claims to religious marketplaces, which are enshrined in the Christian edict to 'make disciples of all nations[2]', as ideological motivation for transnational efforts that undermine nation-state regulation. Beyond the forging of networks, Singapore-based churches also engage in ideological forms of outreach into new

[2] These are the words of the resurrected Christ, and are known as 'The Great Commission'.

marketplaces, which often provide the motivation for tangible involvement in a given marketplace. A Singaporean member of City Harvest Church – one of Singapore's largest megachurches, with a congregation in excess of 25,000 (Poon et al. 2012) – recalled:

> We have the China map [at church] where we draw out different regions … Every zone adopted a province in China. 'Adopted' means we assign ourselves to pray over the province and to have mission trips to the province and to get to know people who are from that province and are staying in Singapore now, and to reach out to them.

Bringing back into consideration the scalar perspective discussed above, we can begin to see how the desire to forge transnational religious networks – and thus to impart transnational religious influence on a religious marketplace – can cause marketplaces to become interconnected, which in turn can cause regulations to be interpreted in a more relative light. The territorial claims made through transnational religious networks have been described as 'dissident geopolitics' (Woods 2012a), whereby individuals are encouraged to subvert the regulatory power of the state in the pursuit of higher territorial ambitions. Thus, whilst the state often seeks to enforce boundaries by employing strategies of religious protectionism via its regulatory regime, transnational religious networks can cause boundaries to be reinterpreted and, therefore, crossed. Often, this involves creating opportunities for domestic players to access resources that they may not otherwise be able to. For example, to overcome the effects of Internet censorship in China, Cheong and Poon (2009:201) show how diasporic Chinese Christian communities serve as "valuable transnational "proxy Internet users" on behalf of their counterparts in China who require religious materials that are either unavailable or cannot be freely accessed or downloaded". Networks like these cause

marketplaces to become interconnected, which in turn can enable religious regulations to be subverted.

Subverting Religious Regulations

By facilitating the flow of resources between religious marketplaces, transnational religious networks serve to equip locally-embedded organisations with the support needed to effectively remove their actors – whether they are return migrants, missionaries, or religiously-motivated relief organisations – from the regulatory prescriptions of the religious economy in which they are embedded. Simply put, such networks encourage independence and flexibility in religious praxis. Two examples support the point. In the first case, a member of a Chinese migrant church in Singapore explained how:

> Our pastor constantly go back to China to plant new churches and plant new cell groups, small groups and also churches. Because, yeah, it's also one of the objectives… [The mission of] our church is that we bring [Christianity] back to China, because here we have much more resources than China… [our pastor] constantly brought experience or something like that to China.

In this case, the Chinese pastor uses the fact that he is territorially removed from China's religious economy to influence it from his base in Singapore. Because he is not directly embedded within China's religious economy, he is able to wield his influence as an ambiguous insider (a Chinese national)-cum-outsider (being territorially removed from China) status to subvert regulatory prescription on religious praxis. The second case is a reversal of this logic, and involves a Singaporean youth pastor describing how he would use

his equally ambiguous outsider (a territorially-removed Singaporean)-cum-insider (as ethnically Chinese) status to forge relationships with people in China. In turn, this would enable him to facilitate the spread of religion:

> China is not very open to all these [religious] things… We actually, through networking, friends of friends, or through recommendations, or through approaching people in the streets [in China] talk to them about God… I say that I am actually here for cultural exchange, so because of that they will be open. They are quite open to know Singaporeans… Then, after that, we invite them to Christian activities.

As these two examples suggest, territorially-removed influences tend to operate in ways that are undeterred by the regulations of a religious marketplace. They can introduce creative and often tenacious strategies of religious praxis that may – to greater or lesser degrees – be transplanted from one religious marketplace to another. In the Chinese context, this involves operating in a way that largely ignores the fact that the regulatory context "proscribes proselytizing outside of approved religious premises" (Yang 2006:101; see also Yang and Tamney 2006; Woods 2012b; Yang 2013). In recognition of such restrictions, the same Singaporean youth pastor explained how, when working in Beijing:

> We go to the campuses [of universities] or go to the street to talk to them about Singapore or China… [A] challenge [is] the location, where to have our gatherings. Because we cannot have it in the open, definitely. Sometimes we have it in K-Box [karaoke studio], so it's quite noisy… We really go everywhere, like hotel rooms, people's houses, cafés also. Of course, we try not to be in the public area.

Here we can see how the private spaces of the karaoke studio, the hotel, the home and cafés are used to avoid surveillance, and to blend into the everyday rhythms of life in China (after Yang 2005). Once a community of believers had been formed, they would try and scale-up their operations, organising larger "camps" that reflect the formalisation of organisation and belief. These strategies of spatial subversion are designed to create opportunities for collective gathering and the formation of community. However, the success of such modes of operation can also, ironically, serve to undermine them. He went on to explain how, on one occasion "we were having a church camp and the authorities came in and they disbanded us" which resulted in him being held and questioned in a police station, and then deported from China. Subsequent attempts to return to China were denied as "our records are there, our passport, our IC [identity card] number", meaning "when I went back [to China] in April, they actually deported me back… they don't allow me to go into China". In response, the church that he represents redeployed him within the organisation: "I am already replaced, I am no longer in the China department". Being caught subverting the restrictions related to the practice of religion in China gave the Chinese government reason to respond with another type of restriction: they denied the missionary access to China's religious marketplace by hardening the territorial borders of the marketplace, and thus mitigating against the effects of transnational religious influence (Grim and Finke 2007). The efficacy of such a response is, however, limited by the operational and strategic flexibility of the network (as shown by the missionaries' "replacement" by his church) in order to circumvent such regulations. Such flexibility is necessary to ensure that the supply of religious influence remains decoupled from the effects of regulation, and that the network remains effective. In turn, this contributes to the relativisation of state power, and the porosity of religious marketplaces.

Porous religious economies are those that are defined by new possibilities for inter-religious, religion-state and religion-society competition and conflict. These possibilities stem from the destabilising effects of transnational religious influence (Olson 1999). In China, transnational religious networks reflect the imposition of internationally-defined understandings of religious rights and freedoms onto a generally restrictive religious marketplace (after Finke and Martin 2014). Navigating between these two logics creates tension between two different scales of operation and understanding. Porosity can therefore cause religious economies to be reframed within a more relativised schema; one that is informed by the dissident geopolitics and deterritorialised logics associated with religious belief. Transnational religious networks encourage such relativisation, as they help to create the conditions through which the regulatory power of the state can be undermined. People are integral to the formation and strengthening of these networks, as the movement of people often occurs outside of any regulatory framework for religion. It is important, therefore, for religious economy theorists to recognise the fact that the regulation of religion and the regulation of people across borders are two inter-related, but also two very different, things. Migration creates unplanned diversity (and, therefore, pluralism) within religious marketplaces, which in turn can lead to the formation of networks and the undermining of more formal, state-centred efforts to regulate religion. Existing understandings of religious economy do not account for these dynamics (see, however, Crockett and Voas 2006), despite the fact that they occur within any religious marketplace that is accessible to outsiders. By outlining the factors that contribute to such destabilisation, this paper provides a first step towards developing a more globally-integrated understanding of how religious marketplaces operate in the contemporary world.

Conclusion

This paper attempts to reframe religious economy, and thus refresh its theoretical value in a world in which the movement and mixing of religion is the norm. As a result of such processes, the state now plays a more relativised role in the regulation of religion. This underpins the theoretical shift from an understanding of religious economies as an interconnected system of factors, to a more nuanced exploration of how each factor responds to the others in specific contexts around the world. As Vásquez (2008:168) argues, "we need a set of tropes that highlight the fact that places are always interconnected and marked with crisscrossing relations of power" with transnational religious networks "allowing us to embed space and the practices of place-making in dynamic fields of domination and resistance [or, for the purposes of this paper, of influence and subversion]". Religious networks augment and strengthen existing understanding of religious economy by scaling up the discourse, and positioning religious marketplaces as territorially distinct entities within a globalised world of boundary-crossing religious practices. It advances the 'emerging' paradigm within the sociology of religion, wherein the geopolitical horizon is one that traverses scales, and integrates local, national and international forces into one framework of analysis (Woodhead 2009; Finke et al. 2017; Mataic 2018). With this in mind, there are two areas for further research.

The first is to build on the premise that a more global approach will necessarily lead to closer exploration of the role of transnational religious networks in both subverting the regulatory logics of the state, and imparting their own regulatory logics. Existing approaches tend to assume that all nation-states are "equal and sovereign actors within a global terrain" (Glick Schiller 2005:443), despite that fact that "globalization still bears the marks of its origins" (Beyer 1998:4) and that global processes often serve to exacerbate inequality at the inter- and sub-state levels. Transnational religious networks play an important – and understudied – role

in transmitting Western interests, legacies and provenance to the rest of the world, and can "obscure the extension of power of some states… into the domain of others" (Glick Schiller 2005:443; after Rudolph and Piscatori 1996). From this, there is a need to explore the impact of transnationally-oriented religious groups on religious marketplaces, and the incursions of an ethos of religious 'freedom' on marketplaces defined by restriction (after Richardson 2006; Finke and Martin 2014). Moreover, the fact that "cultural echoes often reverberate back through the transnational connections to the senders" (Wuthnow and Offutt 2008:227-228) foregrounds the need to understand the effects of operating in China on organisational vitality and growth in Singapore. Doing so will contribute to a more integrated discourse that takes porosity as both a defining feature, and starting point, for the study of religious economies in the contemporary world.

The second is to build on the premise that the global spread of religion is tied to the movement of people, which means that the regulation of religion extends to the regulation of bodies as well. This idea is clearly illustrated above by the example of the Singaporean youth pastor being deported from China, and the suggestion of "anti-globalisation" that this (very specific) example hints at. The (de)regulation of borders has significant repercussions for the structure and workings of a religious economy, and should therefore be factored into future analyses. (De)regulation plays an increasingly important proxy for the regulation of religion in a world in which the cross-border movement of people is integral to the mechanics of a religious economy. Doing so will expand the horizon of religious economy beyond its demand-side focus, and embrace supply-side concerns within one, more integrative regulatory framework.

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