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Forging alternatively sacred spaces in Singapore's integrated religious marketplace

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Abstract
This paper expands the notion of sacred space within the geographies of religion by arguing that spaces of religious praxis need to be understood in relation to the broader spatial logics within which they are embedded. Given that the spatial logics of urban environments tend to be secular and neoliberal in nature, it considers how religious groups respond to the realities of the marketplaces in which they operate by forging 'alternatively sacred' spaces. These spaces augment the appeal of religious groups in non-religious ways, thus making them more competitive players in a religious marketplace. Specifically, it explores how independent churches in Singapore create alternatively sacred spaces that are used for religious purposes, although their appeal and affective value do not accord with more traditional understandings of how sacred spaces should look, feel, or otherwise be engaged with. These spaces are designed to appeal to younger people, and to draw non-Christians to Christian spaces, and Christians to alternatively religious spaces. The extent to which they appeal to these groups provides insight into reimagination of religion under market conditions, spatial politics of value and ideological fissures between different Christian communities.

Keywords
alternatively sacred spaces, Christianity, integrated religious marketplace, Singapore, urban environments

Urban environments and the reimagination of the 'sacred' in space

The sacred is not an absolute category of spatial classification; it is an abstraction that is used to describe spaces that have qualities or associations that can be *interpreted* as 'sacred'. Whilst these interpretations are often defined hierarchically – by the legacies, traditions and instructions

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associated with formal(ised) religious praxis – so too can new interpretations be forged in response to the socio-spatial demands of the environment in which religious groups operate. These new interpretations offer a disruptive counterpoint to preconceived ideas of what sacred spaces (should) look and feel like, and how they are (or should be) engaged with. As counterpoint, these new interpretations can provide insight into the extent to which the realisation of sacredness is not based on an 'endemic' relationship with space,[1] but a negotiated outcome that is defined in response to environmental factors instead.[2,3] Whilst geographical scholarship has explored in detail how the religious and the secular, or the sacred and the profane, are negotiated within various spatial formations,[4,5,6,7] there is an ongoing need to explicate the expansion, splintering and dilution of 'sacredness' in response to the broader contexts within which these spaces are embedded. Echoing this sentiment, Jones[8] recently observed that sacred spaces are increasingly defined by 'diversity and multi-functionality', which foregrounds the need for more 'nuanced and complex understandings of the intertwining of sacrality and profanity in spatial formations'. These intertwinings are pronounced in urban environments, where restrictions on the access to and use of space, and the associated prioritisation of neoliberal, market-based logics, predominate. Urban environments 'place unique stresses and strains on religious praxis',[9] the outcomes of which provide insight into the evolution and reimagination of what sacredness can, and does, mean in the contemporary world.

My argument is that religious groups respond to the pressures of urban environments by creating 'alternatively sacred' spaces. These spaces are designed to augment the appeal of religious groups in non-religious ways, often through the reproduction of more affective types of spatially defined experience. As the secular becomes a vehicle through which affect is reproduced, the sacred can be reimagined in new, or alternative, ways. Forging alternatively sacred spaces can therefore be seen as a strategy by which religious groups become more appealing, and therefore more competitive, players within a religious marketplace. By 'religious marketplace' I refer to the interplay between the supply of, and demand for, religion within a territory. How religious groups respond to this interplay can lead to the realisation of competitive (dis)advantages, the outcomes of which can determine the growth or decline of different groups. By extension, an *integrated* religious marketplace is one in which religious groups are recognised as being implicated in, and responsive to, ostensibly 'secular' market-based logics. Through these theoretical lines of argument, this paper engages with two inter-related ideas. The first is that 'market and religion are not at war against each other'; rather, 'religion adopts market logics'[10] in order to remain competitive and relevant to society. The second is that 'the religious and the secular are in fact hybrid constructs that embrace simultaneously the sacred and profane, the transcendent and immanent'.[11] Both of these ideas highlight the 'resilience' of religion, and its 'ability to adapt'[12] to the pressures and opportunities of urban environments. They also provide insight into Casanova's[13] observation that such resilience and adaptability is rooted in the desire to 'participate in the very struggles to define and set the modern boundaries between the private and public spheres'. It provides, in other words, insight into how religion responds to secularising forces by adopting the secular and transforming the religious in response.

Whilst sociologists have made headway in understanding and theorising these dynamics through the 'market paradigm',[14,15,16,17] geographical understandings remain nascent.[18] In this sense, not only does this paper seek to expand the notion of 'sacred' space within the geographies of religion, but, in doing so, it also seeks to highlight the economic impulses that underpin such expansion, and to therefore recognise how market-based logics may inflect upon the reproduction of spaces of religion. In many respects, these contributions reflect the need for closer consideration of the marketisation of religion,[19] which provides a perspective from which debates surrounding the emergence of (post)secular religious praxes can be brought into conversation with the neoliberal logics that govern urban space.[20] These logics are acutely felt in Singapore, which provides the empirical

context through which these theoretical ideas are developed. Being an island city-state in which space is severely limited, and in which access to, and use of, space is closely regulated by the government, Singapore provides a restrictive spatial context in which religious groups must operate. Notwithstanding these constraints, recent years have witnessed a near-doubling of Singapore's Christian population, with growth being fastest amongst independent churches that operate in distinctly entrepreneurial ways. Understandings of Christian growth in Singapore currently cleave into two separate discourses. One explores the effects of spatial constraints on religious praxis, the other explains the growth of the Christian population. Integrating these discourses can, however, offer a new perspective on the forging of sacred space under market conditions.

In the first instance, space in Singapore is severely limited, and since the passing of the Planning Act in 1960, land for religious (and other) purposes has been clearly zoned and demarcated. Between 2000 and 2005 the Singapore government only released two plots of church land to accommodate the dramatic growth in the Christian population, thus forcing many (especially fast-growing, and independent) churches to compete for access to non-religious – typically commercial or industrial – spaces instead.[21] Compounding this lack of space for religion is the fact that, in 2012, the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) clarified its guidelines regarding the use of non-religious spaces for religious purposes. The clarifications stated how they could only be used on a 'non-exclusive and limited basis' and that 'the premises should not be furnished to resemble a worship hall',[22] the aim being to 'enforce the ephemerality of spatial reproduction and to curb any attempts at sacralisation'.[23] Combined, these contextual parameters have created a situation whereby many independent churches operate outside of officially-sanctioned religious spaces, and are therefore restricted in their sacralisation efforts. In response, they have forged alternative definitions of the 'sacred'; definitions that are direct responses to the close regulation of space, the competitiveness of the marketplace, and the need to drive growth through conversions. In this sense, to the extent that 'the state reserves enough power to define religious places, and, at a larger level, religion itself',[24] independent churches have turned these restrictions to their advantage by becoming more competitive players in Singapore's religious marketplace.

Evidence of competitiveness is shown, in the second instance, in the growth of the Christian population from 588,000 (or 14.6% of the total population) in 2000, to 930,000 (18.3%) in 2010. Much of this growth stems from conversion to Christianity, especially amongst 15 to 24 year olds.[25] This suggests that independent churches (in particular) appeal mostly to youths from non-Christian families. Various theories have been developed to explain this growth. For example, Chong[26] suggests that the integration of spiritual messages with market logics is an 'attempt to rationalize the irrational', the aim being to appeal to well-educated and upwardly mobile Singaporeans. Repositioning Christianity as a more 'rational' religion (as compared to Taoism, for example) is a strategy deployed to distinguish Christianity from other religions. Whilst I do not discount the value of such explanations, I contend that they can be strengthened by being understood in relation to the spatial practices of independent churches. Integrating the two discourses will provide a more holistic understanding of why independent churches have proven to be such competitive players within Singapore's integrated religious marketplace, and new insight into the ways in which the spatial practices of these churches are transforming in response to, and through the appropriation of, the secular. Before illustrating these ideas empirically, I first expand on the conceptual framing of this paper by considering how urban environments can shape religious praxis.

Conceptualising integrated religious marketplaces

Any form of religious praxis can be understood as a response to environmental parameters. That said, the urban is unique in that it represents opportunities for religious groups at the societal level,

and challenges at the spatial level. The urban is, by definition, an environment in which the supply of people is relatively plentiful, but the supply of space is often limited. This dialectic of opportunity and challenge – of society and space – forces religious groups to adapt to urban environments in various ways; it highlights the extent to which religion (as category) can be governed by, and imprinted with, the secular logics of the urban, and how religion (as praxis) is often defined by alternative spaces of religious expression and meaning. By seeking to explore this dialectic further, this paper contributes to a small but growing body of geographical scholarship that explores how religious groups 'refashion and re-invent themselves by appropriating rationalities, values and logics normally defined as "secular"'[27] into their modes of operation. Despite these developments, the fact remains that the 'refashioning' and 'reinvention' of religion in response to non-religious contextual parameters needs to be retheorised in ways that go beyond the structuring effects of secularisation,[28] to include organisation-level analyses of how religion is transforming in response to (and thus becoming increasingly entwined with, and sometimes obfuscated by) secular logics. Accordingly, there is a need to understand the conceptual parameters of integrated religious marketplaces, and how they have come to govern the praxis of religion within urban environments.

Situations of religious pluralism underpin the formation of religious marketplaces, and the associated need for religious groups to compete against each other for resources. 'Resources' can include people, space, funds and symbolic presence, amongst other things.[29] Not only are religious groups embroiled within the competitive logics of the marketplace(s) in which they operate, but so too are they responsive to such logics, often becoming more marketable entities in response.[30] These dynamics are more acutely felt in marketplaces that are saturated (i.e. that have more groups representing the same religion), and/or when religious groups must compete with other, ostensibly non-religious groups, for resources. Whilst there is evidence to suggest that exploration of these dynamics is a nascent area of interest amongst geographers, the 'market paradigm' has provided a vibrant area of debate amongst sociologists of religion for decades. Iannacone et al.[31] outline the paradigm and, in doing so, reveal some of the assumptions embedded therein:

> In speaking of 'religious markets' we implicitly model religion as a commodity – an object of choice and production. Consumers choose what religion (if any) they will accept and how extensively they will participate in it. . . Under competitive conditions, a particular religious firm will flourish only if it provides a commodity at least as attractive as its competitors.

This articulation reveals the restrictive analytical frame within which market-based models of religious competition are currently understood. Religion is accepted or rejected by 'consumers' based on its intrinsic appeal; an idea that leads to religion being understood as a 'commodity' that must be 'at least as attractive as its competitors'. Put differently, it is the intrinsic value of religion-as-commodity that determines whether a group will flourish or not; it does not take into consideration other, ostensibly non-religious, factors. This premise provides the conceptual bedrock for a vibrant and wide-ranging body of scholarship on religious commodification – that which 'turns a religious faith or tradition into consumable and marketable goods'[32] – and the development of new understandings of religion as a 'spiritual marketplace' that operates according to the economic logics of supply and demand.[33,34] Whilst research into the commodification of religion has fuelled debates about the diminution of religious meaning and significance, and the associated dilution of religion to the extent that it becomes an 'empty signifier',[35] they are based on the premise that religion itself is a static and inherently meaning-*full* category of analysis.[36] Similarly, they presuppose that religious marketplaces are isolated systems of value creation that operate independently of non-religious forces. Religious marketplaces are thus treated as separate from – rather than integrated in,

inflected by and constitutive of – the secular marketplaces within which they are socially and spatially embedded.

In the contemporary world, such theoretical separation does, however, require critical interrogation and reconciliation. Urban marketplaces are governed by distinct logics – such as restricted access to resources (especially space), and competitiveness – which invariably shape the operation of religion. Reflecting this sentiment, Beaumont[37] has argued that 'it is in the urban that the shift from secular to postsecular. . . is most intensely observed and experienced'. More recently, Gao et al.[38] have reinterpreted this sentiment in a more nuanced way, arguing that 'secular conditions are not the antecedents to postsecular impulses, but rather co-exist and co-evolve with the latter'. My conceptualisation of integrated religious marketplaces builds on these ideas of co-existence and co-evolution by applying them to the new forms of religious praxis that emerge from being located in-between 'secular conditions' and 'postsecular impulses'. This sense of betweenness accords with Asad's[39] understanding of the secular as a concept that is intimately entwined with the religious, and can be used to 'bring together certain behaviors, knowledges, and sensibilities in modern life'. In this sense, integrated religious marketplaces highlight the need for the secular to be appropriated and repurposed as a strategic tool that is used to fulfil the objectives of religious mission. These processes are motivated by the need to generate competitive and comparative advantage by enfolding religious praxis with other forms of value, the aim being to drive religious appeal, conversions and growth. As a result, religion is transformed through the processes that determine (post)secularisation, with the emergence of alternatively sacred spaces being outcomes of these transformations. These dynamics are pronounced in Singapore, where the sacred is increasingly being reimagined, and (re)politicised, in response to the integrated religious marketplace in and through which it is materialised.

Singapore's alternatively sacred Christian spaces

Given the increasingly integrated nature of religious marketplaces, it is understandable that the role and purpose of religious groups in and to contemporary society has changed. In many respects it has expanded, meaning that providing a framework for belief, moral guidance and community association may no longer be enough to remain competitive in the marketplace, and relevant to society. The three empirical subsections that follow explore these ideas in more detail. They draw on qualitative data collected between August 2017 and February 2018. The data represent the opinions of Christian migrants living in Singapore (55 interviews), Singaporean Christians (28) and Singapore-based clergy (23). Importantly, all of the Singaporean Christians quoted below were *Chinese* Singaporeans, and thus reflect the view of the dominant (at more than 75% of the population) ethnic group in Singapore. Chinese Singaporeans – especially the younger generation – are arguably less socially and culturally attached to ethnically-defined religious traditions than their Malay and Indian counterparts. As such, the potential for alternative forms of sacredness to appeal to them is relatively greater. With this in mind, the data presented below focus primarily on the perspectives of Singaporean Christians – especially those who identified as being students and young professionals in their 20s and 30s – to explore the ways in which Christian groups forge alternatively sacred spaces. Secondarily, I consider the perspectives of migrants – notably those from predominantly Christian countries, such as the Philippines and the UK – to critically interrogate what these alternatively sacred spaces mean for the practice of religion in Singapore. The three subsections that follow explore, first, the forging of alternatively sacred spaces; second, their affective appeal; and third, emergent spatial politics of (alternatively) sacred value.

Forging alternatively sacred spaces

In Singapore, alternatively sacred spaces of Christianity are typically associated with independent churches that operate within non-religious (i.e. non-government-sanctioned) spaces. As such, the extent to which they can sacralise space is limited, yet the extent to which they can maximise its affective value is not. In many respects, minimising the sacred and maximising the affective value of Christian space is both reflective of, and reinforced by, the values and expectations of Singaporean youths. For example, when one Singaporean female in her early 20s was asked if she thought the space occupied by her church (which is located within a multi-storey wholesale centre) was sacred, she retorted 'Sacred? No *lah*! Why sacred? People cannot step in, is it?'. Her questioning as to why her church space could even be conceived as sacred (and, therefore, exclusive to Christians) reveals the extent to which she – and the generation she represents – understands spaces of religion from a more inclusive position of *non*-sacredness. Indeed, it is by recognising this position, and adapting their spatial practices accordingly, that independent churches forge alternatively sacred spaces. In this case, the interviewee comes from a Taoist family, and converted to Christianity in her teenage years, which suggests that her sentiment reflects that of many Christian converts in Singapore. She went on to explain the attachment that she does have with the space occupied by her church:

> I don't think it's sacred. . . The place, I would say that the memories are there, like the place where we always meet, like 'oh 4.30pm, outside!' then we all enter [the church] together. I think it's the memories, but I don't think that the place is sacred such that God anointed [the venue] to rent the space to us.

This excerpt reveals two important insights. The first is that her understanding of 'sacred' space is not concerned with the sacred qualities of space, but about God 'anoint[ing]' the venue so that it could be rented by the church. It is about access, not belonging; even then, she does not think that access was divinely sanctioned by God. This reveals a more functional understanding of sacredness, which can be seen as a reflection of the restrictive spatial context of Singapore. The second is that she associates her church with 'memories' more than sacredness, and, with that, memories that relate to where she regularly meets her friends. This reveals the importance of experience in defining alternatively sacred Christian spaces in Singapore, in enhancing their appeal amongst non-Christians and mainline Christians, and in distinguishing them from their more traditional counterparts. Alternatively sacred spaces are less oriented towards the reproduction of traditionally-defined forms of sacredness – marked by symbols, rules, reverence and a sense of continuity across space and time – and more oriented towards the search for, and production of, alternative forms of value. They are alternative in the sense that they present a departure – physically and discursively – from top-down, hierarchically-defined understandings of sacred space as the 'codification and ritualization of spiritual meanings held dear by a community of worshippers'.[40] She went on to explain how, before she converted to Christianity,

> I had never been in a church before, so it is a whole new experience for me, so it [her church] is super different! People normally think of a church as one with wooden chairs, with Jesus cross hanging in front, it's just very solemn. But [my] church is very vibrant, and when you enter there is music like you're going to a club or concert. . . I grew to like that vibe, that atmosphere it gives.

Here we can begin to see the importance of alternatively sacred spaces in generating an affective – and, therefore, an intuitive – sort of appeal amongst Singaporean youths. She feels that her church 'is very different' because going there is 'like you're going to a club or concert'. This evokes Gilliat-Ray's[41] discussion of public prayer space in the Millennium Dome in London, and

that 'the fact that such sacred spaces often don't look religious only appears to add to their appeal. People can undertake their own private interpretive work, without the potential distraction of architecture or symbolism which may be unfamiliar'. Yet, whilst Gilliat-Ray describes here an essentially neutral space in which the user is empowered to make their own attributions of sacredness, the sacred space outlined above is filled with alternative meanings and values that call for a reinterpretation of what 'sacredness' is, or what it could mean to different users. In other words, in the contemporary world the value of the sacred keeps being called into question. The sacred is not necessarily something distinct, experienced in isolation of everyday life; rather, it is often experienced in intimate conversation with it.

Despite these lived realities of religious experience, scholarship continues to treat the sacred and profane in discrete terms. Often, each category is understood in terms of either/or rather than both/and, as 'sacralisation comes with an *assumption* of distinction; a substantive difference from the secular or profane space that comes before and after religious appropriation'.[42] Helping to theoretically dismantle this separation of categories is Tse's[43] notion of 'grounded theologies', which he defines as 'performative practices of place-making informed by understandings of the transcendent'. Importantly, Tse recognises that these understandings can 'take a negative view toward [the transcendent's] very existence *or relevance to* spatial practices'.[44] This decoupling of theology and spatial practice can be interpreted as a response to the pressures of operating in urban environments, and paves the way for alternative spatial practices, and alternative manifestations of the sacred therein, to unfold. These alternative practices and manifestations embrace the malleable, evolving and often more expansive (than has hitherto been recognised) potential for the secular to be a *vehicle* through which new understandings of the sacred can be developed, delivered to consumers and developed again in accordance with consumer response. The sacred thus becomes a more participatory and responsive construct that balances, sometimes problematically, the tradition of religion with the preferences of (non-)religious consumers. The value of alternatively sacred spaces, then, is that they are not necessarily predetermined by religious doctrine or tradition; instead, they enable Christianity to be experienced within an affective framework of non-religious appeal. They are spaces of 'contemporaneous cohabitation and competition between multiple forms of belief and non-belief',[45] which are designed to focus attention less on the prescribed meanings of space, and more on the affective experience of space. These experiences fuse the religious with the non-religious, and underpin the affective appeal of integrated religious marketplaces.

The affective appeal of integrated religious marketplaces

In urban environments especially, the growth or decline of religious groups can be indexed to the extent to which they are able to maximise the affective value of the spaces they occupy, thus expanding their appeal beyond the putative boundaries of 'religion'. Indeed, the characteristics of alternatively sacred spaces – of not having any overtly sacred qualities, but of being vibrant spaces of affective experience instead – contribute to a reimagination of Christianity in Singapore. Christianity becomes a lifestyle choice that appeals on multiple levels, especially to younger religious consumers. These ideas explain the comments of a migrant from China in his early 30s, who recalled how, before converting to Christianity when studying at a local university, was 'surprised so many young people in Singapore are Christians. . . I used to have the impression that this kind of religion is more for old people'. He went on explain how the alternatively sacred spaces of Christianity in Singapore are part of a broader strategy to 'attract more young people, that's why they perform this way'. By 'perform' he refers to the concert-style venues and services that define

such churches. These churches contrast with Singapore's mainline churches, which often occupy government-sanctioned religious spaces and are therefore less motivated by the economic imperative to compete for adherents. The Singaporean pastor of a mainline church described the differences in the performative logics of the two models:

> They [independent churches] will sing those postmodern church songs. . . You know, those hip-hop songs. . . 50-60% of them are young people and they enjoy these kinds of songs. I cannot bring the traditional church songs, the hymn songs to them. . . they won't come.

His admission that 'those hip-hop songs' are a source of appeal reveals the extent to which independent churches are driven by the competitive desire to appeal to society. Validating this sentiment, a Singaporean male, also in his early 20s, explained how 'whatever they taught was more applicable to me, it connected with me. . . I felt a sense of belonging'. These assertions suggest that the consumption-oriented nature of independent churches has an affective appeal that it an outcome of their 'strong material presence via spectacular buildings, stylish interior designs, capacious spaces, visual aesthetics' and a reliance on 'the technologies of pop culture, semiotics and performativity'.[46] Characteristics like these create affective value that goes beyond the practice of worship. It even goes beyond belonging to a religious community. Rather, it involves belonging to a community of like-minded peers that is, amongst other things, defined by a shared religious belief. A British migrant in his 40s defended such practices, which he experienced when he visited City Harvest Church. City Harvest is an independent church, and one of Singapore's largest megachurches that operates out of Suntec City Convention Centre and its own, purpose-built, building. In many respects, therefore, it represents the competitiveness and success that many other independent churches in Singapore aspire to. He explained how

> it's important that people feel that it's an environment that they want to go to, and if you make it more fun and almost more like a pop concert, which City Harvest seems to be at times. . . that's a good thing. . . I think religion is almost seen as not cool in the UK, whereas I think [in] Singapore, it's almost cool.

Through its alternatively sacred spaces, City Harvest represents itself in an 'almost cool' way to Singaporeans. It wraps Christian messages within an affective layer of appeal, which makes Singaporeans *feel* like they belong there, irrespective of whether or not they identify as 'Christian'. Practices like these expand Asad's[47] notion that '"the secular" should not be thought of as the space in which real human life gradually emancipates itself from the controlling power of "religion" and thus achieves the latter's relocation', as alternative forms of sacredness presuppose that it is the secular that provides a channel through which religion can, sometimes unknowingly, be engaged with. Alternatively sacred spaces thus generate a more inclusive sense of appeal that can attract people that may not otherwise be open to the religion, or the religious group, to which the space is attributed. They are an outcome of what Della Dora[48] terms 'infrasecularity', as they encompass the 'intertwinings and cohabitations of different cultural groups, as well as new complex forms of coexistence between different religions, forms of non-belief, and indifference to belief'. As mosaics of meaning and value, these spaces become repositories of multiple, and sometimes contradictory, associations that can mean different things to different users.

For example, a Singaporean female in her mid 20s explained how her very first exposure to Christianity was 'a good experience, because they have music, their bands are very good! . . . It was more like a social outing as I really like to go for concerts! [It was a] legit kind of concert feel, you know?'. The experience she had was familiar, exciting and positive; it was like she was going to a concert, not a church. Indeed, the fact that she describes the concert experience as 'legit[imate]'

(i.e. authentic) suggests that the experience was less about Christianity as a religion, and more about Christianity being a validation of her pre-existing lifestyle and interests. Upon further probing, she did, however, begin to explain the difficulties she faced in reconciling her enjoyment of the experience with the fact that it was associated with Christianity:

> For the music, I really like the music, but the lyrics are about living with Jesus, so I didn't dare to sing along because my [non-Christian] mum was lingering in my head.
>
> **But you enjoyed the atmosphere?**
>
> Yeah, I really enjoyed it. People were really into it. I was surprised to see people crying! It was a very meaningful experience.

Here we can see how the affective value of the concert-like experience was, ironically, undermined for her by its associations with Christianity. As a non-Christian, she enjoyed the experience, which began a process of her opening up to a religious alternative. This layering of affective value – that which starts with a concert-like experience, and is then overlaid with Christian teachings and belief – is a strategy through which Christianity can easily be integrated with the lifestyles of youths, and thus helps to minimise the 'culture clash' that young people in particular may experience 'as a result of having to negotiate and manage a number of contradictory, confrontational and competing identities'.[49] Indeed, by enabling young Singaporeans to 'reach back sensually to grasp the tacit, embodied foundations of [them]selves',[50] alternatively sacred spaces hold a wide-ranging and pervasive sense of appeal that may only come to be associated with religion over time. A Singaporean male convert in his early 20s emphasised this sentiment, claiming how, even before he converted to Christianity, 'the worship [service] made [me] feel like jumping *lah*', which in itself reveals how engaging the body through affective experience provides an entry point through which (religious) authority can (eventually) be established. This more integrative experience was also keenly observed by a Korean migrant in her 20s, for whom the experience of Christianity in Singapore contrasted with her experiences in Korea. She recalled the first time she visited a church (located within a 'resort-like' golf club) in Singapore:

> We went to the second floor, and we went to, like, a church service. . . I was really impressed. . . I took a video and I sent it to my boyfriend in America, and he said 'it seems like I'm inside MTV! Everyone is so excited!' And I was like, 'it's really cool, because it's very different'. . . it surpasses all the churches that I've been to so far!

Not only does she describe here the extent to which the church service was ostensibly different from many of the Christian associations that she was used to, but so too does she admit the extent to which such alternatively sacred spaces provide a better experience. It is better because it is more aligned with the wants and needs of young churchgoers like herself; it repositions Christianity as a lifestyle choice more than a religious choice, and, in doing so, it enhances the value of the experience. She went on to explain how she has subsequently come to understand churches in Singapore as 'more vibrant, and more engaging' than those in Korea. Alternatively sacred spaces are those in which youths feel comfortable – even proud – to identify with. They align with, and often augment, their lifestyles, serving to validate both. In this vein, alternatively sacred spaces can be seen to both reflect and reinforce the increasingly secular ways in which young Singaporeans engage with religion. Yet, as much as they serve the strategic needs of independent churches seeking to attract non-Christians and mainline Christians and grow, alternatively sacred spaces can also alienate

those seeking more traditionally defined experiences of the sacred. In Singapore, these groups typically include those that attend mainline churches (and/or were born into Christian families), and migrants from countries in which Christian traditions are socially and culturally entrenched. Through the perspectives of these groups, spatial politics of (alternatively) sacred value emerge.

Emergent spatial politics of (alternatively) sacred value

As much as alternatively sacred spaces can be understood as competitive responses to Singapore's integrated religious marketplace, so too can they cause divisions within the broader Christian community. The strategies of spatial reproduction pursued by Singapore's independent churches – which are embroiled within the market and regulatory logics of non-religious space – are noticeably different from their mainline counterparts, for whom a more permanent spatial presence enables them to pursue more traditional strategies of sacralisation. These differences foreground the emergence of spatial politics of (alternatively) sacred value. A Singaporean Christian, who was born into a Christian family and attends a mainline church, lamented these differences by explaining how her and her peers viewed City Harvest Church:

> All of us agree that it's a bit too, like, secular sometimes. It's always about the way things are presented. I remember City Harvest. . . they just put some image on the screen then the lights just shine on the screen and the whole auditorium is dark. So, the focus wasn't about God, it's about something else. . . They use this kind of technology to shift your attention, but. . . it should be about worshipping God.

The lament that alternatively sacred spaces are designed to 'shift your attention' mirrors the comments of the converts quoted earlier, for whom such experiences often comprised their initial experience of Christianity. Yet, whereas they spoke of these experiences in a positive way – in a way that aligned with their pre-existing, non-Christian lifestyles and interests – the comments here criticise the fact that 'it should be about worshipping God'. Essentially, this is a critique of the logics of alternatively sacred spaces, as they are seen to offer a diluted form of Christianity that focusses on meeting the affective demands of the congregation/society, rather than (re)creating the experience of sanctity. It is, in other words, a more intuitively appealing form of experience that can challenge more traditional models of worship. For the British migrant introduced above, this intuitive sense of appeal did, however, render spaces of alternative sacredness a superficial experience; one that is too skewed towards meeting the affective demands of youthful audiences rather than the theological demands of a place of religious congregation and worship. As he explained:

> [In Britain] it's quite dour almost. I can see, as a result, why none of the young ones want to go to church, whereas I've seen City Harvest Church, you know, children very, very much relate to it a lot more. . . But, for me. . . I don't get enough substance from it. . . We refer to them as 'happy clappy' churches in the UK, almost as a derogatory term.

The implication here is that alternatively sacred spaces can infantilise religion; they substitute substance for appeal, sacredness for affect. This sentiment was echoed in a different way by the Korean migrant introduced above, who observed how 'here people enjoy God's love, people are just happy to be blessed by God, they are, like, so *happy* to know that God loves [them]. In Korea, it's more that we are slaves of God'. These affective draws to Christianity in general – and to 'God's love' more specifically – resulted in her 'deepening [Christian] belief' in Singapore, which itself calls into question the (ir)relevance of religious doctrine and tradition within a Christian landscape defined by affective triggers and positive ('intimate') feelings. In many respects, these

substitutions and distinction are a reflection of the market mechanics within which independent churches in Singapore are embroiled; mechanics from which mainline churches in Britain, and indeed Singapore and Korea, are precluded from participating in. This sense of distinction within the Christian community in Singapore was echoed by a Filipino Catholic, who explained how

> I actually feel like it has become more frivolous. . . churches will make [their décor] look very nice, very grand, just because they want to post it on social media. . . to the point that [you question] what's the meaning behind it? Because back in the day, there wasn't really social media, and you don't want to see all these things when you go to church, and now it has become a point of comparison.

What is interesting here is the comparative perspective that reflects the experiences of a migrant. In this sense, the Catholic church attended in Singapore is still perceived to be 'more frivolous' than her experiences of Catholic spaces in the Philippines. In addition, she reveals the competitive tension that underpins many processes of spatial reproduction in Singapore; that décor has now 'become a point of comparison', which serves to further detract from more traditional understandings of Christian spatial praxis. Another Filipino migrant criticised the ways in which Singaporeans dress when attending church, expressing distain that 'you only come [to church] once a week, and only for an hour, yet you don't respect the house of the Lord?'. He speaks of the tendency for Singaporeans to attend church dressed in casual clothes, such as shorts, flip flops and short (or no) sleeved tops. To him, this shows a lack of respect for religion, and for 'respecting the celebration' of church. To others, however, it reflects the dissolution of boundaries that separate religious life from everyday life; religious spaces from everyday spaces. As much as alternatively sacred spaces can be seen as a competitive response to Singapore's integrated Christian marketplace, so too can they be seen to undermine any pre-existing distinctions that serve to distinguish the sacred from the profane, the religious from the secular. Whilst this can enhance the appeal of Christianity, so too does it foreground the emergence of alternative expressions of, and engagements with, the sacred in/and space. Practices like these do not necessarily show the diminution of religion, but they do highlight the malleability of religious formations and expressions *in response to* the pervasive hegemony of secular impulses within Singapore's integrated religious marketplace.

Conclusion

Urban environments foreground the transformation of religion, as observed through the changing spatial practices of religious groups. As much as alternatively sacred spaces are a response to the secular pressures of urban environments, so too do they inform how religion is understood and engaged with by society. These spaces provide insight into the 'new forms of religion – and the new forms of religious spatiality – taking root in urban environments around the world',[51] and thus contribute a more 'nuanced and dynamic understanding of sacred space'[52] to the geographies of religion. Of course, these forms are not uniquely urban phenomena, but their expressions are arguably more pronounced in urban environments wherein the pressures on religious groups to remain relevant and competitive can cause them to become more of a lifestyle choice. In this sense, alternatively sacred spaces can be understood as more participatory forms of religious praxis that represent a departure from top-down manifestations of sacredness-in-place. Indeed, whereas the spatial practices of religious groups have hitherto been interpreted in terms of the extent to which they are able to achieve a prescribed notion of sacredness, the Singapore case not only reveals how sacredness may not be achievable, but also how it may not even be *desired* in the first place.

Alternatively sacred spaces play an active role in shifting the nature of demand for religion. This creates a recursive cycle that leads to more fundamental shifts in how religion is imagined,

materialised and practiced in Asia and beyond. Increasingly, these shifts blur the line between established orthodoxies and market contingencies. In Hong Kong, for example, Qian and Kong[53] have shown how Buddhist groups employ 'tactics of publicity and marketing and organisational cultures that bear clear traces to the secular logics of market, economy and individualism'. These changing patterns of practice – which are oriented towards the 'secular logics' of which Qian and Kong speak – are necessary precursors to survival and growth, but also foreground more radical reinterpretations of what 'religion' means, and how these meanings are being indexed to new forms of value. Explaining this further, Yip and Ainsworth[54] argue that the marketisation of Singapore's mega-churches 'transforms [religious] practices into production processes, with the consumer at the centre of the market and the focus of production. This dramatically repackages many practices associated with 'established religion' and has fundamental implications for religious practice'. Whilst the 'repackaging' of religion in response to the pressures and constraints of operating within urban environments has clear spatial manifestations, this paper has argued that these understandings rest on a coherent and predefined understanding of sacredness that can restrict the potential for alternative understandings to be forged.

Marketisation can be seen to destabilise religion-as-tradition, and thus provides insight into the new forms of religious diversity manifesting throughout the world. In this view, alternatively sacred spaces are heterodox spaces; they are designed to be different from their more traditionally sacred counterparts. Yet, as much as they reflect alternative interpretations of religion, so too do they hint at the alternative ontologies, beliefs and values of religious consumers, *especially* those representing younger generations. In other words, by decoupling religion from orthodoxy, they reveal the extent of religion's adaptive capacity under market conditions. Recognising this capacity reifies the fundamental *value* of religion as an evolving construct that responds to the variegated, and sometimes conflicting, needs and demands of a consumer-oriented marketplace. Religious value is not, therefore, a static or pregiven construct. Rather, it is appropriated, manipulated and realised by different groups serving different purposes, which means that understanding these practices can reveal the *extent to* which, and *ways in* which, the immanence of religious experience is being inverted in the service of the market. The importance of these inversions is that they bring to light the debasing of religious tradition and hierarchy, and the recentring of the consumptive self as the locus of religious meaning and value. They highlight, in other words, the emergence of a more-than-religious world of integrated meanings, self-oriented practices and the rationalisation of the divine in response to the marketisation of everyday life.

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