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Realising contingent religious subjects through relational spaces of missionary encounter

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Abstract: *This paper explores the ways in which the religious subject can be a contingent position that is responsive to the broader socio-religious context within which it is expressed. These contingencies are acutely observed among short-term missionaries (STM), who seek out encounters with difference in pursuit of a more cosmopolitan subjectivity. Yet, while spaces of missionary encounter are inherently relational, the missions literature has tended to downplay the effects of relationality on the realisation of these subject positions. By focusing on the experiences of Singaporean missionaries working among Christian communities in Southeast Asia, I contribute a more nuanced and less pre-determined understanding of the dynamics that underpin intra-Asian missionary encounters. Drawing on interviews conducted with Singapore's STM community, I explore how materiality and new media can structure encounters and subject positions within relational missionary space. I also emphasise the limits of relational space by highlighting its untranslatability beyond the missionary terrain.*

Keywords: *missionary encounter, relational space, religious subject, Singapore, short-term mission*

Introduction

Travelling overseas for religious purposes can start, augment or otherwise contribute to the transformation of the places and people that are encountered. The accretion of these transformations over time causes both the religious landscapes of places, and the religious subjectivities of people, to change. While these changes have traditionally been associated with the spread of Christianity in concert with European colonisation, in more recent years it is the short-term missions (STM) community of lay volunteers that is reshaping global Christianity. Indeed, in the decade since Offutt's (2011: 797; after Trinitapoli and Vaisey, 2009) lament that 'little is known … about the underlying social processes generated by STM visits', research has started to explore how these visits might enable or not the realisation of a cosmopolitan Christian consciousness that implicates both missionaries and their beneficiaries in different ways. Critical scholarship has explored the idea that STM 'offers participants a space within which they create themselves as moral actors through a physical demonstration of empathy' (Occhipinti, 2016: 258), even if such demonstrations make little long-term impact on host communities. Notwithstanding the importance of missionary activity in enabling the religious subject to be realised as a 'moral actor', such scholarship tends to rest on a static, rather than fluid and relationally defined, understanding of the missionary. By foregrounding the contingent nature of religious subject positions, this paper instead considers how relational spaces of missionary encounter can render the religious subject a contested construct (Sutherland, 2017). Importantly, the emphasis on relational space creates opportunities for the beneficiary to 'speak back' in ways that highlight the *partiality* of missionaries' subject positions, and the difficulties of translating the learnings of the missionary terrain to the realisation of religious subjectivity back home.

The idea, and often unfulfilled *promise*, of relationality underpins the novelty of this paper's contribution. In many respects, it is a response to Howell's (2012: 19) lament that the 'narrative' of STM has come to 'take up such a predictable and seemingly powerful form in contemporary Christianity', and yet is usually constructed pre-departure, thus serving to shape and limit the STM experience. Contrariwise, in this paper I consider challenges and changes to the narrative that unfold during the missionary experience and after. I highlight the structuring effects of materiality

(during) and new media (after) in revealing how missionaries can at once become more open and exploratory in their religious subjectivities when overseas, but also more closed and insular once they return home. By 'materiality' I refer to the material expectations of missionaries and the local communities in which they work, and how differences in expectation can lead to a reimagination of piety. By 'new media' I refer to the use of social media by missionaries to connect with local people, and to (not) maintain these connections once they return home. As structuring forces, both materiality and new media underpin the emergence of new missionary terrains that are part of an 'existing and evolving relationality' that foregrounds the need to 'continually interrogate the deployments of these terms in the context of the complex spatial matrices and (dis)connectivities that are central to a postcolonial world' (Raghuram *et al.*, 2009: 7). The structuring effects of materiality and new media can be seen to complicate these 'spatial matrices and '(dis)connectivities' further. They close down the opportunity for missionary encounters to reconcile differences, and instead encourage the acceptance or rejection of difference to become socio-spatially contingent (Goh, 2005; Kong and Woods, 2018).

My empirical analysis draws on interviews conducted among Singapore's STM community. Long known for being a hub that facilitates flows of human, financial and cultural capital into and out of Asia, recent decades have witnessed Singapore become a hub for religion too, and has come to offer a 'highly organized, globally networked, and social[ly] transformative vision of Asian Christian identities' (Goh, 2004: 1) in particular. Complicating this regional purview, however, are the characteristics of Singapore's minority Christian population. Since the 1980s, Christian growth has been driven by conversion, which has occurred in concert with the country's – and individuals' – upward socio-economic mobility. While this has caused the Christian population to double between 2000 and 2010, so too have the outcomes of growth been shaped by the government's attempts to closely and proactively manage religion in order to avoid outbreaks of inter-religious tension and conflict (Woods, 2018, 2019; Chong, 2020). The dialectic of growth and restraint forces Singapore churches – and their congregants – to 'preserve a flexible and dual identity … [by] channelling the bulk of their evangelical zeal and energies *outside of* Singapore's shores' (Goh, 2009: 14, emphasis added). It has stimulated interest in church planting and STM by Christians that do not have the same sorts of religious genealogies, or subject positions, as their Western counterparts; nor, importantly, as many of the communities they work with. Thus, while Singapore church leaders 'express the desire to be at the forefront of the movement to reach "unreached peoples and groups"' (DeBernardi, 2008: 125), how these sentiments translate into the attitudes and actions of their STM communities remains to be seen.

Through these explorations, I contribute to a small but critical body of scholarship that seeks to decentre the study of missions (after Brickell, 2012; Baillie Smith *et al.*, 2013; Zehner, 2013; Nagel, 2018, 2021). In doing so, I both build upon, and provide a point of departure from, Nagel's (2018: 1–2) recent lament that 'scholars outside the field of missiology have given little attention to the ways in which mission experiences shape young American Christians' understandings of themselves as members of, and active participants in, 'a global field'. In terms of accordance, I engage with missions – especially STM – as an increasingly everyday form of religious practice that invokes 'process[es] of change that involve the (re)definition of self and other' (Woods, 2012: 440). The relational dimensions of missionary activity can, then, be seen as integral to a more expansive understanding of religious 'conversion'; one that is not predicated on religious switching, but on the evolution and splintering of religious subject positions in response to encounters with difference. In terms of departure, through an empirical focus on Singaporean Christians, I offer a perspective that, to greater or lesser degrees, can be seen to deviate from the normative views of 'young American Christians'. While these views have dominated the discourse so far, rebalance is needed given that Asian countries play an increasingly prominent role in the global landscape of evangelical Christendom, even though they are consistently under-researched from the perspective of missionary supply (Zehner, 2013). Given that many Singaporean missionaries are converts themselves, and encounter people and places in which Christianity might be more

culturally entrenched than in Singapore, the negotiations that emerge from missionary activity are more complex and contingent than has otherwise been recognised.

Three sections follow. The first provides a critical review of the literature concerning the relational nature of missionary space, and calls for greater emphasis on the negotiation of religious subject positions therein. The second documents in more detail the growth of Christianity in Singapore. The third offers a qualitative exploration of Singapore's STM community, and considers how Singaporean missionaries engage with relational spaces of intra-Asian missionary encounter, how materiality and new media structure the religious subject in ways that render it a contingent position, and the limits of relational space.

Negotiating religious subject positions in/through relational missionary space

Since the 1990s, the number of people participating in STM has experienced 'explosive growth' (Howell, 2009: 206), which has produced knock-on effects for sending and receiving communities around the world. While growth has spurred scholarly interest in missionary activity, so too has such interest been slow to break out of both its Western mould and colonial antecedents. With this framing comes a number of assumptions, biases and idiosyncrasies that both define and undermine normative understandings of mission, and which therefore serve to limit the contemporary relevance, and inclusiveness, of the discourse. Thus, as much as 'the modern form of STMs can be defined as groups of people who take trips with religiously motivated objectives' (Offutt, 2011: 797), religious motivation is the lowest common denominator that unifies the realities of mission. Priest *et al.* (2006: 433–434, original emphasis) offer a more expansive version of this definition, suggesting that mission trips are

> rituals of intensification, where one temporarily leaves the ordinary, compulsory, workaday life 'at home' and experience an extraordinary, voluntary, sacred experience 'away from home' in a liminal space where sacred goals are pursued, physical and spiritual tests are faced, normal

structures are dissolved, *communitas* is experienced, and personal transformation occurs.

Interesting here is the apparent tension between 'intensification' and 'transformation', or between stasis and change. Drawing on a comprehensive review of the missions literature, Offutt (2011: 798) provides important insight into this tension. In doing so, he suggests that 'STMs are more likely to increase participants' civic participation than they are to affect measurable personal religious indicators'. By emphasising the distinction between 'civic participation' and 'religious indicators', Offutt reveals a situation whereby missionary experiences typically have little effect on the religious subjectivities of missionaries, but help to make them more civically minded instead. Recently, Nagel (2018: 14) reiterated this sentiment in a more critical way by emphasising the 'troubling conceit at the heart of missions' whereby missionary activity is based on a logic of 'giving back', yet it is often the missionaries themselves that are 'clearly the main beneficiaries of the trip'. In this sense, beneficence is not indexed to the ability to transform communities, or even the missionary themself, but rather becomes a form of 'moral subject-making' that is rooted in the neoliberal ethos of 'superior social capital' (Occhipinti, 2016: 259). The dissonance between the religious motivations that underpin STM on the one hand, and the desire to realise the neoliberal subject on the other, reflects the clearest critical thread that runs through the STM literature. With this in mind, and in response to Howell's (2009: 206) lament that research tends to embrace STM as an 'all-engulfing category' that 'creat[es] a discursive commonality between disparate people and places', I call for renewed emphasis on, and closer exploration of, the relational underpinnings of missionary space.

Relational spaces of missionary encounter are those in which preconceived ideas of the relationships between missionaries and local communities are, in one way or another, disrupted. Disruption causes these spaces of encounter to become more relationally defined in ways that go beyond the simple transmission of ideas and resources from missionary to beneficiary and reveal more complex webs of exchange instead. While 'relational ministry' has been described as an outcome of when 'evangelical mission leaders encourage

[e] young missionaries to present their 'testimony' of faith to local people' (Nagel, 2018: 12), relational spaces of encounter are structured by broader-based logics that go beyond the agency of the missionary alone. Traditionally, 'missionary interventions particularly emphasised cultural otherness and, in Latin America, left a legacy in which religious leadership and missionaries produced much of our knowledge about cultural "others"' (Baillie Smith *et al.*, 2013: 129; see also Ballantyne, 2011), yet an analytical focus on relational space 'suggest[s] a continuum, rather than binary opposition between … categories' (Della Dora, 2012: 952). In terms of STM, relationality thus foregrounds situations of movement *and* stasis; of continuity *and* change. Missionary encounters become spaces of mutual engagement that allow the beneficiary to 'speak back', thus causing the missionary terrain to be one in which 'new maps must be drawn' (Offutt, 2014: 393; see also Offutt, 2011). Importantly, relational spaces of missionary encounter provide a heuristic through which the STM literature can expand in potentially fertile new directions. For example, Zehner (2013: 132) demonstrates how, in Thailand, the relationships between missionaries and beneficiaries are 'continually renegotiated from all sides'. The cycle of negotiation and *re*negotiation can, in turn, be used to flesh out the ethical complexity and sedimented religious histories of the development landscapes of Asia (after Scheer *et al.*, 2018).

By bringing the idea of relational spaces of missionary encounter into conversation with the undetermined, and thus pluralistic, nature of missionary experiences on individuals, I argue that religious subject positions are (re)defined *through* relational space. In turn, this focuses attention on the resolutely contingent nature of religious subject positions, and how these contingencies might be enforced, or problematised, through missionary encounters with difference. By taking this position, I seek to bring the missions literature into conversation with recent explorations of the religious subject. The value of this is twofold. One, as highlighted earlier, the missions literature tends to downplay the ways in which engagement with the missionary terrain might lead to a redefinition of the *religious* subject. In many respects, this is because much of the literature explores, but also reproduces, a normative view that the missionary is wealthy,

white and from a country in which Christian traditions are entrenched, while the beneficiary is the opposite. The power differential that emerges can be seen to close down opportunities for the beneficiary to 'speak back' (as a religious subject), and for the missionary to adopt a more reflexive subject position in response. Two, while existing research has a tendency to 'depict religious subjects within impenetrable structures, negating their capacity for subversion' (Sutherland, 2017: 321), situating them within the *relational* space of missionary encounter can highlight their fluidity. Indeed, the fact is that 'subjects struggle with various power relations in order to understand and perform their religious identity' (Sutherland, 2017: 321), meaning that to foreground the relational dimensions of missionary encounter is to offer more nuanced understandings of how power becomes implicated *in* and *through* religious subject positions. I return to these ideas later. Before that, I consider in more detail the growth of Christianity in, and beyond, Singapore.

Christian growth in, and beyond, Singapore

The growth of Singapore's Christian population has been rapid, and recent. While conversions to Christianity started to gain pace in the 1980s, it is only within the past two decades or so that Singapore has had the critical mass needed to develop and sustain its STM community. This fact alone contrasts Singapore with traditional hubs of missionary activity, which draw on centuries-long traditions of Christian expansionism (Chong, 2018). However, it is not just the characteristics of growth that set Singapore's Christian community apart. The contextual backdrop of racial and religious pluralism has caused the state to take a proactive role in the management of religious difference, and the latent problem of 'identity politics' (Chong, 2018: 8) more generally. These dynamics create an environment in which Singapore's Christian community has had to walk a fine line between growth through conversion on the one hand, and expressing sensitivity and tolerance to other religions on the other. Indeed, the politics of Christian outreach is reflected in situations in which 'pastors have been hauled up by the authorities from time to time for insulting or denigrating other faiths' (Chong, 2020: 45).

Walking this line implicates many aspects of Christian life, including the ways in which Christian identities are forged, performed and otherwise engaged with. For many, the Christian subject position is an amalgamation that emerges from 'deconstructing, splicing, and reproducing crosscurrents of mainstream and marginal religious affects and discourses' (Sutherland, 2017: 323). It is less likely to draw on the legacy of tradition, and is more likely to be constantly negotiated in conversation with the everyday demands of living with plurality (Goh, 2009).

The need to forge Christian subjects in conversation with the expectations of the secular state foregrounds a degree of flexibility in terms of how Christian morals, beliefs and values are engaged with. This, coupled with the fact that Christianity is closely associated with upward socio-economic mobility and the growing material wealth of Singapore and Singaporeans, means that the Christian subject – and the spaces it occupies and associates with – differs markedly from its counterparts outside of Singapore. Speaking of how Singapore's megachurches have broken through the sacred-secular divide, Chong (2018: 10) observes how they have 'co-opted secular spaces or capitalist practices such that they take on a sacred agenda' to the extent that 'these secularities have also been given sacred meanings and become an extension of the modern day Pentecostal church'. Beyond the embedding of practices commonly associated with the secular domain into their operations, these churches also draw on a 'consumerist ethos to advance their brand of Christianity' (Chong, 2018: 4). This is an ethos that both speaks to upwardly mobile – and materially aspirational – Singaporeans, but also one that sets Christianity apart from Singapore's other religious traditions. It is a religion that is both rooted in, and reflective of, the material wealth of Singapore, to the extent that its megachurches

> have reconciled spirituality with the materialism that has allowed the middle class and the aspiring middle class to demonstrate conspicuous consumption without moral awkwardness. This correlation between the material and the spiritual also enables believers to measure the immeasurable (Chong, 2018: 5–6).

I emphasise this point as it informs my later analysis in three ways. One is that the Singaporean Christian subject position is closely associated with material comfort, which shapes the expression of, and limits to, piety. Two is that this subject position is relatively unique to Singapore, meaning it can become a point of negotiation when asserted within relational spaces of missionary encounter. Three is that it is a flexible subject position that has been shown to evolve in response to changing environmental parameters. Taken together, these factors foreground the uniqueness of Singapore as a regional, and increasingly global, hub of missionary supply.

While the relative wealth of Christian groups in Singapore is an importantly enabler in stimulating missionary activity throughout Asia, so too does such activity align with Singapore's geographical position as a regional hub for business, capital and religion too. The economic and strategic value of this position has caused the state and society to be instilled with a 'mercantilist ethos evident from its founding through its independence and to its present social structure' (Goh, 2004: 6; see also Goh, 2016). Since 1978, when American evangelist Billy Graham prophesised that Singapore would become a regional centre from which Christianity would spread throughout the region, it has come to be known as the "Antioch of Asia" and as the 'cradle of Christianity for twenty-first century Asia' (DeBernardi, 2014: 253; see also DeBernardi, 2008; Chong, 2020). Indeed, while its colonial past means that Singapore has long been embedded within global networks of Christian movement and missionary activity, the growth of its domestic Christian population has caused it to become a source of supply as well. Thus, as much as Singapore's churches 'host local, regional, and international mission organizations and initiatives' (DeBernardi, 2014: 257), so too have they started to develop their own church planting initiatives and STM communities (Goh, 2009). Through participation in these activities, Singaporean Christians encounter their co-religionists in the region. Being intra-Asian missionary encounters, they are qualitatively distinct from those associated with their Western counterparts. These encounters are implicitly more relational, less likely to be underpinned by structures of symbolic power forged over centuries, and therefore more open-ended. They allow the beneficiary to 'speak back' in ways

that subvert the categorical distinction between missionary and missionised, and call into question the effects of missionary encounter on Singaporeans and their religious subjectivities.

Materiality, new media and the relational spaces of intra-Asian missionary encounter

The empirical analysis below draws on qualitative data collected among Singapore's STM community. Data were derived from two different projects conducted between 2017 and 2020. Specifically, 16 interviews were conducted with Singaporean Christians and pastors for a project on Christianity and migrant integration in Singapore. Separately, four interviews were conducted with Christian professionals that worked for a Christian missionary organisation (three interviews), and one missionary, for a project on digital cultures of development. In total, the empirical analysis draws on 20 interviews with members of Singapore's STM community. All interviewees were ethnically Chinese, and represented either non-denominational evangelical, or Catholic, churches. The four subsections that follow explore, in turn, the relational spaces of intra-Asian missionary encounter, the structuring roles of material (dis)comfort and (dis)connectivity of new media on the realisation of the religious subject, and the limits of relational space.

Relational spaces of intra-Asian missionary encounter

Missionary activity is a relatively new practice of faith for many Singaporean Christians, causing their engagements with the missionary terrain to be substantially different from their Western counterparts. While Howell (2012: 24) suggests that Western participants in STM create narrative frames that 'provid[e] the means for [them] to make sense of their experience', these frames are often shaped by the missionary lineages associated with their countries. Where there is adaptation, it is to bring these frames into conversation with the contemporary needs, desires and aspirations of missionaries, and of the opportunities and constraints that STM in particular provides. This is not the case with Singaporeans engaged in intra-Asian STM, as

there tends not to be a clearly defined "narrative frame" they can draw on, meaning they approach the missionary terrain with a greater sense of openness, flexibility and sometimes confusion. These characteristics manifest in various ways. In particular, evangelism tends to be downplayed, as many Singaporean missionaries are relatively new in their faith. Accordingly, missionary zeal is often tempered by a lack of confidence, or assertiveness, when it comes to sharing their faith with others. For example, Jody,[1] a convert in her early-30s, explained how when she went on her first mission trip to Chiang Mai, Thailand,

> I wasn't even sure what we are doing, but after I came back from the trip, there were quite a lot of takeaways … They are so less privileged, but their love for God seems more than us, they are more fervent, and they are trying their best. I feel, I feel like I am quite fortunate, like, I take things for granted.

Jody's lack of clearly defined goals or expectations before the trip translated into her being more open minded when she was there. In turn, this resulted in her learning more about her own faith rather than imparting it – or a prescribed way of engaging with it – on others. Similar sentiment was echoed by many interviewees, who highlighted the sense of respect they experienced when engaging with beneficiaries. Indeed, this was as true for 'cradle Christians' (i.e. those born into Christian families) as it was converts. For example, Rachel, a cradle Christian in her mid-20s, revealed how she had to negotiate cultural sensitivity with the prescriptions of her faith while undertaking missionary work among Akha communities in northern Thailand:

> I feel that for certain cultures, certain practices they might not be in sync with what Christianity believes. For example … for the Akha people, they believe that a woman [who] bears twins during her birth is a curse. But for Christians, a child is a gift from God, you know, and we believe that every child is God's creation … I mean, for us, it's very difficult to confront them regarding these things because the last thing you want is Christians coming in to disrupt their culture … At our end, we have to respect their boundaries that we cannot go

overboard and be pushy about it because I really feel that isn't right … I think the Christian who is within that community, an Akha Christian, would have more authority to do it than an outsider, you know?

Here, Rachel not only acknowledges cultural differences, but also highlights the difficulty she faced in reconciling them with her Christian faith, to the point that 'the last thing you want is Christians coming in to disrupt their culture'. From this, we can see that for both Jody and Rachel their missionary work is much less about sharing their Christian faith with others, and more about using the experience of applying their faith to different cultural contexts to help them better understand their own religious subject positions *in relation to* others. Mark, a cradle Catholic in his late-20s, explained that missionary work in the Philippines enabled him to 'interact on such an intimate level with the people … it really breaks down barriers and really, sort of forces you to accept a lot more things that you normally wouldn't accept'. Relationality like this can be seen to reverse the logic upon which much missionary work is based, as it results in missionaries encountering a new form of religious subjectivity; rather than just imparting goodwill onto others, they can also be the recipients of such acts. For example, Jonathan, a Christian convert in his 40s who attends one of Singapore's largest megachurches, observed with a sense of irony that when participating in missionary work on the Indonesian island of Batam, 'we end[ed] up more like they are taking care of us rather than going there to serve!'. This sentiment reflects both of the points raised earlier. Often, mission trips are undertaken without clear goals or expectations ('I just want[ed] to see what it is like, what can we do there', as Jonathan later reflected), meaning they are approached from a position of openness. In turn, this could lead to both the reimagination of the Christian subject, but also the reassertion of difference.

Material (dis)comfort and the reimagination of the Christian subject

As indicated earlier, Christianity in Singapore has a clearly defined material dimension. Reflecting the relative wealth of churches and their congregants, many church spaces 'combin[e] retail, entertainment, and aesthetic experiences as part of the devotee's spiritual journey', with such an amalgamation of cues and influence both reflecting the malleable Christian subject position, but also creating a 'performance space [that is] readily commoditized for exchange in the information economy' (Poon *et al.*, 2012: 1976; see also Goh, 2016; Woods, 2021). Christianity is commodified so that its exchange value can be maximised; it makes people *want* to buy into what it has to offer. Put simply – if bluntly – comfortable, aesthetically pleasing interiors appeal to Singaporean congregants, and can even foreground a sense of belonging to the church. Undertaking missionary work can, however, challenge these understandings of the material dimensions of Christianity. Speaking of the deprivations he observed undertaking missionary work in East Timor, for example, Eric, a convert in his late-20s, explained how

comfort-wise, it's definitely a lot different, because the furniture in that church is a bit broken up, and the wooden benches are not very new … it can be a bit rickety and a bit spoilt, and there is no loudhailer or microphone, so they really need to raise their voice … In Singapore, we are so blessed, we have microphones … we have a good sound system, so we can just talk normally, and everything is projected for you.

Eric not only highlights the material distinctions between churches in East Timor and Singapore, but also equates being 'blessed' with 'comfort'. Specifically, 'comfort' is equated with new furniture and adequate amplification. This highlights the importance of the material comfort to Singaporean Christians; something that is revealed through their exposure to different manifestations of Christian praxis. Eric went on to explain how this led him to rethink the link between material comfort and strength of faith: 'we can see the joy when they celebrate, when they worship … I think Singaporean Christians now are maybe a bit too comfortable … some use their phones in the church instead of paying attention to sermons … [they're] just disengaged'. In this sense, not only did Eric's missionary encounters in East Timor encourage him to question the need for material comfort in the

church, but so too did it cause him to realise the potentially negative effects of such comfort on Singaporean congregations (being 'disengaged'). Similar sentiment was echoed by Mark, introduced above. Catholics are slightly different from other Christian denominations in Singapore, as Catholic churches are less growth-oriented, and tend to have their own designated church buildings that are more traditional in look and feel. Thus, while the material dimension is still there, it tends to be more closely associated with a distinct understanding of what 'sacredness' is. For Mark, encountering Catholicism in the Philippines made him reflect that

> we live in a place where churches have good toilets, and we complain about the toilets. Some churches don't have aircon, and we complain about it! And if a church doesn't have enough seats, we also complain. But the churches that they have are literally those kind of old warehouse, old house thing, which has nothing at all! … It showed that they appreciated the word 'church' a lot more than what we do. To us, 'church' has to be a place that is air-conditioned, nice, you know? It must be peaceful and silent where nobody disturbs you, but to them, church is different – church is where they all come together and congregate together to pray. It showed a very, a lot more touching side of what a church *should* be.

The contrast Mark describes here is one of different expectations of what a church should be. For Singaporeans, the expectations of a church building are rooted in material comfort, whereas for Filipinos it is based on the principle of congregation; of a group of like-minded people coming together for the purposes of prayer and worship (Woods, 2013). The distinction that Mark identified forced him, like Eric, to rethink what it means to be part of a religious community:

> One thing I realised is that faith is often take for granted in our community. Everybody goes through that whole 'I have to go for Sunday mass', that's it, or sees Sunday mass as a chore. But when you go there, you see that, especially in this sort of aspect where people are living in total hardship, and, every day, living is a struggle. It's just so easy an option to choose not to live anymore. So, the only thing that a lot of them have is faith, and to see that faith is taken to a different level of understanding and

importance in someone else's life, you start to take appreciation for what it is … They really take religion, and everything that has to do with religion, to a higher form of appreciation.

The 'higher form of appreciation' of which Mark speaks is one that, he claims, encourages introspection. Indeed, while it has been noted in the literature that 'the observation that poor people can be kind, generous and happy is eye-opening to young missionaries' (Nagel, 2018: 14), the self-reflexive nature of such observations is underemphasised. Moreover, materiality is typically engaged with in terms of provision. Zehner (2013: 130), for example, shows how local Christian leaders in Thailand leverage their relationships with Western missionaries to 'access moral and material resources that enhanced ministerial vitality and independence'. Not explored is materiality as a form of Christian representation, and its structuring effects on the fashioning and negotiation of religious subject positions. In this view, the self-reflections of Mark and Eric reveal a more fundamental understanding of themselves as Christians *through* the material dimensions of Christianity inside and outside of Singapore. The power differential becomes more balanced; the beneficiary speaks back; the Christian subject is reimagined (Goh, 2005). Often, however, this dynamic was complicated by the (dis)connectivity of new media, which caused relational spaces of the missionary encounter to expand in ways that caused power differentials, and the subject positions therein, to be reasserted anew.

New media's (dis)connectivity and the reassertion of difference

Social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram are channels through which missionary experiences can be documented and shared among dispersed social networks. They also provide new ways to connect with and engage beneficiaries, thus causing the relational dimensions of missionary spaces to be extended. Yet, while 'the exchange of communication in a mediatized environment is transforming the nature of transactions in the religious marketplace' (Poon *et al.*, 2012: 1969), understandings of the role of new media in structuring missionary encounters with their beneficiaries remain

uncritical, and largely positivist. For example, Offutt (2011: 796) highlights the connective potential of new media in 'increas[ing] the number of ties between Christians across borders', while Occhipinti (2016: 265) highlights how it can help to 'reach across a gulf of cultural difference' that might otherwise obstruct engagement. Offering a more critical interpretation is Howell's (2009: 206) analysis of how missionaries represent their trips photographically, and how photographs can become a 'means of distancing the Other and decontextualizing the place visited … creat[ing] a sort of "missionary gaze" … that serves to homogenize locality'. While Howell speaks here of the specific practice of photography rather than new media more generally, his point about distance in particular is pertinent when we think of new media's paradoxically (dis)connecting effects. By decontextualising relationships with 'the Other', new media reproduce an undifferentiated space through which missionary-beneficiary connections can be maintained over distance (Woods and Shee, 2021a, 2021b). In doing so, however, new media also enables the beneficiaries of missionary outreach to 'speak back' in real and tangible ways.

Singaporean missionaries would often add beneficiaries as connections on their social media accounts, the aim being to nurture the encounter into a relationship over space and time. Often, however, the idea of nurturing the relationship remained unfulfilled, and caused the relational space of encounter to be limited to the missionary field rather than carrying over to Singapore. Zhang Li, a Christian convert in her early-20s, explained how the connections she made in Cambodia would 'drop' once she returned to Singapore, even though both parties had the capacity to maintain them:

> It kind of drops because of the other things we are busy with, and sometimes I really cannot reply to them quickly, so they also don't reply very quickly. So, it just kind of drops because I think there's no … We don't know each other enough to have deeper conversations. Because we only meet each other for one week, twice in one week.

We can see how the connections that are made through the relational space of encounter in the field become more problematic once the missionary returns home. In this sense, while relational spaces of missionary encounter work through the logic of a more balanced and inclusive power differential, the connectivity that comes with new media can cause this differential to be reasserted. Tracy, another Christian convert in her early-20s explained this reassertion in terms of ignoring her contacts once she returned to Singapore:

> [After I return from] mission trips, people from overseas always message me, and I always have no time. They will be like 'hi, sister, how are you? I am doing good, how about you?', like, every Monday. So, after a while, I don't really feel very connected with them, I also have my own life to follow. So, if I want to interact with you, I will do it based on whether I want to do it or not.

Tracy's assertion that 'I will do it based on whether I want to do it or not' highlights the reproduction of power that comes with connection over distance. While the missionary field is one of relationality for Singaporean missionaries, causing them to reassess the impact of materiality on their faith, it does not lead to lasting change. This reveals the paradoxical nature of Singapore's missionary terrain; missionisation is something that is embraced and encouraged by young Singaporeans, with the relationality of encounter urging them to think more deeply and broadly about their faith. However, there is also evidence to suggest that it is a relatively isolated experience that does not necessarily translate to everyday expressions of Christian benevolence towards others in Singapore. This suggests that the sense of responsibility to disadvantaged others that is evoked when undertaking missionary work overseas is undermined by the everyday practices of being a religious subject in Singapore. It reveals the limits of relational space, and the socio-spatial contingencies that define the religious subject.

The limits of relational space

Singapore's missionary terrain is limited insofar as the lessons learnt through the relational spaces of missionary encounter that are experienced overseas do not often carry over to Singapore. This speaks to the problem of translation, and how missionary experiences may

impact – or not – the everyday lives of the religious. A perennial problem with missionary encounters is how 'traveling elites relate to "social others" in their own home space', as they tend to 'withdraw from social others in their own suburbs, but pay to engage social others abroad' (Priest *et al.*, 2006: 442–443; after Bruner, 2004). This dynamic was observed among Singaporean missionaries; the difference, however, is the relational spaces of encounter through which the learnings of mission are imparted. In many respects, mission trips can lead to the strengthening, but not necessarily the *expansion*, of religious community, causing it to become a relatively more exclusive – and potentially alienating – construct. To this point, the Canadian pastor of a Baptist church in Singapore said that the value of mission trips stems from the fact that 'we have to provide specific opportunities for us to do things together'. This becomes problematic when understood through the prism of relationality, as the local communities can be led to feel like they are part of a larger Christian community, even though this is not necessarily the case. Zhang Li, for example, explained how Cambodians are

> very open to new stuff … they're very willing to listen, I guess, because you're a foreigner there, they want to kind of make friends with you. All of them kind of want to make friends with you … they all want to come to Singapore to study or work, that kind of thing … they really feel Singapore is a nice place to go, or, like, they can earn money there. For them, basically, it's to have a brighter future.

Relational spaces of missionary encounter can be misleading for those implicated within them. Indeed, while they can be defined by the balancing out of power differentials, these differentials are subsequently re-asserted through the effects of proximity and distance. One of the most telling indications of this reassertion was through post-missionary encounters with foreigners in Singapore. These encounters do not occur in relational space; rather, they occur in spaces that are structured by the guiding logics of Christian society in Singapore. These logics have been shown to be exclusionary towards migrants, with church spaces being resolutely *non*-relational in that they often cause

their congregants to subdivide along pre-existing lines of ethnic, national, linguistic and class-based differences (Woods and Kong, 2020). In turn, this has been shown to lead to the 'bordering' of identity, rather than the embrace of a more integrative religious subject position (Kong and Woods, 2019). My point is that the limits of relational missionary space rarely extend to Singapore, meaning that as much as overseas encounters can open up the subject positions of Singaporean missionaries, they soon close down again once the missionary returns home. For example, An Qi, a Christian in her mid-30s, recalled how her experiences as a missionary

> have not changed [her interactions with foreigners in Singapore]. Because it's not like I purposefully go to any occasions or meetings that allow me to have that kind of exposure. It was just, like, in daily life it doesn't give me an opportunity to interact with foreigners. So, it has not increased. But I guess in terms of attitudes in interactions with them, I am a bit more open now.

A Qi's claims to 'openness' remain abstract, and, as the interview unfolded, did not appear to translate into actual behaviours. If anything, the openness that is experienced and learnt overseas translates into closures back in Singapore. This provokes critical consideration of the intersections of religious subject positions, and the sense of cosmopolitan citizenship that overseas experience is meant to instil. These closures play out through new media, but they are often enforced by the organisation and composition of Singapore's churches. A Singaporean pastor described how mission trips to Aceh in Indonesia actually reproduced a sense of exclusivity among his Singaporean congregation. When asked if missionary work encouraged his Singaporean congregation to connect with other congregations, he replied that 'after service we still hang out in our own gangs, like cell groups, same age group. But going there [on a mission trip], they really appreciate Singapore'. In this sense, missionary work entails the consolidation of a more insular outlook, rather than the development of a more expansive, and integrative worldview. Thus, while relational spaces of missionary encounter

encourage self-reflection, they do little to overcome the consolidation of pre-existing forms of social and cultural distinction. Relational spaces of missionary encounter might enable the configuration of new understandings of 'how spaces are "imagined", how meaning is ascribed to physical spaces (such that they are perceived, represented and interpreted in particular ways), how knowledge about these places is produced, and how these representations make various courses of action possible' (Kothari and Wilkinson, 2010: 1397), but these configurations are largely untranslatable beyond the missionary terrain. Through this untranslatability, they cause Singapore's STM community to remain insulated from the people and places among which they work. As much as they encounter and experience alternative religious subject positions through the missionary terrain, they often fall short of integrating them into a new, or better, way of being a Christian in the world.

Conclusions

As much as the world is changing, so too is missionary activity changing. This paper has tracked some of these changes by offering a counterpoint to normative discourses of missionary activity. As counterpoint, it is rooted in intra-Asian missionary activity, which is defined by relational spaces, paradoxical outcomes and structuring effects that go beyond, and often serve to moderate, the motivating drivers of religious belief. In this vein, this paper can be read as a response to Baillie Smith *et al.*'s (2013: 126; see also 2011) lament that 'we have little understanding of the ways faith based international volunteering connects with issues of poverty and development or discourse and practices of global citizenship'. To this latter point, as much as short-term missions can be seen as articulations of global citizenship among young, upwardly (religiously) mobile people in Asia, the paradoxical outcomes of relational spaces of missionary encounter can be seen to cause the 'global' part of global citizenship to be a resolutely local construct that is performed through *trans*-local spaces of engagement and comparison. This trans-locality can be seen to reflect the flexibility and openness of Singapore's STM

community when overseas, and its closures and exclusions at home. So too can it reflect more fundamental shifts in the performance of mission, with the structuring effects of materiality and new media revealing the enduring sense of practicality that has come to infuse the engagements with, and practices of, faith. What this means for forging a Singaporean Christian consciousness towards co-religionists overseas, the development of a more cosmopolitan Christian outlook at home, and the ethics of encounter therein, present promising avenues for further research.

Acknowledgements

Note

1 All names have been changed.

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