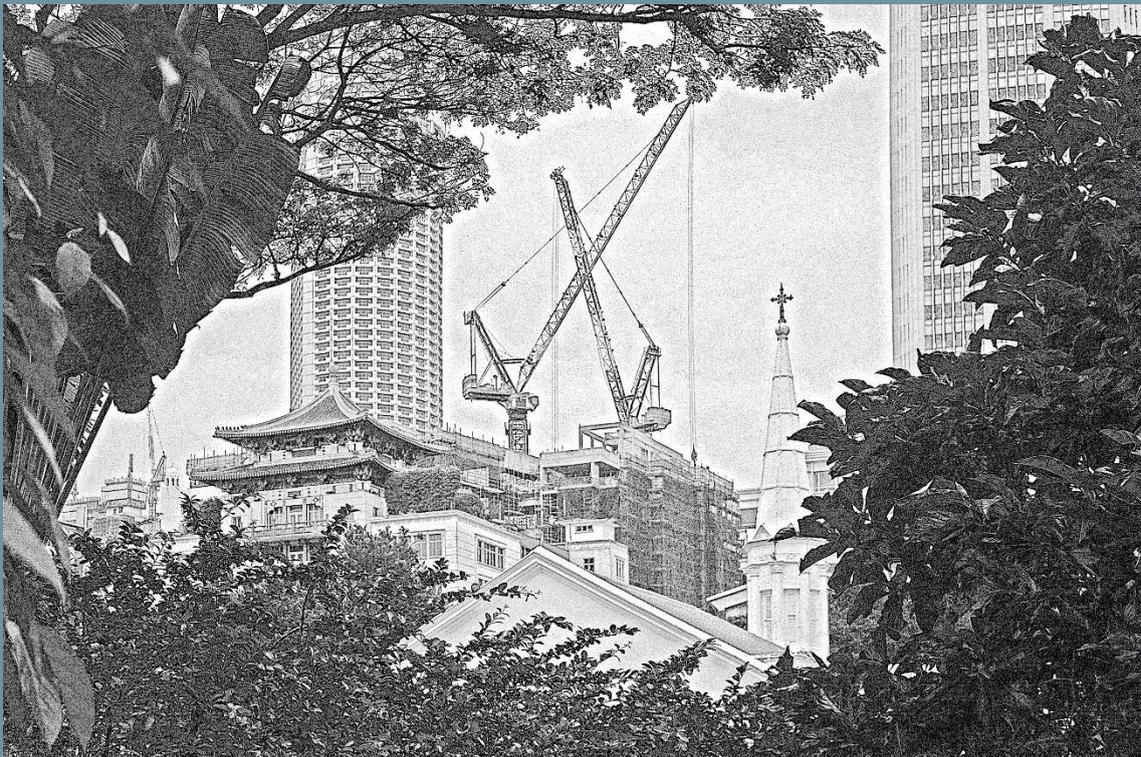# BUILDING THE ANTIOCH OF ASIA

Christianity, Religious Diversity and the
Secular State in Singapore

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BUILDING THE ANTIOCH OF ASIA

Christianity, Religious Diversity and the Secular State in Singapore

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ABSTRACT   This thesis examines the imbrication of secularism and religious diversity in Singapore by focusing on evangelical Christians and their commitment to fulfill the biblical mission imperative (Matthew 28:19, NIV). Over the past few decades, Singapore has developed into a culturally-significant hub for evangelical Christianity in Asia and today serves as an important base for both international and homegrown missionary organizations, training institutes, Bible schools, and mass media outlets (DeBernardi 2008b; R.B.H. Goh 2009). The self-understanding of most evangelical churches to be structured towards mission is commonly framed in a broader prophetic narrative of a unique God-given destiny for Singapore to become the "Antioch of Asia," an epicenter for mission outreach and world evangelism. Against this background, it is argued that the "Antioch" narrative has become a powerful force within the contemporary Evangelical imaginary, creating alternative symbolic territorialities and temporalities which seek to resignify the spiritual telos and developmental ethos of the postcolonial city-state (D.P.S. Goh 2010). However, the realization of these alternate spatiotemporal orderings contests the very ideas of the urban public sphere and state-set boundaries between the secular and the religious. Within an environment where the government exercises strong legal and bureaucratic control over all religious matters, evangelicals are thus forced to develop flexible strategies to negotiate and accommodate their positions as Christian citizens, both in relation to Singapore's ethno-religious diversity and the secular self-understanding of the state. Drawing from empirical data gathered during field research between 2013 and 2015 and beyond, this thesis hopes to contribute to the broader discussions on religious diversity and secularism within the interdisciplinary study of religion.

CONTENTS

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ACS	(Methodist) Anglo-Chinese School
AG	Assemblies of God
CCA	Christian Conference of Asia
CCMS	Council of Churches of Malaysia and Singapore
CHC	City Harvest Church
CMIO	Chinese-Malay-Indian-Other
CSCC	Cornerstone Community Church
DRH	Declaration of Religious Harmony
EACC	East Asia Christian Conference
EIC	(British) East Indian Company
FCBC	Faith Community Baptist Church
IRO	Inter Religious Organisation
ISD	Internal Security Department
JIM	Jurong Industrial Mission
MND	Ministry of National Development
MHA	Ministry of Home Affairs
MCC	Malaysian Council of Churches
MRHA	Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act
MUIS	Majilis Ugama Islam Singapura (Islamic Religious Council of Singapore)
NCCS	National Council of Churches Singapore
NCC	New Creation Church
OMF	Overseas Missionary Fellowship
PAP	People's Action Party
SEC	Singapore Evangelism Center
STB	Singapore Tourism Board
URA	Urban Redevelopment Authority
YFC	Youth for Christ
YSA	Young Sikh Association
WCC	World Council of Churches

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1. INTRODUCTION

Worlds Apart

A warm sea breeze embraced me as I stepped onto the bustling docks of Singapore's Harbourfront Ferry Terminal, the salty air thick with my anticipation and the faint scent of diesel from departing vessels. I was about to embark on a two-day mission trip to Batam, Indonesia, accompanying a group of young Singaporean Christians from a medium-sized church located in the eastern part of the city-state. Welcomed as a participant observer by the church's mission pastor, I was afforded a rare opportunity to engage directly with their mission work and critically examine how their biblical mandate to "go and make disciples of all nations" was enacted in situ.

This trip was not an isolated initiative but part of the church's broader mission strategy, shaped by a wider narrative within Singaporean Christianity that envisions the nation as a regional hub for mission outreach, an aspiration frequently expressed in the trope of being or becoming the *"Antioch of Asia."* Although the term would resurface repeatedly throughout my later fieldwork, its meaning at this early stage remained more evocative than clear to me. As I stood among the team members awaiting departure, I found myself wondering how these grand theological ideals would take form in practice. What would mission work look like on the ground? How would the mission imperative and the self-identification as an "Asian Antioch" translate into action across cultural and national boundaries?

Batam, part of Indonesia's Riau Archipelago, lies just forty-five minutes south of Singapore by ferry, yet its socio-economic realities contrast sharply with the island-state's meticulously ordered urban environment. The mission itinerary reflected a distinctly "Singaporean" approach to planning: every activity was scheduled with precision, from biblically inspired engagements at a local orphanage to leading a Youth Service at a partner church in the evening. The second day was devoted to conducting the Sunday church service and a separate program for children. Yet, upon arrival, the team encountered immediate disruptions to their well-orchestrated plans, including delays in transportation, miscommunications due to language barriers, and infrastructural realities that differed from those in

Singapore. These disruptions, although seemingly minor, highlighted a deeper cultural dissonance. Singapore's efficiency-driven ethos, where punctuality, seamless coordination, and technological connectivity are taken for granted, stood in stark contrast to Batam's more fluid and adaptive rhythms. The late arrival of the designated driver necessitated on-the-spot adjustments, while language barriers further compounded these logistical challenges, requiring negotiation and improvisation in ways unfamiliar to many team members.

More striking, however, was the absences of infrastructural certainties integral to daily life in Singapore. The ever-present hum of air-conditioning, a near-invisible yet pervasive feature of Singapore's built environment, was absent in many spaces, replaced by the stifling embrace of tropical heat. Similarly, stable and ubiquitous Wi-Fi, an unspoken assumption in Singapore's digital landscape, proved unreliable, occasionally cutting the team off from their habitual modes of communication and coordination. These absences, rather than being mere inconveniences, subtly unsettled the rhythms of the mission team, forcing them to adapt to a different temporality, one in which contingency rather than precision dictated the flow of activities. It was against the backdrop of these experiences that one mission team member commented to me in passing: "We're geographically so close, yet it feels like we're worlds apart."

Sensitivities and a Shift in Research Focus

Initially, I did not pay much attention to these observations, noting them without much reflection. It was only later, as I sifted through my field notes, that their significance began to become clear. What appeared to be logistical setbacks (delayed transportation, language barriers, and unstable internet access) were, in fact, indicators of a deeper structural disjuncture that would, along with other challenges, ultimately inspire me to change my research focus.

My original aim was to conduct a multi-sited ethnographic study tracing Singaporean Christian mission practices across Indonesia's Riau Province. However, this plan quickly proved untenable, not merely due to practical challenges, but also because of my positionality as an outsider in a context where visibility entailed significant risks. These concerns were frequently articulated in discussions with mission leaders, who highlighted the precarious nature of Christian outreach in a

predominantly Muslim yet religiously plural environment. As one seasoned Singaporean mission pastor bluntly told me:

> Missionary activities among Muslims in Riau, and Indonesia in general, have to be done low-profile and under great caution. The fact that you are a Westerner could attract too much attention, especially on remote islands where foreigners are rarely seen… So, you might interfere with our mission activities and thus obstruct our mission.

His statement functioned as more than a cautionary note: it was an implicit directive emphasizing the potential liabilities associated with my presence as a "foreign" researcher. Other leaders echoed similar doubts, particularly regarding the confidentiality of mission-related activities. One mission pastor from a prominent church proposed that I sign a non-disclosure agreement, arguing that any form of publicity, even within an academic framework, could jeopardize future evangelization efforts. While not all pastors I encountered expressed such stringent reservations, these interactions nevertheless reflected the complex ethical considerations involved in conducting research in religiously diverse settings, underscoring the prevailing sensitivities surrounding mission work and the potential risks associated with its public exposure. These concerns often manifest as self-imposed censorship and become even more pronounced when addressing the issue of proselytism. Still vividly present in my memory is the warning given to me from the regional director of an international mission agency, who, upon learning about my research project, advised me to refrain from providing specific details about my objectives, worrying that it could put me and others under the surveillance of the state.

It would be easy to dismiss such cautionary remarks and warnings as hyperbole or mere overreactions. After all, I also encountered Christian leaders who were notably outspoken about their mission strategies and objectives. Nevertheless, having spent my formative years in Singapore, I was also acutely aware of the broader socio-political constraints and potential risks associated with researching Christian proselytism in a region marked by high degrees of religious diversity.

The historical and political underpinnings of these concerns are well-documented. In Singapore, religion remains a highly sensitive and, at times, contentious issue within the city-state's multiethnic and multireligious landscape, a reality shaped by its colonial past. British colonial policies institutionalized ethnic

and religious pluralism by categorizing communities along racial and religious lines, a legacy that continues to inform Singapore's approach to multicultural governance today. This historical context has contributed to a highly managed model of religious regulation in which the state actively monitors and structures public religious expressions to ensure interreligious harmony and social cohesion. Such a state-led regulatory framework does not only affect "foreign" researchers like myself but also Singaporean based scholars examining religious life in the city-state. Academic inquiry into religious matters must navigate these intricate socio-political sensitivities, as the state remains deeply invested in maintaining a delicate balance between religious freedom and national stability. Consequently, there exists a degree of caution and self-regulation in religious research, as scholars need to contend with both formal state constraints and the guarded stance of religious communities themselves. As Terence Chong and Hui Yew-Foong observe in their introduction to their survey of Protestant churchgoers in Singapore:

> Research into the Christian community in Singapore is fraught with the same politics and obstacles that come with researching any other community. As an outsider, the researcher may be initially viewed with some degree of suspicion while community leaders may be understandably protective of those under their charge. **However, as any student of Singapore society knows, the particular history and socio-political context of the Christian community in relation to the state and other faith communities add another layer of politics that the researcher must grapple with.** Historical awareness cannot be dispensed with. From the more labour-conscious Jurong Christian Church in the late 1960s, the so-called 'Marxist Conspiracy' in 1987, the passing of the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act in 1990, the attempted takeover of a well known women's rights group in 2009, as well as several high profile cases of disparaging remarks about other faith communities, it is clear that the Christian community is constantly negotiating with the rest of society and with the state [...] While such negotiations are par for course in any multicultural and multireligious society, they sometimes give rise to sensitivities from within the community and do not make the job of sociologists and anthropologists any easier. **Needless to say, we encountered our fair share of slammed doors** (Chong and Hui 2013: 6 and 7, emphasis added).

My own experiences closely mirrored the challenges described by Chong and Hui, as I too encountered my "fair share" of closed doors while attempting to gain access to the research field. Yet, rather than viewing these constraints as impediments, I came to recognize them as valuable insights in themselves. The initial obstacles I encountered provided a productive starting point for redefining my research focus, leading to the realization that to understand Christian mission within the Singaporean context, I needed to excavate the "additional layer of politics" to which

it is inextricably bound.

It was also around this stage of my fieldwork that I became increasingly attentive to the recurrence of the phrase "Antioch of Asia" across a wide range of Christian materials and conversations. What had first appeared during the Batam mission trip as an inspiring but somewhat abstract slogan began to reveal its pervasiveness and institutional embeddedness. In mission leaflets, church newsletters, and online promotional materials from movements and organizations such as *LoveSingapore*, the *Singapore Centre for Global Mission*, and the *GoForth National Missions Conference*, the term surfaced repeatedly, presented as both a theological mandate and a national vocation. Through these textual and visual affirmations, I came to understand that the "Antioch" ideal was not merely rhetorical but operated as a guiding narrative through which Singaporean Christians interpreted their faith, citizenship, and engagement with the world. Recognizing the ubiquity and symbolic weight of this discourse was crucial for understanding how local churches conceptualize their participation in global Christian networks and how this vision interacts with Singapore's secular and multireligious state framework. The notion of Singapore as a "world apart," as articulated by one of my interlocutors during the Batam mission trip, thus took on greater significance. Its meaning extended beyond mere observable differences in infrastructure and culture, encompassing a deeper sense of national exceptionalism that resonated with the Christian collective belief in Singapore's divinely appointed role as an "Antioch of Asia."

Both, the mission trip and my difficulties in gaining field access, underscored the complex realities of Christian public engagements within an environment where religious diversity, state secularism, and missionary aspirations intersect in intricate ways. The disjunction between evangelical ambitions and the realities of religious governance in Singapore suggested that missionary work was not simply a matter of crossing geographical borders; it also required navigating institutional and political boundaries within Singapore itself. This realization prompted me to rethink my original ethnographic approach, shifting instead toward a broader historical and sociologically informed analysis of the trajectories and socio-political contexts that have at once enabled, constrained, and channeled the missional aspiration of Christians in Singapore to become an "Antioch of Asia."

Christianity in Singapore: Historical Legacies, Socio-Political Dynamics, and Local Adaptations

Christianity in Singapore, as in much of Southeast Asia, is deeply entangled with colonial legacies, Western missionary endeavors, and the shifting dynamics of postcolonial nation-building. This complex interplay of historical forces has profoundly shaped the development and character of Christianity in the region. The arrival of European colonial powers in Southeast Asia brought with it not only political and economic transformations but also religious change. Missionaries representing a range of Christian denominations, including Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, and other Protestant traditions, established a presence in Singapore and the wider region, introducing new religious ideas, practices, and institutions (for concise overviews of the historical development of Christianity in Singapore and Southeast Asia in general, see R.B.H. Goh 2005; Roxborogh, 2006; Wilfred 2014).

While these early missionary initiatives laid the groundwork for the emergence of Christian communities, the process of religious transmission was neither linear nor unilateral. Christianity was not simply imposed upon passive recipients; rather, local communities actively engaged with, rejected or adapted and re-contextualized Christian teachings and practices in ways that resonated with their existing cultural norms and responded to specific societal needs (cf. DeBernardi 2001, 2020; Roxborogh 1995; Sim 2015, 2022). Accordingly, Christianity in Singapore did not remain a static remnant of colonialism but evolved into an integral part of the postcolonial national religious landscape. Shaped by transcultural exchanges, it has drawn significantly from Chinese Christian influences while simultaneously engaging with broader global theological movements, rendering it a dynamic and multifaceted religious force within the city-state today.

Nevertheless, despite its historical entrenchment, Christianity in Singapore is still often perceived as a "Western" religion (R.B.H. Goh 2009; Poon 2010; Tong 2007). This perception is reinforced by the state's multicultural governance framework, which closely aligns religious identities with racial categories. Christianity's historical association with colonialism thus complicates its contemporary positioning, as it tends to be simultaneously viewed as an extension of Western modernity and as lacking the deep-rooted cultural heritage attributed to officially recognized "Asian" religions such as Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, and

Hinduism (R.B.H. Goh 2009). This ambivalent status poses a challenge for Christian communities as they seek to articulate and affirm their religious identity within Singapore's racialized multicultural context.

In an effort to counter prevailing perceptions of Christianity as a foreign import, Christian communities have actively pursued to develop a localized theological identity, one that distances itself from colonial legacies and remains attuned to the socio-political realities of the nation. Church leaders have sought to reconcile their global religious affiliations with the formation of distinctly "Singaporean" expressions of Christianity, emphasizing cultural adaptability and relevance to the local context (Poon 2013a; Roxborogh 2016). This endeavor has given rise to theological narratives that reframe Singaporean Christianity as both cosmopolitan and locally embedded, capable of engaging with global Christian currents while remaining sensitive to the city-state's multireligious environment and secular framework.

However, these processes of localization and identity formation have been neither uniform nor uncontested. Theological and denominational differences, particularly between liberal and evangelical-charismatic traditions, have significantly influenced the modes through which Christian communities engage with both the state and broader society (D.P.S. Goh 2010). Mainline Protestant denominations, with their historical roots extending back to the colonial era, have long played a significant role in the country's educational institutions, social welfare initiatives, and public discourse. During the immediate post-independence era, these churches often adopted a more liberal theological orientation, characterized by an emphasis on social engagement, inclusivity, and interreligious dialogue. Since the late 1970s, however, the rise of conservative evangelicalism and Pentecostal/charismatic Christianity has markedly transformed the Christian landscape, displacing the once-dominant liberal theological streams to the periphery (ibid). This shift has introduced a more assertive and spiritually oriented form of Christianity, creating new challenges for both the state and other religious communities. With their strong emphasis on individual conversion, spiritual renewal, and active proselytization, evangelical groups often adopt more overt modes of public engagement that may conflict with Singapore's tightly calibrated framework for managing religious pluralism, which prioritizes intercommunal harmony and sociopolitical stability.

Christianity's position within Singapore's religiously plural and multicultural context is further complicated by its distinctive socio-demographic profile and historical patterns of growth. Christianity is often perceived as the fastest-growing religion in the country, a perception largely attributed to its strong appeal among English-educated ethnic Chinese from middle- and upper-middle-class backgrounds (cf. Gomes and Tan 2019). However, a closer analysis of past census data (Singapore Department of Statistics, 1980, 1990, 2000, 2010, 2020) reveals a more nuanced trajectory. While the proportion of Singaporeans identifying as Christian (excluding Catholics) more than doubled between 1980 and 2020, rising from 5.8% to 11.9%, this growth has not been consistent over time. Using the decadal growth rate as a benchmark, the most significant increase occurred during the 1980s, followed by a marked deceleration in subsequent decades, particularly from the 2000s onward (see Appendices A and B).[1] Concurrently, the proportion of individuals reporting no religious affiliation has emerged as the fastest-growing category over the past twenty years (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2010, 2020), thereby complicating simplified narratives of Christianity's purported "unprecedented" expansion and highlighting broader shifts in Singapore's religious landscape.

Within this context, the significance of Christianity in Singapore cannot be adequately understood through numerical growth alone. Rather, its influence derives substantially from its association with socioeconomic mobility (cf. R.B.H. Goh 2003a). Although Christians constitute a minority within Singapore's multireligious population, they are disproportionately represented among the affluent and highly educated segments of society, with many holding influential positions in business, politics, and academia. This distinctive socioeconomic profile has reinforced perceptions of Christianity as a religion closely aligned with privilege and social advantage (Chong 2015b). While such an elite status has enabled Christian institutions to exert considerable influence, particularly within education and social welfare domains (cf. Mathews 2008a), it has simultaneously engendered tensions with other religious communities, who may view Christianity's prominence as disproportionate relative to its demographic size.

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[1] Decadal growth rates are based on the author's own calculations using census data from the *Singapore Department of Statistics* (1980, 1990, 2000, 2010, and 2020).

Christianity's apparent "excess" on cultural, financial, and symbolic capital (R.B.H. Goh 2016), in conjunction with its evangelical orientation, has significantly influenced the self-understanding of Christian churches in Singapore, particularly in relation to their role vis-à-vis the state and broader society. Rather than confining religious practices exclusively to the private sphere, Christians define the gospel as a public truth intended to have an impact on the common good and society at large (Mathews 2008b). This commitment to active public engagement is grounded in the biblical imperative for mission, which encompasses a concern for the salvation of other "non-believers" and, not least, the nation itself. Evangelical activism (the belief that faith must be expressed through effort and concrete action) thus lays the foundation for various mission programs and public initiatives undertaken by Christian communities on the island.

This outward-looking orientation is often framed within a larger theological narrative that assigns to Singapore a special divine role as the "Antioch of Asia." Drawing upon the example of the biblical city of Antioch, as referenced in the New Testament and recognized as the starting point of Apostle Paul's missionary journeys, many Christians in Singapore perceive their nation as divinely appointed to serve as a regional hub for the dissemination of the gospel. This vision closely aligns with Singapore's broader national ambition to be a global city, reinforcing the idea that the country is uniquely positioned to act as a spiritual and missionary center for Asia and beyond. The "Antioch" narrative thus provides both a theological justification for missionary activism and a reflection of broader national aspirations for regional and global influence.

At the same time, the growing visibility and influence of evangelical Christianity in the city-state unfold within the constraints of state policies that tightly regulate public religious expression. As a secular state overseeing a multireligious population, Singapore has carefully managed the intersection of religion, ethnicity, and national cohesion through an intricate combination of legal mechanisms, bureaucratic regulation, and public discourses emphasizing societal "harmony" (cf. Neo 2019; Thio 2006, 2019). Departing from the strict separation of "church and state" characteristic of many Western democracies, Singapore's secular governance adopts an approach described by scholars as "pragmatic secularism" or "pluralist secularism" (D.P.S. Goh 2014b; K.P. Tan 2010). Within this framework, the state

actively regulates religious diversity to maintain social stability and communal harmony. Public religious expressions are permitted but must remain within well-defined boundaries, as outlined for instance in the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act (MRHA), which grants the state extensive powers to curb activities deemed disruptive to interfaith relations. For Christians, navigating these constraints necessitates strategic engagement as they must balance their missional aspirations with state-imposed secular boundaries and the sensitivities of other religious groups in Singapore's multireligious landscape.

These historical legacies and sociopolitical dynamics outlined above have not only shaped the lived realities of Christianity in Singapore, but also the conceptual and methodological frameworks through which it has been examined. Engaging critically with this body of scholarship is essential for positioning the present study within broader academic conversations. The following section maps this intellectual landscape, tracing its major contributions, its persistent silences, and the openings where this study seeks to intervene.

Researching Christianity in Singapore: Academic Perspectives and Gaps

The study of Christianity in Singapore is characterized by a strong emphasis on local perspectives, with a substantial body of scholarship produced by researchers based within the country. Unlike in other parts of Southeast Asia, where research on Christianity (and religion more generally) tends to be dominated by scholars based in the global North, Singapore's academic landscape is distinguished by the prominence of domestic voices who actively shape and drive the study of religion within the city-state. Institutions such as the National University of Singapore (NUS), the ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore Management University (SMU), and the Asia Research Institute (ARI) have established themselves as important sites for research on religion, attracting scholars from a wide range of disciplines and international backgrounds, underscoring Singapore's emergence as a leading academic hub and a key node in both regional and global networks of knowledge production.

This locally rooted scholarship has not only enriched the empirical understanding of Christianity in Singapore but has also influenced methodological and disciplinary approaches through which it is studied. A notable feature of this

body of work is its interdisciplinarity, drawing on insights from sociology, social anthropology, geography, legal and urban studies, among others. While *religious studies* is not institutionally established as an independent discipline in Singapore (none of the aforementioned institutions maintain a dedicated department of religious studies) research on religion is typically situated within broader academic fields, such as Southeast Asian studies, history, law, or social sciences. This integration reflects both the structural configuration of local institutions and the broader priorities of Singapore's educational and research landscape. The absence of a standalone religious studies department, however, should not be mistaken for a lack of scholarly engagement with religion. Rather, it points to a distinct institutional configuration in which the study of religion continues to thrive within interdisciplinary frameworks.

At the same time, knowledge production on Christianity in Singapore is also informed by theology, which operates outside the public university system. Unlike in European contexts, where theological departments are usually integrated into public universities as a result of historical and institutional legacies, theological education in Singapore is predominantly conducted through independent seminaries and private theological colleges. Institutions like the Trinity Theological College, Singapore Bible College, and the East Asia School of Theology serve as principal venues for the training of clergy and Christian leaders across denominational lines. Although these seminaries operate from confessional foundations, they have made important contributions to a broader understanding of Christianity in Singapore. Through theological reflection, historical inquiry, and contextual engagement, they generate significant scholarship on the lived experiences, doctrines, and evolving practices of Christian communities in the region. Their research often addresses issues such as church growth, interfaith relations, social ethics, and the role of Christianity within a religiously diverse society, topics that resonate beyond ecclesial boundaries and contribute meaningfully to broader academic and public discourse. Nonetheless, the institutional separation between theology and secular scholarship remains pronounced in Singapore's higher education landscape. This divide reinforces the epistemological and methodological boundaries between confessional theology and university-based scholarship on religion, thereby limiting opportunities for interdisciplinary dialogue. Yet, theological institutions continue to

play a vital, albeit parallel, role in advancing knowledge of contemporary Christian life in the city-state.

Despite the richness of locally produced scholarship, Christianity in Singapore has received limited attention within international academic discourse, particularly within the German-speaking tradition of religious studies (*Religionswissenschaft*), With a few notable exceptions (cf. Berg-Chan 2018; DeBernardi 2008a, 2008b, 2020; Rakow 2019, 2022), sustained engagement with the subject remains strikingly absent. This relative neglect cannot be solely attributed to geographic distance; rather it reflects the historical and epistemological foundations of the discipline itself. Emerging in the 19th century, the academic field of religious studies was shaped by the intellectual currents of Enlightenment rationalism, alongside the broader institutionalization of the humanities and social sciences within European universities. A core aspect of its early formation was the deliberate differentiation from theology, which at the time was closely aligned with state institutions and confessional interests. In seeking to establish a neutral, scientific, and non-normative approach to the study of religion, *Religionswissenschaft* constructed its identity in opposition to the perceived doctrinal and faith-based orientation of theological inquiry. Consequently, scholarly attention shifted toward the study of "other" religions (those considered non-Christian, non-Western, and culturally remote) as more suitable objects for scholarly inquiry. Religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, and so-called "primitive religions" became the primary focus of religious studies, while Christianity was often excluded or approached with caution due to its proximity to theology.

This disciplinary legacy has left a lasting imprint on the field, contributing to a bias in which modern expressions of Christianity, particularly those located in non-Western, urbanized, and economically developed societies like Singapore, are often perceived as either too familiar or not sufficiently "other" to warrant systematic scholarly engagement (cf. Berg-Chan 2018). The result of this epistemological distancing is a persistent marginalization of Christian forms that do not align with dominant academic frameworks, as they neither fit neatly into established Western denominational categories nor conform to essentialized notions of "exotic" non-Western religiosity. In contexts such as Singapore (and Southeast Asia more generally) where Christianity unfolds within highly urbanized, globalized, and

religiously diverse environments, the lack of deeper engagement from German-speaking religious studies reflects both disciplinary limitations and enduring Eurocentric assumptions about what constitutes a valid subject of scholarly analysis.

My research seeks to address this gap by offering a critical analysis of Christianity in Singapore as a dynamic, internally diverse, and globally situated religious formation. In doing so, I engage closely with Singapore-based scholarship, which provides both rich empirical insights and conceptually robust frameworks. Scholars such as Terence Chong, Daniel Goh, Robbie Goh, Lily Kong, Orlando Woods, Vineeta Sinha, Mathew Mathews, among others, have been instrumental in advancing nuanced understandings of religion in the city-state, particularly in relation to religious diversity, civil society, secular governance, and identity politics. Their contributions form a foundational basis for this study, reflecting a growing body of scholarship that draws from local contexts while contributing to global academic conversations on religion from a distinctly Singaporean perspective.

Singapore as a Site of Urban Religious Studies

A central focus of existing scholarship on Christianity in Singapore has been the relationship between religion and urban modernity. Many studies have adopted an *urban religion* perspective to examine how Christianity manifests in the city, with particular attention to spatial dynamics, institutional arrangements, and the role of Christian organizations in shaping urban public life. This approach has yielded valuable insights, especially concerning the emergence of megachurches, Christian place-making strategies, and the intersection of Christian practices with consumer culture and neoliberal economic logics (cf. Woods 2018b, 2020; Yip and Ainsworth 2013).

However, while the urban religion framework has proven productive, it also raises critical questions in the context of Singapore. As a fully urbanized city-state, Singapore challenges the conceptual foundations of what constitutes the "urban" in urban religious studies. In contrast to settings where the notion of "urban religion" presuppose a distinction from rural or semi-urban religious configurations, Singapore represents no such internal spatial differentiation. The total urbanization of the city-state implies that all religious life necessarily unfolds within urban logics and infrastructures, rendering the urban not an analytical variable but a given.

Consequently, the "urban" is not merely an external context for religion, but the very condition through which it is lived and practiced. This presents both an opportunity and a challenge: while Singapore provides an exemplary case for exploring the complex entanglements between religion and urbanism, it also risks flattening the analytical utility of "urban religion" unless this category is critically reassessed and contextualized.

In Singapore, this means taking into consideration its dual identity as both a sovereign nation-state and a hyper-modern global city. The government's efforts to brand itself as a cosmopolitan, innovation-driven hub introduce enduring tensions between its global city aspiration and its domestic nation-building agenda. While official discourse emphasizes multicultural harmony and national unity, it simultaneously promotes a neoliberal ethos centered on global competitiveness, adaptability, and openness to transnational capital flows. This dual ambition (to cultivate a cohesive national identity while asserting global city status) produces a conflicted sociopolitical terrain in which religious communities must navigate competing expectations, shaping not only their public engagement, but also the ways in which religious identities are formed, expressed, and negotiated.

Accordingly, this thesis does not adopt urban religion as primary analytical framework. Rather than centering on religious urbanism per se, I focus on how Christians in Singapore navigate the complex and often conflicting demands of the city-state's dual ambitions of nation-building and global city-making. My interest lies in exploring how Christian communities are not simply responding to the urban environment, but are actively engaging with and reshaping the socio-political imaginaries that inform Singapore's identity as both a nation and a city. From this perspective, Christianity emerges as a meaningful site where the tensions between national belonging and global aspiration are lived, negotiated and reimagined. By moving beyond conventional framings of urban religion, I aim to show how Christian identity and missional ambitions are constructed and enacted within a city-state that is not only fully urbanized, but also deeply invested in maintaining internal national unity while asserting its relevance on the global stage.

Research Questions, Aims, and Analytical Framing

This thesis grew out of questions that emerged not only from theoretical interest but

also from my own experiences in the field, through conversations, observations, moments of interpretive ambiguity, and ongoing reflections on how religion is lived, imagined, and regulated in Singapore. At its core, this study explores how Christians in Singapore construct and express their religious identity within a socio-political landscape shaped by secular governance, multicultural policy frameworks, and the intertwined legacies of colonial rule and postcolonial nation-building. It is within this context that two central research questions arise, guiding the inquiry that follows.

(1) *How do Christians in Singapore construct and negotiate their identity as a religious minority within a plural religious environment and in relation to the regulatory framework of the secular state?* While Christianity holds a considerable institutional presence and socio-economic influence in Singapore, as previously discussed, it remains a minority religion within a city-state that actively manages religious expression in the public sphere. This is particularly pronounced for evangelical Christians, who must reconcile their mission-driven identity with national policies that discourage overt forms of proselytization. This question opens several further lines of inquiry: What strategies do Christians adopt to sustain their distinct religious identities and communal boundaries? How do they navigate the tension between participation in global Christian networks and embeddedness within a national framework that emphasizes secularism, religious harmony, and pluralism?

(2) *How has the notion of Singapore as the "Antioch of Asia" become such a powerful leitmotif within contemporary Singaporean evangelical discourse?* What forms of religious, national, and cosmopolitan identity does this imagery evoke, and how does it mediate the relationship between religious aspirations and national belonging? As outlined above, the "Antioch" metaphor invokes a vision of Singapore as a divinely ordained hub for regional Christian outreach, drawing on biblical imagery while resonating with its globalized self-image. This raises further questions: How do evangelical communities mobilize this vision in shaping their missional programs and institutional imaginaries? In what ways does the Antioch narrative align with, complicate, or challenge dominant national discourses on secular governance, religious harmony, and Singapore's regional positioning? Furthermore, does it serve primarily as a theological affirmation of

national purpose or does it also function as a mode of negotiating the inherent tensions between local rootedness and global religious ambition?

Addressing these questions necessitates an approach that remains firmly anchored in the empirical realities of Christian life in Singapore while critically examining the conceptual assumptions through which these realities are interpreted. Rather than treating theory and data as distinct stages, I sought to bring them into a continuous dialogue, allowing empirical engagement and conceptual reflection to mutually inform each other throughout the thesis. This approach is thus guided by three interrelated conceptual arguments, which provide a critical foundation for engaging broader debates on religion, identity, and governance while remaining attentive to the shifting historical, political, and social dynamics through which Christian life in Singapore is continually negotiated. Instead of proposing an overarching theoretical model, these arguments illuminate key dimensions of the relationship between religion, governance, and identity that underpin this thesis's empirical and analytical concerns. The following discussion outlines each of these arguments: the enduring structuring role of the nation-state, the social and political construction of religious diversity and secularism, and the epistemological challenges surrounding the categorization of Christianity in Singapore.

Conceptual Arguments

a) Putting the Nation-State Back into the Picture

The first conceptual argument I wish to advance emphasizes the enduring centrality of the nation-state in shaping the construction, governance, and expression of religious identities across both national and transnational boundaries. While scholarly attention has increasingly turned to transnational religious flows and global Christian networks, I argue that the nation-state remains a pivotal, though often sidelined, actor that actively mediates religious life. Rather than merely serving as a passive backdrop to religious globalization, the nation-state functions as a dynamic force that refracts, regulates, and reterritorializes global religious flows through legal frameworks, regulatory regimes, and cultural logics.

In the context of Singapore, the state's model of multicultural governance and strict religious regulation constitutes a powerful framework that structures the

conditions under which religious practices and public engagements take place. Although global evangelical and charismatic/Pentecostal networks significantly influence the theological orientations and organizational strategies of Christian communities in Singapore, the state remains a crucial mediating force that reframes and reconfigures these transnational religious engagements. Christian discourses such as the "Antioch of Asia" narrative do not circulate freely through a neutral global space; rather, they are conditioned, constrained, or enabled by the specific political, legal, and cultural configurations of the state. National borders, legal regimes, and state interests continue to exert a decisive influence over the circulation, translation, and institutionalization of global Christian discourses. Far from being rendered obsolete by globalization, the nation-state thus persists as a central site through which religious life is configured, negotiated, and reproduced.

Understanding this dynamic requires situating the discussion within broader methodological debates about the role of the nation-state in scholarly analysis. Much recent scholarship has been informed by a sustained critique of *methodological nationalism*: the tendency to treat the nation-state as the natural and self-evident unit of social life and analysis (cf. Wimmer and Schiller 2002). Methodological nationalism tends to emphasize nationally bounded processes and institutions while marginalizing the transnational circulations and global entanglements that increasingly characterize religious and cultural life. Consequently, it risks reifying the nation-state, presenting it as an inevitable and self-contained social form, rather than recognizing it as a historically contingent and politically constructed site of power and negotiation (Koch 2020). Critics have rightly pointed out that such an approach tends to obscure the constructed nature of national boundaries, as well as the diverse ways in which religious actors navigate, contest, and transcend them. In response, a wide body of scholarship has embraced transnational and global perspectives that seek to capture the fluid, mobile, and deterritorialized character of contemporary religious life.

Yet, in addressing the limitations of methodological nationalism, academic inquiry has sometimes veered too far in the opposite direction, leading to what may be termed *methodological globalism* (cf. Moisio et al. 2020). Methodological globalism tends to emphasize borderlessness, fluidity, and seamless circulation, often assuming that globalization has rendered national boundaries irrelevant. In

this view, the global becomes a smooth, universally accessible space of movement and exchange. However, such a perspective risks overlooking the enduring (and often intensifying) role of the state in structuring religious life. Even as religious ideas, networks, and affiliations circulate globally, their interpretation, legitimacy, and institutionalization remain contingent on nationally specific legal frameworks, public discourses, and political interests (cf. Triandafyllidou 2017). Legal regimes and state governance continue to shape the possibilities and limits of religious belonging, practice, and public visibility. Consequently, an exclusive focus on global flows risks obscuring the mechanisms through which power, legitimacy, and identity are produced, negotiated, and contested within national frameworks.

Against this backdrop, this thesis advocates for a more balanced analytical approach, one that remains attentive to the limitations of methodological nationalism but also critical of the blind spots of methodological globalism. Moving beyond the dichotomy of national and global perspectives, this study foregrounds the dynamic interplay between state governance and transnational religious flows. It is at this intersection, where the regulatory frameworks of the nation-state meet the dynamics of global religious circulation, that new forms of religious expression, legitimacy, and contestation emerge.

b) *Rethinking Religious Diversity and Secularism as Socially Produced*

While the nation-state remains central to the governance of religion, it also plays a crucial role in shaping the very categories of religious diversity and secularism through which religious life is organized and interpreted. The second conceptual argument, thus, challenges the assumption that religious diversity and secularism are empirically given or naturally occurring features of modern society. Rather than treating these categories as neutral descriptors of social reality, it draws upon critical scholarship in the anthropology and sociology of religion (e.g., Asad 2003; Burchardt 2020; Mahmood 2015) to argue that both religious diversity and secularism are the outcomes of specific historical trajectories, political agendas, and institutional practices. In this view, diversity and secularism are not simply *found* in the world; they are *made* – through classification systems, legal codes, policy frameworks, and discursive regimes.

In Singapore, secularism does not aim to exclude religion from the public

sphere or strictly confine it to the private domain. Rather, it functions as a mechanism of statecraft, designed to discipline religious life in the interests of national cohesion, racial harmony, and social stability. Religious communities are expected to operate within clearly defined boundaries, avoid proselytization in sensitive contexts, and refrain from political mobilization that could disrupt the state's vision of multiracial harmony. For Christians in Singapore, this creates a highly structured and sometimes restrictive religious landscape, one in which both diversity and secularism function not merely as background conditions but as active forces of categorization, regulation, and meaning-making. Christians must navigate a terrain in which public engagement is continually mediated by secular logics that emphasize social harmony over religious expression. Practices such as evangelism and moral advocacy must be carefully negotiated within the constraints of a regulatory environment that treats religion as both a potential source of conflict and a key pillar of nationhood.

These negotiations are not only discursive but also deeply *material*. As Marian Burchardt (2023) argues through his notion of *"infrastructuring religion,"* religious practices in urban environments are sustained by range of material arrangements, including buildings, technologies, bureaucratic procedures, and everyday infrastructures that connect the sacred with "the profane realm of ordinary urbanism" (ibid.: 181). In this sense, what Christians in Singapore are able to do (whether holding services, organizing mission events, or circulating evangelistic media) is shaped by infrastructural conditions that are themselves structured by state regulation and urban governance. Public evangelism, for instance, is constrained not only discursively but also "infrastructurally" through spatial zoning laws, licensing regimes, and the allocation of permissible venues for religious gatherings.

This focus on the material undepinnings of religious life resonates with the broader field of *material religion* (Prohl 2012; Meyer 2010a), which emphasizes how religion is mediated through tangible forms, sensory experiences, and aesthetic practices. As Inken Prohl (2012) notes, religion is never solely a matter of belief or discourse but always involves embodied, sensorial engagements with material forms. Birgit Meyer's (2010a) concepts of *"aesthetics of persuasion"* and *"sensational forms"* further underscore how religious actors utilize material and sensory media to render the divine experientially real and socially effective. From this perspective, the

lived practice of Christianity in Singapore unfolds not only within regulatory and discursive frameworks but also through a material and infrastructural ecology that both enables and constrains religious expression.

Adopting an infrastructural lens therefore links the social construction of categories such as religion and secularism to the material arrangements that sustain and delimit them. In Singapore's context, practices such as proselytizing, evangelizing, and organizing public religious events can be understood as both socially and materially produced, *infrastructured* by the state through spatial, bureaucratic, and technological means. As my early fieldwork in Batam already suggested, even minor disruptions to the routines and environments of mission work can reveal, how deeply religious practice depends on material and spatial conditions. Taken together, these insights highlight how the material and the political are closely intertwined in shaping the lived conditions of religion in Singapore. Christian communities must navigate not only ideological but also infrastructural constraints, situating their religious aspirations within the material and spatial logics of the secular city-state.

Just as secularism is socially and materially produced through specific regimes of governance, religious diversity, similarly, should not be understood as an inherent feature of pluralistic societies but as a condition that is politically constructed and administratively managed (cf. Burchardt 2020). In Singapore, diversity is carefully engineered through the state's multicultural framework, which categorizes and codifies religious identities in alignment with officially recognized racial groups under the CMIO (Chinese-Malay-Indian-Other) model. This system reifies certain religious traditions (e.g., Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, and Hinduism) while rendering others marginal or invisible. It also transforms complex, lived religious practices into fixed bureaucratic forms that can be governed and regulated. As such, the management of religious diversity in Singapore cannot be understood independently of the broader postcolonial nation-building project, aimed at forging a harmonious and orderly society by institutionalizing forms of difference deemed manageable and politically acceptable.

By foregrounding the social construction of categories, such as diversity and secularism, this thesis challenges normative liberal assumptions about pluralism, religious neutrality, and freedom of belief. Instead, it argues that these concepts are

themselves embedded in systems of governance that shape how religion is recognized, represented, and authorized. What counts as legitimate religious expressions, what forms of belief are protected or promoted, and what kinds of differences are deemed tolerable or dangerous, all of these are shaped by institutional decisions, legal regimes, and state logics. In short, this thesis offers a critical analysis of how religious difference is rendered legible to the state and how secularism functions not as a retreat of state power from religion but as a modality through which that power is exercised.

c) The Challenges of Categorization: Framing Christianity in Singapore

My third conceptual argument critically engages with the challenges of religious categorization, particularly in defining and analyzing Christianity in Singapore. Terms such as *evangelicalism, charismatic Christianity,* and *Pentecostalism* circulate widely in both academic and popular discourse, yet they often do so without sufficient reflection on their semantic ambiguity, historical specificity, and limited contextual applicability outside their Euro-American origins. Scholars such as Giovanni Maltese (2021) and Katja Rakow and Esther Berg-Chan (2016, 2019) have rightly stresses that such terms are not neutral or universally valid descriptors but are embedded within particular epistemological and ideological frameworks. When applied uncritically, they risk flattening the lived complexity of Christian expressions in non-Western contexts and perpetuating epistemic hierarchies in the global study of religion. Maltese (2021), in particular, cautions against the uncritical transposition of Western theological and sociological categories into non-Western contexts, noting that such practices often obscure local religious dynamics while privileging dominant interpretive paradigms. Religious categories function not only as analytic tools, but also as social and political instruments that shape the recognition, legitimacy, and governance of religious communities.

In the Singaporean context, labels such as *Pentecostal* or *charismatic* rarely correspond neatly with local self-perceptions. Many churches affiliated with global charismatic or Pentecostal networks often eschew these designations, preferring more generic or vernacular terms such as "independent," "non-denominational," or "Bible-believing." These self-descriptions are often deliberately chosen to convey theological orthodoxy, spiritual vitality, or institutional autonomy. Likewise,

evangelicalism in Singapore functions less as a formal denominational marker than a broad theological orientation, typically characterized by an emphasis on biblical authority, personal conversion, Christ-centeredness, and the imperative of mission, what Bebbington (1989) famously termed the "evangelical quadrilateral." Yet even this heuristic framework requires critical revision in the Singaporean context, where evangelical beliefs and practices are often interwoven with charismatic forms of worship, neo-Pentecostal prosperity teachings, and Asian-inflected spiritual traditions. As we will see, practices such as prophecy, healing, and spiritual warfare are widely adopted across various congregations, regardless of formal denominational affiliation, rendering the boundaries between established categories increasingly permeable.

The complexity of religious categorization in Singapore is further compounded by the manner Christianity is represented in both official records and everyday discourse. In national censuses and public policy documents, "Catholic" and "other Christians" are often treated as distinct subgroups within the broader category of Christianity. While this distinction may appear administratively straightforward, it reflects deeper theological and institutional assumptions. Among Protestant Christians in Singapore, the term "Christian" (used without any qualifier) is commonly used as a generic self-descriptor, implicitly excluding Catholics, who are instead referred to specifically by their denominational name. This usage reinforces a form of Protestant normativity within local religious discourse, while simultaneously erasing the label "Protestant" as a formal category. As "Christian" becomes the default identifier for non-Catholic believers, the diverse spectrum of Protestant denominations (ranging from mainline to evangelical, charismatic, and Pentecostal) is subsumed into a single residual category. This categorization flattens theological diversity and institutional specificity, marginalizing the complexity and heterogeneity of Protestant expressions within Singapore's highly diversified Christian field.

Fieldwork observations further underline this dynamic. Most of my interlocutors readily subscribed to the theological emphases outlined in Bebbington's evangelical quadrilateral, yet few identified themselves primarily as "evangelical" in everyday discourse. Rather, "Christian" was the preferred and unmarked self-description, with "evangelical" used occasionally as an adjective to

describe particular beliefs, values, or worship styles, rather than as a distinct denominational identity. The relative absence of "evangelicalism" as an emic category highlights the fluidity and contextual specificity of religious self-understandings in Singapore.

A primary aim of this thesis is, therefore, to *historicize* the formation of Christian identity in Singapore by situating it within broader historical trajectories, rather than treating it as a stable or purely contemporary phenomenon. Christian identity is conceptualized here as the product of multiple intersecting processes, shaped by the convergence of postcolonial nation-building, internal theological differentiation, and shifting modalities of state governance. The consolidation of "Christianity" as a recognizable and administratively manageable category was not inevitable, but emerged through the complex interplay of institutional, political, and theological dynamics. In the post-independence period, the state's commitment to multiculturalism and its accompanying racial classification policies necessitated the standardization of religious categories to ensure administrative legibility and social manageability. Concurrently, theological divisions within the Christian community, spanning liberal, evangelical, charismatic, and Pentecostal orientations, produced an internally diverse and sometimes contested religious field. These internal dynamics were further shaped by the state's regulatory interventions, including legislations such as the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act, which delineated the permissible boundaries of religious expression and institutional conduct. Together, these processes have contributed to a historically contingent and politically mediated configuration of Christian identity in Singapore, reflecting the tensions between governance imperatives, global Christian influences, and internal pluralism.

Accordingly, Christian identity in Singapore must be understood as a historically situated formation emerging at the intersection of state governance, global religious currents, and localized theological differentiation. By attending to local meanings, social usages, and historical trajectories of Christian categories, this thesis seeks to contribute to a more reflexive and situated study of religious identity. It emphasizes the contingent, negotiated, and often contested nature of classification, showing how Christian actors in Singapore engage with, appropriate, or resist externally imposed labels to construct identities that are both spiritually meaningful and socially viable. In doing so, this study aligns with a growing body of scholarship

that calls for decolonizing the study of global Christianity, not by discarding analytical categories altogether but by critically interrogating their assumptions, genealogies, and contextual applicability. Rather than treating evangelicalism, charismatic Christianity or Pentecostalism as fixed analytical types, this study investigates how these categories are mobilized, redefined, or contested by Christian actors in Singapore. By foregrounding the disjuncture between scholarly classification and emic self-understanding, it adopts an analytically reflexive stance that tries to resist rigid typologies and instead asks how religious identities are constructed in practice, mediated by particular historical, political, and theological conditions.

Ultimately, this approach enables a more nuanced understanding of Christianity in Singapore, one that acknowledges both the fluidity of religious life and the power-laden processes through which religious differences are articulated, recognized, and governed. It underscores the need to move beyond static frameworks and toward a more dynamic account of religious identity, attentive to the complex interplay of historical, theological, institutional, and political factors that continue to inform its development.

Scholarly Contributions

Drawing together the conceptual arguments outlined above, I position this thesis at the intersection of two major scholarly conversations. First, I engage with ongoing debates on the relationship between religion, secularism, and governance in contemporary plural societies. Rather than reproducing binary oppositions between the religious and the secular, I seek to foreground their dynamic and mutually constitutive interactions. Throughout the study, I approach secularism not as a universal or ideologically neutral stance, but as a historically contingent and contextually specific mode of religious governance. In this view, secularism appears less as the separation of religion and state, and more as a productive force, one that defines the boundaries of legitimate religious expression, structures public engagement, and regulates the terms of religious visibility.

Focusing on the postcolonial context of Singapore, I examine how Christianity is shaped by, but also actively reshapes, the prevailing configurations of the secular, the public sphere, and national identity. Far from being passive recipients of state-imposed boundaries, Christian actors in Singapore creatively engage with, negotiate,

and rearticulate the frameworks of secular governance, pursuing both spiritual renewal and socio-political influence. Through this approach, I aim to contribute to broader theoretical debates about secularism, religious pluralism, and the governance of religion in non-Western contexts. In particular, by analyzing Singapore's distinctive model of pragmatic secular governance (marked by managed religious diversity rather than strict religion-state separation) the study offers insights into alternative forms of secularism beyond Western liberal frameworks, highlighting the contextual specificity and political contingency of concepts such as religious freedom, pluralism, and multiculturalism.

Secondly, this thesis contributes to a growing body of scholarship on global Christianity, with a particular emphasis on the transnational dynamics, global entanglements, and localized articulations of evangelical Christianity in Southeast Asia. As scholars such as Philip Jenkins (2002) and Joel Robbins (2004) have observed, the center of gravity of global Christianity has shifted from its traditional Euro-American heartlands to the global South. This transformation has given rise to new missionary trajectories (often framed in terms of "reverse mission") and has precipitated significant theological, institutional, and cultural reconfigurations that challenge conventional, Western-centric narratives of Christian expansion as a linear, one-directional process.

However, rather than simply celebrating this shift as evidence of a decolonized or post-Western Christianity, I adopt a more critical and contextually grounded perspective. Although global religious flows and transnational networks have deeply influenced local Christian communities in Singapore, I argue that their development must be understood within specific postcolonial, political, and socio-cultural conditions in which they are embedded. Rather than constituting a uniform or hegemonic force, global Christianity operates as a site of transcultural negotiation and exchange, where local actors actively interpret, adapt, and at times resist global theological and institutional currents (cf. Rakow 2022).

In this light, I examine how Singaporean Christians mobilize global evangelical discourses within a national framework that emphasizes multiculturalism, religious harmony, and secular governance. The Antioch of Asia narrative, in particular, serves as a compelling lens through which to explore how global religious imaginaries are localized and recontextualized to align with both spiritual aspirations and nation-

building imperatives. I suggest that it functions not only as a theological claim but also as a form of religious geopolitics, articulating a vision of Singaporean Christian identity that is at once global and local, cosmopolitan and postcolonial.

Through this analysis, I aim to contribute to broader debates on global Christianity, religious transnationalism, and postcolonial religious identities. Rather than situating Singapore as a peripheral site of Western Christian expansion, I position it as an active and influential node within a multipolar global Christian landscape. By interrogating the interplay between global religious flows and local political rationalities, the thesis seeks to illustrate the complex and decentralized nature of contemporary global Christianity thus challenging binary distinctions between center and periphery, missionary and missionized, or Western and non-Western. Taken together, these contributions aim to rethink established categories in the study of religion and global Christianity, emphasizing the historical contingency, political mediation, and local negotiation that shape contemporary religious life beyond Western paradigms.

Having outlined the conceptual foundations of this study, I now turn to the methodological approach and field encounters that informed its development.

Navigating the Field: Methodological Reflections and Encounters

Fieldwork and Source Material

This study adopts a qualitative, multi-method research design situated within the interdisciplinary field of religious studies. Primary fieldwork was conducted between 2013 and 2015, with follow-up observations and engagements continuing beyond this period.[2] The key methods of data collection included semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and textual analysis.

Given the sensitivities surrounding religious discourse and the difficulties encountered in accessing certain field sites, as discussed earlier in this introductory chapter, the research design was revised to address both practical limitations and ethical concerns. Initial efforts focused on mapping transnational mission activities of Singaporean churches across the Riau Archipelago. However, access restrictions,

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[2] This research project was undertaken within the Junior Research Group *Transcultural Dynamics of Pentecostalism*, which was part of the former research cluster *Asia and Europe in a Global Context* at Heidelberg University, Germany.

local sensitivities, and concerns expressed by mission leaders regarding visibility and confidentiality necessitated a shift in focus. As a result, Singapore itself became the primary site of investigation. This reorientation enabled a more focused exploration of local church practices, institutional narratives, theological discourses, and the ways in which mission strategies are shaped and articulated within Singapore's distinctive socio-political context.

Empirical data for this study were gathered through extensive fieldwork conducted in a variety of Christian settings across the city-state. Participant observation took place in contexts such as church services, mission conferences, and interreligious events. Immersion in these spaces provided valuable insights into how Christians in Singapore articulate their identities, theological commitments, and missional aspirations within the context of the state's model of managed religious pluralism. In addition, semi-structured interviews were carried out with a broad cross-section of Christian interlocutors, including pastors, ministry staff, mission leaders, and younger church members. These largely informal conversations explored how individuals navigate the intersection of faith and citizenship, probing, for example, how they interpret the biblical imperative to evangelize within a policy landscape that discourages overt proselytism, or how they make sense of and operationalize the "Antioch of Asia" vision in everyday practice.

In addition to field-based data, this study draws extensively on a broad array of textual, multimedia, and archival sources. These include:

(a) *Media and digital platforms:* Newspaper articles, online news portals (e.g. *The Straits Times*, *Channel News Asia*), and Christian digital publications were reviewed to trace how Christianity, religious diversity, and religion–state relations are represented and discussed in the public sphere in Singapore.

(b) *Historical archives:* Archival materials from the 1978 Billy Graham Evangelistic Crusade in Singapore were accessed from the Billy Graham Center Archives at Wheaton College (IL, USA). These documents offer a historical lens through which to understand the genealogy of the "Antioch of Asia" narrative.

(c) *Legal and policy documents:* Government reports, legislative documents, and speeches by state officials were analyzed to understand the trajectories of

Singapore's secular and multicultural governance model.

(d) *Other Christian materials:* Sermons, mission statements, internal training manuals, and social media posts were treated as discursive sources to examine how theological narratives are constructed, mission strategies are communicated, and churches position themselves in relation to the broader socio-political environment. These materials also reveal how religious identities and messages are adapted and circulated, both within church communities and in the wider public sphere.

The integration of these diverse sources allows for a triangulated analysis of Christian identity and mission, capturing both official and vernacular expressions across different media and historical moments. In sum, the methodological approach adopted in this study seeks to offer a contextualized and historically grounded analysis of Christianity in Singapore. By combining ethnographic depth with discursive and historical breadth, this study provides insights into how religious communities navigate the shifting intersections of state governance, secularism, and global Christian networks in articulating their identity and missionary ambitions.

Field access and Researcher Positionality

Throughout the research process, I paid careful attention to questions of positionality, access, and ethical responsibility. Having spent my formative years growing up in Singapore, I navigated the field between insider familiarity and the outsider perspective of a "Western" researcher. This dual positionality shaped the research process in significant ways. While prior cultural knowledge facilitated rapport-building and contextual understanding, my status as a foreign researcher also occasionally generated suspicion and caution among my interlocutors, especially when addressing sensitive subjects, such as proselytism and interfaith relations. These dynamics required a reflexive and adaptive research posture grounded in dialogue, transparency, and an ongoing sensitivity to the ethical complexities of researching religion in a religiously diverse and tightly regulated environment. Rather than aiming for neutral detachment, the research embraced a critical awareness of how my presence, positionality, and interpretive frameworks shaped field encounters and analytical outcomes.

Access to the field was facilitated primarily through established networks of Christian leaders, personal recommendations, and introductions by key gatekeepers within the Christian community. These gatekeepers, often pastors, mission directors, or church administrators, played a crucial role in legitimizing my presence, mediating relationships, and setting the terms of participation. In many cases, initial access was contingent on demonstrating trustworthiness, familiarity with Christian discourse, and a respectful understanding of the local religious landscape.

However, the process of gaining and sustaining access was shaped not only by trust-building but also by distinct power dynamics between researcher and researched, dynamics that, in the Singaporean context, were often inverted in comparison to "traditional" fieldwork settings. Rather than occupying a position of assumed authority, I often had to navigate requests for time, attention, and access from individuals whose institutional power, social standing, and time constraints far exceeded my own. Many of my interlocutors were senior church leaders, public figures, or heads of mission organizations with packed schedules and limited availability. Their willingness to participate was often predicated on their own sense of strategic interest, theological alignment, or confidence in the academic legitimacy and ethical stance of the research project.

This reversal of conventional power asymmetries required a high degree of flexibility, patience, and responsiveness on my part. Meetings were frequently rescheduled, shortened, or conducted in transit, between church services, during conference breaks, or over hurried meals. In several instances, interviews were granted only after weeks of follow-up communication or on the condition that certain topics remained off-record. These conditions necessitated an attentiveness to not only the content of what was shared, but also the contexts and constraints that shaped how, when, and why access was granted.

Such dynamics underscored the fact that access is never merely a logistical issue, but a relational and negotiated process embedded in broader social hierarchies and institutional structures. In this case, those being "researched" often wielded considerable power in setting the parameters of interaction, shaping the flow of information, and ultimately influencing the scope of the study. Recognizing and respecting these dynamics was critical not only for maintaining ethical integrity but also for generating meaningful, contextually grounded insights. It required balancing

the goals of academic inquiry with a sensitivity to the lived realities, responsibilities, and rhythms of those whose participation made this research possible.

Outline of Chapters

The remainder of this thesis unfolds across four chapters, each building upon the previous to develop a layered and historically informed account of Christianity's public presence, mission aspirations, and identity formation within Singapore's secular and multicultural landscape.

Chapter 2, *Managing Religious Diversity and the Question of Secularism*, lays the theoretical groundwork for the study by engaging with contemporary debates on religious diversity, secularism, and the role of the state in regulating religion. The chapter critically revisits classical secularization theory alongside its postsecular critiques, advocating for a more context-sensitive and historically informed understanding of how secularism is enacted, negotiated, and institutionalized "beyond the West." It introduces the concept of "multiple secularities" (Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt 2012) as an analytical lens for examining the diverse and contingent configurations of religion–state relations across different societies. Singapore is examined as a case of "pluralist secularism" (D.P.S. Goh 2014b), characterized by state-led regulation of religion and the promotion of interreligious harmony. This theoretical framing is substantiated through a detailed empirical account of Singapore's legal, bureaucratic, and discursive apparatus for managing religious diversity, illuminating how secularism functions as a mode of governance and boundary-making in the postcolonial city-state.

Chapter 3, *Contested Boundaries: Christianity, Society, and the State in Singapore*, shifts the focus to the historical and socio-political development of Christianity in Singapore. It traces the transformation of Christianity from a colonial missionary enterprise into a locally embedded and socially influential religious minority. The chapter explores the ambivalent position of Christianity within the state's multicultural framework, highlighting the tension between its perceived Western origins and its aspiration to indigenize. Special attention is given to the shift from liberal ecumenical Christianity to the rise of evangelical-charismatic expressions in the post-independence era. These developments are analyzed in relation to broader political and social transformations, including the consolidation

of state power, the institutionalization of religious diversity, and the emergence of new modes of Christian public engagement. Through this analysis, the chapter demonstrates how Christian communities have negotiated their position in relation to state expectations, legal constraints, and societal perceptions, often navigating tensions between religious conviction and political pragmatism.

Chapter 4, *Evangelical Aspirations, the City, and the Antioch Call*, focuses on the theological and symbolic imaginaries that shape contemporary Christian identity in Singapore. Central to this is the vision of Singapore as the "Antioch of Asia," a theological narrative that positions the city-state as a divinely appointed hub for regional and global mission. The chapter traces the genealogy of this vision, exploring its emergence in the context of the 1978 Billy Graham Crusade and its subsequent uptake in evangelical-charismatic discourse. Drawing on empirical fieldwork, it examines how Christians mobilize this narrative in sermons, strategic planning, and missionary activities. The chapter also explores how the Antioch metaphor intersects with Singapore's own global city ambitions, producing a unique convergence of religious and national imaginaries that reinforces Christian aspirations while simultaneously demanding negotiation with state-imposed constraints.

Chapter 5, *Conclusion*, synthesizes the findings and theoretical insights developed throughout the thesis. It reflects on the broader implications of the study, particularly in contributing to academic debates on the governance of religious diversity, the local articulations of global religious imaginaries, and the reconfiguration of secular-religious boundaries beyond Euro-American contexts. The chapter also identifies potential avenues for future research, emphasizing the need of sustained critical engagement with the evolving dynamics of secularism and religious diversity across varied cultural and regulatory environments. It further underscores the value of interdisciplinary approaches in capturing the complex and context-specific ways in which religious life intersects with wider social, political, and historical forces.

2. MANAGING RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY AND THE QUESTION OF SECULARISM

Each year, members of Singapore's Inter-Religious Organization (IRO) come together as a sign of unity to bless the race track ahead of the city's Formula One Grand Prix (see figure 1). Dressed in their respective religious outfits, they pray side-by-side for the safety and success of the event that has brought in over S$1.4 billion in tourism receipts and more than 490.000 international visitors to the island since its inauguration in 2008 (CNN 2019). According to the Deputy Chairman of Singapore Grand Prix, Colin Syn, the ritual constitutes a unique feature within the global F1 motor racing industry, stating that "no other race circuit in the world has such a public practice and on such an elaborate scale" (TODAYonline 2013).

Figure 1: Screen capture of religious leaders representing Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Taoism, Hinduism, Sikhism, Judaism, Baha'i, Jainism, and Zoroastrianism blessing the Singapore F1 track in September 2019.[3]

At first glance, one could easily dismiss the IRO's formal expression of interfaith solidarity as trivial. After all, the F1 night race that cuts through the city-state's iconic downtown core is essentially a commercial affair, deliberately pushed forward by the government to "boost Singapore's image as Asia's world-class events [and

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[3]https://www.facebook.com/F1NightRace/photos/a.107477302190/10156128284872191/?type=3andpermPage=1 (accessed 27. September 2019)

entertainment] capital" (The Straits Times 2008). Yet, as incidental as the ceremony might appear, its symbolic significance would hardly get lost on anyone familiar with Singapore's social and political landscape. Indeed, the sight of religious leaders jointly blessing business- or state-related events is nothing uncommon in Singapore, a country where religious diversity constitutes a fundamental pillar of nationhood and the secular state actively promotes "harmony" as a means to accommodate religious differences.

Home to a wide range of cultures, ethnicities, and religions, Singapore prides itself on being a model for state multiculturalism that upholds the ideal of a just and equal society "regardless of race, language or religion" (Singapore National Pledge). Unlike developments in some parts of Europe, where claims of the "failure" and "death" of multiculturalism have found their way into mainstream political thinking over the past decades (cf. Chin 2017), Singapore continues to embrace the normative idea of pluralism for achieving social integration and national unity. References to the success of Singapore's distinct form of multicultural governance (often framed in a self-aggrandizing narrative of Singapore's exceptionalism) are common both in public and political discourse: "Singapore," as former prime minister Lee Hsien Loong reaffirmed on the eve of Racial Harmony Day in 2017, "is a rare and precious example of a multi-racial, multi-lingual and multi-religious society where people live harmoniously together," cautionary adding, however, that this "is not by chance" but because "[t]he Government and the different communities worked hard together to make this happen" (Lee Hsien Loong cited in The Straits Times 2017b).

The question of how to ensure social cohesion under conditions of religious plurality has become a central concern to many governments and policy-makers around the world, and Singapore certainly does not represent an exemption in this regard. Defying the predictions of those who believed that religious institutions, beliefs, and practices would inevitably lose their relevance as a result of modern 'progress', religions remain a significant and vital social and political force in contemporary societies. As such, they are inextricably linked to the broader socio-cultural changes brought about by the often conflict-ridden dynamics and pluralizing effects of global modernity.

Increased levels of domestic and transnational migration have engendered new forms of diversity with the potential to disrupt existing (or imagined) religious

and cultural hegemonies that may feed into particularistic identity claims and breed new conflicts along communal lines. Equally, differentiation processes within major faith traditions (e.g., Islam, Christianity, and Buddhism) have contributed to the ongoing diversification of religious landscapes that might challenge established religious monopolies and generate new fields of contestation on matters related to religious authority, orthodoxy, and orthopraxy. On the other hand, the global diffusion of so-called new religious movements and the proliferation of non-institutional modes of religiosities continue to blur taken-for-granted boundaries between the religious and the secular, thus further complicating common perceptions of "religions" as bounded and mutually exclusive entities in which "belief" and "affiliation" function as the primary means of religious identification. In short, what we are witnessing is not simply the multiplication of religion(s) per se but the emergence of "multiple religious diversities" (Burchardt and Becci 2016) evolving alongside older forms of diversity and intersecting with various other types of social identities and categories, such as gender, language, ethnicity, social class, culture, and heritage. Against this background, it is hardly surprising that issues concerning the accommodation and governance of religious diversity have acquired a renewed global significance and urgency.

Yet, while religious diversity constitutes a defining feature of most contemporary societies, its configuration will vary significantly from one place to another. Such variations, as I would argue, not only derive from the divergent ways in which states variably respond to the existence of religious plurality. Nor do they merely stem from differences in the religious composition or the degrees of religious heterogeneity that can be found within a particular geographical region or a given population as measured, for example, by the Pew Research Center's index of religious diversity (see www.pewresearch.org/religion). Although providing a valid basis for comparison, understanding the empirical variations of religious diversity purely on a descriptive level tells us little about how such diversities are socially constructed and produced in the first place. More than just a neutral descriptor for designating the co-presence of different religions, religious diversity is infused with social and political meaning that shapes reality beyond its representation as an objective fact. As Marian Burchardt (2020) has pointed out, religious diversity is not a natural condition that exists prior to or apart from governance and the political: "it is not

something given but accomplished through social practices," thus advocating to shift our analytical lens from one that is concerned with mapping and quantifying the multiple patterns of religious affiliations, beliefs, and practices to one that conceives diversity through its productive and generative capacities by asking how religious diversity itself is turned into an epistemic and administrative category through which states observe societies and render populations legible for state-building projects.

Viewing religious diversity from a governance perspective has the advantage of bringing into sharper focus the constitutive role of governments and state agencies in shaping religious diversity, as well as the power dynamics involved in structuring the relationship between the state and religious communities. It not only compels us to look more closely at the various policy and legal frameworks through which religions become institutionalized, but also to consider how both state and non-state actors are implicated in *creating* the very differences they try to regulate and thereby reconfigure historically established patterns of religious coexistence and forms of religious identification (cf. Mahmood 2015). Thus, rather than taking religious boundaries for granted or treating religious diversity as simply something "out there" that awaits discovery and management, a critical approach to religious diversity draws attention to the particular ways through which religious differences and similarities are produced, enacted and become normalized in specific contexts and as a result of historical and socio-political processes.

The politics of religious diversity

State practices of governing through religious diversity involve acts of categorization that inevitably (re)produce social differences by drawing symbolic boundaries around religious groups that simultaneously emphasize sameness within a particular group and reify distinctions between them. From a pure functionalist perspective, such politics of categorization are, at first, nothing unusual but inherent to how modern nation-states rationalize governance to regulate populations and maintain social order. Following Paul Starr (1992), states have no choice but to categorize and draw lines between kinds of people for marking out directions of social and political action. State actors shape and reshape established categories by selectively "editing" an official version of the social world to "achieve economy in record-keeping, calculation, the manipulation of data, and institutional problem-solving" (Starr 1992:

271). Similar to other modes of social classifications, religious categories represent abstractions that enable governments and state agencies to address faith communities when making public policy decisions related to religious matters. Religious typologies form an integral part of the state's administrative nomenclature that aims to reduce social complexity and render religions comparable and commensurable in all their differences. Consequently, they invariably flatten the social structure within religious groups and, despite appearing to be objective, natural, and self-evident, do not necessarily correspond to the lived realities of the people on the ground.

The very act of assigning differences and similarities to religious groups and individuals, however, is more than just about creating legibility for administrative and policy purposes. Importantly, religious categorizations also function as political means to systematize and justify control over the religious domain and, therefore, operate as an effect of state power that produces sites of inclusion and exclusion and orders religions in hierarchies of social value and status (cf. Burchardt 2020). By virtue of their political authority, states, for instance, reserve the right to demarcate the boundaries of religion by legally defining "what counts as religion" and what not (Beckford 2003: 20), or determine the limits of both institutional and individual religious freedom by discriminating between legitimate and illegitimate forms of religious expressions and, by extension, distinguishing "good" from "bad" religion (cf. Hurd 2015).

State practices of governing through religious diversity thus ultimately intersect with politics of recognition and the distribution and allocation of rights, privileges, and obligations that affect religious communities (and particularly religious minorities) in diverse and often unequal ways. Crucially, such differential treatment can be observed among almost all modern nation-states *regardless* of the political system in place and the extent to which religious freedom is guaranteed by the constitution or whether a state formally upholds the principle of equality and neutrality towards the religious realm.

In this regard, it is important to note that so-called "liberal" democracies do not always demonstrate superiority in safeguarding the rights of religious minorities and ensuring religious freedom when compared to non-democratic or autocratic regimes. As Jonathan Fox (2020) has shown, levels of government-based

discrimination[4] against religious minorities can even be higher in Western "liberal democracies" compared to "non-democratic" countries despite the West's self-perception of being a model of liberty and tolerance. Witness, for example, Switzerland's constitutional ban on the construction of minarets or Austria's controversial "burqa ban," which prohibits full-face veiling in public spaces. Witness further Greece's longstanding prohibition on proselytizing to protect the monopoly of the Greek Orthodox Church or Denmark's proposed (and meanwhile revoked) "Law on Sermons" that would have required all sermons preached in foreign languages to be translated into Danish and submitted to the state for approval, a measure ostensibly intended to curb Islamist extremism.

If we consider the current state of affairs in Europe and other regions in the world as a "crisis of representative democracy," it is important to recognize that what we are witnessing is not merely a "crisis," but rather the "outcome" of democracy itself, where right-wing populism and ethno-religious nationalism have emerged as dominant political forces (cf. Brubaker 2017; van der Veer 2021). The fact that states claiming to adhere to "liberal" or "secular" political principles engage in religious discrimination and (re)produce religious hierarchies along majority-minority lines thus raises the question whether political regime types are sufficient enough for explaining differences in how governments exercise and legitimize social control as they attempt to regulate different religious communities. Which religious groups a state will recognize within its classificatory domains and which religious institutions, beliefs, and practices it will support, promote and protect (or conversely constrain, marginalize, prohibit, persecute or prosecute) cannot be understood on the basis of an essentialized democratic/authoritarian or liberal/illiberal binary, but depend on a range of *contextual factors* that are specific to each polity. They include (1) the degree of identification (strong or weak ties) between state and religion and how such state-religion relations are historically shaped and reconfigured through various concepts of nationhood and forms of nationalism (e.g. whether they are based on civic, monocultural, multicultural, religious, or civilizational ideas); (2) the

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[4] Following Fox (2015: 136 – 137), religious discrimination can be defined as "limitations placed on the religious practices or institutions of minority religions that are not [or at least not to the same extent] placed on the majority religion."

pervasiveness and centrality of state regulations of religion as well as the extent of religious freedom rights and how they are underpinned by different and changing notions of secularism and constitutional arrangements (e.g. confessional states that explicitly prioritize religion; states that explicitly subordinate religion to their interests; non-confessional states that explicitly commit to the separation of state and religion); (3) the ways in which religious *pluralism* is framed in both political and public discourse and either valued or rejected as a *social norm*. Taken together, these dimensions allow us to discern and empirically ground variations in the politics of religious diversity without resorting to reductive explanations based on abstract political models or culturalist assumptions.[5]

Debating religious diversity – divergences and convergences

Contexts matter, not only because they provide a heuristic entry point for understanding divergences and convergences in how states define, produce, relate to and regulate religious diversity but also because they affect how the topic of religious diversity is addressed and problematized differently in academic research. The kinds of questions scholars ask (or do not ask), what claims or value judgments they make, the theories they apply, and the research aims they pursue are contingent on the particular political and social environments in which they are situated. As Mar Griera (2018: 44) points out, "there is a dynamic interplay between political conditions, social transformations, and the research agenda on religion" that influences how scholars understand and conceptualize religious diversity as both a category of social practice and a category of analysis.

Thus, while I agree with Birgit Meyer (2020: 119) that the plurality of religion should be taken as a "default epistemological starting point" in the studies of religion, it is equally important to recognize that the epistemological (and

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[5] Another pitfall arises when attributing differences in the politics of religious diversity to the alleged innate disposition of (religious) cultures for being either tolerant or intolerant towards other religions (e.g. the assumption that "pluralistic" religions such as Buddhism or Hinduism are more inclusive, peaceful and tolerant than monotheistic traditions, above all, Islamic traditions). Such culturalist interpretations crucially overlook how religions are often deeply involved in politics and can be driving forces behind nationalist projects that may breed majoritarian intolerance and lead to the violent exclusion of minority groups. Modi's Hindutva nationalism in India or the involvement of Buddhist-nationalist organizations in the ethnic cleansing of Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar serve as vivid reminders how such politics of religion can play out.

ontological) *status* of diversity is far from fixed but remains rather "fuzzy" (Obadia 2017). What do we mean when we talk about religious diversity? Are the dynamics of religious pluralization and diversification that we can observe across many world regions today really new phenomena? Can radically different cases be studied using the same concepts and interpretative frameworks? And, above all, how does the discussion of religious diversity relate to and draw upon broader discourses surrounding the concepts of secularism and secularization?

Not coincidentally, there has been a rising interest in the study of religious diversity, particularly within Western academia, which is intimately tied to highly politicized debates about the putative "return" or "resurgence" of religion resulting from increased migration flows over the past decades. Widespread public concerns about the (non)integrability of religious minorities have stimulated a new politics of difference and nativism that projects the non-Christian 'other' as a threat to the imagined secular identity and "Judeo-Christian" roots of "Western civilization" (cf. Brubaker 2017). Fears of an imminent "wave of Islamization" have further fed into islamophobic resentments and national-populist mobilizations, which have been exploited by politicians across the political spectrum to gain electoral influence. Multiculturalism, once celebrated by intellectual and political elites as the solution to Europe's "integration problems," has since devolved into an empty shibboleth and is now instead viewed as the root cause for many of today's social ills – a mismatch that has eroded social cohesion, undermined national identities and degraded public trust.[6]

However one wants to account for these conflicting trends and crisis productions (a topic that reaches beyond the scope of this thesis), what is certain is that the rising public visibility and presence of religious minority groups has produced considerable challenges to the secular self-understanding of Western societies that afford new answers to the realities of an increasingly religious plural and (post)immigrant social order. Against the backdrop of these wider socio-political undercurrents, it hardly comes as a surprise that religious diversity has

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[6] As famously declared by former German chancellor Angela Merkel in 2010: „Dieser Ansatz [für Multikulti] ist gescheitert, absolut gescheitert!" (This [multicultural] approach has failed, utterly failed!) (https://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/integration-merkel-erklaert-multikulti-fuer-gescheitert-a-723532.html) (last accessed 21.05.2023)

predominantly been researched as a *problem* within Western contexts, particularly in Europe (Triandafyllidou and Modood 2017). According to Lori Beaman, research on religious diversity in the West has been preoccupied

> with questions about the management of religious diversity, the negotiation of religious diversity, the challenges of religious diversity, and so on. In almost every case, religious diversity is imagined as something that is a relatively recent development, and as something requiring scholarly and policy attention as a problem to be solved. **One of the results of this 'crisis of diversity' has been a springing up of numerous research initiatives aimed at studying and resolving this 'problem' of religious diversity** (Beaman 2017: 90, emphasis added)

Yet, the inclination to frame the ongoing transformation of Western European religious landscapes in a "crisis mode" or something "new" is itself problematic for at least two reasons. First, it unwittingly reproduces the idea of a seeming monocultural and unified Christian past, thereby ignoring that a plurality of religious discourses and practices have coexisted in Europe long before 'modern' social forces such as globalization and migration created the present multi-religious condition. Throughout its history, Europe has been part of an open economy of cultural exchanges and acted as an important center for the production and accommodation of religious diversities, including Islamic traditions. In this sense, religious and cultural plurality has always been the norm rather than the exception in Europe (cf. Meyer 2021). Second, deploying a "crisis" framework for describing current religious diversification processes tends to obfuscate deeper underlying issues that go well beyond everyday politics. As I would argue, the postulated "return" of the religious and its pluralization does not simply constitute a problem in and of itself, but far more reveals an epistemological crisis in which long-held assumptions about the "secular modern" have increasingly lost their plausibility and self-evidence. While still being defended by some, there is a growing consensus among scholars today that the discursive construction of modernity along the coordinates of a fixed religious-secular binary has reached its epistemological *cul de sac*. Ideas about the intrinsic correlation between secularism, modernity, progress and democracy have lost their explanatory power, exposing the limitations of the secularization paradigm as the dominant framework for making sense of religion's role and place in contemporary societies (but see Bruce 2011; Norris and Inglehart 2004; Stolz 2020).

While the discourse on religious diversity in the West has typically been

framed as a problem and centered on migration and integration issues, the scholarly interest into religious diversity in Asian societies has generally taken on a different focus and emphasis. Rather than invoking a "return of religion," scholars working on religious diversity in Asia have pointed out to the deep historical roots and continuities of various forms of religious coexistence, "syncretisms", and interactions that have persisted for centuries across the region (cf. Borup et al. 2020). Indeed, for many Asians today, religious hybridity and plurality are seen as natural, perhaps even trivial. Although not unique to Asia, few other world regions feature such a high degree of diversity in terms of religious traditions intersecting with ethnic, regional, linguistic, and class identities. Even among countries with a strong religious majority (for example Muslims in Indonesia, Buddhists in Thailand, Hindus in India, and Christians in the Philippines), diverse minority religions remain culturally significant, such that no single country within Asia can be considered religiously or culturally homogenous. Different religious beliefs and practices continue to constitute a vital aspect of people's everyday lives and assume a substantive presence in Asian public spheres, which is why the subject of religious diversity is rarely discussed in connection to secularization – a concept that has, as Kenneth Dean and Peter Van der Veer (2019: 3) observe, "not yet really excited scholarship on Asian societies" and is often viewed as a phenomenon that is specific to Europe and North America.

Given the long history of religious plurality and experience of religious integration, there is a tendency to view the existence of religious diversity in Asian contexts as self-evident and to characterize the accommodation of this plural condition as "non-problematic and harmonious" (Kühle 2020: 329). The idea that there is a "natural" propensity towards "harmony" in Asian cultures, coupled with the stereotypical beliefs about so-called "Eastern" religious traditions as inherently tolerant, inclusive, and peaceful, has consequently informed the perception of a unique Asian model to handling religious plurality. Amid the self-diagnosed "integration crisis" of the West, Asia's deep experience in governing diversity is often presented as a positive counterexample, prompting calls to "learn from Asia" (Triandafyllidou and Modood 2017) or to use Asia as a "laboratory" for research in Western settings (Borup and Fibiger 2020: 14).

Notwithstanding the noble intentions implied in these appeals, it is important

to recognize that such Asia-centric readings are not merely neutrally descriptive but highly ideological and normative. On the one hand, they tend to perpetuate an idealized (reverse)orientalist image of Asia, obscuring the fact that throughout history, religious coexistence in Asia has also been marked by fierce competition, conflict, and violence. On the other, they often neglect the profound impact of Western colonial powers in creating and shaping the plural order of many postcolonial Asian societies and their continued legacy in regulating this order through various legal and administrative frameworks. Rather than simply embodying an inherent spirit of tolerance, the tropes of "harmony" and pluralism in contemporary Asia are deeply rooted in the varied experiences of colonial rule and imperial encounters, and today used as powerful political tools to legitimize state control over the religious realm and circumscribe the secular boundaries of religious discourse and public religious expressions.

Against this background, two key questions have emerged in current academic discussions on religious diversity in Asia, both of which are relevant to the subject matter of this thesis and will be more thoroughly examined in subsequent chapters. The first question pertains to the various forms of secularism that have evolved from postcolonial state formations, and how they have influenced different approaches and normative ideas for governing religion under conditions of diversity. This question is closely linked to deeper theoretical and methodological concerns regarding the categorization of the "secular" and the "religious," as well as the translatability and applicability of Western-derived concepts (such as secularism and secularization) in analyzing religious-secular dynamics in Asian contexts. As numerous scholars have emphasized, there is a need to de-provincialize discussions on the secular and reevaluate our conceptual tools and frameworks to better understand the empirical realities on the ground *beyond the West* (cf. Burchardt et al. 2015). Secular models of state-regulated religious diversity vary across Asia, reflecting the distinctive demographic, historical, and geopolitical realities present in the region, which makes it all the more pertinent to take Asian experiences seriously and study them on their own terms (Neo et al. 2019).

The second question relates to the concrete ways states at once produce and regulate religious diversity, and the extent to which these regulatory practices not only reflect a commitment to religious tolerance and pluralism but also pose

limitations on religious freedom. In this regard, the issues of proselytism (or proselytization) and "harmony" have emerged as central topics around which the "limits of religious pluralism" in Asia are debated (cf. Hackett 2008b; Finucane and Feener 2014). As Michael Feener argues, any discussion of proselytizing and pluralism is driven by a similar tension, as the practice of proselytizing is predicated upon a situation of diversity, in which individuals can potentially change their religious identities and affiliations, while at the same time seeking to overcome this diversity by ultimately converting the rest of society to one's own religion (Feener 2014: 5). However, this tension becomes significantly more intricate in Asian contexts, where religion is not only perceived to be an individual matter but also tends to constitute an essential part of one's ascribed and/or self-identified social group identity, such as ethnicity, "race," or caste. Accordingly, the act of conversion often extends beyond personal choice and can lead to serious repercussions for the convert, including the renunciation of one's customs and traditions and disengagement or exclusion from familial and communal ties (cf. DeBernardi 2008a). Practices of proselytization have thus become a source of recurring interreligious and communal tensions across Asia, requiring states to strike a careful balance between protecting the individual freedom rights of religious propagation and conversion on the one hand, and/or maintaining "religious harmony" to prevent potential conflicts on the other. As such, proselytism challenges the boundaries of state-regulated religious diversity and, as noted by Rosalind Hackett, "often functions as the thorn in the flesh of the secular state" (Hackett 2008a: 14).

In Singapore, controversies arising from religious proselytism have taken their own distinctive complexions, and are mediated through the state's unwavering commitment to "pluralist secularism" (D.P.S. Goh 2014b) – a model that takes religious pluralism as its "constitutive foundation" and positions the state as the ultimate neutral arbiter in religious disputes while setting the rules for determining the parameters of 'acceptable' religious articulations and practices in the public sphere.

Although proselytism is not explicitly prohibited, it is restricted to the extent that it does not violate laws that safeguard the common good of religious harmony and offend the sensitivities of other religious groups. For the Singapore government, religious harmony thus serves as both a regulatory principle to legitimize state

control over the religious domain and a social norm that is expected to be embraced by all religious communities equally. However, the degree to which such norms are actually shared and put into practice varies across the religious spectrum. The habitual public display of religious harmony, as illustrated at the beginning of this chapter, often obscures the fact that underneath the performative veneer, Singapore's multi-religious landscape is largely characterized by "exclusivism, separation, avoidance and tolerance" (Lai 2008: 606). For evangelical Christians in particular, the state's expectation to commit to religious pluralism and requirement to maintain religious harmony are often challenging to reconcile with their fundamental doctrinal tenets, which are grounded in salvific exclusivism and evangelism, thus encompassing the ultimate goal of overcoming diversity through the conversion of the broader society to Christianity. Consequently, Singapore's policy of promoting religious diversity through pluralist secularism reveals the limitations of the evangelical expansionist aspiration to establish an "Antioch of Asia" within a highly diverse religious environment.

The question of how Singaporean Christians have developed and negotiated their distinctive evangelical and global-oriented identity as a religious minority within a highly diversified religious environment and in relation to the secular state will be explored in greater detail in chapter three. Prior to examining this topic, it is essential to theoretically ground and contextualize the discussion in light of the two thematic threads that I have identified as being prevalent in current debates on religious diversity in Asia. Consequently, the subsequent sub-chapter will focus on a theoretical analysis that reevaluates the problematic relationship between the religious and secular by revisiting the secularization theory and critically assessing its proposed successor postsecularism. As I will argue, both frameworks have notable analytical weaknesses in accounting for the changing religious and secular configurations in contemporary societies, particularly in contexts beyond the so-called 'modern West.' Subsequently, the concept of 'multiple secularities' will be explored as an alternative approach for capturing the variety of ways in which the boundaries between religious and secular spaces shift and are redrawn in response to religious diversity. The theoretical discussion will be further substantiated through a detailed empirical analysis of Singapore's politics of governing religious diversity through the frameworks of state multiculturalism, secularism and the

notion of "harmony'. It is argued that rather than presenting an epistemological challenge, the question of diversity and secularism in Singapore has been one of political pragmatics and as such is fundamentally linked to the city-state's colonial past and ongoing postcolonial nation-building process.

2.1 What's in a name? Unwinding the secularization debate

*«The theory of secularization is one of the most deadly master narratives in the social sciences. The boredom that takes hold of almost any audience when one speaks about contemporary religion is a striking effect of that narrative» (*Van der Veer 1995*: 5)*

For much of the twentieth century, the concept of secularization has been a central focus of research in the social sciences and humanities. Deeply embedded in post-war modernization theories and grounded in a teleological understanding of history, the European trajectory of secularization was seen as a paradigmatic case for modern societal development and progress. It was expected that the general decline of religious beliefs and the marginalization of religion's institutional role, which had supposedly accompanied social differentiation processes within Western European societies, would provide a template for similar developments elsewhere. Religion was expected to progressively withdraw from public life and recede into the private realm of the individual's imagination, with its universal truth claims either transmuted as deeply felt personal convictions or replaced by scientific reasoning.

The idea of secularization as a defining feature of modern societies is firmly rooted in classical sociology and can be traced back (among others) to Max Weber and Émile Durkheim, who both saw a direct correlation between the formations of European modernity and the observable decline of traditional forms of religion in the late nineteenth century. While for Weber the constitution of the modern bureaucratic state and capitalist-driven rationalization of modern reality ultimately brought about a 'disenchantment of the world,' for Durkheim, the increasing functional differentiation of secular spheres and resulting individualization consequently meant the weakening of religion's integrative function for society and the loss of its relevance altogether. As José Casanova points out, these classical theories have informed the main concept of secularization, arguing that "the theory of secularization is nothing more than a subtheory of general theories of differentiation, either of the evolutionary and universal kind proposed by Durkheim or of the more

historically specific kind of Western modernization theory developed by Weber" (Casanova 1994: 18). Interestingly, neither Durkheim nor Weber offered a strong teleological view of modernity or used the term "secularization" as a key analytical category to comprehend the societal changes of their era. It was not until the early 1960s that such assumptions were incorporated into various post-war modernization theories, thereby perpetuating the master narrative of secularization, which posited that modernity would transform religion into a differentiated functional system, a private matter, or render it superfluous. More than just a descriptive tool for understanding the particular trajectory of Western European socio-historical developments, secularization became to function as a determinant variable to explain the general success or failure of modernization within nation-states, feeding into the normative understanding that "to be secular means to be modern, and therefore by implication, to be religious means not yet fully modern" (Casanova 2011: 59).

Yet, against all predictions by secularization and modernization theorists of religion's inevitable privatization and decay, the past decades have shown that religion in most parts of the world has neither declined as a public force nor been domiciled within a sphere of interiority but is thriving under conditions of modernity (Hefner 1998). Processes of commodification and commercialization have engendered new modes of "spiritual economies" (Rudnyckyj 2010) that follow neoliberal market logics and selectively incorporate key elements of consumer capitalism into their ethics and theologies (cf. Gauthier and Martikainen 2013; Martikainen and Gauthier 2013). Concomitantly, politicized forms of religious conservatism have emerged since the 1970s, which in some cases found their expression in religious nationalism or, to the extreme end, have resorted to religiously legitimated violence and terrorism (cf. Juergensmeyer 1993). Not least, the dynamics of globalization have facilitated to raise the public and social profile of religion on a global scale. Processes of "missionization, migration, mobility, and mediatization" (Csordas 2009: 5-6) have stimulated new kinds of public religious cultures and identity formations that may contest the very ideas of the secular social order, the public sphere, and the modern nation-state (cf. Appadurai 1996; Woodhead and Catto 2012). In short, what we are witnessing is not a decline of religion per se but its pluralization, and the simultaneity of secular and religious

institutions and ways of belonging that shape everyday life and often transcend the taken-for-granted boundaries between the religious and the secular (Berking et al. 2018). Instead of merely becoming 'the other' of the secular, religion has proven to be an integral part of broader societal changes that can function as an "effective site for critique, tension, cooptation, adaptation, and even catharsis in relation to the conditions of modernity" (Cornelio 2008: 349).

The "stubborn persistence of religion in the global arena" (Shupe 1990: 17) has prompted a scholarly reappraisal of classical assertions on secularization and its inherent correlation with modernity. Scholars who had long bought into the hegemonic narrative of religion's imminent demise and conceived research into religion-related topics as redundant were urged to re-examine their understanding about religion's role and place in our contemporary era. Once regarded as the paradigmatic case of secularization and the model for the rest of the world, Western Europe now proved to be an exception to global patterns of religiosity (Roudometof 2016: 509). Presuming that "God is back" (Micklethwait and Wooldridge 2009) and the world just "as furiously religious as it ever was" (Berger 1999: 2), it seemed that the time had come to follow Rodney Stark's call and once and for all "carry the secularization doctrine to the graveyard of failed theories, and there to whisper 'requiescat in pace'" (Stark 1999: 22).

Since the 1990s, religion has consequently forced its way back on to the research agenda of mainstream social science and the humanities, generating a renewed interest in the configurations of religion and its conceptual imbrication with notions such as the secular, modernity, and the public sphere (see Gorski et al. 2012; Calhoun et al. 2011; Bryan S. Turner 2010). Invocations of the "resurgence of religion" (Riesebrodt 2000), "de-secularization" (Berger 1999), or "postsecularity" (Habermas 2008) have acquired increasing currency within academic discourse, altogether challenging the legitimacy of secularization as the only basis for thinking about the interrelationship between religion, state, and society. Much of the current debate on secularization has consequently abandoned the idea of a unitary and universal process of secular modernization as a general model to which contemporary societies will eventually converge, trying to move beyond the ideological and Eurocentric underpinning of normative-teleological secularization theories to more global comparative and historically grounded accounts.

However, while there is a general agreement among scholars that our present condition is marked by the coexistence of the religious and the secular, questions about the very definition and localization of the secular and its relation to the religious realm remain far from settled. Similar to other social-scientific macro concepts, neither secularization nor its epistemological cognates (such as secularism, the secular, or secularity) are clear-cut or uncontested. Depending on the context and academic discipline, these terms are used in various ways, leaving the door wide open for multiple possibilities of interpretation and connotations. These conceptual ambiguities make for a dissonant literature resembling the "Tower of Babel" (to use a biblical analogy here), where scholars from diverse disciplinary backgrounds use different terminologies, and the meanings of the categories applied tend to get lost in translation. Given the polyvocality inherent to the debate, it can be challenging to discern if participants speak of the same things when referring to notions of the secular, let alone be sure if they always share a common discursive field.

As a first approximation, it thus may be helpful to follow Casanova's (1994; 2011) proposal and analytically distinguish between a) the secular as a modern epistemic and societal category signifying a realm of reality that is differentiated from 'the religious'; b) secularism as a type of worldview or ideology that can be both, a principle of statecraft involving a legal–constitutional separation of church and state, or/and a broader, taken-for-granted, modern Doxa; and c) secularization as a social-scientific conceptualization of modern world-historical processes that usually encompasses three hypotheses: 1) the decline of religion or religious beliefs and practices, 2) the privatization of religion and its gradually increasing absence from the public sphere, and 3) the institutional differentiation and emancipation of secular spheres (e.g., state, science, economy, law) from religious institutions and norms.

Obviously, the categories mentioned above (i.e., the secular, secularism, secularization) are interrelated and only become meaningful if thought in differentiation to their double (religion) and vice versa. Yet therein also lies a core problem. For if we presume that religion and the secular are both functionally and structurally separated from each other, we must first reach an understanding what we actually mean by these terms. The conclusions drawn from analyzing religious-secular dynamics fundamentally depend on how we define our concepts and operationalize them both methodologically and theoretically for our research. For

instance, it makes a significant difference if we think of religion and the secular as a priori given and relatively stable referents that are diametrically opposed to each other or if we understand religious-secular boundaries as social constructs built on contingent signifiers and discourses that may change according to context and historical circumstances. While the former tends to rely on a substantive (some might say reductionist) notion of religion as a freestanding descriptive or analytical category (thus singling out 'religion' as its object of study), the latter operates on the premise that religion only becomes visible as an object against the background of a secular frame, emphasizing the relational character of religion as a social phenomenon and highlighting the importance of considering the specific socio-political, historical, and cultural contexts in which religions become embedded. The task for scholars, therefore, is not to outright reject these binaries as something intellectually "flawed", but rather to critically interrogate the circumstances in which they are taken for granted and mobilized, while taking into account the social actors involved and the implications that arise from making such distinctions.

Most current scholarship has abandoned the idea of 'the religious' and 'the secular' as constituting a fixed and mutually exclusive binary opposition, asking instead how these distinctions have themselves become productive of the very differences they purportedly try to describe. Rather than presupposing an inherent antagonism between religious faith and secular reason, it is now commonly accepted that both concepts are intricately connected and mutually constituted. Considerable efforts have been made to deconstruct these categories and disentangle the historical and conceptual interrelationship between the "formations of the secular" and the formations of the religious in processes of social change (cf. Asad 2003). As argued by some, part of the problem inherent to secularization debates derives from the fact that the categories applied are deeply rooted in the history of European thought and come with their particular conceptual histories that have accumulated different layers of meaning over time (cf. Philip S. Gorski 2000; Lübbe 1965). Against this background, it has been maintained that the religious/secular binary system of classification is essentially a Euro-American historical construct that advanced out of theological responses to pluralization processes within Western Christianity following the Protestant Reformation and the philosophical challenges posed by the Enlightenment. Pursuing a genealogical account inspired by Michel Foucault, Talal

Asad (2003) thus points out to the inherent paradoxical structure, or "ideological inversion" of European secularization processes, arguing that 'the secular' first emerged as a particular theological category within Western-European Christendom, while later becoming the modern antonym of 'the religious' per se.

In its function as an ideological critique of religion, secularism turned the specific Christian experience of Western European secularization "into a universal teleological process of human development from belief to unbelief, from primitive irrational or metaphysical religion to modern postmetaphysical secular consciousness" (Casanova 2013: 32). The conceptualization of the secular as the ultimate other of the religious and its normative imbrication with modernization has accordingly come to function as a central narrative for the self-description of modern society. Stripped of its theological connotation, the secular evolved into "the dominant category that serves to structure and delimit legally, philosophically, scientifically and politically, the nature and boundary of religion" (Casanova 2011: 72).

Such forms of boundary-making, in turn, have informed the discursive formation of religion within academia, leading to its allocation as a definable social phenomenon to be studied 'objectively' from the outside, thereby helping to reproduce and reify the categorical distinctions between the religious and the secular, transcendence and immanence, faith and reason (cf. Fountain 2013; Lambek 2012). As has been pointed out by some scholars, what is often neglected or left unreflected are the historical roots and continued legacy of Christian theological categories and modes of argumentation upon which the construction of these boundaries rest (cf. Asad 2003; Klassen 2011; Tse 2014). The positioning and self-identification of the humanities and social sciences as absolute secular disciplines consequently reveals an epistemic predicament, as the claim to 'religious neutrality' – or methodological agnosticism – is itself based on an inherent secular-religious dichotomy which makes it difficult to resort to a neutral or objective space that is not always already implicated by the distinction (Lambek 2012). Finding a 'meta-secular' position or developing an analytical vocabulary that transcends its Christian genealogy and speaks "outside the hegemonic presence of the secular" (Furani 2015: 8) or beyond an Enlightenment rationale is therefore difficult to achieve, given the fact that the 'secular' observer is always -already situated within and part of the

broader discursive field constituted by the secular-religious binary (Lambek 2012). In other words, and following Markus Dressler (2011: 222), the conceptualization of the religious and the secular as binary opposites tends to reinscribe "a secularist worldview and therefore is part of the problem that it aspires to understand."

Perhaps more importantly, these constructed dichotomies have also become essential categories of self-description and interpretation outside the academic realm. There exists a certain degree of interdependence between the scholarly usage of terms and those in the world of practice outside academia, which reproduces the conceptual ambiguities inherent to the debate. As Fenella Cannell (2010: 87) argues, secularization arguments "appear to be a default position at the border of the academic, the journalistic, and the political." They feed into public debates that can move beyond issues of politics and law to more fundamental questions about the normative implications of secular dispositions and the expectations attached to the redemptive promises that encompass the grand-narrative of secular modernity. According to Webb Keane (2013: 160), the idea of secularism possesses an affective force whose power partly derives from a subjectified "moral narrative of modernity" that projects onto chronological time an emancipatory view of "human self-transformation" and liberation from "false beliefs" and "fetishistic displacements". In this sense, secularism has the tendency to develop into an ethical and moral imperative for development and progress (Keane 2013: 159). The belief in the loss of religion's societal significance and ultimate decay can, therefore, become part of a secularist project of modernity, which, although never fully realizable, has the potential to function as a self-fulfilling prophecy (Cannell 2010; Keane 2013). Referring to the West European context, Casanova notes that the idea of secularization has arguably become an integral part of contemporary identity formation that conceives religious decline as "normal" and "progressive", that is, as a quasi-normative implication of what it means to be a "modern", "enlightened" European (Casanova 2006). Thus, it can be argued that the notion of secularization is itself an expression of the "post-Enlightenment hegemonic discourse of rationality, reason, and scientific progress" and, as such, helps to create the very situation it tries to describe (Granholm 2013: 314).

The historical and conceptual baggage, as outlined above, is largely responsible for the inherent ambiguity that has accompanied theoretical claims

about secularization. Sociological approaches to secularization often remain unclear regarding the theoretical scope and analytical range of their inquiry. For some scholars secularization functions as a conceptual tool to explain religious change in the macro-structural, mid-range institutional, and micro-social dimensions of society, thus aiming to empirically test the propositions of a general theory of secularization (cf. Dobbelaere 2002). For others, secularization is used with the intention to provide a 'diagnosis of the present time' (German: *soziologische Zeitdiagnose*). In contrast to social theory, time-diagnostic prognosis as a genre of sociological inquiry is neither grounded on 'objective' truth claims nor does it try to establish an analytical vocabulary for interpreting empirical evidence at hand. Instead, it seeks to construct a meaningful narrative of the present that aims to convince a wider audience through the coherence of its argumentation line and thus operates at the intersection of academic research, public discourse, and politics. In this context, secularization does not stand for a theory to be empirically verified or falsified but rather functions as a selective description of the contemporary.

Accordingly, one can observe an inconsistency in the terminological usage of secularization with a tendency to conflate normative and descriptive lines of argumentation and to equate the *explanans* with the *explanandum*. However, and as argued by Gorski and Altınordu (2008), linking the dependent variable (explanandum) to the definition of the independent variable (explanans), that is, analyzing secularization as both an outcome and cause of social change risks becoming tautological, thus undermining its explanatory value. Such a conceptual slippage particularly comes to the fore when correlating secularization with grand narratives of modernity. For one, and as pointed out earlier, secularization can be interpreted as a *product* of modernity that, at least in its conventional reading, would ultimately lead to the demise of religious beliefs and practices. Charles Taylor (2007) refers to such causal accounts negatively as "subtraction stories", in that they presume a linear development of human "progress" from primitive piety to enlightened rationality and posit the liberation from religious bonds as a consequence of the formation of modernity. Like Asad (2003), Taylor criticizes classical notions of secularization as post hoc constructions that obfuscate the religious (i.e., Latin-Christian) origins and undercurrents of the secular.

On the other hand, the arrival of new social complexities and subjectivities

usually associated with modernity can also be understood as produced by (Western) secularity itself, a stance that has been advocated by Taylor, for instance. In his seminal volume *A Secular Age* (2007), Taylor offers a phenomenological reconstruction of secularity, tracing the secular present back to the changing "conditions of belief" over the longue durée by asking: "why was it virtually impossible not to believe in God in, say, 1500 in our Western society, while in 2000 many of us find this not only easy but even inescapable?" (Taylor 2007: 25). Taylor argues that despite the periodic resurgence of religion in Europe and North America, Western secular modernity has brought about an "immanent frame" whereby religious belief no longer structures our social imaginary but has become disengaged from its institutional underpinnings and is now experienced as an option among others. According to Taylor, the emergence of the immanent order transformed the mode of human subjectivity from a pre-modern "porous self" that was open to being influenced and determined by natural and supernatural forces to a modern "buffered self" constituted through a carefully maintained boundary between the interior and exterior world. With the disenchantment of the external world, the locus of meaning and belief became interiorized, opening up the possibility of disengaging oneself from everything outside the mind. Consequently, human flourishing (in the Greek sense of *eudaemonia*) is no longer grounded in a transcendental frame but has come to be understood as wholly immanent and self-sufficient, giving rise to exclusive humanist alternatives to (Christian) faith. The emergence of a secular age, therefore, did not bring about a mere decline in individual religiosity; instead, it caused religion to lose its self-evidence and thus radically opened up the possibilities of belief and unbelief. Consequently, for Taylor, the defining characteristic of secularization is not disbelief but the pluralization of worldviews in which believers and unbelievers alike share an awareness that the belief in God is no longer a given but now involves a choice.

A Secular Age has received much critical acclaim, and rightfully so. Yet, it would be mistaken to understand Taylor's magnum opus as providing a global theory of secularity. On the contrary, in his introduction to A Secular Age titled "What does it mean to say that we live in a secular age?" Taylor explicitly confines his analysis to "'we' who live in the West…or otherwise put, in the North Atlantic world" (Taylor 2007: 1). Taylor's storyline remains self-avowedly grounded in Western thought and

uses Europe as a point of reference to unfold his narration of the Christian origins of secularism. As Reinhard Schulze (2016) points out, Taylor intends to retell a meaningful and coherent story of the Christian condition of modernity that, even if based on extensive evidence, derives its validity through a "narrative truth" that does not claim a "factual one-to-one correspondence with reality." Rather than proposing a universal theory or historical reconstruction of secularization that can be falsified or verified, Taylor attempts to provide an alternative master narrative of the rise of modern Western secularity that is, in his own words, "more convincing" than the "subtraction stories" he criticizes. Hence, what Taylor offers, is an "affirmative genealogy of modernity as experienced by 'the West'" that is firmly anchored within the "cultural imaginary" of the European Latin-Christian world, and as such, constitutes just one possible (albeit a narratively justifiable) version of the history of secularity (Schulze 2016: 190, 197). Against this background, I concur with Schulze that it can be problematic to apply Taylor's narrative to so-called non-Western contexts, even if there have been attempts to do so (cf. Künkler et al. 2018).

Altogether, the problem of the religious-secular distinction remains a persistent issue, not so much because of the apparent difficulty in defining these terms or determining how they relate to one another, as for the reason that they are commonly claimed to be the exclusive legacy of transformation processes within European Christendom and thus purely a product of Western history and thought. Although no longer grounded upon teleological suppositions, recent revisions of the secularization thesis and genealogical or discursive deconstructions of the secular often remain Western-centric as they take Europe as their main reference point for understanding religious-secular developments in other parts of the world. There is a danger that the various pathways of secularity emanating from outside the West are simply folded into the historical emergence of a singular Euro-American modernity and thus become mere variations, modifications, or even aberrations to a master narrative of origin authorized and told by the West itself. As Hilary Carey (2014: 12) critically argues in reference to *A Secular Age*, Taylor's self-confined "we" suggests that "secularity is a condition constrained in time and space to a Northern moment, against which the [supposed] non-secularities of contemporary Islamic, Indian, or African societies…appear as anomalies against the Western norm."

However, and as pointed out by Bruce Robbins (2013: 259), "[i]f the

secular/religious binary doesn't work as a practical account of West/non-West relations, it's because the West has never been constitutively secular and the non-West has never been constitutively religious." In other words, the grand narrative of the emergence of a totalizing immanent frame as a hallmark of modernity leading to a disenchantment of the world and bringing about a secular age is based on assumptions that do not stand empirical scrutiny, neither in the so-called West nor outside of it. Birgit Meyer, for instance, argues that contrary to Weber's notion of the disenchantment of the world, we face re-enchantment and religionization as a result of global modernization processes (Meyer 2010b). Similarly, Bryan Turner (2012) observes that one of the major developments in the contemporary global religious landscape lies in the „pietization of everyday life," which he sees as a consequence of religious revivalism that promulgates a new orthodoxy to counteract the "secular" lifestyles of consumerism in global capitalism. For Peter van der Veer (2012; 2019), on the other hand, modern society is permeated by transcendental values and magical elements, as evidenced by the mystification of the sovereign nation-state and the metaphysical quality of money and capitalist markets. Rather than witnessing the disappearance of the transcendence, forms of nationalism and capitalist accumulation have succeeded in enchanting the world and thus are integral to what he terms the "magic of modernity."

The point, therefore, is not to reify a West non-West dichotomy that posits a fundamental opposition between a supposedly secular (i.e., disenchanted) West and an inherently religious (i.e., enchanted) rest of the world but to understand the emergence of different secular and religious formations as an outcome of various interactions, and transfer of ideas between the West and the non-West. Historically the introduction of new terminologies into non-Western contexts did not merely reproduce the Western discourse of secularism but *mutually* shaped and reconfigured the respective discursive fields, drawing on preexisting notions and practices as much as on newly imported ones. As Michael Bergunder (2016), Prasenjit Duara (2014) and Peter van der Veer (2001) have convincingly demonstrated for the Asian-European context, concepts such as "religion," "secularism," "esotericism" or "spirituality" arose interactively out of imperial and colonial encounters and involved constant reflexive acts of translation on both sides, notwithstanding the asymmetric power dynamics that were often implied in such

relations. On the other hand, and as argued by Max Deeg et al. (Deeg et al. 2023), we can also observe variations of culture-specific differentiations between the "sacred" and the "secular" in pre-modern Asian societies, long before their encounter with the West. These historically grown demarcations continue to have an impact today and give rise to a global diversity of secularities that cannot simply be regarded as variants of a European prototype.

According to Nilüfer Göle, we should therefore give up on "reading secularity in the mirror of an ideal-Western model and measuring its gaps and deficiencies" and instead focus "on the ways secularism is semantically adopted, politically reinvented, collectively imagined, and legally institutionalized" in various parts of the world (Göle 2010: 44). It is through interrogating such global interconnections and mutual transformation processes that provide us with a better understanding of the historical and contemporary developments of religious-secular formations and helps us to decenter the Western "ownership" of secular modernity as an originary project (cf. Bhambra 2007).

Overall, the idea of the Western origins of secular modernity has increasingly lost its plausibility. The grand narrative of secularization, in which the secular is conceived of as an all-encompassing, immanent framework and the religious realm merely functions as a residual category of the secular, does not comply with the recent global transformation of the religious and its alignment with modernity (Casanova 2011). On the contrary, what we are witnessing is the "weakening of the hegemony of the secular" as both the dominant epistemic paradigm in the social sciences and ideology of Western modernity (Göle 2010: 44), which has brought about a renewed openness towards manifestations of public religion and questions of religious reasoning. It is against this background that the idea of *postsecularism* has come to occupy a central place on the scholarly agenda, producing a plethora of publications across disciplines that envision the coming of a "post-secular" condition marked by the coexistence of multiple religious and non-religious modes of belonging and forms of expressions in the public sphere. However, and as I will discuss next, it is debatable whether the postsecular framework truly provides a sufficiently renewed perspective on the state of religion in contemporary societies, especially when considering developments beyond the so-called 'modern West'.

The postsecular in question

By way of entering into the discussion, let me state from the beginning that I do not wish to engage with all the varieties of postsecular thinking that have emerged recently. Such an attempt would be a difficult endeavor, given the vast array of disciplines that have embraced a postsecular perspective. As James Beckford (2012) has rightly pointed out, the term "postsecularism" is polyvalent, and the theoretical claims made in its name often incommensurable. Nevertheless, it is possible to discern some recurring leitmotifs in current debates on the postsecular. At the most fundamental level, postsecularism can be read as a response to the (for some surprising) fact that religion has maintained its importance to political and public life, despite predictions of its demise in the course of modernization (cf. Habermas 2008). Based on this observation, postsecular theorizing may include: the diagnosis of a global public resurgence or revitalization of religion as one of the defining features of the 21st century; a general skepticism toward secularism that is often combined with a critique of a secularist bias in mainstream social sciences and the humanities; the attempt to transcend the binary distinction between the "religious" and the "secular" and rethink the dialectical tensions between religion and secular notions of modernity; and a call to move "post" (beyond) current secular epistemological frameworks by according religion an enduring value and acknowledging the plurality of secular and religious dispositions in contemporary societies. In short, postsecular thinking seems to be predominantly an exercise of scholarly self-interrogation that seeks to destabilize the hegemonic narrative of the secular modern and rehabilitate the religious 'other' within the public sphere and in academic discourse. Yet, despite the legitimacy of such critical interventions, serious doubts have been raised whether the concept holds any intellectual power, import, or utility (Parmaksız 2016). The question remains whether postsecular reasoning indeed constitutes an effective avenue to dislodge the particular style of progress narrative that has long accompanied debates on secularization and what can be gained from adopting a postsecular perspective.

According to Khaled Furani, one core problem with current accounts of the postsecular lies in their inability to overcome the epistemological quandaries that underlie the discussions on secularism and thus risk "to perpetuate the secular entrapments [they] aspire to resolve" (Furani 2015: 1). Similarly, Gregor McLennan

points out to the irony that "the conceptual resources and manoeuvres of postsecular thinking remain, in their way, as recognizably secularist as the theoretical figurations in question," concluding that "on the whole, the postsecular turn is about exploring ways of thinking and acting that are (inclusively and modestly) secular" (McLennan 2010: 18-19). Deeply embedded in the conceptual history of the secular, postsecular claims are often grounded in a transition narrative of modernity that presumes a pre-existing secular stage as part of a linear development, thereby neglecting significant historical continuities in the engagement of the sacred and the secular (Ascione 2017; Kong 2010). The presupposition of secularity as the default mode of modern society has thus influenced research agendas in so far as it is precisely the "empirical anomaly" of religious persistence rather than the varieties of secular expressions that are seen as in need to be explained and analyzed (Casanova 2011: 56). Yet, while it could be argued that the secular as a hegemonic collective imaginary is weakening, at least in some parts of the world, we should be cautious about drawing any generalizing conclusions from this. For the most part, the secular is certainly not (and never has been) the dominant mode of consciousness that regulates the daily social lives of individuals, therefore rendering any discussion that tries to account for the potential decrease or increase in secular or religious self-perceptions problematic. In other words, and as pointed out earlier, the rise of different formations of the secular has neither resulted in a pervasive disenchantment of the world nor has it necessarily brought about a self-sufficient "immanent frame" as proposed for instance by Charles Taylor (2007). Rather than the result of some natural difference between two modes of consciousness, the distinction between enchantment and disenchantment is itself an integral part of the modern secular imaginary (Modern 2011: xvi) and, therefore, should not be the starting point but the very object of our inquiry.

Hence, what often remains uncertain in postsecular approaches is the extent to which they are empirically grounded on observations of actual social transformations, or if they simply reflect a change in the *optics* of how we understand what has effectively "been there for quite some time" (Beyer 2013: 664). Rather than offering a *theory* of social and religious change, current notions of postsecularity predominantly take the form of a 'diagnosis of the present' and, in doing so, tend to conflate both normative and descriptive lines of argumentations. As Olli Pyyhtinen (2010: 31) argues, in contrast to social theory, diagnoses of the times (*Zeitdiagnosen*)

as a genre of social inquiry are inclined to pathologize the present by identifying a 'condition' or problem in contemporary society, analyzing its cause, and prescribing a cure or treatment that would relieve the symptoms. As such, they typically operate within a framework that presumes an epochal societal transition from one phase to another, thereby "oversimplifying the complex nature of social life by taking up one single theme and making it a ruling one." Hans Joas (2014: 65) refers to such accounts as "monothematic analysis," criticizing time-diagnostic concepts (like postmodernity or postsecularity) for remaining "chronically unclear" about whether they are "dealing just with a change in cultural currents or also with a new era in terms of social structure."

Consequently, the postsecular poses a range of methodological and theoretical problems, not only regarding its validity and viability but also more fundamentally concerning the taxonomy of the term itself. Arguing that "the meaning of the postsecular lies in the very contestedness [*sic*] of the term" (Stoeckl 2011: 4) or claiming that "the postsecular condition is quite diverse and internally differentiated" (Braidotti 2008: 10) neither renders the concept operationalizable for comparative empirical research nor makes it useful for constructing a coherent theoretical framework that accounts for its inherent heterogeneity. Furthermore, self-evidently assuming that we live in a postsecular age does not tell us whether the postsecular exists as a social phenomenon and, for that matter, where to meaningfully locate it in the social realm (Huggan 2010 but see Molendijk 2015). Accordingly, a core difficulty in postsecular reconfigurations of the secularization paradigm lies in the ambiguity of their theoretical scope of inquiry and the often inconsistent definitional premises on which they are grounded. Much of the potential analytical purchase of postsecularism tends to get lost due to the often divergent meanings attributed to the postsecular and weak interest in substantiating its claims empirically (Beckford 2012). Alluding to these shortcomings, David Martin (2011: 14) thus dismisses "'postsecularity' as a construction of the intelligentsia, no doubt useful for obtaining grants, but lacking secure root in the empirical and historical data". Against this background, it can be argued that the postulation of a new public presence and visibility of religion reveals more about the renewed scholarly attention towards religion than the actual global changes of religious patterns and their interrelation with the secular. We can thus ask with Gorski et al. (2012: 2):

"Which world has changed – the 'real' one or the scholarly one?" And more importantly: from which perspective and based on what premises have claims of the resurgence of religion and terms such as postsecularism come to serve as popular categories for the self-description of contemporary society?

It is perhaps not accidental that the notion of the postsecular first emerged within Western academic circles, following well-established deconstruction practices of assigning a 'post' prefix to an assumed fundamental epochal transition for which previously held analytical frameworks have seemingly lost their plausibility. As a rather latecomer in a series of epistemological departures (such as post-modernism), the post-secular can thus be seen as another "wishful illusion of an exit from the present mire" (Masuzawa 2012: 208); this time, however, framed in the guise of overcoming the exigencies of the Enlightenment critique of religion. In this sense, the postsecular should not only be understood as a response to the alleged resurgence of religion or its pluralization but as an attempt to rectify a previously lopsided secularist self-understanding of modernity and move to a stage that "recognizes religion's immanence and the transcendental qualities of the secular" (Rajeev 2015: 109).

Much of the recent contributions to the postsecular discourse have resorted into an "intellectual rehabilitation" of the religious (Burchardt 2016), seeking to revert its former marginalization by revalorizing religious epistemes and affirmatively assigning a new, enhanced public role to religion (cf. Connolly 1999; Habermas 2008; Taylor 2007). As Marian Burchardt points out, the apparent "triumphalism" with which some scholars have endorsed religion's 'new' significance tends to invert the Enlightenment critique of religion into a normative critique of liberal secularism, where "religion now appears as a space of freedom, and secularism as an instrument of regimentation and exclusion" (Burchardt 2016: 140). The postsecular quest to redeem the "West" from the broken promises of the grand-narrative of secularization has thus the tendency to resort to a new "metaphysics of anti-secularism" that ascribes to secularism a quasi-religious quality and accordingly seeks to dismantle secularism's modern dictates and inherent power and knowledge regimes (Gourgouris 2008).

Hence, at least in its political-philosophical framing, the concept of the postsecular proves to be less a descriptor for renewed forms of public and politicized

religiosities than a normative ideal that defines the postsecular as a condition of co-existence between religious and secular worldviews while recognizing the moral intuitions of religions as an essential cultural resource for curing the social pathologies of contemporary modernity. Along these lines, the postsecular can be viewed as yet another offshoot of modern Western intellectual history that aims at providing an answer to the diagnosed 'crisis of secularism' which has come to destabilize the secular self-perception of Western societies. Consequently, and similar to my discussion on Taylor, this raises the question about the possibilities of applying the postsecular framework to a world beyond the West: What does the 'post' in the post-secular stand for under conditions where the distinction between the secular and the religious has historically never been static and religious diversity at both the individual and institutional level is not a new phenomenon but a sociocultural pattern that has been established for centuries? How do we account for cases where secularity did not necessarily emerge from conflicts between religious and secular ideologies but where religion was fundamentally intertwined with postcolonial state projects of modernity? As Rajeev Bhargava (2015: 110 - 111) critically remarks in reference to the Indian context:

> If the post-secular refers to the acknowledgment of the continuous presence of religion, indeed of multiple religions, to the recognition of their positive value, to their coexistence with non-religious perspectives, and to the imperative that state be designed to cope with and value this plural condition, then, I argue, India has always been postsecular.

As we shall see later, a similar argument can be made for the Singaporean case, where postcolonial modernization processes have not resulted in a secularist disenchantment of society nor led to the same epistemological predicaments diagnosed by Western scholars. Following Graham Huggan (2010: 754), we can thus argue that postsecularism may be more valuable "as a critical methodology" for rewriting the narrative of (Western) secular modernity "than as an indicator of social realities." The question whether we have entered a postsecular phase, or, to invoke Charles Taylor (2007), what it means to say that we live in a secular age marked by a purely immanent frame, therefore, remains an object of philosophical inquiry and is not one that "social scientists qua social scientists can answer" (Gorsk iand Altınordu 2008: 72).

Multiple Secularities

The argument I have been trying to make so far is not so much geared towards discarding the notion of the postsecular altogether. Nor should my critical inquiry be understood as an epitaph for yet another failed theory along the lines of Rodney Stark (Stark 1999). Indeed, one significant contribution of current postsecular thinking arguably lies in its attempt to decenter the conceptual edifice of secular modernity. In this regard, current invocations of the postsecular function as a necessary disruption of a secularist bias that has long prevailed in conventional versions of the secularization paradigm and thus can be read as a self-correction of intellectuals' previously held positions "who […] felt justified in considering religions to be moribund" (Joas 2008: 106). What I am far more questioning is whether the postsecular in all its variety of expressions actually poses a viable alternative to the secularization paradigm and, for that matter, is able to overcome the theoretical and methodological deficits inherent to standard versions of the secularization thesis. Despite its increasing academic popularity and widespread usage in recent years, the so-called 'postsecular turn' has not yet resulted in a paradigm shift in a Kuhnian sense. For better or for worse, the unwanted specters of secularization continue to haunt the scholarly and public imagination. Stitched together like Shelley's Frankenstein monster – to invoke Gorski and Altınordu's analogy (Gorski and Altınordu 2008: 75)– secularization theory has accumulated different layers of meaning over time, beginning "as a product of scientific hubris, which sometimes rebels against its masters, slipping out of their control and out into the public square of political debate, where it dances to the tune of other masters, who use it to denounce secular humanists and beckon religious ideas back into the public square." Hence, if one is willing to accept that 'Frankenstein' is still alive and well among us today, we can ask with Gorski and Altınordu (*ibid*.): "What is one to do with such a monstrous theory?"

Obviously, the use of secularization theory as a prognostic tool to determine the probable decline or resurgence of religion has lost its credibility. Current debates in the sociology and anthropology of religion have shifted away from hypothetical questions on religion's future fate to more fertile grounds that account for the various forms that religions take under different secular conditions. The focus has thus considerably moved beyond mere criticism of the orthodox secularization narrative

towards more elaborate comparative approaches that try to identify and explain the variations of secular regimes and the dynamics that structure the relationship between the religious and the secular. However, as the new scholarship on comparative secularity is still in its early stages of development (Gorski 2016: 60), a convincing alternative *theory* to secularization that is at once "contingency-sensitive, culturally informed and thoroughly comparative" (Koenig 2015: 301) has yet to be formulated. I, therefore, concur with José Casanova that instead of abandoning the idea of secularization tout court, we should aim to critically de- and reconstruct the analytical framework in a way that allows for more global comparisons and captures "the diverse patterns of differentiation and fusion of the religious and the secular and their mutual constitution across all the religions of the world" (Casanova 2008: 104).

This means, first, treating processes of social differentiation, religious decline, and the privatization of religious practice as analytically independent and historically contingent variables (Casanova 1994), while acknowledging that the outcome of these transformations is neither predetermined nor irreversible, but can simultaneously lead to processes of secularization and de-secularization (Martin 2017). Second, to rethink the interrelation between secularism, religion, and modernity by examining the different regimes of secularities that have emerged due to various modernization paths around the globe (Gorski 2016). Third, and related to the latter point, developing a framework that takes both the global dynamics and local path-dependencies of these developments into account, thus recognizing the plurality of secular and religious formations and their variegated manifestations in different historical and contemporary societal settings (Göle 2010; Koenig 2015). And, finally, establishing a common analytical vocabulary that, on the one hand, is context-sensitive towards the global and local entanglements of secular and religious terminologies and their respective genealogical trajectories and, on the other, strong enough to function as a basis for comparative research (cf. van der Veer 2001).

One approach that has been pushing in this direction is the conceptual framework of *multiple secularities*, as advocated by Monika Wohlrab-Sahr, Marian Burchardt and others (see Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt 2012; Burchardt et al. 2013; Burchardt et al. 2015).[7] Firmly grounded within the program of cultural sociology,

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[7] see also the research program "Multiple Secularities - Beyond the West, Beyond Modernities" developed at the Humanities Centre for Advanced Studies, Leipzig University, Germany.

Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt aim to provide an interpretative framework for analyzing the cultural constructions of 'secularities' and their variations within different social and historical contexts (Burchardt et al. 2015). To this end, the authors propose to use 'secularity' as an inclusive analytical term that encompasses "the institutionally as well as culturally and symbolically anchored forms and arrangements of differentiation between religion and other social spheres" (Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt 2012: 881). Consequently, they do not only confine their analysis to state regulations of religion but are also interested in how different cultural expressions and social practices of 'secularity' become manifest in diverse other functional domains of society (such as law, science, education), the public sphere, material spaces and people's everyday lifeworlds (Burchardt et al. 2015: 5). The idea of multiple secularities thus intends to move beyond a narrow ideological and legal-political understanding of secularism by (1) focusing on the "*cultural framings* of secular-religious distinctions" and the specific meanings attributed to them; and (2) by subsuming the often implicit and taken-for-granted demarcation between the religious and non-religious (Burchardt et al. 2013: 615, emphasis in the original; Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt 2012: 881). The latter point is insofar important, as it circumvents the fallacy of defining secularism as by default the opposite of religion and shifts the attention to the variations of how the category of the secular and the religious is socially constructed and engaged by both religious *and* non-religious actors (Burchardt 2016: 148).

Taking their cue from Shmuel Eisenstadt's concept of multiple modernities (Eisenstadt 2000), while carefully eschewing its strong civilizational underpinning, the multiple secularities framework accounts for the diversity of religious/secular configurations that emerged from various historical interactions, cross-civilizational entanglements, and colonial encounters (Burchardt et al. 2015). Accordingly, Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt suggest that secularities operate on the basis of "different cultural logics that document specific social histories of conflict" and therefore engender ambivalent configurations of competing notions of the secular which "are inevitably linked to the political and cultural contexts in which they emerge" (Burchardt 2016: 149). Far from being consensually agreed upon, the

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(https://www.multiple-secularities.de/) last accessed 23.11.2019.

understanding and interpretation of secularities, that is, the question of where to draw the boundary between the secular and religious, are subjected to processes of negotiation and authorization and "thus invariably embedded in power relations" that "involve a variety of social and political actors and social movements, often with antagonistic agendas" (Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt 2012: 887, 888). In reference to Hussein Ali Agrama (2012), secularity can, therefore, be defined as a 'problem-space' in which different versions and modalities of religious/secular boundaries are negotiated, contested, and recomposed, thereby altering the line of demarcation between both spheres (Burchardt 2016; see also Göle 2010).

To analyze the development of different forms of secular differentiations and how they are linked to historical circumstances, Burchardt and Wohlrab-Sahr suggest that secularities respond to specific societal problems (as their reference problems) and offer solutions to them. Four such ideal-typical reference problems can be identified under modern conditions: (1) the problem of individual freedom vis-à-vis dominant social units, be they groups or the state; (2) the problem of religious heterogeneity and the resulting potential or actual conflictuality; (3) the problem of social or national integration and development; and (4) the problem of the independent development of institutional domains (Burchardt et al. 2013: 615). Obviously, the meanings and interpretations of such problems and their solutions are often contested and only collectively shared to varying degrees. Yet, at certain "critical junctures" in history, the competing cultural meanings of secularity held by individuals, groups, states, or functional domains can provide motives or constitute motifs for institutionalizing distinctions between religious and non-religious social spheres (Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt 2012). Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt thus propose four ideal- types of "motifs of secularity," that correspond to the reference problems and which they formulate in terms of "secularity for the sake of...": (1) individual rights and liberties; (2) balancing/accommodating religious diversity; (3) social integration/national development; (4) the independent development of institutional domains of society (see table 1).

Furthermore, the motifs of secularity can feed into different "guiding ideas" that set the basic normative terms and ideological resources for the enactment and legitimation of these distinctions (Burchardt 2016). The connections between the forms of secularities and guiding ideas, that is, how such boundaries are achieved,

how entrenched and explicit they are, and how they are framed, however, differ significantly according to context. As Burchardt et al. (2013: 614) point out, "guiding ideas of secularity are actively and competitively constructed, supported or put into question". They allow for a variety of possible constellations that at once may "restrict the dominance or even the development of a guiding idea" (ibid.: 615) or, conversely, can act as an organizing principle that bring together competing discourses of secularities and fuse them temporarily into collective narratives and shared normative frameworks (ibid.: 625). Under given circumstances, then, the reference problems and associated guiding ideas can assume specific ideal-typical patterns with the possibility of one motif becoming temporarily the dominant one, thereby pushing other motifs to the background. Following the authors' argumentation, the motifs and associated guiding ideas can thus come to serve as a common "reference point" and "develop a binding social thrust for certain historical periods" that may give rise to the establishment of temporary shared "'cultures of secularity'[…] across otherwise existing lines of difference" (Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt 2012: 887-888).

Table 1: Multiple Secularities

Reference problems	Secularity for the sake of...	Guiding ideas
individual freedom vis-à-vis dominant social units	...individual rights and liberties	freedom and individuality
religious heterogeneity and the resulting potential or actual conflictuality	...balancing/accommodating religious diversity	toleration, respect, and non-interference
social or national integration and development	...social integration/national development	progress, enlightenment, and modernity
independent development of institutional domains	...the independent development of institutional domains of society	rationality, efficiency, and autonomy

Source: own elaboration based on Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt 2012; Burchardt et al. 2015

Notably, the ideal-typical distinctions made within the concept of multiple secularities are to be understood as a continuum rather than exclusive categories, which in reality may overlap or even conflict with each other, allowing for different empirical constellations and variations that may limit the reach of the typology

(Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt 2012: 886). As such, the framework proposed by Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt is not to be construed as a fully elaborated theory that can be operationalized equally for all empirical cases under study. Rather it functions as a model that provides useful analytical instruments for understanding the dynamics of contemporary secular-religious configurations and the historical trajectories and ideological frameworks on which they are grounded.

However, despite the apparent strength of the 'multiple secularities' approach in offering a means to develop a non-reductive way to problematize the empirical material at hand, some limitations remain to be addressed. While I agree that there is much to be gained from including the symbolic-cultural dimensions of secular-religious distinctions in our studies, emphasizing the *cultural* construction of secularity risks sidelining the social structures inherent to the secular-religious configurations in question. As Matthias Koenig (2015: 300) contends, a one-sided culturalist approach to modern secularities falls short in explaining the short -and mid-term implications and path-dependencies of *institutionalized* varieties of secularism "understood as state regulation of religion as articulated in constitutions, laws, and policies." Koenig thus advocates taking into account more prominently the various configurations of social actors, their interests, and power relations in analyzing processes of institutional secularization or de-secularization (ibid.). In a similar vein, Philip Gorski proposes to pay more attention to the different social and structural dimensions of various "regimes of secularity" that "differ greatly in the range, degree and form of 'religious options' they permit or encourage" (Gorski 2016: 62). Gorski refers to several such dimensions, including forms of religious-political differentiations; patterns of inter and intra-religious competition; degrees of religious freedom and state regulations; and the dynamics of globalization that affect religious communities and may lead to processes of de- and reterritorialization.

The importance of focusing on state constructions of the secular becomes especially apparent when considering developments in postcolonial contexts. Clemens Six (2018), for instance, advocates analyzing secularism as political projects of postcolonial nation-building that involve various state and non-state actors with sometimes conflicting agendas. As he demonstrates in his case studies of India, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore, state-led secular projects neither emerged in a straightforward manner nor were they necessarily grounded on ready-made ideas

or concepts. Instead, they often took shape through improvisations and evolved as *practical* responses to the challenges of postcolonial state formations in religiously diverse settings. Thus, for analytical purposes, it makes sense to retain the notion of secularism and make a clearer differentiation between secularism as a secularist worldview or Doxa, and secularism as a political project of modern state formation and nation-building. Such a move permits to focus more closely on the practices of secular institutionalization and the socio-political, demographic, and historical contexts that conditioned the variations of the secular modern through the proliferation of the nation-state form (Streicher 2016). At the same time, it also encourages us to look beyond the ideas that inform the secular principles of governing and administrating religion towards the ways religious and non-religious actors respond, adapt, contest or help shape the state's secular policies (Sinha 2011; Six 2018).

In sum, a comprehensive analysis of the diverse patterns of differentiation between religion and the secular should account for both its cultural construction and the institutional varieties of secularism that channel, constrain, or conversely enable religious expressions and engender what we might call local regimes of secularity. Such an approach moves away from universalizing theories on secularism and "beyond its civilizational focus on the historical legacies of Christendom" (D.P.S. Goh 2014b: 125). Instead, it aims to account for the complexities of secular formations by developing concepts that are more appropriate to the local environment, thus "recognizing that one context will offer simultaneously similar and different expressions of a particular phenomenon from another" (Kong 2015: 112). It also acknowledges the explanatory limitations of Western-originated notions of the secular and the need to reframe and re-theorize them to describe and explain the local situation in more nuanced and adequate ways (ibid.). My following discussion on the imbrication of the religious and the secular in the context of state management of religion in Singapore will follow along these lines of thought

2.2 Multiculturalism, religious diversity and the regime of secularism in Singapore

«Religion must not get mixed up in politics otherwise a clash of political views can easily turn into a clash of religious beliefs. Then there will be deep enmity between our different religious communities and our society will come to grief. Remember that these peaceful, easy inter-communal, inter-religious relations cannot be taken for granted. They need to be safeguarded and upheld» (Lee Kuan Yew, first Prime Minister of Singapore).[8]

«Singapore has a secular government but we are not an atheistic state. The Government does not favour or disfavour any particular religion. It is neutral. This is an important principle because all the major religions of the world are here» (George Yeo, former Minister of State).[9]

«I see secularism in Singapore as "secularism with a soul", that is, a system that respects the role that can be played by religious life in Singapore» (Zainul Abidin Rasheed, former Senior Minister of State)[10]

Similar to other nation-states in Asia, secularism in the Singapore context is a product of the colonial encounter and predominantly determined by the response of the postcolonial city-state to the challenges of ethnic and religious plurality. As a "child of diaspora" (Harper 1997: 261), Singapore inherited a largely migrant population from British colonial rule whose ethnic ratios have been deliberately maintained through immigration policies and therefore remained relatively stable over the last decades, comprising a Chinese majority (74.3%) with a culturally substantial minority of Malays (13.5%) and Indians (9%), as well as a diverse mix of other ethnic groups (3.2%) including people of Arab, Indonesian, European and Eurasian descent (Singapore Census of Population 2020). Correspondingly, Singapore is marked by high degrees of religious heterogeneity, reflecting a variegated religious landscape that has been ranked as "the most diverse in the world" (Pew Research Center 2014). According to the latest figures, the majority of the resident population self-identifies as Buddhist or Taoist (39.9%), followed by significant numbers of both Catholic and Protestant Christians, (18.9%), Muslims (15.6%), and Hindus (5%), while a growing number of people declare themselves as having no religious affiliation (20%) (Singapore Census of Population 2020).

In an important way, the colonial structuring of Singapore's diverse population into an essentialized Chinese-Malay-Indian-Others quadratomy has formed the basis of Singapore's postcolonial multicultural framework that upholds

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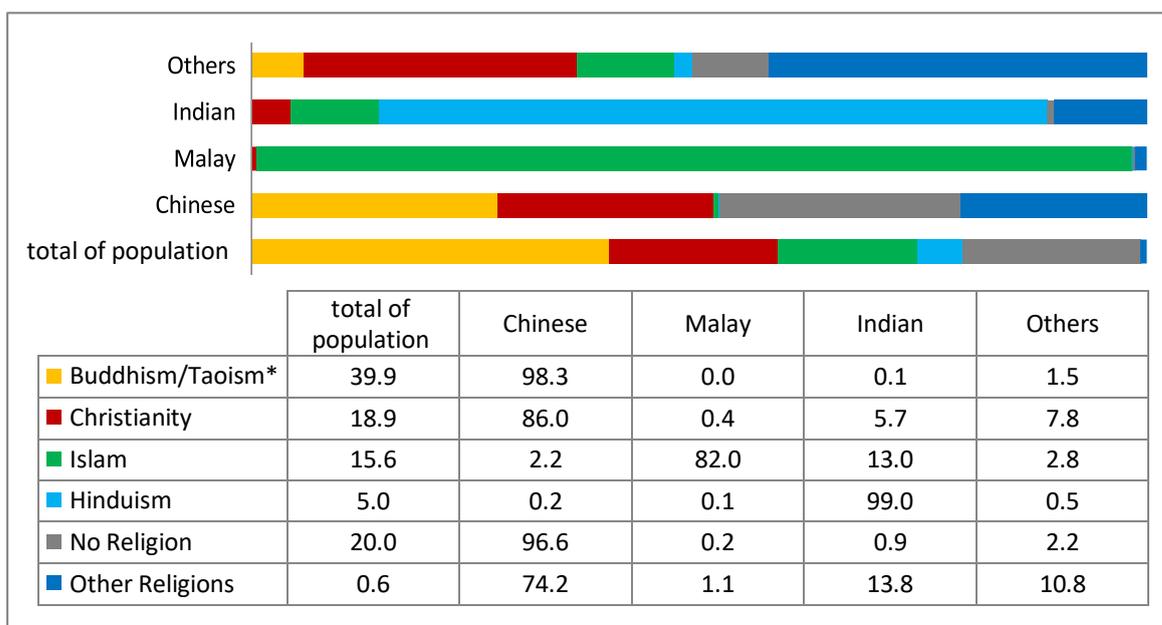[8] Prime Minister's Eve of National Day broadcast 1987 (Singapore Government Press Release No.: 26/Aug 02-1/87/08/08).

[9] Speech by George Yong-Boon Yeo, Minister of State (finance) and (foreign affairs) at the St Joseph's Institution's prize and speech day on 7 October 1989 (Singapore Government Press Release No.: 16/Oct. 08-2/89/10/07).

[10] Zainul Abidin Rasheed, 84 Singapore Parliament Reports, 26 February 2008, col 723ff.

ethnicity, language, and religion as the primary means of cultural and social classification and tends to conflate religious and ethnic differences both at the institutional level and in public discourse. Consequently, Singapore's pattern of religious affiliation is to various degrees determined by the ethnic composition of the population. Thus, adherents of Buddhism and Taoism are almost exclusively Chinese, Hinduism is predominantly practiced by Indians, while the majority of Muslims are of Malay origin. Christianity, both in its Catholic and Protestant forms, is the most diversely distributed religion in Singapore, but continues to be dominated by Chinese. Likewise, the rising number of people who claim to have no religious affiliation remains a trend among the Chinese (see Chart 1 below).

Chart 1
Percentage of resident population aged 15 and above by religion and ethnic group, 2020

	total of population	Chinese	Malay	Indian	Others
■ Buddhism/Taoism*	39.9	98.3	0.0	0.1	1.5
■ Christianity	18.9	86.0	0.4	5.7	7.8
■ Islam	15.6	2.2	82.0	13.0	2.8
■ Hinduism	5.0	0.2	0.1	99.0	0.5
■ No Religion	20.0	96.6	0.2	0.9	2.2
■ Other Religions	0.6	74.2	1.1	13.8	10.8

*includes Chinese traditional beliefs
Source: Singapore Census of Population 2020

While the state adheres to the principles of secularism in its mode of governance, Singapore's society can hardly be considered secularized. With almost 80 percent of the resident population claiming a religious affiliation, religion forms a significant part of the city-state's social fabric, manifested in a rich diversity of beliefs and practices, which in turn reflects the city-state's inherent multicultural disposition. There are no signs that Singapore's rapid economic development since independence has led to a significant decline in personal religiosity or has had a negative impact on religious institution building. On the contrary, recent studies have shown that for

most Singaporeans religion remains an important identity marker and constitutes a vital aspect of their everyday lives (cf. Mathews et al. 2019). Despite having one of the highest GDP per capita in the world and routinely topping global rankings in various domains such as education, health care, infrastructure, and economic competitiveness, Singapore's citizens generally exhibit strong beliefs in metaphysical concepts, are religiously active, and make decisions based on their religious principles (Pereira 2005). Singapore thus proves to be a vivid example that the accumulation of wealth and the institutionalization of the secular state do not necessarily lead to a more secularized society. Contrary to the once-dominant narrative of secularization, Singapore's path to modernization has neither brought about a significant decline in religious beliefs nor weakened the social relevance of religious institutions, but arguably increased religious competition and facilitated religious growth (Tong 2007). As a "nation of believers" (The Straits Times 2005), religiosity and religious diversity remain integral to Singapore's national identity.

Against this backdrop, the careful and circumspect management of ethnic and religious differences has become a key imperative for Singapore's political leadership. While the government is dedicated to maintaining a neutral stance with regards to religious matters, it does not endorse anti-theistic ideologies and has not implemented a formal separation of 'church and state.' Rather than being anchored in a normative framework that presupposes an ideological critique of religion, Singapore's secular model of governing religious communities is driven by the pragmatic concern to preserve ethnic and religious harmony and maintain the equilibrium of its multireligious polity. Consequently, the state exercises a firm bureaucratic and legal control over religious affairs that circumscribes the place and role of religion in society and provides the government with a vast panoply of legislative powers to defend the status quo and keep religion out of the "secular" domain of politics. At the same time, the government is well aware that upholding a strict boundary between the secular and religious realm is difficult to achieve in an environment where religion forms a vital part of people's everyday lives and assumes a substantive presence in the public sphere. In recognizing the social value of religion, the government has adopted a calibrated approach to regulating religious affairs that selectively co-opts religions into its nation-building project, thereby creating opportunity structures (cf. Beckford 2003) for religious communities to navigate

their interests in relation to the state. Singapore's corporatist form of managing religious diversity, therefore, does not foreclose the possibility of cooperation between the state and religion. Instead of simply domesticating the religious domain, the state seeks to simultaneously safeguard the common good of religious harmony and integrate religious groups into its governance framework by facilitating religious participation in the public sphere and the production of social goods (D.P.S. Goh 2019). Scholars have accordingly characterized Singapore's form of secularism in various ways, labeling it at once as "accommodative" (Thio 2006), "pragmatic" (K.P. Tan 2010), "intrusive" (Aljunied 2012) "assertive" (Rahim 2012), "electoral" (Abdullah 2019), "pluralist," or "patronage" (D.P.S. Goh 2014b, 2019). Depending on the analytical lens and disciplinary perspective, each of these conceptualizations emphasizes a different quality of Singapore's distinct regime of secularism. Nevertheless, all emphasize the government's active role in policing the religious realm and the importance of state ideologies in determining the place of religion in Singaporean society.

These ideological principles, to use my own rendition of the multiple secularities framework, are grounded on several reference problems and relate to specific state-defined goals that can provisionally be summed up as follows (see table 2 below): (1) *secularism as a means to maintain social cohesion and national unity* that responds to the problem of balancing individual freedom rights against communal/national interests and is guided by the state's ideology of communitarianism; (2) *secularism as a means to accommodate religious diversity* which is informed by the government's perception of the potential conflictuality of Singapore's heterogeneous disposition and prompts the state to regulate the religious realm through direct and indirect intervention while presenting itself as the neutral arbiter in interreligious disputes; (3) *secularism as a means to social integration and nation-building* that emanates from Singapore's postcolonial predicament of forging national unity and ensuring economic growth via a multiracial framework and the imperative of developmentalism (4) *secularism as a means to maintain political hegemony and stability* by opting for a 'non-liberal' approach to governance that is grounded on meritocratic principles, state corporatism and patronage.

Table 2: Postcolonial refraction of state secularism in Singapore

Reference problems	Goals (Secularism as a means to…)	State ideologies and principles
individual freedom vs. communal interests	… maintain social cohesion and national unity	communitarianism, survival motif and pragmatism
religious heterogeneity and the resulting actual or potential conflictuality	…balance/accommodate religious diversity	equality and non-discrimination, calibrated interventionism
national integration/identity and development	…social integration/ nation-building and economic progress	multiracialism, (neoliberal) developmentalism
political legitimacy 'liberal' vs. 'non-liberal' democracy	…maintain political stability and hegemony	meritocracy, corporatism, patronage

As should be clear, my adaptation of the 'multiple secularities' approach shifts the analytical emphasis from cultural constructions of secularities based on competing guiding ideas towards political secularism and the related ideological principles that have informed its institutionalization. While this could be read as a deliberate aberration from the framework's original intent, my purpose of focusing on secularism as a regulatory political principle is not without reason but grounded in the social-political realities that have shaped the distinct regime of secularity in postcolonial Singapore. As I will elaborate in more detail shortly, the historical formation of secularism in Singapore did not emerge as a cultural but a political response to the problem of managing religious and ethnic diversity. Rather than emanating from a "social history of conflict" where different concepts of the secular and guiding ideas compete with each other (Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt 2012), the origins of Singapore's secular regime are deeply rooted in the political legacy of colonialism and post-independence project of nation-building. Thus, from the very beginning, the state was the prime actor in setting the basic normative terms and ideological resources for enacting and legitimizing the boundaries between the religious and other social domains.

This is not to say that these boundaries have never been contested in the history of modern Singapore. Indeed, questions about the extent to which religious freedom rights should be granted and where to draw the line between religion and

politics have been the subject of much debate. Moreover, religious actors have found innovative means to circumvent state regulations and, in doing so, have re-engaged the official boundaries between the secular and the religious on their own terms. However, such adaptation strategies rarely materialize in direct opposition to state power, nor do they present a significant challenge to the political legitimacy of the PAP government. Given the nearly total hegemony of the one-party state in Singapore, the values that have informed state ideologies in managing religion and the objectives for implementing related policies have remained relatively consistent over time. Vineeta Sinha thus reminds us of the historical continuity in state discourses on religion within the context of postcolonial nation-building, arguing further that the status of religion in Singapore cannot be evaluated independently of specific historical occurrences and incidents (Sinha 1999: 78).

To understand the diverse features of the secular regime in present-day Singapore, it is, therefore, crucial to first examine the historical and socio-political contexts that have shaped Singapore's approach towards governing religious diversity before delineating the different strategies that inform the government's contemporary policies on regulating religious communities.

The problem of diversity, race, and religion

«In Singapore, we start with the irrefutable proposition that the alternative to multi-racialism…is genocide in varying degrees» (S. Rajaratnam, former Minister for Culture)

The origins of Singapore's legal and bureaucratic framework for managing religion are firmly rooted in the trajectories of colonial state-building, post-war decolonization, and the formation of Singapore as an independent nation.[11] Comparable to other postcolonial nation-states in Asia, Singapore inherited a divided

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[11] Modern Singapore was established as a trading post for the British East India Company in 1819 by Thomas Stamford Raffles, then appointed Governor-General of Bencoolen on Sumatra. After the Anglo-Dutch Treaty of 1824 Singapore became a subdivision of the British Indian colony and, together with Penang and Malacca, was administered by the British East India Company as one of three "Straits Settlements". In 1867 the control of the Straits Settlements was passed from British India to the London Colonial Office, making Singapore part of the British Malayan Crown Colony until the Japanese occupation during WW II (1942 - 1945). With the British return after the war, Singapore became a separate Crown Colony and attained partial and, subsequently, full internal self-governing status lasting until 1963. From 1963 – 1965 Singapore formed a short-lived union with the Federation of Malaya and the former British colonies of North Borneo and Sarawak. The failure of the merger eventually resulted in Singapore's secession from the union and sudden independence on 9 August 1965. The following discussion will focus only on Singapore, thus sidelining contemporaneous developments in Malaysia.

plural society and racial regime after gaining independence from British colonial rule in 1965. Both were determinant for Singapore's postcolonial nation-building process and defined the ideological and political parameters for governing ethnic and religious diversity. The question of racial and religious pluralist inclusion, that is, "how to forge a national unity" (D.P.S. Goh 2008: 248) and legitimize political authority under postcolonial conditions of diversity became a central concern for the first generation of political leaders. As a legacy of the British colonial racial framework, religious pluralism thus constituted the precondition for Singapore's postcolonial formation of secularism and institutionalization thereof (D.P.S. Goh 2008). Against this background, the issue of religious diversity in Singapore cannot be analyzed without considering the close interrelationship between race and religion that emerged out of the colonial encounter and which laid the foundation for the development of Singapore's secular state formation and its postcolonial model of multiculturalism.

Similar to other colonies of the British Empire, 'race' was an essential category for governance and population management. It provided a powerful instrument to legitimize the key economic and political imperatives of colonial rule (Rocha 2011). Grounded on stereotypes regarding the supposed 'inherent' predispositions of each race (including ancestry, phenotype, and religious beliefs), the colonial state institutionalized a pluralist racial framework in which distinct racially and linguistically defined groups were to coexist but not to intermingle (cf. Furnivall 1948). Accordingly, the colonial regime actively pursued the racial compartmentalization of society by spatially segregating the population into different residential, occupational, and communal enclaves. As pointed out by Daniel Goh:

> Ethnic stereotypes that had existed before colonialism were transformed by European racial theories into an ideology built on pseudoscientific beliefs about innate biological tendencies, which then informed government policies toward the colonial political economy (D.P.S. Goh 2017: 3).

Instead of remaining merely at the level of political ideology, the racial organization of the political economy imposed on its colonial citizens a normative framework that fundamentally transformed the diverse ethnic composition and interethnic relations of pre-colonial Singapore into a new form of racialized pluralism with far-reaching consequences. On the one hand, it generated a stratified racial system that reinforced

class hierarchies between the designated races and, as a result, racialized economic inequalities (Tham 2016). In brief, the colonial racial grid elevated the "hard-working" Chinese majority to positions of economic power, conceived the Malays as "lazy natives" to be patronized, and the Indians as a source of cheap and docile labor working on European-owned rubber and palm plantations (Hirschman 1986). The very practice of racial classification, on the other hand, led to the essentialization and reification of ethnic, linguistic, and religious categories. It drew symbolic boundaries around groups that not only simplified and homogenized the far more diverse ways of ethnic and religious belonging but also weakened the existing social fabric with its intricate web of inter-and transethnic relations and allegiances (Rocha 2011: 99).[12] According to Daniel Goh (2008: 236), the colonial concept of 'race' was, therefore, not only a discursive device to legitimize political hegemony, but also "inextricably involved in the construction of the colonial state and in determining the very content and direction of state intervention in the structuring of [the colonial society and production of the colonial subject]." Through its racial policies, the British colonial state reinforced interethnic boundaries, ensuring order and racial harmony within colonial plural society while simultaneously being the main agent in the construction and institutionalization of the same (ibid.: 238).

However, as much as the colonial state's rationale of governance was geared towards maintaining its hegemony over the socio-economic realm and primarily focused on the efficient administration and management of a diverse population, it concomitantly displayed a "lack of interest (even disregard) for the private lives of its subject" (Sinha 2011: 62), especially when it came to regulating the internal affairs of ethnic and religious communities. The colonial administrators took a liberal stance regarding the administration of 'native' traditions and religious customs that was committed to freedom of religious expression and generally favored a hands-off policy towards religious matters. Following Kwen Fee Lian (2016: 12), the colonial policy of non-interference meant that "[...] the major ethnic groups were left to their own devices to mobilize resources and develop their own community organization

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[12] Prior to the colonial encounter Chinese and Indian migrants were already present in the Malay states giving way to various cross-ethnic alliances and new creolized cultures emerging from either assimilation or acculturation (D.P.S. Goh 2008: 237).

to look after the welfare and religious needs of its members— including building temples and mosques, hospitals and setting up vernacular schools". Unlike their Portuguese and Spanish predecessors in the region, the imperative of British colonial rule in Singapore was not primarily geared towards civilizing and Christianizing its colonial subjects but far more determined by commercial and economic interests. Founded as a trading post by the British East India Company, Singapore's acquisition was a thoroughly commercial decision rather than one of colonial conquest. Right from the outset, the formation of the settlement was guided by the idea to establish an entrepôt based on economic principles of free trade and laissez-faire to secure British commercial interests against the Dutch trade monopoly in the East, as spelled out by Stamford Raffles:

> Our objective is not territory but trade; a great commercial emporium, and a fulcrum, whence we may extend our influence politically as circumstances may hereafter require. By taking immediate possession, we put a negative to the Dutch claim of exclusion, and at the same time revive the drooping confidence of our allies and friends. One free port in these seas must eventually destroy the spell of Dutch monopoly, and what Malta is in the West, that may Singapore become in the East (Raffles, cited in Drysdale 1984: 1).

As a free port, the colonial office sought to minimize operational and administrative costs to maximize trade revenues. Consequently, religion was primarily perceived as an incidental and peripheral matter as long as it did not impact "the maintenance of law and order in the public domain" (Sinha 2011: 247) or interfere with British trading interests.

Yet, the colonial non-interference policy did not imply a complete absence of regulations or involvement in religious affairs. As Sinha (2011: 80) argues, colonial officials often "found themselves enmeshed in local circumstances, engaged, participated and involved with religious affairs of the natives, sometimes due to practical necessity, at other times on the force of public opinion or simply by choice." Seeing an increasingly pragmatic need to "properly" manage the religious domain, the colonial administration introduced institutional mechanisms at the end of the 19th century to legislate and supervise non-Christian religious communities. The establishment of new administrative and legislative practices, however, was not solely a matter of colonial imposition and intrusion. Although far from benevolent, they also strengthened the communal rights of the colonial subjects and were thus partly welcomed if not petitioned by some sectors of the religious communities.

Nurfadzilah Yahaya (2015), for instance, has shown that members of the Arab Muslim minority explicitly called for the formalization of Islamic law and, acting in their self-interest, "exhorted British authorities to take charge of the administration of Muslim marriages and divorces." Other examples for the colonial management of religion include the institutionalization of religious festivals as public holidays, the regulation of public religious processions, the granting of land for building places of worship, and the establishment of the Singapore Mohammedan and Hindu Endowments Board in 1905 to administer and supervise Hindu and Muslim affairs (Radics and Sinha 2018; Sinha 2011).

Altogether, and counter to the colonial practices of British India, the implementation of a calibrated regulatory framework within certain religious domains did not imply an outright prohibition on religious and customary practices or fundamentally change the basic liberal stance of the colonial administration towards the "heathen" religions. On the contrary, as Sinha (2011: 60) argues, "the [relative] absence of restraints and control in this arena, undoubtedly, enabled expressions of non-Christian religions and facilitated their early institutionalization in the [colony]". What emerged was a form of religious legal pluralism that granted diverse ethnic-religious communities a certain degree of autonomy while concomitantly demanding their loyalty to the overarching framework of the British Empire (D.P.S. Goh 2019). As such, the colonial context was arguably "conducive for religious activity" and facilitated public religious expression (Sinha 2011: 251), albeit not for all religious actors alike. Ironically, the 'downside' of the general hands-off approach to religion was primarily felt by Protestant missionaries. While the colonial non-interference policy did not imply an official ban on missionization, it equally did not actively encourage Christian proselytizing efforts, especially among the Malay Muslim population. Despite enjoying the privilege of colonial patronage, Protestant mission and church organizations had difficulties establishing a stable presence on the island and were, to a great extent, restricted to providing social welfare and educational services, which the colonial office was only reluctantly willing to prepare. As a result, the Protestant presence during the colonial era remained mostly confined to the European community and had only a minor impact on the rest of colonial society in terms of conversion rates.

A more detailed elaboration of the historical trajectories of Protestantism and

the role of mission organizations in pre-independence Singapore will be provided in chapter 3.2. For now, it is sufficient to understand that within the colonial context, ethnic and religious pluralism was not just a natural outcome of existing cultural differences but the result of Singapore's colonial state formation (D.P.S. Goh 2008). Accordingly, the colonial state did not simply respond to the existing conditions of diversity but was complicit in the very construction of the same by imposing a pluralist order that served as a powerful ideological and political instrument to police and regulate its colonial subjects which, in turn, enforced the pervasive racialization of society.

The colonial legacy of pluralism with its essentialized racial (and religious) categories thus laid the foundation for the ethnic management and implementation of multiracial policies in newly independent Singapore. Transposing the British colonial discourse on race, multiracialism emerged as a key component for constructing the postcolonial nation-state, which channeled the complex multicultural realities of Singapore society into a simplified Chinese, Malay, Indian and Other (CMIO) quadratomy.[13] The institutionalization of the CMIO model by the PAP government further cemented the colonial practice of "ascriptive ethnicity" (Hill and Lian 1995: 5) and consequently flattened and homogenized ethnic, linguistic, and religious differences within each of the racial categories (B.H. Chua 2005: 193). As an ideology and policy instrument, multiracialism thus became a fundamental part of the nation's "founding myths" (Geoffrey Benjamin 1976) that continues to shape the national imagination and renders 'race' as the primary means of cultural and social classification.

While the postcolonial conceptualization of multiracialism clearly showed continuities from the colonial period, it also departed from it in significant ways. Daniel Tham (2016) reminds us of the anti-colonial origins of Singapore's multicultural politics, arguing that the nascence of postcolonial multiracialism should

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[13] In Singapore, both multiracialism and multiculturalism are terms that tend to be used inter-changeably. In public and political discourse the terms 'race' or 'multiracialism' are often used in place of 'ethnicity' or 'multiculturalism', resulting from the officially endorsed view that cultural groupings are fixed and biologically determined races. As Chua (2003: 58) points out: "For the reasons of colonial history, Singapore uses the term multiracialism instead of multiculturalism to signify its multicultural policies and administrative practices." The category 'culture', in turn, is commonly used as an ethnic signifier associated with language, tradition, and religion.

be analyzed against the backdrop of different competing ideologies of multiculturalism that emerged as a result of decolonization processes during Singapore's pre-independence period. The failure of the British proposal to establish the Malayan Union and the rise of various anti-colonial movements in Singapore provided the socio-political context for the founding of the PAP in 1954 and the subsequent formulation of a distinct anti-colonial ideology of multiculturalism (Tham 2016: 51). Following Tham, the success of the PAP was grounded in its ability to harness the growing resentment against the colonial color bar by consolidating the demands of various anticolonial interest groups under a coherent egalitarian framework of multiculturalism that emphasized "the need for the equal recognition of racial difference" (51). Projecting itself as the primary advocate for decolonization, the PAP's discourse on multiculturalism was thus framed as a "direct antithesis to colonial ideology and policy" (45), offering a "legitimate alternative" (51) to the existing colonial racial hierarchy that persisted during Singapore's decolonial period. Upon gaining independence, this initial version of multiculturalism was refashioned into "a conservative management and control of ethnicity via a politics of racial ascription and rigid maintenance of racial boundaries "(46), now officially termed multiracialism. Stripped off its anticolonial motive, multiracialism became constitutionally and administratively incorporated into the state apparatus leading to the institutionalization of formal equality among the different communities in several areas of policy and public interest (B.H. Chua 2005: 185)[14], thereby manifesting Lee Kuan Yew's vision as proclaimed on the day of Singapore's independence:

> We are going to be a multi-racial nation in Singapore. We will set an example. This is not a Malay nation; this is not a Chinese nation; this is not an Indian nation. Everyone will have his place, equal: language, culture, religion (Lee 1965, cited in Blackburn and Wu 2019: 140).

At the same time, the postcolonial formation of multiracialism provided the foundation for the successive adoption of a corporatist form of governance, in which

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[14] Article 153A of the Constitution recognizes four official languages: English, Mandarin, Tamil, and Malay as the national language. Religious festivals of the major religions are declared public holidays, including Christmas and Good Friday (Christian), Hari Raya Haji and Hari Raya Puasa/Aidilfitri (Muslim), Vesak Day (Buddhist), and Deepavali (Hindu).

the state acts as the final arbiter of inter-ethnic and religious disputes and thereby vests the government with the ultimate authority to manage communal differences and preserve social cohesion (Brown 1997). As David Brown (1997, 70) points out, corporatism implies an understanding of statehood, after which the state is "perceived as autonomous of society, and as the neutral agency seeking the stability, unity, and development of the society through efficient management". Such a state is "not subject to challenge from popular or particularistic demands" (Lian 2016: 16); instead, it co-opts various socio-economic interest groups (including ethnic and religious communities) whose cooperation is deemed necessary for the realization of the government's developmental goals. In Singapore, this form of governance has been amalgamated into a national communitarian ideology that portrays the nation as a consensual and organic community, thus underscoring the need to balance individual rights and interests with those of the community as a whole (B.H. Chua 1995). As a result, Singapore's political system has commonly been characterized as a soft-authoritarian or communitarian democracy in which the PAP-dominated state at once maintains its monopoly of political power and prioritizes "the community's interest in social cohesion and stability above individual rights and liberties" (D. Tan 2011: 458).

Historically, the political significance of embracing multiracialism as a strategy of corporatist governance can be traced back to the experiences of racial and religious conflict during the 1950s and 60s, which reminded the political elite of the inherent fragility of its pluralist colonial legacy and underscored the potential destabilizing implications of ethnic and religious loyalties for national integration. According to Brown (1994: 56), the apprehension about racial or communal unrest and violence informed the government's corporatist strategy of managing ethnicity and the subsequent implementation of related policies, which followed two contradictory logics: on the one hand, the state pursued to depoliticize ethnic attachments and "sanitize" them from their political contents by affirmatively promoting ethnicity as "high culture" and a resource for unity and development to be located outside the political arena. On the other hand, the state equally upheld a strategy that "demonized" ethnicity as a dangerous primordial form of identity and a source of danger to political stability. Following Brown (1993), the state fostered

> ... a garrison mentality to buttress Singaporean national political loyalty, with Singaporeans repeatedly being told that they must rally behind the nation-state under PAP leadership so as to avoid the danger of ethnic chaos which constituted the major threat to the survival of their small and fragile society (Brown 1993: 20–21).

The motif of Singapore's vulnerability became an essential part of the scripting of the official national narrative, which, up to this day, promulgates socio-religious harmony and political stability as "the basic and irreducible requirements for rapid and continuous economic growth and ultimately national survival" (Ramakrishna 2010: 3). The experience of racial riots during the immediate pre-independence era thus provided the narrative material for formulating an "ideology of survivalism" (Brown 1995: 147) through which the PAP government could legitimize its political authority and top-down approach to governance. Religious and inter-ethnic harmony was not just a desirable objective to be achieved but also constituted the fundamental basis for the political elite to transform the plural social condition into a governable multicultural 'national' order (Selvaraj 2017). Singapore's corporatist multiracialism, therefore, functioned at once as an essential instrument for consolidating the state's hegemonic power and as a means to control and police ethnic and religious boundaries in the name of the larger public good (B.H. Chua 2003).

Hence, rather than promoting a multicultural model based on assimilation, the government sought to integrate the different ethnic groups within a national framework that affirmed the particularity and autonomy of each community while simultaneously recognizing ethnic diversity as a cultural building block for the creation of a distinct 'Asian' communitarian polity (Brown 1994: 73).[15] Subsumed under the guiding principle of 'unity in diversity', the four CMIO communities were to equally retain their ethnic boundaries and share a common space to form an essentialized national identity based on shared values.[16] Norman Vasu (2008) thus

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[15] To be sure, the strategies of regulating ethnic politics were not static, but changed according to the different phases of nation-building, shifting from an amalgamation approach during the immediate post-independence era towards a more integrationist one during later stages (cf. Brown 1994; Hill and Lian 1995). However, it can be argued that the rationale underlying Singapore's corporatist model of multiculturalism has remained relatively stable despite policy adjustments over the past decades. For an in-depth discussion on the evolvement of Singapore's multicultural system, see D.P.S. Goh 2014a.

[16] In 1991 the government introduced a set of shared national values to forge a "coherent Singapore identity" based on essentialized Asian values. The need to formulate an 'Asian' national ideology reflected the government's concern that Singaporeans were adopting a "more Westernised, individualistic, and self-centred outlook on life" in the wake of rapid economic development, as opposed to "[t]raditional Asian ideas of morality, duty and society"

argues that Singapore's interventionist practice of governing diversity reflects a "hard" form of multiculturalism which emphasizes the recognition of differences and advocates the affirmation of group distinctions as opposed to "mild multiculturalism" where cultural diversity is defined as being primarily a matter of the private sphere and the state practices a policy of non-interference concerning cultural differences. Unlike 'mild' multiculturalism, "where different modes of democratic political representation are available to reflect independent group interests," Singapore's corporatist multiculturalism is based on formal arrangements that adhere closely to the dominant ideological frameworks imposed by the PAP government (D.P.S. Goh 2014a: 61). Accordingly, Singapore's 'hard' multiculturalism reinforces cultural identity through the CMIO framework while recognizing the state's primacy in defining the parameters of the common space for inter-ethnic interaction; as epitomized by former Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong's metaphor of "four overlapping circles":

> My preferred imaginary for building a multi-racial Singapore…is not mosaic pieces, but four overlapping circles. Each circle represents one community. The area where the circles overlap is the common area where we live, play and work together and where we feel truly Singaporean with minimal consciousness of our ethnicity. The areas outside this common area are where each community retains its own characteristics and traditions… This framework of multi-racialism allows for diversity and growth for the different races and religions. We must continually expand the common area and concentrate on enhancing and expanding interaction between our different communities… This pragmatic arrangement of seeking integration through overlapping circles has underwritten the racial and religious harmony that Singaporeans enjoy today (Singapore Government 2000: para 22-25).

Singapore's postcolonial politics of corporatist multiculturalism and 'ideology of survivalism' have profoundly informed the government's rationale for managing religious diversity. As pointed out earlier, religion assumes a significant role in defining public identities as ethnic categories often align with religious categories (Bryan S. Turner 2011: 186). Therefore, the government has an evident and pragmatic interest in ensuring that religious differences do not lead to conflict, as this would be detrimental to the socio-economic stability and political security of the

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(Singapore Government 1991, *Shared Values*). The five shared values thus comprise: (1) Nation before community and society above self, (2) family as the basic unit of society, (3) community support and respect for the individual, (4) consensus, not conflict, (5) racial and religious harmony.

young nation-state. Defining religious diversity as one of Singapore society's core identity markers has thus resulted in a permanent need to preserve religious harmony and remains a dominant motif in public and political discourse (Thio 2006). Consequently, the government maintains an ambivalent position towards the configurations of religious freedom and pluralism, viewing religion as both a potential threat to social cohesion and a constructive force that is able to promote national unity and help maintain national identity (Hill 2004). This ambivalence in the relationship between the secular state and its multi-religious polity is ultimately mirrored in the government's active and interventionist role in regulating religious affairs, which is channeled through a variety of legislative measures, administrative policies, and state-led initiatives. It is this regulatory framework that I will discuss in the next section.

Secularism and the management of religious diversity

As should be evident from the previous discussion, in Singapore, the issue of religious diversity is deeply embedded in broader discourses on multiculturalism, national unity, and social cohesion. Following the policy position of secularism as a cardinal principle of political governance, the state pursues to uphold a strict regime of neutrality towards the religious realm by securing its moral authority over a multi-religious society and prohibiting the politicization of the religious sphere and vice versa (E.K.B. Tan 2009). However, even though the state defines itself as secular and adheres to the principle of secularity in its mode of governance, the separation of state and religion is not explicitly written into Singapore's Constitution. In contrast to other secular models, such as the French regime of laïcité, where secularism entails a principled stance of separation between church and state, Singapore's form of secularism is neither guided by secularist values nor grounded on the premises of liberalism as a political doctrine. As Thio Li-Ann (2008) points out, the Singapore state is not anti-theistic but remains agnostic towards religious truth claims and secular insofar as it does not profess a state religion or promote any particular faith at the expense of others.

Instead of adopting a constitutional arrangement that institutionalizes the separation of state and religion, Singapore's legal and political strategy to manage religious communities is conditioned by the government's imperative of treating all

religions equally and guided by the idea that "religious freedom intimately requires a thoughtful and calibrated intersection of rights, regulation and responsibility" (E.K.B. Tan 2011: 195). The state, therefore, follows an accommodative approach to religion that simultaneously aims to maintain "a sense of equity among the religious groups" and balance individual religious freedom rights with those of public order and national security (Thio 1995: 36; 2009). In this sense, the nature of Singapore's secular framework might best be described as pragmatic, wherein the state "seeks to harness the powerful potential of religion, while ensuring that the secular always takes precedence over the sacred in political discourse, public policy and governance" (E.K.B. Tan 2011: 204).

Despite Singapore's commitment to secularism, its approach to accommodating religious diversity, therefore, does not exclude cooperation between religion and the state. While the possibilities of religious influence in public policy discourses and political processes are clearly circumscribed, the government's self-avowed non-dogmatic approach to religious management has equally created *opportunity structures* (cf. Beckford 2003) for different religious communities to navigate their interests in relation to the state. Such forms of partnership are most evident in the social sector, where religious organizations, such as faith-based NGOs, have become central contributors to education, social welfare, and philanthropy (Thio 2009; Mathews 2013). Concomitantly, the government preserves a respectful attitude towards religion in the pragmatic recognition that maintaining a clear-cut separation between the religious and political realm is difficult to achieve in a context where high levels of religiosity prevail and religions assume a substantive presence in the public sphere (Thio 2006, 2008). This sentiment is reflected in paragraph 24 of the Maintenance of Religious Harmony White Paper:

> It is neither possible nor desirable to compartmentalize completely the minds of voters into secular and religious halves and ensure that only the secular mind influences his voting behavior (Government of Singapore 1989, para 24: 1989).

Aware of the potential influence of religion in motivating behavior, values, and norms among its adherents, the political leadership has thus selectively mobilized, co-opted, and incorporated religious communities into the framework of governance to facilitate aspects of state- and nation-building (D.P.S. Goh 2019). Accordingly, religion is not only conceived of as a danger to be controlled but also recognized and

valued as a potentially constructive social and stabilizing moral force, carrying the responsibility of promoting positive social values, fostering good citizenship, and ensuring religious harmony and tolerance. As stated by former President S.R. Nathan:

> Religion and culture, transmitted through society and the family, complements the legal system. Moral and social values ... inspire us to look beyond ourselves and our immediate needs. They set us standards of conduct and charity to aspire to, and help to build social cohesion and community-bonding (S.R. Nathan as quoted in Tong 2007: 241).

While faith-inspired views are not excluded from the public domain, the government equally endeavors to circumscribe the ambits of religious expressions in the 'common space' out of the consideration that the identity markers of race and religion can hinder national integration. Consequently, the government also treats religion as a persistent fault line in society and strives to draw a clear distinction between the religious realm and the public domain of politics and economy. Obviously, this leads to a paradox, where the state seeks to keep religion and politics apart, but in doing so must actively intervene in religious affairs to ensure that religious actors do not subvert the government's authority in securing social stability and public order. The maintenance of Singapore's state secularism thus requires the government to impose a tight regulatory framework on the religious realm in order to fulfill its role as a mediator and final arbitrator in the socio-political arena. Against this background, Jaclyn Neo (2016) suggests that Singapore's constitutional order is only 'quasi-secular' because the state is openly entangled with religious affairs and explicit about its desire to regulate religions through public policies.

Altogether, Singapore's secular model of control, cooptation, and cooperation has kept religion very much alive in the public sphere and arguably helped to place religious affairs at the very center of political debates. As Jothie Rajah (2012: 239) points out, despite the state's insistence on the separation between religion and politics, the discursive construction of religion as either a threat to be carefully controlled or a social value to be co-opted reveals that in Singapore, "religion is already and inherently about politics." The close entanglement of the state with religion thus raises the question about the nature of Singapore's constitutional, bureaucratic, and legal framework, particularly with regard to the content and extent of religious freedom rights.

a) constitutional provisions and religious freedom

Based on the principle of freedom of conscience, Article 15 (1) of the Constitution formally provides freedom of religion and the right to profess, practice, and propagate one's faith as fundamental liberties. This includes the right for each religious group "to manage its own religious affairs, to establish and maintain institutions for religious or charitable purposes, and to acquire and own property and hold and administer it in accordance with law" [Article 15 (3)]. Furthermore, religious equality is constitutionally guaranteed under the equal protection clause, which explicitly prohibits the discrimination of citizens on the grounds only of religion, race, descent, or place of birth [Article 12 (2)].

While Singapore is a non-confessional state, there are no anti-establishment clauses in its Constitution, therefore permitting various constitutional provisions that authorize or obligate the state to regulate and administer religious affairs (Neo 2016). As Tan points out, the government practices a nuanced approach to equality, which departs from an understanding that the formal equality prescribed by the Constitution must "also allow for unequal treatment to the extent necessary to achieve *substantive* equality" (E.K.B. Tan 2017: 229; emphasis added). The centrality given to a substantive approach to equality is most clearly expressed in the constitutional recognition of minority interests. Article 152, for instance, prescribes the government to continually care for the interests of "racial and religious minorities" while recognizing "the special position of the Malays" as the indigenous people of the country and the responsibility of the government to "protect, safeguard, support, foster and promote" Malay interests.[17] Limited legal pluralism is further mandated under Article 153, authorizing the government to adopt legislation via the Administration of Muslim Law Act (AMLA) to regulate Muslim religious affairs, especially pertaining to areas of personal Islamic laws such as

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[17] Article 152 entitled "Minorities and special position of Malays" reads in full: "(1) It shall be the responsibility of the Government constantly to care for the interests of the racial and religious minorities in Singapore. (2) The Government shall exercise its functions in such manner as to recognise the special position of the Malays, who are the indigenous people of Singapore, and accordingly it shall be the responsibility of the Government to protect, safeguard, support, foster and promote their political, educational, religious, economic, social and cultural interests and the Malay language." In addition, the Presidential Council for Minority Rights was established under Part VII of the Constitution in 1970 whose main function is to scrutinize all legislation passed by the parliament to ensure that they do not discriminate against any racial or religious community.

inheritance, marriage, and divorce (E.K.B. Tan 2011: 200). Notably, the provisions of Article 152 do not grant justiciable rights or entitlements to minority groups but are rather construed as being political in effect with the intention to safeguard the racial and religious equilibrium in a Chinese-dominated society (E.K.B. Tan 2017). Thus, while Articles 152 and 153 can be read as derogations from the non-discrimination principle under Article 12, they also point towards the government's imperative of balancing "religious freedom and religious non- discrimination claims with the need to accommodate religious autonomy and the protection of religious minorities" (Neo 2016: 437).

As much as the discourse on religious equality reveals the government's political aim for an even-handed approach towards balancing the interests and rights at the individual, community, and statist level, the state equally upholds a hierarchy of interests in its legal-judicial approach (Thio 1995; Neo 2016). As alluded to earlier, Singapore's communitarian form of governance prioritizes state-defined collective goals over individual autonomy and thus reserves the right to curtail individual liberties for the sake of national interests. Against this background, the constitutional right to freedom of religion is not absolute but qualified by Article 15 (4), which provides that the rights guaranteed under Article 15 do not "authorize any act contrary to any general law relating to public order, public health or morality." According to Eugene Tan (2008: 62-63), religious freedom in Singapore is thus subjected to a "belief-action distinction," meaning that religious adherents are constitutionally free to believe the tenets of their respective faith but actions motivated by such beliefs that contradict Singapore's laws or run counter to public and community interests are proscribed and not protected by the Constitution. Even though the Singapore courts, as yet, have not judicially considered issues of 'public health' and 'morality,' several court decisions in the past have affirmed the limitation of religious liberty rights when they intersect with community and state interests. In the 1999 case of "Nappali Peter Williams v. Institute of Technical Education" , for instance, the Court of Appeal argued that "Article 15 taken as a whole demonstrates that the paramount concern of the Constitution is a statement of citizen's rights framed in a wider social context of maintaining unity as one nation" (Nappalli 1999: 576, cited in E.K.B. Tan 2015: 426). Similarly, in an earlier case (*Colin Chan v. Public Prosecutor*, 1994), then Chief Justice Yong Pung How declared that "[t]he sovereignty,

integrity and unity of Singapore are undoubtedly the paramount mandate of the Constitution and anything, including religious beliefs and practices, which tend to run counter to these objectives must be restrained" (Yong 1994, as cited in Thio 1995: 81).[18]

Both statements illustrate that religious freedom only extends to the point that it does not undermine the authority of the state and its judicial prioritization of collective interests over religious ones (Tong 2007). As Neo (2017: 348-349) argues, in contrast to "liberal" states, religious freedom in Singapore is not recognized and protected as a matter of individual autonomy but conceptualized as part of the common good and justified "on the basis of its value to broader community interests" and the pragmatic "need for peaceful coexistence of different religious groups under conditions of religious plurality" (ibid.: 348- 349). The protection of religious freedom is, therefore, not grounded on an intrinsic but an instrumental value, thereby legitimizing restrictions when religious beliefs and practices are believed to undermine the public good of religious harmony (ibid.). Consequently, religious organizations in Singapore are subjected to a body of rules and administrative policies, which allows the government to extend its control over the religious domain and determine the parameters of 'appropriate' and permissible religious activity (Rahim 2012; Sinha 2011).

b) administrative measures and the allocation of religious space

Unlike most neighboring countries, Singapore does not maintain a ministry or department of religious affairs that oversees policies related to different religious communities. Instead, the state administrates religious institutions through representative bodies that are more or less formally connected to government agencies and to varying degrees supported and controlled by the state. The main umbrella organizations representing the dominant faith traditions in Singapore include: The National Council of Churches of Singapore (NCCS); the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Singapore; the Taoist Federation of Singapore; the Singapore Buddhist Federation (SBF); the Sikh Advisory Board (SAB); the Singapore Hindu

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[18] Both cases involved members of the Jehovah's Witnesses, whose Singapore congregation was deregistered in 1972 on the grounds that its existence was prejudicial to public welfare and order as its members refused to carry out mandatory military service and pledge allegiance to the state.

Endowments Board (SHEB); and the Majilis Ugama Islam Singapura (Islamic Religious Council of Singapore, MUIS). Significantly, the latter three are organized as state-linked statutory boards whose members are appointed by the government and directly administered under the purview of the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth (MCCY). As a result, the minority religions of Islam, Hinduism, and Sikhism are subjected to a greater degree of state regulation and control than their Christian, Taoist, and Buddhist counterparts. Such regulatory variations, however, should not be understood as instances of discrimination against religious minority groups but can be attributed to the different trajectories of ethnic-religious institutionalization and legal-constitutional provisions originating from colonial rule (cf. D.P.S. Goh 2019).[19] The statutory boards act as important intermediaries between the state and the respective Muslim, Hindu, and Sikh communities, granting them limited autonomy in managing their own affairs while safeguarding their constitutional rights as minority religions.

Furthermore, a wide array of legal-bureaucratic measures has been instituted to regulate religious institutions and practices, including: the requirement for religious organizations to register either as a "specified society" (i.e., one that represents, promotes, or discusses religious matters) under the Societies Act (Cap. 311), or as a corporate entity through the Companies Act (Cap. 50) to gain legal status; the need to secure permissions from the respective authorities to hold public rituals, festivals, and processions, or to invite foreign spiritual figures (i.e., preachers, priests, and other religious specialists);[20] and the need for religious bodies to register as a charity under the Charities Act (Cap. 37), if involved in social welfarism, which further obligates religious organizations to be audited and to reveal details of their financial records and commercial activities (Sinha 2011: 9).

Another important feature of the government's administrative repertoire for

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[19] The centralized state regulation of Muslim religious affairs through the MUIS, for instance, can be traced back to the colonial patronage of the Malay-Muslim community and the establishment of the Muslim Advisory Board (the predecessor of MUIS) in 1915 to represent matters related to Islam and Malay customs. Policies related to the Muslim community in Singapore are further overseen by a Minister-in-charge of Muslim Affairs.

[20] A foreigner who wishes to conduct short-term work in Singapore that is directly or indirectly related to any religion must hold a Miscellaneous Work Pass (MWP) that is applied for on his/her behalf by a Singapore-based sponsor. MWP are only granted if the applicant successfully passes a screening process which assesses whether the foreigner concerned has previously made any comments or promoted teachings that are regarded as inimical to Singapore's religious harmony.

governing religion lies in the allocation of land for religious purposes. Regulations concerning the provision and establishment of religious sites are incorporated into the broader framework of urban planning and land-use policies, which are overseen by the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) (a statutory board under the Ministry of National Development (MND)) and essentially determined by three contextual factors: first, Singapore's acute land-scarcity resulting from its small physical size as an island city-state; second, Singapore's high population density and total urbanization; and third, the state's monopoly over land use and land redistribution by owning 90% of all real estate on the island via the Singapore Land Authority (SLA), a statutory board operating under the auspices of the Ministry of Law. Accordingly, the government has a vested interest in the efficient management of urban space and exercises strict control over the distribution of land for religious purposes.

As part of the URA's master zoning plan, the government designates parcels of land for so-called "Places of Worship" in newly developed town centers, which are then put up for tender and auctioned off in closed bids by institutions of the same religious group in order to prevent interreligious competition.[21] Most religious sites are granted only a thirty-year leasehold tenure, which means that religious organizations have to renew their leases for another thirty years at the prevailing market rates after expiring, if they can afford it. The criteria for allocating a religious site to a specific religious community are further based on planning standards (e.g., religious demography, religious habits, and space requirements) and revised periodically to account for demographic and social changes (Chee et al. 2019: 131). Notably, the government does not provide preferential treatment to religious communities when allotting land plots. Instead, it views religious sites as part of the broader infrastructure provision for new town estates, and thus on par with other community and commercial facilities such as cinemas, shopping centers, medical centers, banks, or food courts (Kong 1993). Consistent with its pragmatic and secular governance approach, the government treats both non-religious and religious spaces in functionalist terms and as "subordinate to the planning requirements of the

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[21] Exemption is granted to the Muslim community, where the first mosque site in a new town is allocated by the state at a price that is usually lower than the market value. The construction, maintenance and upgrading of mosques is overseen by the Mosque Building Fund (MBF), a community fund which is financed through monthly contributions of every working Muslim in Singapore. The contribution rates differ according to the individual income level.

national development agenda" (Woods 2018b: 539). Apart from being the main agent in distributing land, the state, therefore, also reserves the right to demolish and compulsorily acquire religious sites to realize urban development projects or, conversely, preserve them as heritage sites.

As much as the government tends to treat religious sites as "no different from other buildings" in urban planning (Kong 1993: 41), it equally upholds strict regulations regarding the religious use of buildings outside their designated zoning purposes. To prevent the encroachment of religion into the secular domain of the economy, the URA issued new mandatory guidelines in 2010 and 2012 aimed at restricting religious groups from appropriating commercial and industrial spaces for religious activities.[22] Commercial or industrial premises hosting religious activities that are not zoned as places of worship must be approved by the URA and meet specific requirements, including: the prohibition of displaying religious signs, advertisements, or posters on the site or the exterior of the building; restricting the use of the venue for religious purposes to two days a week; barring the display of any religious symbols, icons, or religious paraphernalia when the premises are not in use by the religious organization; and the obligation to ensure that the religious activities do not cause any disturbances to the public order.

On the other hand, the state also aims to protect religious groups from secular intrusions by averting foreign and local businesses from "muscling in on space reserved for religion" (The Straits Times 2018c). Such was the case with the Australian-registered subsidiary company *Eternal Pure Land* which had outbid two Taoist and Buddhist organizations by S$5.2 million in 2014 to build a commercial columbarium on a plot meant for a Chinese temple. The issue caused tensions among neighborhood residents, eventually prompting the government to terminate its agreement with the company and to put up the site for re-tender, this time, however, only to domestic religious organizations. In response to this incident, the MND introduced a new two-stage tender process in 2018 to tighten the requirements

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[22] see "Guidelines for use of commercial spaces for religious purposes" https://www.ura.gov.sg/Corporate/Property/Business/Change-Use-of-Property-for-Business/related/Commercial-spaces-religious-purposes (accessed October 6. 2018).
"Guidelines for Non-Exclusive and Limited Religious Use in Industrial Premises https://www.ura.gov.sg/Corporate/Guidelines/Circulars/dc12-07 (accessed October 10.2018).

for acquiring land for religious purposes.[23] Under the new framework, tenderers are no longer evaluated solely based on price but first have to meet a set of pre-requisite criteria to be qualified to bid for land set aside for places of worship. Religious groups now must demonstrate that they are registered as religious entities, have organized regular activities that benefit the broader community in Singapore, and show a genuine need for the new space. Furthermore, they must prove that they have adequate and sustainable sources of local funding and will not finance the site's purchase and development using foreign donations. Only by meeting these requirements are bidders eligible to proceed to stage two, where a site is awarded to the qualified tenderer with the highest bid price. In addition to the new tender regime, the MND will also release land for the development of so-called Places of Worship hubs to house multiple religious organizations belonging to the same faith in a multi-story building. It is hoped that these hubs will optimize Singapore's limited land resources and provide smaller and financially less resourceful religious organizations with better access to worship sites.

c) *legal framework: The Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act*

In addition to bureaucratic measures, Singapore's legislative framework provides for a variety of legal instruments that can be invoked "in the event of 'subversive' and 'illegitimate' use of religion, or in instances of incitement of religious disharmony" (Sinha 2011: 8).[24] Of particular interest to our current discussion is the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act (MRHA), which arguably represents the centerpiece of Singapore's legal arrangement for governing religious affairs. Under the Act, the Minister for Home Affairs is empowered to issue executive and non-justiciable 'restraining orders' against leaders or members of religious groups on grounds where a person has committed or is attempting to commit acts,

(a)causing feelings of enmity, hatred, ill-will or hostility between different religious groups;

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[23] see Ministry of National Development (2018), New Tender Framework for Place of Worship Land https://www.mnd.gov.sg/newsroom/press-releases/view/new-tender-framework-for-place-of-worship-land (accessed April 17.2019).

[24] These include the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act (Cap. 167A), the Penal Code, the Sedition Act (Cap. 290), the Internal Security Act (Cap. 143), the Undesirable Publication Act (Cap. 338), the Public Order Act (Cap. 257A), the aforementioned Societies Act (Cap. 311) and Charities Act (Cap. 37), and most recently, the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA).

(b) carrying out activities to promote a political cause, or a cause of any political party while, or under the guise of, propagating or practising any religious belief; (c) carrying out subversive activities under the guise of propagating or practising any religious belief; or (d) exciting disaffection against the President or the Government while, or under the guise of, propagating or practicing any belief.[25]

Restraining orders can be issued for up to two years and restrict a person from addressing religious groups or being involved in producing or distributing publications related to the religious group. Violations against the restraining order may result in a fine up to S$10,000, imprisonment of up to two years, or both. Furthermore, the MRHA establishes the Presidential Council for Religious Harmony (PCRH) comprising distinguished laypersons and religious representatives from the main faith traditions who are appointed by the state and serve in an advisory capacity to the Minister for Home Affairs and the President of the Republic on matters affecting the maintenance of religious harmony.

Introduced in 1990 "more in sorrow than with joy,"[26] the Act reflected the government's growing concern over tendencies of overzealous proselytization and the mixing of religion and politics evident during the 1980s. Incidents like the alleged involvement of lay Catholic social workers in a 'Marxist Conspiracy' and the heightened religious fervor exhibited by some evangelical Christian groups provided the broader political context for crafting a White Paper on Religious Harmony, which summarized the government's motivation for passing the Act as follows:[27]

> Aggressive proselytization and exploitation of religion for political and subversive purposes pose serious threats to religious and racial harmony and public order. Unless all religious groups exercise moderation and tolerance in their efforts to win converts, and maintain a rigorous separation between religion and politics, there will be religious friction, communal strife and political instability in Singapore (MRWH 1989: 19).

As a "unique feature in the legal landscape of Singapore" (Tey 2008: 118), the MRHA at once gives the government broad powers to restrict religious freedom and

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[25] Section 8(1) (a)-(d), MRHA (Cap 167A), 2001 Revised Edition.
[26] As stated in the parliamentary address by then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong: "In a sense, this Bill is a recognition of a retrogression, or potential deterioration, in religious harmony. The Government takes no joy in introducing it. I take no joy in speaking on this subject. It is not something which we are proud of. We introduce it more in sorrow than with joy. It is to prevent us sliding backward. It is an act aimed at preserving common sense and harmony" (The Straits Times 1990).
[27] A detailed historical contextualization of the events leading to the enactment of the MRHA will be given in chapter 3.3

consolidate the state's authority in defining the boundaries of state-religion relations. Following Tey Tsu Hang, the MRHA is thus primarily designed to "nip the budding effects of inter-religious discord" while removing religious influence from political contestation and obstructing political activism from religion-linked organizations (Tey 2008: 131, 120). Against this background, the MRHA can be characterized as a pre-emptive measure that "widens the options" of the government in exercising control over religious matters presenting concerns to public order (E.K.B. Tan 2008: 65). Nonetheless, it seems odd that the PAP leadership saw the necessity to implement the MRHA given the fact that other broader and arguably more powerful legislative tools such as the Sedition Act or Internal Security Act (ISA) were already in place and could be employed to deal on issues related to religious incitement.[28] Indeed, as has been pointed out by others, the rhetoric of the MRHA exhibits striking similarities to the formulations of the Sedition Act and the ISA and thus can be read as derivations from the latter (cf. Rajah 2012; Tey 2008). Furthermore, since coming into force in 1992, no restraining order has ever been issued under the Act, altogether raising the question of the effectiveness and significance of the law.

Alluding to these ambiguities, Rajah (2012: 256) argues that the main efficacy of the MRHA lies not so much in the legal applicability of the Act, but in its discursive performativity that "enabled a public process by which the state reiterated and revitalized its version of Singapore's precarious stability." The broader discourse preceding the implementation of the MRHA thus prepared the contextual background for making inter-religious differences visible in the public sphere while confirming the state's "unchallenged role [as] a neutral, secular arbiter in policing and enforcing religious harmony in Singapore" (Tey 2008: 141; see also Sinha 2005). As such, the Act provides the state with an important tool for maintaining its dominance in public discourse by reminding its citizens of its unconditionality in dealing with national security matters. Clearly then, the MRHA seeks to demonstrate the decisiveness of the political leadership in safeguarding the delicate equilibrium

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[28] The ISA and Sedition Act, both legacies from the colonial era, give the government broad legal discretion in handling matters of national security. While the Sedition Act is designed to retain racial and ethnic harmony by restraining the freedom of speech, the ISA grants executive power to preventive detention without trial in cases incidental to internal security or public order. Although both Acts don't deal exclusively with religious matters, they have been the prime legal tools used for legislating religious groups and individuals that are seen as posing a threat to the public order.

of its multi-religious polity, thereby underscoring the state's key imperative of maintaining and ensuring religious harmony for the sake of political and societal stability. Some legal scholars thus argue that the introduction of the MRHA was politically motivated and functions more as an ideological tool and policing statement than an actual piece of legislation (Rajah 2012; Thio 2009; but see Tey 2008). In this sense, the effect of the Act lies beyond its actual use but owes its value to the mere fact that it exists as a *potential* legal instrument (Neo 2016).

However, such readings might be revalued in light of the recent changes made to the MRHA. In October 2019, the government introduced the Maintenance of Religious Harmony (Amendment) Bill, which has, at the time of writing, undergone two parliamentary readings and yet to come into effect. In a nutshell, the amendments are meant to address the government's increasing concern about the impact of foreign influence and the proliferation of the Internet and social media on the domestic religious landscape. Viewing both as potential threats to Singapore's religious harmony, the government has proposed the following key provisions:[29]

(1) the introduction of safeguards against foreign interference in domestic affairs which requires a religious group to:
- declare any affiliations with foreign individuals or organizations that are in the position to exercise control over its activities (section 16B).
- disclose the composition of its governing body in a key management report which includes, among other details, the identity and nationality of every individual who is either a member of the governing body or holds a responsible position in the religious group (i.e., chairman, director, company secretary, president, treasurer, or partner) (section 16B). The provision further prohibits non-Singaporean citizens and non-permanent residents from holding key leadership positions in the organization (section 16D) and requires more than half of the total number of seats in its governing body or executive committee to be occupied by Singapore citizens (section 16E).
- annually report to the government authorities of any single donations

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[29] see Maintenance of Religious Harmony (Amendment) Bill 25/2019, retrievable under https://www.parliament.gov.sg/docs/default-source/default-document-library/maintenance-of-religious-harmony-(amendment)-bill-25-2019.pdf (accessed 2.May 2020)

exceeding S$10,000 if the donor is a foreign individual (i.e., non-Singapore citizen or non-permanent resident) or a foreign organization, with some exemptions granted (section 16A).

(2) the revision of the Restraining Order (RO) regime by:

- expanding the issuance of ROs from individuals to religious organizations as an additional means to counter foreign influence over the affairs of religious groups [section 8(1A)].

- removing the 14-day notice period currently required for ROs to take effect. Instead, ROs issued under the amended Act will be enforced immediately to minimize the spread of offensive material online. Offenders can be required to cease all "communications activity" involving the religiously offensive material and to remove its content from the Internet and social media platforms (Explanatory Statement in MRH Bill 25/2019: 66-67).

(3) the introduction of the Community Remedial Initiative (CRI) as a non-legal reconciliation tool to provide the offender with an opportunity to perform activities that help mend his/her ties with the aggrieved community. Such non-mandatory remedial actions may include a public apology or participation in community programs to promote religious harmony in Singapore. Charges may be dropped, and criminal prosecution stopped if the alleged offender agrees to take up actions proposed by the CRI.

(4) the porting over of religion-related provisions from the Penal Code (sections 298 and 298A) to the MRHA and the introduction of two new offenses that prohibit individuals or groups to:

- incite violence *on religious grounds* against any target persons and groups, or, conversely, to incite violence against religious groups or persons who belong to these groups (section 17E). Target groups need not be confined to persons practicing a certain religion but may include "atheists, individuals from a specific racial community, who share a similar sexual orientation or have a certain nationality or descent like foreign workers or new citizens" (Explanatory Statement in MRH Bill 25/2019: 77). Offenses committed under section 17E are punishable with up to 10 years of prison, a fine, or both.

- incite hatred against a religious group, insult a person's religion, or wound his/her religious feelings (section 17F). Religious leaders are subject to a

lower threshold to hate speech offenses, given their greater ability to influence and mobilize followers. They are only exempt if their offensive statement has been directed to an audience in the domestic realm (e.g., private conversations with family members or friends). Laypersons, on the other hand, can only be held accountable if the committed offenses "threaten the public peace or public order" in Singapore (Explanatory Statement in MRH Bill 25/2019: 78). Offenses under section 17F may lead up to 5 years of imprisonment, a fine, or both.

Overall, the new Bill constitutes a comprehensive overhaul of the existing MRHA, simultaneously tightening, expanding, and supplementing the Act's legal framework to safeguard and strengthen Singapore's social cohesion. Given that the Bill is still in the making, it is too early to assess what implications the revisions will have on religious organizations in the long term. Nevertheless, two points are worth highlighting. First, it is notable that the amendments are designed to have extraterritorial effect, thereby also covering offenses committed overseas provided that they target and have an impact on Singapore. As section 17C (2) spells out: "Where an offence under section 17E or 17F is committed by a person outside Singapore, the person may be dealt with in respect of that offence as if it had been committed in Singapore." Such extraterritorial jurisdiction not only adds another layer to the proposed web of regulations that seeks to safeguard local religious organizations against foreign influence but also showcases how "[t]he very real Singaporean legal framework, applicable to a relatively small island nation, has now jumped to the global scale" (Luger 2020: 87). Second, the provisions made under Section 17E (incitement to violence) address religious and non-religious groups or individuals alike. The government's determination to expand its legal protection to social groups and individuals outside the realm of religion, particularly to those "who share a similar sexual orientation," is timely, considering ongoing controversies about issues related to LGBTQ rights. As former Senior Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Home Affairs, Sun Xueling, argued during the second parliamentary reading of the Bill, the enactment of section 17E "sends a strong signal that the weaponisation of religion to urge violence or force to be used against any person is

unacceptable in our society."[30] It is, therefore, hardly surprising that such a commitment has been endorsed by LGBTQ communities, who have long struggled for state recognition and are often subject to harsh criticism from religious conservative groups.

Negotiating and accommodating state regulations

So far, my discussion has followed the main lines of argument brought forth in the scholarly debate on state-religion relations in Singapore. As has been reasoned, Singapore's form of secularism is marked by strong state interventionism and firmly embedded in a constitutional and legal-bureaucratic framework that clearly circumscribes the place and role of religion in society. Given the apparent omnipresence of the state and extent to which it seeks to regulate nearly all domains of social life, most studies have adopted a more state-centric approach in analyzing state-religion encounters. However, as Sinha (2011: 255) reminds us, such a unidirectional view falls into danger of reiterating "stereotypical characterizations of this island community, populated with passive, oppressed citizens, facing an authoritarian government". While it is certainly true that the state's administrative and legal apparatus has "restricted the constitutional and civil rights of Singaporeans on the grounds of national security and public order" (Rahim 2012: 173), religious actors have equally found ways "to negotiate this labyrinth of officialdom, constructed by a network of regulatory, interventionist mechanisms" (Sinha 2011: 255). It is therefore important to point out that the extensive influence of the state in regulating religious affairs not only poses restrictions to religious organizations but can also "create an environment within which specific features of religiosity are enabled" (ibid: 23).

As Qian and Kong (2018: 160) point out, religious groups "may refashion and re-invent themselves by appropriating rationalities, values and logics normally defined as "secular"' into their organizational ontologies and practices. As such, religious actors have found innovative strategies to adapt and accommodate their

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30   https://www.mha.gov.sg/newsroom/in-parliament/parliamentary-speeches/news/second-reading-speech-for-the-maintenance-of-religious-harmony-amendment-bill-speech-by-sun-xueling-senior-parliamentary-secretary-ministry-of-home-affairs-and-ministry-of-national-development   (accessed 26.05.2020).

interests in relation to state bureaucracy, thereby often transgressing and recomposing the state-defined boundaries between the secular and the religious or the private and the public. Francis Lim (2012; 2014), for instance, demonstrates how the transnational Chinese religious movement Yiguan Dao has successfully circumvented state-imposed constraints by adopting a "secular" identity in its formal relations with the public and state institutions. By emphasizing the "non-religious" aspects of its organization and consciously aligning itself with the government's nation-building agenda (e.g., by providing social welfare services, promoting traditional Chinese culture, and conducting activities that aid moral cultivation), Yiguan Dao has managed to largely operate outside the official religious domain as defined by the state. At the same time, members of Yiguan Dao have shifted the organization's "religious" elements to the domestic realm by establishing private temples (so-called "Buddha halls") in residential properties, and in doing so, have transformed officially recognized "secular" spaces into "sacred" ones, without the need to seek approval from the relevant state authorities. Through such organizational and territorial strategies, Lim argues, Yiguan Dao has managed to flourish in the face of government regulations while allowing it to avoid competition with other religions for land resources.

Lim's case study closely mirrors Sinha's observation of informal shrines and "home temples" proliferating within Singapore's secular and highly regulated urban landscape (Sinha 2016). Based on ethnographic research, Sinha shows how Hindu and Chinese religionists infuse seemingly ordinary urban spaces, like public car parks, wet markets, food courts, construction sites, pavements, or undeveloped jungle stretches with a temporary sacred meaning, thus "'messing' up the carefully demarcated and policed boundaries between secular and sacred sites" (ibid.: 472). These makeshift altars and shrines offer alternative spaces for devotees to express their everyday religiosity outside formal religious settings and, although often fleeting, create urban sacred worlds that "exist alongside and within highly instrumentalist and pragmatic frames of Singaporean society" (ibid.: 485). Lastly, and drawing closer to the subject-matter of this thesis, examples of organizational and spatial boundary-crossings can also be found within the Protestant community. With the continued growth of Christianity over the past decades, the demand for space has regularly exceeded the supply of land allocated by the state and has forced many

churches (especially independent ones) to utilize state-defined "secular" spaces (e.g., cinemas, hotel function rooms, or industrial premises) as sites for worship. Adapting to the new URA guidelines that restrict the use of commercial and industrial spaces for religious activities, some churches have "secularized" their organizational structures by establishing business arms or directly registering as a company to legally acquire locations officially zoned for non-religious purposes. This has allowed churches to find a more permanent solution to their accommodation problem and expand their ministries beyond the state-defined religious domain into the secular realm of the economy (cf. Woods 2018a).

The examples above clearly reflect the agency of religious actors in accommodating their interests to the state's demands. However, it would be wrong to construe such strategic adaptations as mere acts of contestation or opposition to state control. Nor should they be taken as evidence of the government's limited ability to effectively manage and monitor the religious realm. The fact that alternative religious spaces and practices of boundary- crossing exist within Singapore's tightly controlled urban environment is less the result of overt resistance to state regulations, as it is due to the state allowing such spaces and practices to persist in the first place. While the government might exercise a nearly totalizing "culture of control" (Trocki 2006) over society, this does not mean that it always sees the need to use its coercive power to constrain religious 'malpractices'. Indeed, in many cases, the state chooses not to interfere in the religious realm and tolerates religious boundary-crossings as long as they do not infringe upon laws that uphold the common good of harmony, or run against the state's economic and urban redevelopment plans.

The pragmatic adaptation strategies of religious actors thus take place in an environment where social stability is always already predefined as paramount to economic survival and national security. As such, religious actors may equally interpret their ready 'submission' to state regulations as a necessary condition for achieving their ends and accept them "as inevitable within the context of a multireligious, secular and urban society" (Sinha 2011: 254). Sinha (2011: 253) thus points out that, "[t]o a large extent, state regulation of the religious domain (via legislation and bureaucratic procedures) has been normalized, taken-for-granted and legitimized amongst lay Singaporeans." Confirming Sinha's observation, a

recent survey conducted by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) in 2013 revealed that only a minority of the respondents (out of a representative sample n= 3128) believed that religious groups should be accorded more rights than they currently have, while a majority agreed with the statement that the government is responsible for managing and ensuring the peaceful coexistence of different faiths (Mathews et al. 2014). Whether these findings point to a general political apathy of Singapore citizens, who are comfortable with the status quo and the state's ongoing consolidation of power (George 2000) or if they should be attributed to the effects of the state's 'soft power' in maintaining religious harmony is a question I will address next.

Maintaining religious harmony through soft-law

While 'hard' law instruments such as the MRHA form part of the government's coercive legislative framework and thereby "reinforce the abiding policy position of secularism as a central principle of Singapore's political governance" (E.K.B. Tan 2011: 203), the state equally seeks to regulate religion through informal persuasive means or 'soft' law measures.[31] Following Thio (2004: 434), "[s]oftlaw norms are created by informal processes, being in nature moral-political obligations [which] are subject to looser internal 'sanctions' inducing compliance, such as peer pressure or generated expectations." As non-legally binding policy instruments, soft laws usually contain "recommendations or hortatory, programmatic statements" that take the form of "informal rules, such as circulars, codes of conduct and white papers" (ibid.) with the objective of building consensus and norms through internal self-regulation. Rather than coercing norms and behavior through disciplinary mechanisms, Singapore's 'soft' form of governance seeks to 'nudge' people towards the desired policy objectives of the state.[32] Thus, the main efficacy of soft law measures lies in

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[31] Within the Singaporean public legal order, informal soft law instruments are commonly used to complement 'hard' positive law measurements. Although not legally binding, soft law norms and guidelines function as a facilitator to internalize the norms embedded in hard law. As such, they have become to constitute an alternative means for the government to regulate social relations (see E.K.B. Tan 2009; Thio 2004).

[32] Based on insights from behavioral economics 'nudging' has globally become an effective public policing instrument and a powerful interventionist tool for social engineering aimed at affecting behavior change and inculcating social norms through manipulating people's choices for the sake of the common good.

their discursive power to 'translate' values embedded in 'hard' laws into palpable normative standards to be internalized by the citizens.

Perhaps the clearest example of a soft law instrument pertaining to religion is the Declaration of Religious Harmony (DRH). Issued in 2003 after extensive consultations with national religious bodies and the general public, it contains a 'set of guiding principles' to promote interfaith dialogue and reflect upon the basic values of a national commitment towards religious harmony, reading:

> We, the people in Singapore, declare that religious harmony is vital for peace, and prosperity in our multi-racial and multi-religious Nation. We resolve to strengthen religious harmony through mutual tolerance, confidence, respect, and understanding. We shall always recognize the secular nature of our State, promote cohesion within our society, respect each other's freedom of religion, grow our common space while respecting our diversity, foster inter- religious communications, and thereby ensure that religion will not be abused to create conflict and disharmony in Singapore.

The formulation of the DRH reflects the government's gradual shift from relying solely on overt control of religion through legal structures to a more dialogical and reconciliatory approach in regulating religious diversity. One decisive reason for incorporating soft-law instruments into the government's policy apparatus was the awareness of the increasing threat of global Islamist terrorism following 9/11 and the detention of alleged Jemaah Islamiyah militants in Singapore the same year (Rahim 2012). Against the backdrop of these events, various state-led community-building initiatives have been introduced to promote inter-religious dialogue and advance mutual trust and confidence between the different religious communities. Programs like the Inter-Racial and Religious Confidence Circles (IRRC) or the Community Engagement Program (CEP) were set up to engage civil society in the process of developing the "heartware" needed to raise the receptiveness of Singaporeans to maintain racial and religious cohesion and increase the city-state's societal resilience against the ongoing threat of religious radicalization (Mathews and Hong 2014).[33]

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[33] Another, more recent government platform includes the *BRIDGE (Broadening Religious/Racial Interaction through Dialogue and General Education)* program which was launched in 2017 and provides financial support to community-based initiatives that foster a better understanding and appreciation of different religions and cultures in Singapore. Furthermore, in January 2020, the government implemented a new *Crisis Preparedness for Religious Organizations (CPRO)* program aimed at raising the awareness among religious communities of possible terrorist threats and fostering a crisis-ready mentality.

However, despite the apparent benefits of these state-initiated arrangements, it is debatable how effective such nudging policies and initiatives have been in influencing the citizens' behaviors and attitudes towards religious difference and harmony (Mathews and Bin Khidzer 2015). For one, it can be argued that Singapore's idiosyncratic practice of so-called 'out-of-bounds" (OB) markers has cordoned off intense public debates on sensitive issues of race and religion, consequently preventing any substantive cultural exchange or deeper understanding between the different religious communities (B.H. Chua 2003).[34] Following Chua Beng Huat (2003), the constant reiteration of Singapore's vulnerability and mythologizing of its 'violent' past has fostered a culture of deterrence and self-censorship that inhibits the possibility of creating public spaces in which divisive topics can be addressed. Similarly, Michael Barr (2010a) argues that the government's efforts to sanitize the public sphere from political contestation have not only led to the depoliticization of society but have also engendered an ethos of conformity that eschews critical engagement and initiatives on the part of the citizens. Accordingly, and as pointed out by Mathews and Bin Khidzer (2015: 90), "a large proportion of the population still views the state as the ultimate arbitrator of any racial and religious infraction" and delegates the responsibility of maintaining social cohesion to the state. Critics have thus argued that the use of 'harmony' as a social and political trope represses and pre-empts discussions in the public domain, resulting in a 'minimalist' understanding of tolerance and harmony that may obfuscate underlying ethnic and religious tensions (cf. Barr 2010a; Tong 2007). As such, the repression of open communication on race and religion may have counter-productive effects by raising the levels of "suspicion, resentment, and division" with the potential to impede "true integration" and the creation of a more deeply-rooted racial and religious harmony (Neo 2011: 371). Mathews and bin Kidzer (2015: 90) thus advocate opening up the discussions about sensitive issues that would "allow the public to confront racial and religious insensitivities and develop the appropriate mechanisms to deal with them based on the spirit of respect and tolerance."

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[34] OB markers are used by the government to delineate the boundaries for acceptable public discourse. Race and religion are generally deemed as 'off limit' and too politically sensitive to be discussed in public as they might destabilize the public order. As a 'soft' regulatory mechanism, OB markers tend to take the form of self-censorship and thus act as an effective means of state control (cf. Gomez 2000).

Notwithstanding the validity of these observations and appeals, we must be cautious not to give undue weight to the assumption that Singaporeans are merely apathetic bystanders in the political and public discourse on religion and race. Such a reading tends to depict a too static picture of state-society relations that overemphasizes the power of the state and downplays the agency of religious actors in shaping patterns of religious difference. As argued, Singapore's form of secularism not only circumscribes the possibilities of religious action but also provides religious communities with the potential room to navigate and advance their interests in relation to the state, and most importantly, also between each other. Chua (2017: 153) points out that many of the "cultural behavior constraints" affecting inter-racial and inter-religious relationships in Singapore are not only a consequence of state policies but imposed by the respective communities themselves. Accordingly, the government's promotion of a more inclusive interfaith dialogue as a means to anchor Singapore's religious harmony hinges crucially on the readiness of the respective religious communities to participate in such. To be sure, at least at the level of religious leadership, considerable efforts have been made to negotiate religious differences via dialogue and cooperation. Inter-faith platforms such as the already mentioned Interreligious Organisation (IRO) have strived to promote better relations between religious groups through education programs and public performances such as joint prayers or visiting each other's places of worship.[35] Most recently, representatives from the main religious communities have publicly signed on to a written *Commitment to Safeguard Religious Harmony*, which is designed to enhance the existing DRH and specifies concrete ways how interreligious encounters can be practically realized and translated into everyday life.[36] However, while such ground-up initiatives demonstrate the dedication of religious leaders to foster social cohesion, it remains to be seen if they indeed lead to a deeper mutual understanding among religious communities, especially when it comes to addressing more divisive issues. The habitual public display of religious harmony cannot hide the fact that underneath the performative veneer, Singapore's multi-religious

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[35] The IRO is a non-governmental organization that was formed 1949 with the intention to cultivate harmony and peace between followers of the many faiths in Singapore. Currently ten religions are represented in the body including: Hinduism, Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Taoism, Jainism, Christianity, Islam, Sikhism and the Baha'i Faith.

[36] https://www.ircc.sg/commitment (accessed 03.02.2020)

landscape is mostly characterized by "exclusivism, separation, avoidance and tolerance" (Lai 2008: 606). The fragmentary nature of Singapore's religious landscape arguably poses considerable limitations to any substantial interfaith dialogue and raises the question to what extent a deepened commitment to interreligious exchange beyond the symbolic is desirable or even possible. Persisting theological differences on issues of proselytization and religious exclusivism remain obstacles that often hinder consensus building and can complicate efforts to find common ground on the objectives and content of religious exchange.

Consequently, responses and commitments to interreligious dialogue have varied across religious communities. Mathew Mathews (2008a) observes that doctrinal differences have played a crucial role in shaping the attitude of evangelical clergymen towards religious pluralism and may be an indicator of the general reluctance of churches to engage more substantially with other religions. The fear that deeper interreligious engagements could come at the expense of diluting the exclusivity of the Christian faith thus partly explains the underrepresentation of evangelicals in interreligious organizations and initiatives such as the IRO. This is not to say that evangelicals are not committed to interfaith dialogue and the national goal of preserving religious harmony. For instance, the National Council of Churches Singapore (NCCS) has issued non-binding guidelines to churches on matters related to interfaith relations (National Council of Churches of Singapore 2008) and regularly participates in events that advance religious cohesion. However, given the evangelical outlook of the Protestant community in Singapore and its claim to religious exclusivity, this commitment is more directed to practical than theological issues. As former president of the NCCS Robert Solomon opined,

> [f]rom the Church perspective, we understand religious harmony not so much as harmony of religion because we think that route is very theoretical and doctrinal and has many problems anyway...It makes us more relaxed if we define religious harmony as harmony among people of different faiths living in a multi-religious society (quoted in Chen 2013: 72).

Another critical issue raised in recent debates relates to the question of who should be included in the dialogue. To date, interreligious efforts in Singapore have mainly focused on exchanges between established religious communities, leaving out a growing number of those who do not identify with any religion. Calls for the need to

include so-called non-religionists in interfaith platforms and public discourse have been issued that would at once reflect the demographic realities in society more adequately and, as it is hoped, "enrich inter-religious dialogues by introducing some critical inquiry into religious ideas and articulations" (Taib 2016). Such demands, however, may face limitations, as the category of non-religion itself is ill-defined. Non-religionists consist of a heterogeneous mix of people who might self-identify as atheists, agnostics, humanists, or skeptics but also include individuals who hold religious or spiritual beliefs despite their religious disaffiliation. The only registered organization currently seeking to represent the former is the Humanist Society Singapore (HSS), a group formed in 2010 to promote secular humanist values that are "guided by reason, informed by evidence and driven by compassion."[37] Nevertheless, despite its attempt to establish an alternative to religious reasoning, the HSS remains a minority voice in public discourse and, so far, has mostly been excluded from official interreligious engagements.

Avoiding disharmony and regulating religious disputes

What becomes clear from my previous discussions is that the trope of religious harmony can assume different forms and fulfill different roles in Singapore. As a key legal and political principle, religious harmony guides state actions involving the accommodation of religious diversity and thereby functions as an important instrument to legitimize state control over the religious domain via a calibrated but comprehensive regulatory framework (Neo 2019). On the other hand, religious harmony has also become internalized as a *social norm* through soft law measures and, as such, acts as a self-regulatory principle or code of conduct that shapes the social behavior of religious and non-religious actors and determines how they relate to one another both at the institutional level and in everyday life. Neo (2019: 981, 971) sees such socialization and internalization processes as an expansion of the idea of religious harmony from one of order to one of "complementariness" that requires "more than just passive tolerance" but also entails "active obligations upon groups and individuals to mutually adapt to avoid disharmony." By extending its influence beyond the state's coercive power regime, religious harmony has, therefore, become

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[37] see https://humanist.org.sg/ (accessed 25.2.2020)

"part of the practical features of everyday life in Singapore" (ibid.: 982) and constitutes a vital normative component for structuring interreligious relationships.

Still, the question remains as to whether the socialization of religious harmony norms presupposes religious actors to adopt a deeper understanding of each other's religious practices and doctrines. As I would argue, this is not necessarily the case. While certainly desirable, a more profound interreligious engagement that moves 'beyond mere tolerance' is not essential for religious harmony to function effectively on the ground. Following Chua (2017), a minimalist understanding of tolerance based on mutual recognition and respect towards religious difference suffices to maintain the peaceful coexistence of different religious communities in Singapore. To arrive at such a conclusion, one must shift the focus from institutionalized settings of interreligious engagement to how religious harmony is socially (re)produced and maintained in the interpersonal experiences of ordinary life. Importantly, for most Singaporeans, the continual negotiation of religious diversity does not take place at the institutional level but primarily occurs through the micropolitics of everyday interaction within a densely populated urban environment. Rather than an abstract concept, religious diversity is part of the mundane reality that shapes the day-to-day encounters of people living in close proximity to one another.

The maintenance of religious harmony as an *everyday social practice* can accordingly take on various forms, which may reach from the *toleration* of religious difference (understood here in its original sense as "to bear with or endure") to the *avoidance* of a direct confrontation with the religious 'other' through strategic or selective indifference, or the *active involvement* in religious exchange that is committed to a didactic but non-divisive interreligious dialogue aimed at nurturing a deeper mutual understanding of one another. While the latter is actively promoted by the state and to various degrees by religious institutions, toleration and self-restraint are arguably the predominant modes through which Singaporeans have so far successfully managed and negotiated religious difference on a day-to-day basis.

However, one should be careful to address such non-confrontational strategies as mere instances of self-censorship or passive compliance to the dictates of an 'authoritarian' regime. As pointed out, the power of soft law lies precisely in its ability to translate state-imposed legal obligations into *socially desirable* norms of

civility. Far more than 'just' an instrument of state control, religious harmony functions as a normative code of conduct that at once guides people's social interactions and appropriate behavior in public life but, most importantly, also can be employed by religious groups and individuals as a "*mutually constraining obligation*" to demand others to refrain from certain activities that might deviate from the social norm (Neo 2019: 981). As Neo argues, "groups and individuals invoke harmony to explain and justify behavior, as well as to make claims upon one another" and, in doing so, strategically transform the meaning of harmony and co-opt the concept to advance their own dynamics of mutual control and surveillance (ibid.: 978). Moreover, demands to maintain religious harmony can also be directed to the state itself, thus reversing state-society relations and obligating the government to fulfill its role as the neutral arbiter in interreligious disputes (ibid.). Offended groups or individuals might frame their claims based on religious harmony by filing complaints or starting online petitions as a means to delegitimize the conduct of others and to pressure the government in disciplining those who have allegedly breached the 'out-of-bounds' markers or are seen as posing a 'threat' to the public order. Hence, rather than merely suppressing religious difference, the socialization of religious harmony equally tends to produce echo chambers that are "hyper-sensitive to alterity" (Woods 2021) and encourage a "culture of offendedness" that may amplify social dissent and promote intolerant or exclusive forms of identity politics (George 2016). It is against this background that the continuous invocation of religious harmony can have a chilling effect on religious discourse and immunize religions against criticism as any kind of critique could be construed as an incitement to hatred or an insult that needs to be rectified. Disciplining infringements of religious harmony has thus become a salient feature within Singapore's public sphere, whereby citizens themselves take on the task of speaking out against instances of religious discrimination and pose demands on the alleged offender to remedy his/her transgression or call upon the state to intervene. Several recent incidents demonstrate how such dynamics of crisis amplification and crisis resolution may unfold.

In March 2018, the local online media outlet *Rice Media* accused US-American evangelist Lou Engle of having "crossed the line" by allegedly making anti-Islamic comments during his appearance as a guest speaker at the annual "Kingdom Invasion

Conference" organized by Singapore's Cornerstone Community Church (CSCC). Reporting on the event, *Rice Media* (2018) quoted Engle as proclaiming that Muslims were "taking over the south of Spain," and in his dream, he would "raise up the church all over Spain to push back a new modern Muslim movement". For the author of the article, Engle's statement seemed to suggest that Islam was posing a threat to Christianity that needed to be curbed, thus highlighting "the growing influence of the Christian right in Singapore's society" (ibid.). The report, titled *Lou Engle: An American Threatens a Christian-Muslim Divide in Singapore*, further raised the question, why Engle had been permitted by the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) to preach in Singapore, despite being known to hold "fundamentally extremist views" about Islam and homosexuality.[38] According to the author's view, this amounted to a "double standard" as just a year before two Islamic clerics had been banned from entering Singapore on the grounds that their "teachings run counter to Singapore's multi-cultural and multi-religious values" (The Straits Times 2017a). Alarmed by the report, the MHA started investigating the matter and made it clear that if the allegations were true, it would take "firm action," while reiterating the government's position that it does not "tolerate any person undermining Singapore's social, racial and religious harmony" (The Straits Times 2018a).

In the meantime, the article provoked CSCC to file a police report against Rice, claiming that it constituted a "scurrilous attack" and contained a "seditious tendency" that "denigrated the Christian faith" and was inflammatory in "stirring up religious tensions and promoting feelings of ill-will and hostility between Christians and Muslims" (The Straits Times 2018a). Yang Tuck Yoong, senior pastor of CSCC and main host of the conference, also clarified that Engle's comment was taken out of context, stating that the "new modern Muslim movement" referred explicitly to the rising influence of ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) in Spain and was not meant as an indictment against the Muslim community as a whole (ibid.). A week later, Yang, however, backtracked and offered a public apology to the Islamic Religious Council

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[38] Lou Engle is commonly associated with the so-called American Christian Right and known to hold a firm stance against abortion rights and homosexuality. In the past, Engle has made contentious comments about Muslims, accusing them of "fueling the demonic realm" and organizing rallies to pray for their conversion to Christianity. Engle was invited several times as a guest speaker to Singapore and has preached at previous Kingdom Invasion Conferences both in 2016 and 2017.

of Singapore (MUIS), acknowledging that Engle's statement was insensitive and had no place in the multi-racial and multi-religious context of Singapore. He promised that the church would not invite Engle to speak in Singapore again and would tighten its protocols on inviting foreign speakers to prevent such incidents from happening in the future (The Straits Times 2018b). As a sign of the church's commitment to reconciliation, Yang met in person with several Muslim leaders, who in turn, accepted the apology and expressed their intent to "move on and look forward to a more constructive and healthy relationship" (The Straits Times 2018b). In a letter to its member churches, the National Council of Churches (NCCS) expressed its deep appreciation "of the measured response to this controversy shown by the leaders and members of the Muslim community in Singapore," noting further that "their gracious acceptance of Rev Yang's apology shows a magnanimity which bodes well for inter-religious harmony in our nation" (National Council of Churches of Singapore 2018). Lou Engle who had left the country shortly after the conference, was requested by the police to return to Singapore for an interview and further investigations, which the preacher apparently left unanswered. One year after the incident, in March 2019, the MHA banned Engle from preaching again in Singapore and, according to the online media outlet *mothership.sg*, "administered a stern warning/advisory to the Singapore Pastors involved for contravening conditions under the Employment of Foreign Manpower Act (under which Mr. Engle's Miscellaneous Work Pass (MWP) was granted)," thus putting an end to the 'Kingdom Invasion controversy'.[39]

Notably, the ban on Lou Engle coincided with two other events that provoked strong emotions among different segments of society. The first event relates to the government's decision to cancel the concert of the Swedish black metal band Watain just hours before it was scheduled to take place. The ban was issued after members of the Christian community filed complaints and launched an online petition against the concert, raising their objection to the band's lyrics and beliefs that were seen as vilifying Christianity "in a seriously offensive manner" (TODAYonline 2019b). According to Home Affairs and Law Minister Shanmugam, the public outcry had prompted the MHA to revoke its initial permission for Watain to perform in Singapore. After reassessing the situation, the Ministry concluded that it would be

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[39] https://mothership.sg/2019/03/lou-engle-islamophobia-ban-mha/ (accessed 23.11.2019).

"against public order interest" if the government allowed the concert to go ahead, stating that the band's history of denigrating religions and promoting violence had the "potential to cause enmity and disrupt Singapore's social harmony" (TODAYonline 2019a).

On March 10, just three days after the concert was supposed to take place, Australian pastor Colin Stringer was invited to speak at Singapore's largest megachurch, New Creation, provoking netizen Jeremy Tan to start a discussion thread on the online forum Reddit titled "New Creation Church Guest Speaker's Divisive Views." Digging deeper into Stringer's past, Tan had found several online articles written by the preacher in 2011 and 2001 that made derogative comments about Islam and other religions, claiming among other things, that "Islam is still bent on world conquest, through the weapons of oil and immigration - a modern invasion of the west."[40] For Tan, Stringer's religiously divisive views were "antithetical to Singapore's secularism" and "worse than the statements that earnt Lou Engle a ban." He concluded that

> by MHA's standards, he should not have been allowed to guest speak. After all, his case is analogous to Watain's performance ban, which was based on past actions. Hopefully, MHA will be fair in dealing with foreign guests of all stripes, so as to avoid appearing partisan.

In response to media queries, the MHA stated that it had not received information of Stringer making any "statement of concern during his sermon" at New Creation Church and, after assessing his previous engagements in Singapore, was granted a Miscellaneous Work Pass (The Straits Times 2019a). Undeterred by the government's reply, Tan started an online petition to "Ban Col Stringer from Preaching in Singapore" for the sake of "maintaining Singapore's religious harmony," which, however, did not garner much popular support.[41]

Finally, a more recent incident demonstrates that religious disharmony disputes can also be resolved through the initiative of the aggrieved party itself,

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[40] https://old.reddit.com/r/singapore/comments/azp50u/new_creation_church_guest_speakers_divisive_views/ (accessed 04.05.2020). Stringer's blog entry and online newsletter have since been removed from their respective websites but their cached versions can still be retrieved from above URL. All following quotes are taken from the same source unless stated otherwise.
[41] https://www.change.org/p/jeremy-tan-ban-col-stringer-from-preaching-in-singapore (accessed 03.03.2020)

without necessarily involving the state. In September 2019, social media influencer Sheena Phua stirred up moral outrage among netizens after posting an Instagram video of two Sikh men in white turbans sitting in front of her at Singapore's Formula One Grand Prix and captioning it with "Dang! 2 huge obstructions decided to appear out of nowhere" (The Online Citizen 2019). Phua, who at that time had more than 76.000 followers on Instagram, was accused of being a racist and culturally insensitive, compelling her to respond to the online backlash and offer a public apology "for the distress" the video had caused. According to Phua, however, the comment was not intended to offend the Sikh community or any other religious group but had been "misinterpreted" and "taken out of context." She clarified that the term "obstructions" only referred to the height of the two men who were taller than her and, as such, had blocked her view of the show in front. While some questioned the sincereness of her apology, others, including some of the Sikh community, saw no malicious intent to Phua's post and believed she had simply been highlighting the men's height, not their race or religion. The increasingly heated online firestorm, which effectively amounted to cyberbullying, eventually prompted members of the Young Sikh Association (YSA) to reach out to Phua. Instead of feeling insulted or demanding an apology, the YSA tried to diffuse the tensions by inviting her to a personal tour around the Central Sikh Temple to learn more about their religious traditions (The Straits Times 2019d). In a Facebook post, the YSA justified its response by explaining:

> We first reached out to @sheenaphua after one of her posts on social media upset some within and outside of our community. They demanded an apology. We however feel that actions speak louder than words. ... don't we all hope that when we make a mistake and cause unintended offence or hurt, that others will show us empathy, be understanding and forgiving? Better yet, when we make mistakes don't we all hope that we can expect people will act on their convictions and reach out to us in friendship, as opposed to reacting based on emotions and pointing fingers to blame.[42]

The YSA's proactive intervention received wide acclaim, not least from the Sikh Advisory Board, which praised the young men's actions as a "First World response to a Third World incident" (The Straits Times 2019b). In a similar vein, Home Affairs

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[42]https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=2655918301125859andid=682322868485 422andtn =H-R (accessed 11.04.2020)

and Law Minister Shanmugam referred to the incident as embodying "the spirit" of the proposed Community Remedial Initiative in his speech during the second parliamentary reading of the MRHA (Amendment) Bill, further stating that:

> These young men understood that at times, insensitive and derogatory comments can come from a place of ignorance. And the better and more sustainable path is not of hate or taking sides, but of friendship, respect and learning about each other under the new MRHA amendment Bill (The Straits Times 2019c).

The examples above illustrate the ambivalence inherent to the discursive construction of 'out-of-bounds' markers in defining the limits of acceptable conduct in the public sphere. OB markers are not fixed but left indeterminate, consequently leaving room for various interpretations regarding which behaviors or statements count as offensive or not. Such conceptual ambiguities have produced a hyper-sensitive environment in which any comment about religion or race might be construed as transgressive and as posing a threat to public order. As seen in the case of Sheena Phua, claims in the name of harmony can be made even if the alleged offender had no intention of insulting others, and the concerned party did not take full offense through his/her actions. The socialization of religious harmony thus tends to reinforce a culture of public shaming and ostracism that at once demands from the alleged offender to express remorse for his/her supposed misconduct and, in turn, expects the aggrieved party to respond with benevolence and forgiveness. It is through such public rituals of reconciliation that putative disputes are resolved, and religious harmony is performatively restored and sustained in the medium term (cf. Thio 2019).

Conclusion

The persistent hegemonic meta-narrative of religious harmony and top-down regulation of the religious realm via hard and soft law instruments has put the state at a delicate boundary with religion. As argued, the state at once seeks to relocate religious affairs within a clearly defined field outside the political domain and uphold a strict regime of neutrality towards the religious realm to secure its moral authority over a multi-religious society. Such demarcations, however, are difficult to maintain in an environment where religion assumes a significant presence in the public sphere and religious communities are embedded in larger global networks that operate

beyond the ambit of the state and often tend to "cross the constructed boundaries of [the] official religious sphere" (R.B.H. Goh 2009: 6). More than merely being a neutral arbiter of religious differences, the secular state creates the very differences it seeks to regulate (cf. Mahmood 2015: 23) and thereby redefines religion simultaneously as a question of public security and control and as an integrative social force that has the potential to facilitate national unity. This means that the state must actively intervene in the religious realm, and despite its principle of maintaining a strict equidistance, is intimately connected with religion through its self-interest in ensuring societal stability and preserving the political status quo. Against this background, Singapore's secular governance of religious diversity through a "firm hand and gentle nudge" (The Straits Times 2016) has proven to be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it has been relatively successful in ensuring high levels of socio-religious cohesion and thus far kept deeper religious conflicts at bay. On the other hand, it has also circumscribed the development of a mature public deliberation on sensitive religious issues and limited the incentives for citizens to participate in religious interactions that move beyond mere toleration of difference towards a deeper understanding and interest in diversity (Mathews and Bin Khidzer 2015).

Meanwhile, the re-fashioning of Singapore into a cosmopolitan global city since the 1990s has produced new forms of diversity that sit uneasily with the national ideal of multiculturalism and multireligiosity. Processes of migration- driven diversification continue to blur and shift religious and ethnic boundaries, producing ambiguous, mixed, or multiple identities that defy neat classification and complicate the concept of a singular and monolithic representation of religious views. The imposition of a racialized civic identity, as enshrined in the CMIO model, has thus increasingly fallen under scrutiny as it does not account for the far more complex constellations of ethnic and religious belonging observable on the ground. Concomitant with the pluralization of ethnic and religious categories, the continued diversification of Singapore's social landscape has also engendered a "new era of cultural and value pluralism" (Aziz et al. 2016), which have shifted the contours of controversy from ubiquitous religious and racial issues towards matters of public morality and identity politics. The evident rise of faith-inspired morality arguments within public policy discourses on topics such as homosexuality and LGBTQ rights

has created new societal fault lines that not only challenge the state's imperative to prevent religious influence in the political and public realm but also pose the difficult task of aligning religious and non-religious norms and tenets to the institutional life of the state without compromising the secular basis of its governance (E.K.B. Tan 2011).

Hence, although Singapore's form of state secularism seeks to "fix permanently the social and political place of religion" in society (Asad 2001: 221), it only manages to do so temporarily (cf. Six 2018). The boundaries between the religious and the political are never clear-cut but subject to constant negotiation processes and contestation despite and also because of the state's hegemonic ambitions in policing and controlling these demarcations. To what extent the state is able to maintain its 'secularism with a soul' model and manages to accommodate the new diversity of religious and non-religious worldviews while affirming national unity remains to be seen – for a secular condition, devoid of a soul will hardly keep the specters of religious and ethnic conflict at bay. After all, and as Daniel Goh has aptly pointed out, Singapore's separation between secular politics and religious traditions is not a natural condition of modernity, but "merely a punctuated, meandering, changing, and well-traversed frontline in a discursive struggle fought in the terrain of the post-colonial public sphere over the defining *telos* of the nation and *ethos* of the state" (D.P.S. Goh 2010: 86; emphasis in original). It is a struggle that has, from its inception, influenced the postcolonial development and identity formation of Protestant Christianity in Singapore, laying the ground for the emergence of the idea of Singapore as an "Antioch of Asia", a topic to which I will turn next.

3. CONTESTED BOUNDARIES: CHRISTIANITY, SOCIETY AND THE STATE IN SINGAPORE

What does Christianity mean in the Singaporean context? Obviously, the answer to this question cannot be determined by defining what Christianity *is* (in an ontological sense) or *ought* to be (a theological question to which I remain agnostic) but by understanding how its identity is socially constructed through the dynamic interplay between self-ascription and the ascription by others. To think of and about Christianity in Singapore thus means, above all, to treat it as a "category of social, political, and religious practice" rather than simply as an analytical abstraction or a *sui generis* concept (cf. Brubaker 2012). It further means to focus on how the boundaries through which Christians in Singapore have established and maintained their distinct identities are discursively, materially, and symbolically produced and enacted *in relation to* the specific cultural and socio-political environment in which they are embedded.

The purpose of this chapter is therefore not to provide an accurate description of contemporary Christianity in Singapore "as it is," but to analyze its colonial and postcolonial formation as an outcome of multiple "relational processes" (cf. Spies 2019), which have enabled, constrained and channeled the development of localized forms of Christian expressions within the city-state's plural religious landscape. Building upon the previous chapter's discussion of the regulatory framework that governs religious and ethnic diversity in Singapore, this chapter aims to explore in greater depth the complex relationship between the state and Christianity, probing into how Christians have negotiated their positions relative to the state-defined boundaries of secularism and multiculturalism, and how these boundaries, in turn, have both directly and indirectly influenced the postcolonial trajectory and identity formation of Christianity on the island.

This chapter is thus structured as follows. In the next section I set out to understand how Christianity is conceptualized (or "thought of") in relation to the state-led structuring of religious and ethnic difference through the model of multiculturalism. It is argued that the combination of Christianity's socio-demographic profile, colonial origins and its disposition as an ethnically "neutral," globally-oriented, and all-encompassing religion have shaped the socially

constructed boundaries of Christian difference and consequently informed the perception of Christianity as a predominantly "Western," cosmopolitan, and thus culturally uprooted religion. This point is further elucidated through examining the example of Christmas and how it is marketed by the Singapore Tourism Board in distinction to other ethnically-based religious festivals.

The subsequent sections, which also constitute the main focus of this chapter, provide a more detailed historical analysis of Christianity in Singapore, offering a concise overview of its colonial origins before delineating its postcolonial development. The objective here is not to capture the different denominational histories of the various churches present on the island, or to narrate *the* history of Christianity in Singapore in the form of a continuous and progressive evolution. Instead I seek to understand how the confluence of state interventionism, nation-building, transnational Christian movements, and internal theological differentiations have variously reconfigured, facilitated or impeded the formation and growth of indigenous expressions of Protestant Christianity in Singapore since its introduction by missionaries during British colonial rule. As such, the chapter aims to de-center the oversimplified picture of Christianity in Singapore as a "Western" religion by analyzing its historical development as a product of transcultural encounters and exchanges (cf. Berg and Rakow 2016), which have at once provided the conditions for evangelical Christianity to emerge as the predominant force within Singapore's Christian landscape, and helped to position the city-state as a Christian hub (or Antioch) within the circuits of global Christianity.

3.1 Christianity in Singapore: a matter of cultural deracination?

*«…to think of what 'Christian' means in Singapore, is to think of someone English-speaking, middle-or upper-middle class, well-educated…» (*R.B.H. Goh 2004*: 103, citing one of his informants).*

Protestant Christianity occupies a distinct position within Singapore's multi-religious landscape both in terms of its colonial past and socio-economic profile. Introduced by Western missionaries in the course of British colonial expansion, the history of Christianity in Singapore is inextricably linked to colonial memories of British rule and European cultural hegemony (R.B.H. Goh 2009). As a result, Christianity is commonly perceived of as a relatively recent entrant to the region, lacking a longstanding cultural heritage, and thus often cast in a different light from the other dominant 'Asian' religions officially recognized by the state, such as Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, or Hinduism. Furthermore, and due to its global outlook and high socio-economic status, the Christian community is regularly associated with external, Western influences and middle-class cosmopolitanism that sits uneasily with Singapore's regime of multiculturalism where racial, cultural, and religious identities are often closely intertwined.[43] As Robbie Goh points out, Singaporean Christians largely operate within and through "globalized social, educational, and liturgical networks based on the English language, which distinguishes them from the local, vernacular, and more traditional elements of society" (R.B.H. Goh 2004: 103). Consequently, and although the majority of Protestants in Singapore are ethnic Chinese, they tend to be mostly absent from the larger celebrative events and official representations that uphold ethno-religious traditionalism as one of the essential hallmarks of Singapore's multicultural identity.

The image of Christianity as a cosmopolitan yet "culturally deracinated" (R.B.H. Goh 2009) religion has not only informed public perceptions and attitudes

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[43] According to Robbie Goh (2009: 3), "Christianity is strongly correlated with households living in the more expensive private property (as opposed to public housing) and who have attained university-level education (who in turn tend to speak predominantly English at home)." Statistics certainly bear out these claims. According to the most recent census of 2020, 48.2 percent of Christians (including Catholics) have attained a university degree, which is higher than the average population (33 %). In terms of housing, close to one-third of Christians (30%) live in a condominium, landed property or "other" types of residence, compared to the average percentage across all Singaporeans (14.5%). Regarding ethnic composition, 92 percent of Singapore residents self-identifying as Protestants (i.e., other Christians) are Chinese.

towards Christians but has also been validated and reproduced by the state itself. This is perhaps nowhere better observable than in the domain of religious festivals and how they are promoted by the Singapore Tourism Board (STB).

Religious festivals form an integral part of the ethnic identity of Singaporeans that, on the one hand, function as important social venues for maintaining internal group cohesion and, on the other, are used by the government as a nation-branding tool to "showcase Singapore's unique historical roots and ties to the rest of Asia" (Daniel 2018). Through its destination brand "Singapore – Passion Made Possible," the STB (a statutory board under the Ministry of Trade and Industry) fashions Singapore's idea of multiculturalism into a marketable tourist product by promoting various religious festivities as part of the city-state's rich cultural heritage, thereby reinforcing the state-constructed image of Singapore "as one of the most harmonious and plural nations on the planet" – an exciting multi-racial melting pot in which different ethnic communities come together "as one people" to celebrate their distinctive cultural and religious traditions.[44]

In the calendar of events, the STB advertises religious festivals largely along ethnic lines that coincide with the state-imposed CMIO distinctions. Accordingly, the Hindu public holiday Deepavali (or "Diwali") is endorsed both as a religious and cultural event of the Indian community. On its website, visitingsingapore.com, the STB describes Deepavali as "one of the major cultural festivals in Singapore" that "marks the triumph of good over evil," where "thousands of Hindu families in the city … transform their homes into beacons of light, exchange gifts, share feasts and perform pooja (prayers) to deities such as Lakshmi, the goddess of fertility and prosperity."[45] The main public festive activities leading up to Deepavali, such as the Deepavali Light-Up, the Silver Chariot procession, dance performances, and open-air fairs, take place in the former ethnic enclave of Little India, itself an outcome of colonial urban planning and today marketed as the vibrant epicenter of Singapore's Indian cultural heritage: "Bright colours, tantalising aromas and the light of a thousand oil lamps fill the streets of Little India during Deepavali," enticing both

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[44] https://www.visitsingapore.com/editorials/a-kaleidoscope-of-cultures/ (accessed 0.8.02.2020)
[45] https://www.visitsingapore.com/festivals-events-singapore/cultural festivals/deepavali/#festivals-events-singapore (accessed 08.02.2020)

international and local visitors to

> [c]hase the scents of floral garlands and incense while browsing through stalls hawking gold jewellery, traditional snacks, embroidered *sari* (traditional Indian womenswear) and ornamental decorations. Enjoy a musical performance under the stars while getting an intricate henna tattoo done. Or simply park yourself at any of the neighbourhood's many coffee shops with a mug of *teh tarik* (pulled milk tea) to watch one of the most beautiful festivals in Singapore blossom.

Similar to Deepavali, the celebration of Hari Raya Puasa (or "Hari Raya Aidilfitri"), which marks the end of the fasting month for the Muslim community, is closely associated with Malay culture and traditions. According to the STB, Hari Raya Puasa is a feast of "contemplation and celebration":

> Many Malay families in Singapore don new clothes in the same hue—men in loose shirts with trousers known as 'baju Melayu' and the women in 'baju kurung', a loose-fitting full-length blouse and skirt combination. The day begins with a trip to the mosque where special prayers are recited. Then it's off to see the parents—Muslims traditionally ask for forgiveness from their elders for any wrongs committed during the year. More visits are made to see relatives and friends, where home-cooked feasts await.[46]

Streets around Geylang Serai, one of the oldest Malay settlements in Singapore, are lit up during the fasting season, while a large bazaar and weekly cultural performances invite visitors to join the Malay-Muslim community in their celebrations. The Hungry Ghost Festival (or "Zhong Yuan Jie"), on the other hand, marks an important date in the Chinese festive calendar, involving a month-long celebration that honors the memories of the deceased and culminates on the 15th day of the seventh lunar month. Unlike Chinese New Year, the Hungry Ghost Festival is not gazetted as a public holiday but nevertheless promoted as part of the "rich traditions of Singapore's Chinese population" that is deeply rooted in "Buddhist and Taoist culture." As the STB explains:

> According to traditional customs, the souls of the dead are believed to roam the earth during the festival, and these ghosts can get up to mischief if ignored. To prevent this, all sorts of offerings are made during this period...Large tents are set up in open fields to host raucous dinners and auctions in heartland estates like Ang Mo Kio and Yishun. There are performances too, such as Chinese operas and '*getai*' (literally 'song stage' in Chinese, or live stage performances), which feature tales of gods and goddesses, bawdy stand-up comedy, as well as song and dance numbers.[47]

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[46] https://www.visitsingapore.com/festivals-events-singapore/cultural-festivals/hari-raya-aidilfitri/ (accessed 09.02.2020)
[47] https://www.visitsingapore.com/festivals-events-singapore/cultural-festivals/hungry-ghost-festival/ (accessed 09.02.2020)

Whereas Deepavali, Hari Raya Puasa, and the Hungry Ghost Festival are each framed as embodying the 'distinct' traditions and religious customs of the local Indian, Malay, and Chinese communities, and thereby reinforce the essentialized concept of race and religion that underpins the CMIO model, such cultural references are noticeably muted if not absent when it comes to advertising the Christmas season. Although Christmas is officially recognized as a public holiday for both Protestants and Catholics, it is neither explicitly promoted as part of Singapore's ethno-cultural heritage nor aesthetically or semantically charged with overt religious content. Instead it is primarily marketed to advance Singapore's reputation as a cosmopolitan global city and first-class shopping and entertainment destination (cf. Rakow 2019).

Singapore's festive season typically starts in mid-November and is officially opened with a spectacular Christmas-themed light-up on Orchard Road; the city's premier shopping avenue famous for its state-of-the-art shopping malls and global luxury brands. Promoted as "Christmas on A Great Street," the STB invites visitors to join the celebration of "love, peace and joy" and step into "a wonderland filled with bright lights, enchanting decorations, irresistible festive buys and endless bustle from holiday makers."[48] A "multitude of offerings" awaits the discerning Christmas shopper in the "retail paradise" at the heart of the city-state's downtown area, tempting one to "indulge in luxury brands" or simply be "awed by the striking modern architecture" of shopping malls such as the ION Orchard with its "treasure-trove of global labels and fashion boutiques." In the meantime, "Yuletide spirits are in full swing" at Gardens by the Bay, Singapore's futuristic multi-billion-dollar eco-park built on 101 hectares of reclaimed land next to the CBD (Central Business District) area. Transformed into a "magical Nordic winter wonderland" during the festive period, it hosts, among other "Yule-themed" attractions, a Christmas Parade featuring "some of the season's most iconic characters, including reindeers, elves and Santa Claus himself."[49] Visitors can immerse themselves in the "nostalgic ambience" of a traditional European Christmas by strolling around the funfair modeled after "renowned Christmas markets like Hyde Park in London" with its "charming,

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[48] https://www.visitsingapore.com/festivals-events-singapore/annual-highlights/christmas-light-up/ (accessed 11.02.2020)
[49] https://www.visitsingapore.com/festivals-events-singapore/annual-highlights/christmas-wonderland/ (accessed 11.02.2020)

European-style wooden huts," carousels, and carnival games, or experience the replication of a wintry "snow blizzard" in the tropics sponsored by Häagen-Dazs™. While acknowledging the religious roots of Christmas as "a special day for Christians" to commemorate the birth of Jesus Christ, it is equally "a religious celebration like any other," where everyone "regardless of religious beliefs … gets to take part in the fun of frolicking in fake snow, men in Santa suits and of course, Christmas presents!" After all, and as succinctly put by the STB, Christmas in Singapore is first and foremost "a big celebration that gives locals another excuse to do what they love most—Eat and shop."[50]

To be sure, the commercialization and commodification of Christmas is not something unique to Singapore but can be observed across Asia. Much like its neighboring countries, Christmas marks an important date in the religious calendar of the Christian minority, while also serving as a secular event driven and shaped by global flows of consumer culture. As such, Christmas tends to escape the self-orientalizing gaze deliberately advanced by the STB to harness ethnic traditions as a resource for generating tourist revenue and foreign exchange. Rather than representing the cultural heritage of a particular racial group, Christmas is cast as a 'Western' cultural import that emphasizes Singapore's status as a cosmopolitan global city: Hokkien getai is substituted by Jingle Bells, the Malay baju kurung replaced by Gucci, and the "tantalizing aroma" of a cup of teh tarik exchanged for a scoop of Häagen-Dazs™ ice cream. Tellingly, the main public Christmas events as advertised by the STB do not take place in one of the former colonial ethnic enclaves (e.g. Chinatown or Little India) or close to Singapore's 'heartlands'[51] but are staged inside the city's Downtown Core – the epitome of Singapore's economic success characterized by its dense towering skyscrapers, gleaming shopping malls, and iconic architectural landmarks.

Reinserted into the local context as a globalized commodity, the celebration

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[50] https://www.visitsingapore.com/festivals-events-singapore/cultural-festivals/christmas/ (accessed 11.02.2020)

[51] In Singapore's public and political discourse 'heartland' refers to the high-rise public housing estates in which the majority of the population lives. It has also become a highly symbolically and ideologically charged term, denoting the working-class segment of society that is conservative and adheres to traditional cultural values as opposed to their cosmopolitan counterparts. For a detailed discussion on the social construction of the "heartland-cosmopolitan' distinction see A. Poon 2013.

of Christmas in Singapore thus neither depends on an "infrastructure of Christian public memory," nor is it shaped by a "Christian seasonal habitus" as Pamela Klassen and Monique Scheer (2019: 5 & 8) have observed for the Euro-American context. Indeed, if it was not for its strong visual imagery (represented by symbols such as fir trees, Santa Claus, reindeers, and snowflakes) and its 'nostalgic' association with the cold winter season commonly found in the Northern hemisphere, Christmas in the tropical city-state (where temperatures barely reach below 25℃) might just as well take place in July. Unsurprisingly, for the vast majority of the non-Christian population, the "reason for the season" (Rakow 2019: 225) is not necessarily connected to the birth of Jesus or associated with a particular *cultural* tradition but primarily lies in its commercial and entertainment value. As such, and precisely because of its cosmopolitan appeal and ability to transcend ethnically defined religious boundaries, Christmas enjoys unabated popularity among Singaporeans. Detached from overt ethno-cultural and religious referents, the Christmas holiday allows anyone "regardless of religious beliefs," and ethnic background to participate in the "magical" spectacle of the year's end festivities and indulge in what can be considered Singapore's favorite national pastime: shopping and eating.

The perception of Christianity as a religion devoid of traditional values and ethnic-cultural markers and its close association with cosmopolitan elitism, as illustrated by the example of Christmas above, poses both opportunities and challenges for the Christian community in Singapore. On the one hand, it has compelled Christians to adapt their position by carefully negotiating the boundaries between a localized Singaporean identity and their membership in a worldwide Christian community. Consequently, and as argued by Robbie Goh (2009), Christians have adopted a "flexible identity" that allows them to position themselves within the nation as an integral part of the national community while maintaining their distinctive evangelical and global-oriented orientation. One of the ways Christians demonstrate their national commitment can be observed in their engagement in social outreach initiatives that address local community needs, thereby positioning the Christian community as a partner and vital contributor to the nation's welfare. Concurrently, Christianity's global outlook has also created opportunities to present itself as an inclusive community (as symbolized by the biblical figure of the "universal body of Christ") that transcends ethnic and cultural barriers and thus aligns with the

government's ambitions to refashion the island into an inclusive, cosmopolitan global city.

On the other hand, however, this delicate balancing act between local and global identities continues to pose challenges for Christians, especially when navigating the complex dynamics of religious diversity in Singapore's multicultural environment. While flexibility allows for integration, it also raises the question regarding the extent to which Christians can publicly propagate their faith and act upon their commitments without being perceived as a potential threat to religious harmony. The limits of religious pluralism become evident as Christians are compelled to navigate between state expectations, religious sensibilities, and their global religious affiliation, potentially leading to conflicts regarding how their faith is expressed and practiced in the public sphere.

As we shall see next, the question of how Singapore Christians situate themselves and construct their identity as a religious minority within a plural religious environment and in relation to the secular state has been a problematic one throughout the history of the island city-state. This particularly holds true when considering the colonial origins of Christianity and its association with European modernization. However, viewing Christianity solely as a result of Western "imposition" and influence fails to acknowledge the transcultural dynamics that have underlined its colonial and postcolonial development. Indeed, right from its inception, the story of Christianity in Singapore has been one of a heterogeneous faith community that was shaped and reconfigured by global impulses as well as local conditions (Chong 2016). The West/East dichotomy that has informed much of the conversation about Christianity in Singapore thus proves to be far more intricate than it initially appears. To fully comprehend this complexity, it is necessary to go back to the early 19th century, when the story of Christianity in Singapore began.

3.2 Colonial Antecedents

The birth of Singapore as a British colony dates back to 1819, when Sir Stamford Raffles and Singapore's Malay rulers, Sultan Hussein Shah of Johor and Temenggong Abdul Rahman, signed a treaty that granted the British East India Company (EIC) the exclusive right to set up a trading post on the island. By then, the tiny landmass lying

on the southern tip of the Malay Peninsula could already look back to a long history as a strategically important port and trading settlement under the rule of the Johor-Riau-Lingga Empire, which had been destroyed and rebuilt several times over the centuries.[52]

Word about the newly-founded free port spread quickly and resulted in a steady inflow of merchants, traders and laborers hailing primarily from South China, India, and the surrounding Malay-Indonesian Archipelago. By 1824 Singapore was already well on its way to reestablish itself as a significant center of commerce comprising a trade volume that exceeded 22 million Spanish dollars and an ethnically diverse population of over 10.000 – a tenfold increase from an estimated 1000 inhabitants upon Raffles' arrival (Saw 1969). Following in the wake of the EIC were various Protestant mission societies who seized their opportunity to set up mission outposts in the thriving port city. The London Missionary Society (LMS) was the first to initiate a ministry on the island in 1819, followed by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions in 1834, the Anglican Church Missionary Society in 1836, and the US Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church in 1838. However, the overall impact of the missionaries during the first decades of British rule was minimal. The majority of the societies' work took the form of chaplaincies that served the miniscule European merchant community, while initiatives targeting the majority non-Christian Asian population were often limited to welfare and educational provision (R.B.H. Goh 2005). The rise of Singapore as a commercial hub and incipient mission presence, therefore, did not translate into a significant growth of the Protestant community on the island (Sng 2003).

One reason for this can be traced back to the relative indifference with which the colonial administrators regarded the mission endeavor. As pointed out earlier, the EIC's acquisition of Singapore was essentially driven by its ambition to counter the Dutch trading monopoly in the Malay-Indonesian Archipelago and secure Britain's strategic interests in the maritime trade routes between India and China. Consequently, the British viewed Singapore primarily as a commercial investment

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[52] Dating back to the 14th century CE Singapore, or Temasik as it was known during most of its history, was firmly embedded in the millennium-long maritime history of the Melaka Straits and part of the wider regional and transregional trading network that spanned from the Indian Ocean to the South China Sea (cf. Barr 2019; Miksic 2013).

and not a territorial responsibility, let alone as a site for Christian proselytism. Unlike their Portuguese and Spanish forerunners, where commercial ambitions and Christian missionizing often went hand in hand, and the Catholic Church acted as an important agent of colonization and economic domination in the region, the British maintained a strategic distance towards the Protestant mission societies and were careful not to mix commerce with religion. The overall aim of the EIC was to minimize administration costs and maximize revenues from trade, which led to a policy of non-intervention and non-engagement when it came to regulating the internal affairs of the various ethnic and religious communities that settled on the island. Religion was, therefore, largely considered a peripheral matter as long as it did not interfere with British trading interests or affect the public order. Hence, while the colonial commitment to freedom of religious expression and general hands-off approach towards religion did not imply an official ban on missions, it equally did not encourage or actively support the proselytizing efforts of the missionaries. On the contrary, the EIC's non-interference policy created an environment conducive to the early institutionalization of religions among the various Asian diaspora communities. It engendered an increasingly plural and dynamic religious economy in which Protestant Christianity was left to play a marginal role despite enjoying the "colonial patronage as the unofficial state religion in Singapore" (D.P.S. Goh 2016: 436) via the Anglican Church.

If one of the reasons for the low impact of the Protestant missionary presence can be attributed to the EIC's general lack of interest in Christianizing its colonial populace, then a similar argument can be made for the mission societies themselves. To be sure, the inefficacy of the early missionaries in establishing a stable Protestant community and winning over converts was hardly born out of a general neglect or indifference towards the mission enterprise. Judging from mission reports, the motivations of the early missionaries coming to Singapore were clearly evangelical and, apart from ministering to the European merchant community, considerable time and energy was spent reaching out to the non-Christian population on the island (cf. Sng 2003). But it was also evident that such commitments were to a great extent overshadowed by British and American overseas mission boards' longtime preoccupation with China. Compelled by the challenges posed by its enormous population, China was seen as the ultimate frontier for missions, leaving Southeast

Asia to play a less significant role as a mission site, at least for the time being. Previous attempts to enter China, however, proved to be largely unsuccessful, as the ruling Qing government had effectively shut down its borders to foreign missionaries, which made it impossible to establish a permanent mission presence inside the China proper. Faced with an increasingly antagonistic environment, the foreign mission boards were prompted to divert their workforce and refocus their operations towards the Chinese diaspora living in Southeast Asia. Against this background, Singapore never figured as a primary missionary destination but rather served as a temporary expedient to the problem of China's inaccessibility. Consequently, most missionaries sent to Singapore viewed their stay on the island as a prelude to the larger mission field in China (Harrison 1979). They were waiting for the Qing administration to end its closed-door policy, using their provisional time to prepare themselves for their anticipated future as missionaries in the" Middle Kingdom."

Yet, as much as Singapore was regarded as no more than a preliminary staging post, the mission societies equally realized its potential as a strategic hub for gaining a foothold into China. Capitalizing on the vast Chinese maritime trading routes and diasporic networks, Singapore evolved into a major regional center for translating, printing and disseminating Christian literature to China and beyond (DeBernardi 2011). Commercial junks arriving from South China, Batavia, Cochinchina and Siam provided an ideal opportunity for the circulation of Christian print materials among Chinese traders bound home to their ports of call. According to a mission report compiled by the Singapore Christian Union, an estimated 60 Bibles, 200 Testaments and 4000 Tracts alone were distributed in this way by 1830 (Singapore Christian Union 1830).

Apart from the mission press, early Chinese converts began to play an essential part of the evangelistic plans of mission societies to reintroduce Christianity to mainland China. Although small in number[53] and scarcely mentioned in the mission reports, they acted as important cultural brokers for the missionaries, not only by assisting them in learning various Chinese dialects or translating Christian materials for publication but also by using their extensive kinship and lineage networks to carry the gospel back to their native homes in China (J.T.H. Lee 2001;

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[53] A directory compiled by Carl T. Smith lists around 150 baptized Chinese Protestants throughout Southeast Asia for the period between 1813 and 1843 (Smith 2005 [1985]).

White 2012). Largely operating outside the official control of the Qing administration these transregional Chinese networks provided an effective channel for proselytization and thereby helped to facilitate the Protestant expansion from Southeast Asia to China even before Western mission societies were able to enter into mainland China.

The emergence of a "maritime highway of Chinese Christian networks" (D. Wong and Tien 2014: 268) moved by Chinese evangelists, lay preachers, and church workers was important for at least two reasons. First, it marked the beginnings of a continual relationship of mutual evangelistic support between mainland Chinese and the overseas Chinese Christian communities in Southeast Asia which remained in operation long after China was forcefully opened to foreign missionaries in 1842 (White 2012). As we will see shortly, it was through the existence of such networks that itinerant Chinese evangelists such as John Sung could later move around and extend their influence beyond the shores of mainland China. Second, the formation of Chinese Christian networks also showed how intimately entangled the two worlds were, both in the perception of Chinese Christians and as a geopolitical reality. While the Western mission boards may have viewed Singapore as no more than a transitory stopover, from a Chinese perspective, the southern Chinese coastlines and the archipelago of Southeast Asia were more likely perceived as a unified and shared mission field (D. Wong and Tien 2014: 268, see also Sim 2022). Furthermore, political events within China often had an immediate effect on the Chinese diaspora, sometimes significantly altering the composition and direction of migration and mission flows. The aftermath of the Taiping Rebellion (1850-1864) and the subsequent Boxer Uprising (1899-1900), for instance, saw a mass exodus of Chinese Christians from mainland China to different parts of Southeast Asia, resulting in the establishment of Christian enclaves across the Chinese diaspora (D. Wong and Tien 2014). Often collectively organized (either by a church or by family lineage) they formed various vernacular churches that stayed closely connected to their respective communities of origin, thus enhancing the already existing networks among Chinese Christians in the region (White 2012).

A turning point in Singapore's early mission history was reached with the signing of the Treaty of Nan-Jing in 1842, which ended the First Opium War (1839 – 1842) and forced China to open five port cities to the British colonial power. Seizing

the opportunity to redirect their mission efforts to China once again, the mission societies closed their stations and relocated their resources to China. By 1846, the majority of foreign missionaries were transferred to China, effectively bringing to a close the first phase of Western missionary work in Singapore (Sng 2003: 50).

The establishment of mission schools

From the middle of the nineteenth to the beginning of the twentieth century, the missionary presence in Singapore was reinforced by the advent of several mission societies, leading to the establishment of new churches along both denominational and non-denominational lines including, the Brethren Assemblies (1864), the English Presbyterians (1881), the American Methodists (1885), and the Seventh-Day Adventists (1908).

One of the significant contributions of mission societies during this period was the development of a strong mission school system. The importance given to education and social welfare as means of mission reflected the increasingly popular discourse within Western mission circles at that time, which regarded Christian charity and educational ministry as paramount for proselytization. The colonial government generally welcomed the institutionalization of mission schools as it provided English-medium education to the masses at a relatively low cost (R.B.H. Goh 2003b: 33-34). By imparting "a modified version of Victorian cultural progressivism" that syncretized "Christian values with the commercial ethos and social ambitions of the immigrant population in Singapore", mission schools were seen as an effective way to "transform the colonial other into a serviceable tool" for the British colonial project (ibid.: 27 and 28). While this might convey the impression that mission schools stood merely in the service of the colonial administration to deliver efficient and inexpensive education, the missionaries' intentions in setting up mission schools, however, were evidently evangelistic. Yet, given Singapore's multi-ethnic and multi-religious context, it was also clear to the mission boards that putting too much emphasis on religious conversion would have been counterproductive to the very cause of education (R.B.H. Goh 2008b). Aware of the environment in which they were working in, the mission schools thus channeled their educational efforts towards exercising a "moral influence" that would cultivate a "gentlemanly virtue appropriate for Singapore's mercantile immigrant society" while retaining the underlying

Christian pedagogy of their curriculum (R.B.H. Goh 2003b: 33). The initial educational efforts and impact of the mission schools thus did not translate into a significant increase in conversions but followed more indirect patterns. On the one hand, the provision of education helped break down the reservations held by the predominantly Chinese immigrant population against Christianity (Hinton 1985). Despite initial fears of the loss of Chinese cultural identity, mission schools were increasingly seen as "an affordable means of enabling their children to acquire a valuable Anglophone education which would stand them in good stead regarding careers under the colonial government" (R.B.H. Goh 2005: 38). On the other hand, mission schools became one of the primary sites for reforming and modernizing the local Chinese society by educating and 'civilizing' the boys of Chinese elites to "match the imperial Victorian masculinity that British missionaries promoted in the schools" (D.P.S. Goh 2015: 138). As such, they acted as a vehicle for the production of a hybridized Anglo-Chinese masculine subjectivity that would later secure the rise of English-educated Chinese elites as the dominant socio-political force in society.

Changing migration patterns

The growing commercial significance of Singapore as an export-oriented trading port resulted in an increased demand for laborers to work either in the burgeoning tin and rubber industries in Malaya or to fill in positions within the expanding colonial administration. The colonial government instituted labor recruitment policies to expedite and channel migration, causing the inflow of a vast number of mainly Tamil and Chinese male immigrants to Singapore between 1880 and 1930. The accelerated influx of migrants from South India, Ceylon, and China significantly transformed and diversified the racial, cultural, linguistic, and religious composition of the population. By 1901, the population in Singapore had risen to over 226.000, comprising 72.1% Chinese, 15.8% Malays, 7.8% Indians and 4.3% 'Others' (e.g. Arabs, Jews, Eurasians, and Caucasians) (cf. Saw 2012).

Among the migrants who settled down were a small number of Christian converts and pastors from various denominational backgrounds. Their arrival facilitated the formation of different diaspora congregations, thus paving the way for the gradual localization and indigenization of Protestant Christianity on the island while further contributing to their fragmentation and diversification along ethnic and

linguistic lines (Sng 2003). Some of the larger church denominations took active steps to form self-governing and self-supporting congregations as they became increasingly multi-ethnic and multi-lingual.[54] Intra- and inter-denominational platforms were utilized to establish a more comprehensive ecumenical cooperation among the vernacular churches and to achieve greater autonomy from missionary control. One outcome was the founding of the Singapore Chinese Christian Inter-Church Union in 1931, which later played a vital role in the formation of Chinese-stream evangelicalism in Singapore (Sim 2015).[55] In other cases, the move towards more autonomy and independence was perpetuated by the missionary self-understanding of the organization itself. As Jean DeBernardi (2015; 2020) shows in her historical case study of the Brethren movement in Penang and Singapore, the Brethren's practice of inclusive leadership and inclination to form local Chinese assemblies generally favored indigenization and led to the creation of autonomous, locally run Christian congregations with their own theological hermeneutics as far back as the mid-nineteenth century. Nevertheless, despite these tendencies, the majority of congregations in Singapore remained under the direction of foreign missionaries and continued to be supervised by their overseas denominational church governing boards.

With the advent of the worldwide economic depression of 1929-1932, migration patterns, however, began to change. The economic crisis caused widespread unemployment and poverty on the island, forcing migrant workers to return to their home countries and leaving many churches with diminishing congregations and declining revenues (Sng 2003: 179 and 180). At the same time, immigration restrictions were imposed on unskilled male workers in 1930 to stabilize the population and address the sex ratio imbalance.[56] These policies had significant long-term impacts. Not only did they lead to an increase in population

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[54] The Anglican Church, for instance, established each a Tamil (1923) and Chinese (1931) Diocesan Council in addition to their English-medium churches. Similar administrative differentiations along ethno-linguistic lines can be observed later among other major denominations such as the Methodists and the Presbyterians.

[55] The new Singapore-based Union was initiated by Chinese pastors who had migrated from China during the 1920s and 1930s and had experienced the numerous revivals taking place in China (such as the Hinghwa Pentecost in 1909) during the early twentieth century.

[56] The male to female ratio at the beginning of the 20th century was 3.87:1 and very much reflected the nature of the migrant society which consisted mainly of young, single males who came to Singapore with the intention to work, earn money and then return to their country of origin.

through natural births, replacing migration as the primary driver of population growth, but they also contributed to the development of a nuclear family system and the subsequent revitalization of the population (Tong 2007: 59). Consequently, Christian migration from South Asia and China reached an unprecedented low level by the 1950s.

John Sung and Chinese revivalism

One factor that decisively influenced the localization of Protestant Christianity in pre-independence Singapore is closely linked to the advent of revivals among the Chinese Christian community during the 1930s. By the 1920s and 30s increased evangelism intersected with a Chinese-led surge of Christian revivalism in China which helped to facilitate the emergence of influential Chinese preachers such as Watchman Nee (1903-1972) or Wang Ming-Dao (1900–91) and the establishment of independent Chinese churches and movements such as the True Jesus Church in 1917 or the Little Flock Movement in the 1920s (cf. Bays 2011).

One of the evangelists who gained particular prominence among the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia was John Sung (Song Shangjie, 1901-1944). Born to a Methodist pastor in Fujian (South China), Sung initially earned a doctorate in chemistry before going to New York to pursue his studies in theology at the liberal Union Theological College. His encounter with liberal theology, however, soon led to a crisis of faith and eventually his mental breakdown. Disillusioned by his liberal theological explorations, Sung experienced a "born-again" epiphany leading to his hospitalization in a mental asylum for several months. He returned to China in 1927 and embarked on a new career as an "itinerant musician-evangelist" (Andaya 2015), gradually becoming one of the most influential Chinese evangelists in his time.

Capitalizing on the existing Chinese Christian networks between mainland China and overseas Chinese communities, Sung initiated numerous revivals during his evangelistic visits to major towns in colonial Southeast Asia and Siam between 1935 and 1939 (cf. Lyall 2004). Sung's revival campaigns took place at a time of great political and economic uncertainties, both within China and among the Chinese diaspora. The effects of racial discrimination and immigration restrictions, resulting from the worldwide economic depression, left many overseas Chinese Christians feeling uncertain about their future prospects in their host countries (Andaya 2015).

Moreover, the spread of pan-Chinese nationalism and Confucian revivalism spurred intense debates among overseas Chinese Christians over how to reconcile their Chinese identity and cultural traditions with their Christian belief (Hoon 2012). As Chinese Christians, they experienced a 'double alienation'—alienation from their fellow Anglophone Christian believers, as well as alienation from the larger Chinese society as members of a Christian minority. This tension between faith and ethnicity prompted Chinese churches to overcome the perception of Christianity as a foreign religion and to indigenize their ecclesiastical structures to gain independence from Western missionary influence (Sim 2019: 119).

Sung's appeal was primarily owed to the performativity of his innovative preaching style that combined healing and prophecies with a literal understanding of the Bible.[57] His "participatory emotion" induced by performance, music and the enactment of biblical teachings spoke directly to Chinese concerns in an uncertain economic and political climate and was uniquely suited to the mainly Chinese audiences (Andaya 2015: 7). As Barbara Andaya points out:

> Sung's explicit and unapologetic self-identification as a Chinese conveyed a powerful message of confidence - he dressed as a Chinese, his publications were in Chinese, and he spoke essentially to Chinese interests and from a Chinese perspective (Andaya 2015: 12).

According to Andaya, Sung's "Chineseness" and imparting of a vibrant faith that stressed experiential expressions and theological conservatism thus helps to explain why his evangelistic meetings during 1935 were particularly well received among the Chinese-speaking churches in Singapore. His message of salvation, embedded in his archetypical sermon on the parable of the Prodigal Son immediately spoke to the Chinese audience, as it reflected their migratory experience of alienation and sense of homelessness (Ireland 2012). With his firm stance against missionary paternalism and theological liberalism, Sung's revivalism threatened established missionary churches by introducing "radical new social practices and self-reliant grassroots evangelical bands into a landscape dominated by Western missionaries" (Chong and

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[57] Sung's performance-centered preaching style has been subject to various interpretations. While some argue that Sung was influenced by US holiness-revivalist practices, such as those exhibited by his American contemporary, evangelist Billy Sunday, others view it as a successful adaptation of Chinese local entertainment practices, particularly those employed by street storytellers. (For further elaboration on Sung's theology and preaching style, see Wim 2022, particularly pages 123-188.)

Goh 2015: 402). As such, Sung's campaigns paved the way for the formation of various locally-run evangelical organizations, such as the Singapore Christian Evangelistic League, the Chin Lien Bible Seminary and later, in 1955, the Bible-Presbyterian Church. These communities became local carriers and agents of Sung's legacy, appropriating his organizational models, theologies, and teachings and paving the way for the development of independent Chinese-evangelical expressions within the Singaporean Christian landscape (Sim 2015: 101).

Post-war developments

The Chinese Civil War (1927 - 1949), which culminated in the Communist revolution and the establishment of the People's Republic of China, forced Western missionaries to withdraw from mainland China and redirect their attention to Southeast Asia (Sng 2003 210). History seemed to have come full circle, as some of the mission societies that had previously left Singapore following the forceful opening of China after the first Opium War nearly a century earlier re-channeled their resources back to Southeast Asia. By 1952, almost 10 percent of the estimated 1.298 British missionaries serving in China had relocated to Malaya and Singapore (White 2018: 231). The influx of Protestant missionaries, many of whom were trained to minister in Chinese dialects and possessed medical or teaching experience, provided an outreach opportunity to the different dialect groups of Chinese migrant communities across the region. Together with Chinese evangelists and pastors who had equally been forced to emigrate from mainland China, they further intensified the Christian presence in Singapore by initiating new congregations and expanding existing ones (Sng 2003:217).

The events leading to the communist takeover in China and the concomitant expulsion of several thousand Western missionaries coincided with the advent of WWII and the Japanese occupation of Singapore between 1942 and 1945. Both had significant implications for the further trajectory of the Protestant community during the post-war era. In geopolitical terms, the Japanese military occupation during WWII marked the sudden end of European dominance in Southeast Asia, resulting in a gradual shift of the contours of power relations in the post-war era towards the

US.[58] The reordering of east-west relationships and emerging polarization along Cold War lines left a lasting impact on the Christian landscape in Asia. As Michael Poon (2013a) points out, it not only moved the Asian Christian point of reference from the Atlantic to the Pacific but also opened the doors to an increasing US-American influence in the region, which was followed by an influx of various new denominations, mission agencies and evangelical para-church organizations (ibid.).

In Singapore, this meant an acceleration of the already ongoing diversification and pluralization of the Christian landscape resulting from the new arrival and convergence of several missionary and denominational bodies, such as the Assemblies of God (1933), the Salvation Army (1935), the Finnish Pentecostal Mission (1947), Southern Baptists (1950), and Lutherans (1956). Alongside these churches which were mainly initiated by western missionaries, several independent and locally-run denominations were founded, including the Bible-Presbyterian Church (1955), the Bible Church (1958), and the Evangelical Free Church (1959). Concomitantly, international evangelical para-church organizations started their ministries among students in schools, colleges, and universities. Among them were the Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship (IVCF, 1952), Youth for Christ (YFC, 1957), Scripture Union's Inter-School Christian Fellowship (ISCF, 1958), and the Fellowship of Evangelical Students (FES, 1959). As we shall see shortly, these para-church groups had an important impact, as they laid the basis for the growth of evangelical Christianity among English-educated youth from the 1960s onwards.

The political events in China and the devastating experience of the Japanese occupation also underscored the need for greater autonomy from foreign missionary influence and for establishing local leadership within both vernacular and English-speaking churches. With mainland China closed to evangelistic efforts and the subsequent growth of Chinese-speaking diaspora churches, the shortage of church leaders proficient in either Chinese dialects or Mandarin became a pressing concern. Chinese congregations that formerly relied on mainland China for their supply of pastors and other church workers suddenly found their source cut off (Sng 2003).

The experience of WWII further intensified the debate about autonomy, particularly among English-speaking congregations whose dependency on Western

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[58] The US-American strategic interest in Asia was largely driven by its policy of containing Sino-Soviet communist expansionism and to secure its ideological and hegemonic power in the region.

missionaries was far greater than that of their Chinese-speaking counterparts. During the occupation, most foreign missionaries were either repatriated or interned by Japanese forces, compelling many of the larger denominational mission churches in Singapore to stand on their own feet and assume leadership. This sudden change paved the way for greater independence as local church leaders grew more confident in their capacity to self-govern church affairs. At the same time, however, it also revealed the problematic dependency on Western leadership and the scarcity of trained local pastors to run their parishes. One consequence was the gradual institutionalization of theological education in Singapore, leading to the establishment of the Trinity Theological College in 1948 and Singapore Bible College in 1952.

The experience of Japan's military occupation also exposed the fragmentary nature of the Christian landscape and the inability of churches to cooperate in dealing with common challenges (Sng 2003: 199-201). Reflecting the global tendency towards ecumenism, church leaders recognized the need for more church unity and as a result, formed the Malayan Christian Council (MCC) in 1948.[59] However, the MCC's ambition to create more unity among Protestant churches was ultimately unsuccessful due to irreconcilable doctrinal and linguistic differences (D.P.S. Goh 2010; Sng 2003). According to Sng (2003), the initiative was mostly driven by larger denominational churches whose leadership still depended on foreign missionaries and whose ecumenical vision was influenced by liberal theology. Consequently, this led to the further estrangement from their conservative-minded migrant and local-born counterparts, highlighting the growing theological division between Chinese conservative churches and the predominantly liberal-influenced Anglophone church leaders (Sng 2003: 221). In an important way, the emerging fault lines between liberal and evangelical theological orientations laid the ground for the further trajectories of Christianity in postcolonial Singapore, generating an undercurrent of tension that would later facilitate the rise of evangelicalism at the expense of liberal Christianity. It is to these postcolonial developments that I now turn my attention.

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[59] The MCC was succeeded in 1961 by the Council of Churches of Malaysia and Singapore (CCMS). After Singapore's independence, two separate councils were established for each nation leading to the constitution of the National Council of Churches of Singapore (NCCS) in 1974.

3.3 Postcolonial Refractions, Ecumenical Experiments, and the Rise of Evangelicalism

Becoming independent

In 1959, Singapore was granted full internal self-governance by the British colonial office, changing its constitutional status from colony to state. The implementation of new constitutional amendments paved the way for the first general elections the same year, which ushered in a landslide victory for the PAP winning 43 of the 51 seats in the Legislative Assembly. From the outset, the newly-elected political leadership led by Cambridge-trained lawyer Lee Kuan Yew (1923-2015) and his cadre of English-educated elites were convinced that Singapore's political and economic survival could only be secured through a merger with the Federation of Malaya,[60] an idea actively supported by the British, who feared that a fully independent Singapore was prone to falling into communist hands (T.Y. Tan 2008). Influenced by Cold War calculations and viewing a merger as a guarantee to protect British (and US-American) political and security interests in the region, the colonial office made the inclusion of Singapore a precondition for forming a unified Malaysia. Thus, in 1963, Singapore joined the Federation of Malaya and the Crown Colonies of Sarawak and North Borneo (Sabah) to constitute the new federated state of Malaysia.

However, Singapore's membership in the union turned out to be short-lived. Deep ideological and political differences, which were overshadowed by a series of racial riots, increasingly strained the relationship between the Chinese-dominated PAP in Singapore and Malaysia's ruling Malay-nationalist party UMNO (United Malays National Organisation). By July 1965, tensions had reached a breaking point prompting Singapore's then Finance Minister Goh Keng Swee to secretly open negotiations with the central government in Kuala Lumpur on Singapore's possible withdrawal from the union (Barr 2019). Seeing no other way out to avoid an imminent collision, a joint agreement was signed under the radar of the British High Commissioner, which sealed Singapore's secession from Malaysia and culminated in

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[60] The Federation of Malaya was established by the British in 1948, comprising nine peninsular states (which became British protectorates) and two of the British Straits Settlements, Penang and Malacca (which retained their British colonial status). The Federation was granted independence within the British Commonwealth in 1957 and existed until its reconstitution as part of the larger political entity 'Malaysia' in 1963.

Singapore's declaration of independence on 9 August 1965. In hindsight, Singapore's separation from Malaysia was, therefore, neither accidental nor an act of hostile expulsion as perpetuated in the official national narrative, but the result of a mutually negotiated withdrawal that was actively pursued if not initiated by Singapore (E. Lim 2015).

Nevertheless, Singapore's "bloodless coup" (Kuan Yew Lee 1998: 639) took many by surprise and while for some it may have constituted a moment of relief that ended "two years of frustration and disappointment" (Barr 2019: 117) to Lee Kuan Yew it was likewise a "moment of anguish" that had buried his long-standing belief in merger as the only possible solution for Singapore's survival in Asia's emerging postcolonial order (Kuan Yew Lee 1998: 16). Either way, what was certain was that with its unexpected independence Singapore had entered uncharted territory. Singapore's political leaders not only found themselves "in possession of a state they considered nonviable without a corresponding nation" (Hill 1998: 2) but also were confronted with the general absence of the idea of Singapore as an independent political entity (B.H. Chua 1996: 52). Indeed, before becoming Singapore's first elected Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew pronounced that "in the context of twentieth-century Southeast Asia, island nations are a political joke", dismissing any form of independence as a "political, economic, and geographical absurdity" (Josey 2012). Yet, once a fait accompli, the task to "build a nation from scratch" (Kuan Yew Lee 1998: 9) was by far no laughing matter. Substantial socio-political and economic challenges lay ahead that needed to be addressed if Singapore was to succeed as a nation-state.

Although Singapore was already an established commercial hub well before independence[61] it remained uncertain how economic growth could be sustained in the long run, especially now that it was cut off from its wider economic hinterland. Lacking natural resources to spur internal industrial production and without a viable domestic market or sizeable labor force, the economic future and

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[61] Contrary to the popular narrative that depicts Singapore's 'economic miracle' as having developed from a blank slate, recent scholarship has pointed out that Singapore's post-independence economic development actually started from a strong foundation. Singapore's success as a British colonial trading hub was continued after the Japanese occupation during WWII, making Singapore one of the most prosperous, but also unequal, economies within Asia at the start of independence (cf. Huff 1994).

prospects for continued growth looked bleak. Further aggravating the situation was the devastating socio-economic condition of the majority of the population on the island, which was epitomized by a severe housing shortage, poor sanitation, pervasive unemployment, and poverty (Kong and Yeoh 2003). While Singapore might have inherited one of the "most prosperous cities in the British Empire" (Bayly and Harper 2005: 50), it also took over the deep-seated structural inequalities that persisted as a result of colonial exploitation. As in most post-colonial societies, social stratification in Singapore closely overlapped with ethnic boundaries – a direct consequence of British racial policies that had, as pointed out earlier, elevated the Chinese majority to positions of economic power and relegated Malays (and to a lesser extent Indians) to the status of a socio-economic minority. Differences in socio-economic developments between the designated racial groups (Chinese, Indians, Malays, Others) and the resultant social inequalities thus posed a serious challenge to economic integration. The problem of integration was further complicated by the fact that the vast majority of people were immigrants to the island. Given the heterogeneous ethnic composition and transient nature of the largely migrant population, there was a lack of political identification with the newly independent state and no overarching cultural values to ensure social cohesion (Brown 1998). Singapore was, in the words of Goh Keng Swee, then acting Minister for Defense, "a complex, multiracial community with little sense of common history, with a group purpose which is yet to be properly articulated, in the process of rapid transition towards a destiny we do not know yet" (quoted in Chew 1991: 363).

In short, Singapore was faced with the unusual situation of attaining political sovereignty *before* developing a national identity (Willmott 1989). Unlike other postcolonial nation-building projects in Asia, Singapore's Founding Fathers could not resort to any historical or cultural resources to construct a national identity and legitimize their political power (Barr and Skrbiš 2008). Confronted with a diverse population comprising various diasporic groups of sojourners, the PAP leadership was neither in the position to follow the example of traditional elites in other postcolonial societies and reclaim intrinsic linkages to an imagined indigenous community nor could it project the national framework onto a common pre-colonial civilizational heritage or shared primordial past (Tang 2017). As Chua argues, Singapore's particular demographic composition meant that "no conventional unity

of race, land, and culture could be evoked as the 'organic basis for a new nation'" (B.H. Chua 2010: 337). On the contrary, Singapore was caught in the bind of a "double minority", in which the Chinese constituted the majority on the island but a minority in the region while the Malays were a minority in Singapore but formed a majority in its immediate vicinity (Mauzy and Milne 2002: 99-100). Forging national cohesion by seeking recourse to a Chinese cultural identity that would have resonated with the ethnic Chinese majority was, therefore, considered unfeasible. Moreover, Singapore's delicate geopolitical position as a small Chinese-majority island-state surrounded by its larger Malay-Muslim neighbors (Malaysia and Indonesia) propelled the political leaders to carefully eschew being labeled as a "Third China" (B.H. Chua 1983: 38). They were well aware that the impression of Singapore as a client-state of China would severely complicate relations with its Malay-dominated neighbors; as reflected by Lee Kuan Yew in his memoirs:

> Seventy-five percent of our population of two million were Chinese, a tiny minority in an archipelago of 30,000 islands inhabited by more than 100 million Malay or Indonesian Muslims. We were a Chinese island in a Malay sea. How could we survive in such a hostile environment? (Lee Kuan Yew 1998: 23)

Altogether, and as aptly pointed out by Tim Harper, Singapore's diasporic condition testified to "the difficulties of creating a modern nation-state on a model inherited from Europe in a region where history mocks the nation-state's claims to cultural and linguistic exclusiveness" (Harper 1997: 261). After nearly 150 years of colonial rule, Singapore's leadership had to forge a national identity that would at once rupture the "ideational and interactional bonds that formerly tied people" to their ancestral 'homelands' and fundamentally reshape the "felt primacy of places in people's consciousness" by replacing it with the abstract concept of a 'nation' defined by political and territorial boundaries (Geoffrey Benjamin 2015: 569). In the absence of a "reason for the new state," universal concepts had to be found that would "concurrently transcend and suppress ethnic differences" and organize Singapore's heterogeneous population into a relatively unified people (B.H. Chua 1996: 52). The prevailing socio-economic problems, lack of collective identity and delicate geopolitical positioning thus defined the parameters of Singapore's postcolonial nation-building project which followed two main objectives: modernization in the form of rapid industrialization and urbanization, and the management of ethnic and

religious plurality through a multicultural and secular framework.

Emerging fault lines

During the first two decades of independence, continuous economic growth and material progress became the pre-eminent national goal that would guarantee social and political stability and ensure the survival of the nation. Grounded on a discourse of pragmatism, economic and industrial development served as the single criterion for implementing all government policies to meet the requirements of its economic zeal. As Shawna Tang summarizes:

> For Singaporeans, all aspects of social life became subject to the logic of the industrial economy; schools were nationalized, and English formalized as the first language in order that Singaporeans be proficient in the language of trade and commerce; land dwellers were moved and local communities disaggregated to make way for the state's massive development of the city and public housing programme; racial tensions were tamed by political action and ethnic diversity flattened by meticulous social engineering; civil groups were politically curtailed and population growth carefully managed (Tang 2017: 58).

Economic pragmatism thus became the prime ideological resource for justifying the one-party dominance of the PAP government. It provided the basis for organizing the population into "a tautly-controlled, efficient and achievement-oriented society" (Bedlington 1978: 211) in which citizens were expected to identify with the state's purposive rationality and pro-capitalist orientation (Hill and Lian 1995). As we have seen, the creation of a national identity based on pragmatic economic values was further augmented by a 'politics of survival' which sought to transform Singapore's population into a "tightly organised and highly disciplined citizenry all pulling in the same direction with a sense of public spiritedness and self-sacrifice in the national interest" (B.H. Chua 1995: 18). The aim was to build a 'rugged society' that would be able to overcome the challenges faced by the nascent nation and safeguard the success of Singapore's industrialization efforts. The deployment of an "ideology of survivalism" and inculcation of a "siege mentality" (Brown 1998: 39), therefore, served to both legitimize the state's policies of social control and consolidate its ideological hegemony by constantly reminding its citizens of the 'traumatic' origins and vulnerability of the young nation-state while emphasizing the necessity of rapid material development and self-reliance for the sake of national survival (B.H. Chua 1995: 19).

It is within this context that the postcolonial trajectory of Christianity in Singapore took its course. While the end of WWII had pushed many of the established Protestant churches towards greater autonomy, Singapore's separation from Malaysia and subsequent independence further necessitated the formation of national church bodies and the implementation of ecumenical initiatives. Many mainline churches were caught up in the struggle to realign their relationship with their denominational umbrella organizations while trying to find a new localized identity independent of western funding and interest (Sng 2003). Concurrently, Singapore's church leaders were confronted with the question of how to redefine their national role amidst the rapidly changing socio-economic landscape induced by the government's imperative of industrial modernization. The state's developmental projects, such as the pervasive urban redevelopment of the island and large-scale resettlement of nearly 90% of the population from urban slums and villages into public housing estates not only dramatically reshaped the social realities of the people but also propelled the churches to respond fast to these changes or face the risk of losing their national relevance and becoming a "declining colonial relic" (Philip N Pillai, quoted in G. Lee and Lee 2015).

For the government, the responsibility of the Christian community was evident and circumscribed as lying in its duty to provide a spiritual ethos of solidarity and purpose that would serve the government's vision of progress and help to legitimize the need for making ever greater sacrifices in the collective struggle for economic success (Barr 2008: 233). Churches were thus expected to play a proactive role in overcoming the structural problems in society by helping to ameliorate the social costs of rapid economic development implemented by the state (Poon 2012b). Furthermore, the Christian community was seen as providing a valuable resource of educated young people that was ready to be tapped to raise a future generation of leaders. In the context of the state's meritocratic approach to governance, the early promotion and long-term planning of a second-generation leadership was regarded as pivotal for guaranteeing political stability and the continuity of Singapore's modernization path. The question of succession thus became a primal concern for the PAP and was spelled out in Lee Kuan Yew's address to the delegates at the meeting on Youth and Leadership Training organized by the East Asia Christian Conference in 1967 as follows:

> [...] we are confronted, now, with this problem of succession. The first generation, whatever the reasons which motivated them, have got rid of the past and the people who ruled and ordered that society. But have they got it in them now, to create a situation, a system in which succeeding generations can build upon what they have?...How do you create it, in this area, without tradition, without a past to fall back on? Can it be created? Can you talent-scout?...Somewhere in the church hierarchy or in the Young Men's Christian Association some people are demonstrating more than above average activity, intelligence, verve, drive, ambition, civic consciousness....I think the Christians, if they understand the milieu in which they are working in South and South-East Asia can make their contribution, a ferment, without which it is very difficult [...] to climb the sharp face of the cliff towards a higher ledge in human civilization (qtd. in Josey 2012: 58, 62).

From the government's perspective, Christian organizations provided a large pool of highly-motivated young people who exhibited great vigor and diligence that was congruent with the state's imperative of cultivating a disciplined citizenry. The government thus sought to co-opt the youthful idealism and channel it towards its agenda of building a 'rugged society' and, above all, to ensure the Party's political succession. In this respect, and in striking continuation to their colonial predecessors, church-run mission schools stood out to function as important sites for the hegemonic production of a distinct masculine elite expected to take over a leading role in society (D.P.S. Goh 2015). Robbie Goh (2008b) argues that politicians and educationists valued the unique 'Christian' quality of the mission school's moral education, which was not pre-eminently achieved through specific curricular and formal extra-curricular means but conveyed through the personal and informal agency of dedicated Christian teachers. By imparting Christianized values that emphasized character development and moral behavior, mission schools were thus recognized to play a vital part in socializing students into resilient model citizens and, above all, nurturing the nation's human capital (G. Lee and Lee 2015: 41).

Altogether, and in line with its modernizing project, the government adopted a pragmatic approach towards the role of the Church in the early stages of nation-building, relegating its prime function to the realm of social welfare and education. As we have seen, both domains were far from novel to Christian institutions but constituted a crucial part of their *raison d'être* ever since their arrival on the island during the colonial era. In this regard, the Christian community already occupied a space that could have served as a resource to strengthen its position in society and enable it to meet the state's expectations. Yet, given the circumstances, church leaders struggled to find common ground in setting up a national church

agenda and were considerably grim about the prospects and role of the Christian community in the nascent republic (Sng 2003). On the one hand, Christianity continued to be a minority religion and was largely perceived as a 'foreign import' brought to Singapore via its former colonial rulers. While this did not necessarily translate into a general hostility towards Christians, it considerably lowered the societal relevance of the Church and made it difficult to act as a powerful stakeholder for the Christian community vis-à-vis the state, especially now that the benefits of colonial patronage no longer existed. Churches, as one Methodist clergyman remarked, now found themselves in the situation of "having to stand on equal terms with all other religions in a secular society" and were pressed to reorganize "their understanding and resources to bring about the relevant Christian message in a new society" (New Nation 1971). The delicate position of the churches was further highlighted by the fact that most were still dependent on western funding and governance. Albeit tendencies towards greater institutional independence and the rise of locally initiated churches, church leadership continued to be in the hands of Europeans and North Americans well into the 1960s and 1970s, thus exacerbating the problem of defining a shared and localized Singaporean church identity. More significantly, however, efforts toward greater church unity and ecumenical cooperation were undermined by the inherent heterogeneity of the Protestant landscape, which was fragmented along ethno-linguistic lines and theologically divided between conservative and liberal factions.

A more disinterested reading would see the prevailing theological fault lines primarily as an extension of the fundamentalist-modernist controversy that originated in Britain and North America during the late 19th century and found its global expression through the worldwide missionary expansion and subsequent establishment of denominational church identities.[62] Yet, depicting the conservative-liberal divide solely as an import of Western theological controversies and an outcome of missionary-imposed denominationalism does not take into account the different contexts in which these debates developed and took root in Singapore. Most importantly, it ignores the historical grassroots dynamics of Chinese-dominated Christian conservatism and its transnational links to independent Christian

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[62] For a more detailed discussion on the history of the modernist/evangelical controversy see Hankins 2009 (esp. chapter 2).

movements in China and other parts of Asia. These linkages cannot be defined in strictly institutional terms but were largely structured along the lines of informal networks that transgressed denominational boundaries. As we have seen, they were to a great extent based on the historical agency of Chinese evangelists like John Sung, Watchman Nee, or Wang Ming Tao, who were influential in consolidating the conservative orientation among overseas Chinese Christians. Their emphasis on Bible-centered preaching and staunch opposition to liberal theology helped foster an underlying tension between conservative Chinese-speaking churches and their more liberal-minded, Anglophone, and Western-dominated counterparts (Sng 2003).

Furthermore, Christians in Singapore were affected by broader shifts within global Christianity that saw two powerful movements – charismatic Christianity and liberal ecumenism– making their way into Asia (Poon 2012a). Both movements intersected with the emancipatory ambitions of church leaders to indigenize Christianity within the Asian context. Caught up between the influence of these wider global shifts and their Asianizing reorientations, Christians thus found themselves in the difficult position to simultaneously respond to these currents and provide localized answers to the postcolonial condition in which they found themselves. Michael Poon (2012b: 19) captures the mood of uncertainty and change prevalent at that time by observing:

> Old forms of Christianity were retreating. Familiar denominational demarcation and Christian practice were no longer reliable guides for discerning new social and religious movements. Religious ideas and cultural norms from the West Coast of America would find their way through the Pacific, and take root in the new nations in Asia. The worldwide evangelistic crusades, church growth, short-term mission trips and spiritual warfare movements in Singapore in the following decades are part of this larger global shift. Churches were ill-prepared to interpret these powerful spiritual and intellectual shifts, especially in the question of orthodoxy. In short, how do the new expressions of faith, order and worship connect with traditional "mainline" Christian understanding? Equally, how do the historic forms of Christianity find new meaning and reference points when they are fused with Pacific expressions of Christianity in Southeast Asia? Familiar words (like liberal, evangelical, charismatic, Anglican) now carry new and localized meaning.

Against this background, and following Daniel Goh (2010: 61), the emerging divisions can be best understood as expressions of "competing Asian Christianities", who each in their own way tried to establish an independent church identity by formulating contextual theologies that would speak to the new generation of believers and respond to the social and economic ramifications of Singapore's rapid

urbanization and industrialization. While liberal Christians were moved by the ecumenical vision of building solidarity amongst the poor and advancing a just society, evangelicals saw Singapore's postcolonial condition as an opportunity to proselytize and turn the nation 'to Christ'. Both agendas, however, conflicted at some point with the state's pluralist secular framework, prompting the PAP leadership to intervene in the religious realm and reconfirm its claim to political hegemony. The interplay between state interventionism and internal theological differentiations had immediate and long-term implications for the postcolonial trajectory of the Protestant community in Singapore, leading at once to the declining influence of liberal Christianity and the rise of evangelical conservatism in the 1980s.

3.3.1 Asian ecumenical Christianity and the quest for social justice

Throughout the 1960s and the 1970s, the majority of mainline Protestant church leaders in Singapore subscribed to a liberal theological position that was oriented towards establishing ecumenical bodies and building inclusive Christian communities. Institutionally backed by the East Asia Christian Conference (EACC)[63] and its regional affiliate, the Council of Churches of Malaysia and Singapore (CCMS), they actively took part in developing a contextualized Asian theology, which sought to translate the specific postcolonial experience of newly-independent Asian countries into a social theology of "suffering and hope" (D.P.S. Goh 2010: 62). Socio-economic and political issues, such as poverty, injustice, and human rights, were viewed as fundamental questions of faith, with the confession of Christian hope to be set in the context of the aspirations of the people themselves, rather than merely serving the church's own interest of unity (cf. Ariarajah 2008). Yap Kim Hao, the first Asian Bishop of the Methodist Church in Malaysia and Singapore (1968 – 1973) and designated General Secretary of the EACC/CCA between 1973 and 1985, summarized the basic tenet of the conference in writing:

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[63] The EACC was formed in 1957 as a result of an ecumenical initiative by the World Council of Churches (WCC) to establish regional, autonomous councils to carry out missionary work in conjunction with local churches and under the general guidance of the WCC. In 1973 the conference, now renamed Christian Conference of Asia (CCA), established its headquarters in Singapore, from where it operated until its expulsion by the Singapore government in 1987.

> For the Church to be present is to stand with the poor and the oppressed and to suffer and labor with them for liberation from poverty and oppression. This is the Christian presence as we reflect God's kingdom and work towards its fulfillment in the situation in Southeast Asia (Yap 1975: 12).

The self-understanding of being "a movement for the unity of people" instead of "a movement for the unity of churches and Christians" (Huang 2006: 34) deliberately departed from the ecumenical idea initiated by the World Council of Churches. It inverted the aims of the western ecumenical agenda from one that was concerned with 'Christian Confessions' to one of 'Confessing Christians,' which meant "existential involvement rather than the formulation of the right kind of creedal statements" (Park 1982, cited in D.P.S. Goh 2010: 61). By shifting the concept of unity from denominational concerns to social issues, the EACC not only intended to challenge the continued dominance of the West in the reordering of world Christianity but also expressed the desire of Asian churches to remain autonomous from Western ecumenism and carve out an indigenous church identity that corresponded to the particular cultural and socio-political contexts of postcolonial Asia. Accordingly, the framework of the Asian ecumenical agenda placed people at the center of the movement, leading to the formulation of a socially-engaged ecclesiology based on solidarity with the poor and the marginalized and a soteriology that interpreted salvation in terms of humanization and liberation. The Commission on World Mission and Evangelism of the WCC's meeting in Bangkok in 1973, which was dominated by non-Western theologians and organized under the theme "salvation today" spelled out that,

> salvation works in the struggle for economic justice against the exploitation of people by people; in the struggle for human dignity against the political oppression of human beings; in the struggle for solidarity against the alienation of person from person; and in the struggle of hope against despair in personal life (International Review of Mission 1973: 200).

The church was not to be "merely the refuge of the saved but a community serving the world in the love of Christ" (ibid.). This shift in orientation consequently altered the mission paradigm from one that prioritized church growth and personal salvation to one that identified Christ with the suffering multitudes and viewed social activism as the prime objective of mission work in industrializing Asia (Ariarajah 2008; D.P.S. Goh 2010).

Standing with the poor - the Jurong experiment

The re-interpretation of missions in terms of Christian service to society paved the way for the EACC's engagement in Industrial Evangelism and the subsequent establishment of Urban Industrial Missions in the late 1960s as a practical means to defend urban workers from exploitation and empower them in their struggle against the suppression of their labor rights (Barr 2008). It was against this background that the interdenominational Singapore Industrial Mission Committee (SIM) was formed in 1966, bringing forth two ecumenical community development initiatives, one of which resulted in the opening of a civic center on the premises of the Lutheran-led Jurong Christian Church in 1968. The Jurong Industrial Mission (JIM), as the mission came to be known, was situated in Jurong Town, a former swampland that had been redeveloped into Singapore's first industrial estate and provided low-cost housing to workers employed in the expanding manufacturing industry in the area. Operating under the auspices of the EAAC and its national affiliate CCMS, and supervised by Hawai'i-born American social activist Ron Fujiyoshi, the JIM set out to mobilize and empower the industrial workers by deploying Community Organization (CO) methods that emphasized the use of "abrasive but nonviolent and legal brinkmanship" (Barr 2010b: 344) to build solidarity with the powerless and gain compromises from the relevant authorities in power.[64] For a time, the JIM enjoyed encouraging success in its efforts to assist residents in the developing Jurong area and to help improve the lives of the workers living in the new estate. As Sng sums up, it managed to "solve conflicts between rival groups of workers; advocate for the opening of a second market and mosque in the area; negotiate with the Ministry of Health to set up a maternal and child health clinic; convince the bus company to set up new routes in the area; and to arrange for English tuition for working girls" (Sng 2003: 255).

The success of the Jurong mission project, however, was short-lived and culminated in its closure in 1972 for several reasons: on the one hand, internal disputes emerged among community workers of the civic center and members of the mission committee, which started to strain their relationship (Poon 2012b).

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[64] The Community Organization (CO) method was developed by Saul Alinsky, a social activist in Chicago, who had been working with churches across North America since the 1930s (Barr 2010b: 342).

According to Sng (2003: 255-256), the mission's liberal Christian agenda of "building [...] a viable, human and mature community" and to "foster new social values that would help in cultivating inter-racial community understanding and solidarity" were conceived of as lacking a clear biblical foundation by some member churches associated with the SIM. Disagreements about the 'right' strategies and objectives of social evangelism accentuated the underlying tensions between liberal and conservative Christians prevalent at that time, making a collaboration between the churches and the civic center increasingly difficult to maintain. On the other hand, the JIM's increasing orientation towards adversarial strategies in community problem-solving and change of focus from social to labor issues during its later stage of development contributed to the further estrangement of the mission from its environment. It not only generated tensions between the JIM and various power groups (such as state-supported unions) but, in the end, also failed to take roots within the local community itself. As Sng (2003: 255) argues, Fujiyoshi's "doctrinaire" CO approach and deployment of high-pressure methods in solving community issues lacked a more nuanced understanding of the local situation and cultural practice of accommodating differences through subtler and non-confrontational manners.

The decisive reason for the final shutdown of the JIM, however, can be traced back to the reactions of the PAP government itself, which perceived the mission's activities among industrial workers as subversive to the extent that it challenged the state's authority as the dominant arbitrator in labor relations and disputes. Accordingly, the Registrar of Societies began to apply pressure to the Jurong Christian Church and its parent church organization, the Lutheran Church of Malaysia and Singapore (LCMS), warning its leaders to stop allowing its premises to be used for non-religious purposes or face deregistration and the confiscation of all its church properties on the island. Another warning was issued shortly after, this time directly to the SIM, highlighting the government's concern that its mission could be subverted by 'political agitators', thus urging the mission's representatives to work more closely with government authorities. Faced with increasing pressure exercised by the state and weakening support of the churches, the decision was finally made to withdraw the endorsement and financial support from the SIM, eventually leading to the shutdown of the project in January 1972 and the subsequent demise of Urban

Industrial Missions in Singapore altogether (Barr 2008: 232). Thus, the first experiment in Christian community development was brought to an "inglorious end" (Sng 2003: 256).

In assessing the government's response, it is important to remember that the Jurong Industrial Estate was the center of the state's large-scale industrialization strategy aimed predominantly at establishing labor-intensive industries to attract foreign capital investment and create new job opportunities for its population. To ensure the success of Singapore's industrial project, the PAP pursued a mostly repressive labor policy throughout the 1960s that was geared towards disciplining and demobilizing oppositional labor unions and, among other measures, tightened the rights over the registration of any social organization (Deyo 1989: 123).[65] By the 1970s, government officials had suppressed the working class by depriving them of independent leaders and organizations while simultaneously co-opting the workers' concerns through the establishment of a state-controlled union umbrella organization, the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC) (Tamney 1996: 28). Any pressure group that operated outside pro-government unions and attempted to undermine the success of the Jurong industrial project was, therefore, seen as interference with the state's fundamental goal of industrial modernization and, in the end, represented a threat to Singapore's very economic survival.

Against this background, it is evident that the ecumenical concept of being on par with the state in addressing social justice concerns and labor rights issues found no acceptance from a government that had staked its political legitimacy on economic progress. The fact that the JIM was spearheaded by an American and largely funded by the EACC further provided the government with a strong incentive to portray the mission's actions as an act of foreign interference in local affairs (Ow 2014: 80). In hindsight, the shutdown of the JIM can thus be interpreted as a political move through which the government could at once demonstrate its hegemonic power over civil society and reaffirm its unconditionality in pursuing

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[65] The legal policy instruments instituted to regulate and discipline the labor market included: the *Societies Act* (1967), which required most organizations and associations of more than ten people to be registered; the *Trade Union Act* (1966), which weakened trade union's collective bargaining power and de facto made it illegal for unions to carry out strikes; the *Industrial Relations (Amendment) Act* and *Employment Act* (1968), which increased the weekly working hours of Singaporeans and reduced the number of annual public holidays.

its economic development goals. However, it is equally important to understand that the government was not in principle opposed to the *social* aims of the Industrial Mission (Poon 2012b). As already mentioned, the government saw the Christian community as being well equipped to conquer social ills, realizing its potential in aiding to overcome the structural problems in wider society caused by the state's modernization program. Nevertheless, social involvement was only tolerated as long as it did not resort to *political* activism or ran counter to the state's secular interests. For the government, the imperative of maintaining a secular framework laid precisely in its value of furthering national development, whereas religion always-already carried the potential risk of obstructing progress. Secularism, as Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Inche Rahim Ishak had emphasized in 1970,

> places no impediment as it does in some societies where development is sometimes dictated by religious beliefs which if carried to the extreme can lead to stagnation. It is therefore important for us to realise that while a secular state allows the individual religious enlightenment **it also allows for national development without religious hindrances** (The Straits Times 1970; emphasis added).

Clearly, the EACC's vision of empowerment, social justice, and solidarity with the poor and working class stood in sharp contrast to the state's rationale of creating a 'rugged society' based on meritocratic and pragmatic economic principles. The unfolding of these fault lines thus made conflict almost inevitable (Barr 2008: 233).

Closing the Pandora's Box of Christian social activism

In a way, the shutdown of the JIM in 1972 foreshadowed developments that were to take place nearly two decades later and culminated in the extra-judicial detention of Catholic social activists during the so-called 'Marxist Conspiracy' in 1987 and the subsequent expulsion of the CCA the same year. Both events proved to be critical turning points for the consolidation of the government's secular framework, marking the beginning of a new era in the relationship between state and religion and the end of liberal Christianity in Singapore.

The 'Marxist Conspiracy', to which I turn first, revolves around a covert security operation (code-named 'Operation Spectrum') by the Internal Security Department (ISD) in May and June 1987, which saw a total of twenty-two Catholic lay workers and other social activists arrested and detained without trial under

the Internal Security Act (ISA) for their alleged involvement in a "clandestine communist network" (The Straits Times 1987a). Using state-controlled mainstream media, the government conveyed its own account of the events, crafting a narrative of a "conspiracy" that had sought "to subvert the existing social and political system in Singapore" and thus justified the "pre-emptive strike" against the "red threat" out of national security reasons (The Straits Times 1987i). In privileging the state's version as apparent objective fact, various media channels proceeded to portray the core of the 'conspirators' as Catholic Marxists "who had been subverted by the teachings of liberation theology" (Barr 2010b: 335) and had used the Catholic Church and other religious organizations as a cover "to overthrow the Government and establish a communist state" (The Straits Times 1987e). According to the press statement issued by the Ministry of Home Affairs, the activists had propagated communist ideas during Bible study classes and through publications that "condemned the capitalist system, denounced the multinational corporations for allegedly exploiting the workers, exaggerated class differences, and incited the Christian activists to fight for the oppressed" (The Straits Times 1987g). Stirring up the heat, Senior Minister S. Rajaratnam further accused the detainees as "Leninists wearing white collars the wrong way round" whose actions formed part of an "unholy trinity of racialism, religious fanatism and communism" that was "emotionally and intellectually" rooted in "ancient tribal instincts" and thus carried the "potential for religious conflict and bloodshed" (Singapore Government Press Release [SGPR] no. 46/ Jun. 26 June 1987; SGPR no. 44/ Jul. 28. July 1987; SGPR no. 46/ Aug. 14 August 1987).

Overall, the official statements and extensive media coverage depicted a profoundly disturbing picture of the events, intentionally triggering deep-seated anxieties about the return of the 'red threat' that still lingered in the collective memory of the people. As Michael Hill (1998) points out, exaggeration and symbolization were critical components of the state's discursive repertoire to establish the context within which the 'Marxist Conspiracy' was to be interpreted, creating images "sharper than reality" that served to identify the "folk devils" to be scapegoated. All the more, it was indicative that the 'danger from within' would come in the guise of several English-educated activists who were by then relatively unknown to the wider public. Of all people, they were the ones cast as the "folk

devils" who had brought back the unwanted specter of communism and, almost overnight and single-handedly, managed to put the government in a state of alarm. But, who were these "Genghis Khans of the 21st century" that had allegedly sought to "destroy capitalism" and establish a "Marxist state"?[66] Where did they come from?

It did not take long for the government to 'discover' the historical connection between the EACC and the civic center at Jurong, tracing the origins of the 'conspiracy' back to the JIM where two of the alleged main agitators, Vincent Cheng and Tan Wah Piow, had met for the first time (D.P.S. Goh 2010). According to a *Straits Times* report, it was during their time as student activists in the 70s that both had sought to stir up social unrest and "infiltrate" a "triumvirate" of organizations (the paper specifically referred to the *Jurong Industrial Mission,* the *Student Christian Movement of Singapore*, and the *National University of Singapore Student's Union*) by propagating Marxist ideas and organizing protest actions (The Straits Times 1987j). In retrospect, the article thus described the JIM as a "religious body formed purportedly to promote workers' welfare, but which was used by leftists, Maoists, and Marxists to stir up industrial unrest in the Jurong factories," while Cheng and Tan were seen as having attempted "to exploit industrial disputes by taking up the cause of allegedly 'exploited labor' and instructing workers to ignore the directives of the bona fide trade unions" (ibid.). Cheng, however, a full-time Catholic lay worker who had been receiving financial support from the EACC arguably played a minor role during his time at the JIM (Barr 2010b). Nevertheless, he was portrayed as the central figure in the conspiracy plot, leading to his detention without trial for three years. Tan, on the other hand, the former president of the University of Singapore's Students' Union who had fled Singapore in 1976 after being sentenced to one year in jail for supposedly unlawful assembly and rioting, was depicted as acting as Cheng's mentor and mastermind of the plot from his exile in London. In its press release, the Ministry of Home Affairs stated that both had "since the early 1980s executed a systematic plan to infiltrate and subvert lawfully established organisations for political agitation...calculated to revive class hatred and conflict, breed disaffection towards the existing political and economic system, and revive political instability" (The Straits Times 1987c). Under

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[66] Quotes taken from S. Rajaratnam; SGPR no. 46/ Aug. 14 August 1987.

the given circumstances, such activities were seen as "prejudicial" to national security "and, if left unchecked, "would lead to unmanageable political instability and chaos" (ibid.).

Significantly, the state's account of the 'conspiracy' was rarely clear about the precise nature of the activities of the social activists it detained (Rajah 2008: 279). The detainees were never charged with a criminal offense, nor did they undergo a public trial. Indeed, as Michael Barr (2010b: 337) has argued, the PAP leadership never believed that the activists were part of a Marxist plot with the intention of overthrowing the state in the first place. According to the secret minutes recorded at a private meeting between Lee Kuan Yew and representatives of the Roman Catholic clergy that took place after the arrests, the prime minister expressed that he was neither "worried" nor "interested in Vincent Cheng and his group," dismissing them as "novices" and nothing more than "do-gooders, who wanted to help the poor and the dispossessed" (Lee qtd. in Barr 2010b: 353; see also Seow 1994: 70). Furthermore, there is little evidence to support the government's accusation that the lay activists had embraced a Marxist interpretation of liberation theology to engage in political activism. On the contrary, as Barr points out, a closer examination of the internal Catholic publication organ *Church and Society* reveals a more selective reading of liberation theology that "deliberately eschewed the most contentious positions with which it was sometimes associated" while taking most of its inspiration from traditional Catholic social teachings (Barr 2010b: 340). Clearly then, the inconsistency between the government's public rhetoric and the actual threat that the 'conspirators' posed to national security not only reflected the government's unfamiliarity with the variety and nuances of Catholic liberation and social theologies but also suggests that deeper issues were at stake.

Hill (2002: 1998) situates the conspiracy episode within a series of state-sponsored crisis-productions during the 80s, suggesting that the motifs of 'crisis' and 'survival' formed a vital part of the PAP's governance repertoire to maintain its political dominance whereby religion functioned as a symbolic reference point around which public anxieties were mobilized. According to Hill, the discursive construction of the 'Marxist Conspiracy' can thus be interpreted as an "elite-sponsored moral panic" intended to reconfirm the state-imposed normative boundaries of society and consolidate the imaginary of the state as the main

guarantor of social stability. Following the government's official rhetoric, one can accordingly read the scripting of the conspiracy narrative as part of the state's underlying survivalist ideology in which the citizens had to be constantly reminded of the nation's inherent vulnerability, while the construction and amplification of a crisis mentality served to legitimize the state's power and, in turn, reinforce the citizens' dependency on the state. However, as we have seen in the JIM case, this was not the first instance that Christians had challenged the state's developmental ethos or been associated with subversive political action. Why, then, would the government react so fervently this time while the shutdown of the Industrial Mission in the 1970s had been dealt with in a much more discrete manner? Why use the Internal Security Act and construct a moral panic in the first place? And, most importantly, why did the secular government suddenly involve itself in theological matters (D.P.S. Goh 2010: 74)?

One factor that might have prompted the government to respond differently can be traced back to the increasing complexity and scale of Christian developments in Asia in the late 1970s and the 1980s, which saw the convergence of transnational Protestant and Catholic ecumenical movements, as well as the concurrent rise of politicized forms of Asian liberation theologies. The political struggle for democracy in South Korea, for instance, was vitally driven by the *minjung* ('people's') theological movement, which justified Christian political activism as a means to overthrow the ruling military regime under Chun Doo-hwan. In a similar vein, Christian activists in the Philippines employed Marxist social class analysis to formulate their own grassroots liberation Christology (popularized as the *theology of struggle*) and were substantially involved in the People Power Revolution that led to President Marcos' subsequent downfall in 1986. 'Operation Spectrum' thus took place at a time of greater democratic transitions in Asia, with Catholic and Protestant Christians adopting prominent roles in forming political opposition parties and bringing about regime change. Confronted with the widespread popularity of various strands of liberation theology and their involvement in Asian democratic movements, the PAP leadership became increasingly vigilant about the implications such developments could have for Singapore. Already one year before the arrests, during Pope John Paul II's visit to Singapore in 1986, Lee Kuan Yew expressed his concerns about the

constant "to-ing and fro-ing" of some local priests and church activists to the Philippines, lamenting that some of them were "falling for the 'do-it-yourself revolution', packaged in the Philippines" and "acting as if I were President Marcos to be opposed and overthrown" (The Straits Times 1989a). Fearing that "the wave of democratization was arriving in Singapore through liberal Christianity" (D.P.S. Goh 2010: 72) it was clear that any form of Christianity exhibiting an affinity to liberation theology had to be contained; as laid out by Lee Kuan Yew in his statement that he "would not allow this idea to be put into practice in Singapore" (The Straits Times 1989b).

Yet, despite such rhetoric, it would be far-fetched to assume that Lee Kuan Yew genuinely believed that a people's revolution similar to the one in the Philippines would likely occur on Singaporean soil. The PAP's political power was too entrenched to be seriously challenged, even though the party's share of votes had unexpectedly plunged in the 1984 general election due to several unpopular policies it had implemented during the first half of the 1980s (Quah 1985). Nor was the massive human rights pressure from over 200 organizations and foreign governments in the aftermath of the arrests able to cause much damage to the PAP's political legitimacy.[67] As Barr (2010b) points out, the issue at stake was that the radical democratization approach of Christian liberation movements had the *potential* to threaten the PAP's monopoly on political discourse in the short term. Unlike in the early 1970s, when a few quiet words with church leaders had been sufficient to shut down the JIM, the government believed that the Catholic Church was willfully defying its explicit warnings that some of the para-church organizations working under the Archdiocese's auspices had allegedly crossed the line into politics (ibid.: 358). In hindsight, the state's real concern in staging the 'Marxist conspiracy' was, therefore, not about some misguided "do-gooders" falling for some DIY revolution but geared towards the *capacity* of the Church to engage

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[67] The detention of the Catholic social workers drew wide international criticism from NGO's, human rights organizations and foreign governments, eventually prompting the International Commission of Jurists, the International Federation of Human Rights, and the Asian Human Rights Commission to investigate the circumstances of the arrests on site. The request of the facts finding mission to meet with government representatives or the detainees, however, was denied. From the government's point of view the facts of the case had already been made public through the media and there was nothing new to be added (The Straits Times 1987f).

in socio-political issues which carried the risk of undermining the nation's developmental and secular covenant in the long run (Barr 2008: 242; D.P.S. Goh 2010: 71, 74). Contrary to the official narrative, then, the social activists did not pose an actual danger to national security but challenged the compartmentalization of politics and religion (Barr 2010b: 356). In this sense 'Operation Spectrum' served as an explicit warning to other religious organizations not to be engaged in the political sphere and to refrain from contesting the state's monopoly on setting the public agenda for the day-to-day running of the country (Barr 2008), a stance that was underlined by Lee Kuan Yew in his broadcast on the eve of the National Day in 1987:

> After this experience, I do not expect the Catholic Church to allow any Catholic priest or Catholic lay worker again to make use of the Church or parachurch organisations for political ends. I expect that to be the case also with other Christian denominations and indeed with all other religions (Lee Kuan Yew 1987: Eve of National Day Broadcast, *Press Release Ministry of Communications and Information* no. 26/Aug/02-1/87/08/08: 4-5).

Against this background, it did not come as a surprise that the government began to set its eyes on the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA), ultimately leading to the organization's expulsion in December 1987, just seven months after 'Operation Spectrum'. Invoking Section 24(I) of the Societies Act, the government ordered the CCA to be dissolved; its property seized; the working permits of its international staff revoked; its accounts frozen, and affairs wound up (O'Grady 1990). Again, it is revealing to look more closely at the government's rhetoric in justifying its actions, which followed in a similar vein as the 'Marxist Conspiracy'. In its press release, the Ministry of Home Affairs spelled out the reason for its decision, claiming that the CCA had been using Singapore "as a base to support 'liberation movements' in other Asian countries, helping to fund pro-communist movements, solidarity conferences and exchanges for political activists and dissidents" (Singapore Government Press Release [SGPR] no. 48/Dec, 30 December 1987).[68] Alluding to the conference's involvement in the JIM back in the 70s, the report laid out that it had provided "covert support for radical activists in Singapore" and had "taken care to conceal its direct association with Cheng", therefore breaching "its undertaking not to indulge in any political activity or allow its funds to be used for

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[68] The following quotes are taken from the same source unless stated otherwise.

political purposes." Furthermore, the government accused the CCA of including articles on liberation theology in its monthly news journal, which tried to "persuade its readers to involve themselves in radical political activities" and included editorials that exhorted "readers to take up issues that have nothing to do with Christianity." What weighed even more from the government's perspective was that the CCA had seemingly mounted a "campaign against the arrests of the Marxist conspirators" from its subsidiary bodies in Hong Kong and some of its member Councils of Churches, thereby disregarding "the fact that the detainees were involved in a conspiracy to subvert and destabilize the country to establish a Marxist state."[69] The statement thus concluded that the Singapore state

> …will not allow any foreign or regional organization based in Singapore to meddle in the internal affairs of Singapore or to use Singapore as a base for political activities involving other countries…The CCA is being used for purposes prejudicial to Singapore's interests and has therefore been expelled.

To be sure, the Singapore government was not alone in linking global ecumenical Christianity to leftist political activism. A report issued by the U.S. State Department in August 1987 claimed a close relationship between the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the Soviet Union, arguing that the Soviets were misusing the WCC for propaganda purposes and its headquarters' in support of "radical leftist and/or violent movements in the Third World" (United States Department of State 1987: 12). While it is difficult to verify whether government officials in Singapore were aware of the report, it certainly reveals the broader geopolitical dimension and Cold War dynamics at play.

Yet, contrary to the Singapore government, the CCA did not view the issue at stake as being about political ideology, Marxist or otherwise. In an open letter, the CCA counter-posed the government's charges as "unwarranted and untenable" which revealed "a basic misunderstanding of the role of the Church in society and the way in which church and state relate to each other" (*Open Letter* cited in O'Grady 1990).[70] According to the CCA's theological self-understanding, the Church could

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[69] Several organizations (such as the Asian Human Rights Commission, the Asian Committee for People´s Organization, or the Documentation of Action Groups in Asia) had supported the international investigation into the arrests and were falsely linked to the CCA.

[70] *Open Letter to Member Churches of the Christian Conference of Asia* reprinted in O'Grady 1990: 79-85. The following quotes are all taken from the same source unless stated otherwise.

not simply retreat to the private realm but was called "to view society from the perspective of the poor and the oppressed" and to challenge "all structures which diminish human life" in its pursuit to "witness to God´s love for all people everywhere and every aspect of human life…, [including] political and economic life". With striking determination, the CCA not only criticized the government's actions as a "presumptuous" secular intervention into the conference's core beliefs but also accused the state of acting unrightfully "beyond its area of competence when it attempts to define Christianity." Referring to the state's accusation of orchestrating a campaign against the government after the arrests of Cheng and others, it clarified that the mentioned NGO's were not 'subsidiaries' of the conference but independent bodies that had acted on their own account and without its support. The CCA was neither "associated with the findings of the mission," nor did it make a public statement on the arrests as to avoid any "embarrassment to CCA constituents in the country." The letter concluded that "the first allegiance of the Church of Jesus Christ must always be to God. In matters of faith, therefore, the CCA is answerable to God and not the Singapore, or any other, government."

Nevertheless, the CCA's interpolation went unheeded as the Singapore government had already begun to tighten its control over religious affairs, making it clear that the Church should follow its biblical imperative to "render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's." (Matthew 22: 21). The government's policy on the relationship between religion and politics had been clearly outlined by Lee Kuan Yew in his memorable National Day Rally Speech in August of the same year, in which he re-invoked the unconditionality of the state's demand for a strict separation of the religious and political spheres while re-emphasizing the social role of religious actors in society:

> What we want our religious and para-religious groups to do is to give relief to the destitute, the disadvantaged, the disabled, to take part in activities which will foster communal fellowship. Emphasis on charity, alms-giving and social and community work. And priests better stay out of espousing a form of economic system, or challenge the way we do things, social policy or theory…Churchmen, lay preachers, priests, monks, Muslim theologians, all those who claim divine sanctions of holy insights, take off your clerical

robes before you take on anything economic or political. Take it off. Come out as a citizen or join a political party and it is your right to belabour the Government. But if you use a church or a religious publication and your pulpit for these purposes there will be serious repercussions...**Once religion crosses the line and goes into what they call social action, liberation theology, we are opening up Pandora´s Box in Singapore. The end result is dismemberment of our multi-religious community** (The Straits Times 1987b; The Straits Times 1987d, emphasis added).

In hindsight, Lee Kuan Yew's speech set the benchmark for Singapore's state-church relations and laid the foundation for the subsequent implementation of the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act (MRHA) in 1990. At the same time, the expulsion of the CCA also marked the end of liberal Christian influence in Singapore. As Michael Poon (2012a: 12) observes, "ecumenical and liberal Christians, who dominated Singapore's Christian scene in the 1950s and 1960s, suddenly found themselves with little public space to manoeuvre." The government's message was clear: Christians should stay out of politics, or they would risk getting 'burned' (ibid.).

Losing ground

Looking back at the events surrounding the 'Marxist Conspiracy' and the expulsion of the CCA, one could jump to the conclusion that the government was the only reason for determining the fate of Christian liberalism in Singapore. But understanding the demise of liberal Christianity merely as an outcome of state interventionism overlooks the more complex internal developments that were taking place within the Protestant community during that time. Significantly, the opposition against the CCA and its alleged increasing alignment with liberation theology did not only come from the ranks of government officials but also from member churches themselves. The language of politicization, liberation, and social transformation, which had taken hold of the ecumenical agenda, did not find common ground among the majority of Anglican and Methodist church leaders, leading them to critically reassess their further engagement with the CCA and their role within the ecumenical network in general. Not long after the CCA's expulsion, the Methodist Church suspended all its activities with the conference, criticizing its "overall shift of emphasis from a viable program of witness to a political challenge to any government, including the government of Singapore" (O'Grady 1990: 34). As evidence, Bishop Ho Chee Sin pointed out to a CCA newsletter statement from May

1988 in which Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, his son Lee Hsien Loong (then acting minister for Trade and Industry), and First Deputy Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong were alluded to as the political triumvirate "Father, Son and holy Goh," a reference to a then-popular joke easily recognizable by a Singaporean audience (ibid.). For Bishop Ho, however, such a caricature of Singapore's leading elite was "stale, questionable and profane" and confirmed the shift which the CCA had taken, while at the same time adding that his church would reconsider its decision and re-associate with the CCA "as and when the issues have been resolved to [its] satisfaction"(ibid). Concomitantly, in February 1989, the National Council of Churches of Singapore (NCCS) cut its ties with the CCA, while the Anglican Church, who had already stopped paying membership subscriptions back in 1985, officially suspended their links to the conference in June 1988 (ibid). Similar to the Methodist Church, the disaffiliation of the Anglican Church was grounded in its objection to the conference's interpretation of liberation theology and its alleged promotion of "anti-government action to solve social and economic problems" (ibid.).[71]

In retrospect, it is easy to interpret the reactions of the two largest mainline churches and the NCCS as a tactical means to demonstrate their national allegiance to the state and thus an opportunistic adjustment to the political pressure exercised by the PAP government. Given the experience of the JIM shutdown back in the 1970s, the detention of Catholic social workers during the 'Marxist Conspiracy' and the subsequent expulsion of the CCA, it was evident that church leaders had lost interest in any further ecumenical engagement involving social activism and were cautious about any actions that could be interpreted as running against the government's interests. However, the issues at stake went beyond political intimidation and self-censorship. On the one hand, the expulsion of the CCA coincided with broader theological shifts and realignments that led to an increased "evangelicalization" of the Protestant landscape in Singapore, consequently pushing the non-evangelical wings of mainline churches to the margins. The reasons for and

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[71] The Methodist Church retained its membership in the World Council of Churches and currently is the only church organization in Singapore that is member of the ecumenical body. The NCCS, on the other hand, is affiliated with the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism (CWME) of the WCC, but has not maintained official ties with WCC in general. Thanks to Ming Shun Chiang for clarifying this point.

implications of this development will be discussed in more detail in the next section. For now, two contextual features are worth sketching out. First, evangelicalism received an unexpected boost through the emergence of the charismatic movement in the mid-1970s. The 'revival' that gradually swept through the island and cut across denominational boundaries not only led to the partial dissemination of charismatic practices but also, and more importantly, offered a spiritual meaning and sense of predestination to Singapore's postcolonial nation-building process (Chong 2016). Rather than challenging the dominant national narrative held by the state, evangelical charismatics aligned the teleological scripting of Singapore's economic 'success story' with the spiritual trajectory of the Christian community, thereby transposing the divine significance of the revival unto the nation itself. Faced with a burgeoning charismatic movement that provided a more practical framework for making sense of the developmental ethos of the state and spiritual telos of the nation (D.P.S. Goh 2010), the ecumenical initiative and formulation of a contextualized liberal Asian theology based on 'suffering and hope' was bound to lose out. Second, and related to the latter point, the rise of evangelicalism in the 1980s further intersected with a growing middle-class of Chinese Protestant Christians who, as beneficiaries of the economic status quo, did not subscribe to a social reading of the Gospel and therefore were less inclined towards advocating social inequality issues. As Terence Chong argues, "the decline of liberal Christianity and social activism made Christianity less of a contentious space for numerous new converts who were from the emergent middle class, many of them reaping the benefits of global capital" (Chong 2016: 102). The evangelical message of individual salvation and the later popularization of prosperity theologies which interpreted material progress as a sign of divine blessing correlated with the spiritual needs, aspirations, and working ethos of an emergent urban middle class and thus found fertile ground among young, upwardly mobile Singaporeans (ibid.).

On the other hand, and from a broader perspective, the sudden suspension of the CCA and subsequent membership withdrawal of Singapore's two largest church denominations and the NCCS also exposed the weak institutionalization of Asian ecumenism at the national level. As Poon (2013b: 42) points out, it underscored the "dispensability" and shallow rootedness of pan-Asian ecumenical

involvements, particularly in matters of national security and interest. Ironically, the redundancy of the CCA was in part precipitated by its shift from a church-centered ecumenical agenda towards a people-centered approach, which consequently undermined the organization's capacity of setting a solid foundation for intraregional church cooperation and hindered the development of a regional self-awareness that could have served as a reference point for establishing a shared Asian Church identity (Poon 2011). According to Poon (2013b), the CCA's advocacy for a contextualized social theology as a common denominator proved insufficient to bridge the inter-denominational rivalries arising from ethnic-nationalist conflicts in the wake of nation-building processes in postcolonial Asia. Caught up between the struggles of state-building and self-determination, ethnic minority churches often turned to the former mission boards as a source of identity and used their foreign linkages to establish their credentials (M.N.-C. Poon 2013b: 41). Even if the Western missionary era had ended, Asian churches remained under the influence of denominational identities and, as argued by Mathews Chunakara, "more enthusiastic in relating to their Western counterparts rather than relating to and engaging with their sister churches at local or national levels" (Chunakara 2006: 67). The diverse trajectories of independence and nation-building thus fostered the growth of different trans-continental allegiances, making any attempts at deeper regional collaborations within Asia challenging from the start. Without a strong pan-Asian identity, national sovereignty became an overriding concern, resulting in the development of contextual theologies tailored to each country's specific local political, social and economic circumstances (M.N.-C. Poon 2013b). Preoccupied with their own domestic affairs, church leaders began to have little incentive to engage in region-wide initiatives or make commitments beyond their national sphere of influence (Poon 2011: 29). This may also explain why the responses to the CCA's expulsion from Singapore remained limited and failed to inspire solidarity among various ecumenical agencies. As O'Grady (1990) laments, instead of sending "shock-waves to all national, international and regional ecumenical bodies," the event was mostly regarded as an internal affair and quickly "faded into the background of people's memory".

In sum, the 'dispensability' of the ecumenical initiative in Singapore was as much a result of the general waning influence of institutionalized forms of Pan-

Asian ecumenism as it was induced by the member churches themselves, most of whom were struggling to identify with the liberal agenda set forth by the CCA and critically viewing its actions as unnecessary interference into their domestic affairs. In retrospect, it can thus be argued that the PAP government contributed to the already ongoing decline of Christian liberalism and, paradoxically, became the unintentional facilitator for the consolidation of evangelical Christianity in Singapore. While successfully closing the 'Pandora's Box' of liberation theology and curtailing any Christian incentives for political activism, it yet opened up another one that would prove hard enough to be closed again.

3.3.2   The Spirit moves – Evangelical realignments and charismatic revivalism

To understand the emerging dominance of evangelicalism in Singapore, we have to go back in time. As pointed out earlier, the evangelical presence on the island stepped up in the 1950s through the influx of new church denominations and various interdenominational mission and para-church agencies. Their arrival converged with already established Chinese vernacular churches which were mostly theologically conservative and based their spiritual heritage on John Sung's revivalist meetings in the mid-1930s. Concomitantly, a small number of non-denominational and locally-run churches existed in Singapore that subscribed to a conservative evangelical position, and as was the case with the Brethren movement, could trace their origins as far back as the early colonial era. Evangelicals in Singapore thus came from diverse historical backgrounds, adhered to different ecclesiastical traditions, and accordingly pursued different church agendas. Yet, despite this inherent diversity, they sought to establish their own credentials within the Protestant landscape and redefine their role amidst Singapore's postcolonial nation-building process.

Challenges ahead

An overriding concern arising within evangelical circles during the post-war and immediate post-independence era was the dominant influence of liberal theology among mainline church institutions and their alignment with the ecumenical movement. Unlike their liberal counterparts who identified Christ with the suffering multitudes (D.P.S. Goh 2010: 65) and interpreted salvation in terms of

liberation and humanization, evangelicals emphasized personal conversion and evangelism as the church's primary callings. Critical of any ecumenical initiative associated with the EACC or the CCMS, they accused the liberal-oriented Protestant leaders of substituting evangelism with social action. In their understanding, the attempt to unite Christianity on liberal theological foundations came at the expense of biblical truth and, therefore, had the potential to undermine efforts to develop a localized Christian identity based on evangelical principles. As Thomas Harvey points out:

> Evangelical suspicion of modernist ecumenism led local churchmen not only to resist its rhetoric but also to see it as something alien and unwelcome. What appeared 'progressive' to western eyes appeared strange, irrelevant, imposed and even dangerous to most Christians in Singapore and Malaysia. Such ambivalence not only strengthened the appeal of John Sung's anti-ecumenical message, it led local churchmen to embrace conservative evangelicalism as indigenous, true and practical in character (Harvey 2009: 262).

The fundamental different theological understanding concerning the salvific purpose and mission of the Church in society stirred intense debates among evangelicals on how to respond to liberal theological streams within their church institutions. After all, John Sung's legacy loomed large, and his admonition against liberal Christianity as a 'poison that could easily cause death' was still fresh and alive among some local pastors. Evangelicals were thus moved to react to the dominance of liberal Christianity and develop a contextualized theology that could withstand the perceived foreign imposition of liberal ecumenism while strengthening the evangelical basis of the Christian community in Singapore (Sng 2003). Views on the best way to proceed varied across the evangelical spectrum. One option was to actively pursue secession from denominational church bodies associated with the ecumenical movement, as was the case with the Singapore Life Church, which broke away from the Chinese Presbyterian Synod to form the reformed-fundamentalist Bible-Presbyterian Church in 1955 (see Tow 1985). Such breakaways, however, proved to be the exception. Most evangelical leaders from mainline churches encouraged their members to remain in their respective congregations, even if they happened to be under liberal guidance or connected to the ecumenical movement. As Harvey (2009) argues, the decision to maintain former colonial ecclesial connections and friendly relations with foreign

missionaries was largely based on pragmatic considerations. Despite perceiving the 'foreigners' as a "symbol of colonial hegemony and modernism," maintaining informal and formal ties with western churches and missionaries not only ensured that the practical needs of the congregations were met but also strengthened the denominational identity of an already fragmented church landscape split along ethnic and linguistic lines (Harvey 2009: 262). Contrary to the national ecumenical agenda set forth by the CCMS, which was viewed as having little practical value, the benefits of preserving church unity through denominational structures outweighed the evangelical concern for theological orthodoxy. Hence, unlike developments in the US, where modernist-fundamentalist controversies resulted in permanent schisms within mainline denominations, the majority of evangelicals in Singapore stayed put and opted to maintain a tenuous relationship with the denominational umbrella organizations they were affiliated with, hoping for a "spiritual renewal" to revive their congregations from within (Sng 2003: 238).

Yet, as much as the majority of evangelicals did not support secession, they equally recognized the need to establish inter-denominational institutions that would correspond to their evangelical orientation. Influenced by John Sung's radical stance against liberalism, members of the Singapore Chinese Christian Inter-Church Union initiated the foundation of their own theological college to provide a Chinese-evangelical alternative to the liberal inclined and foreign-dominated Trinity Theological College (Sng 2003). As a result, the Singapore Theological Seminary (later renamed Singapore Bible College) was established in 1952 by evangelical pastors from Anglican, Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, and independent churches, with support from the Chinese Church Union, Christian Nationals Evangelism Commission (CNEC) and the Overseas Missionary Fellowship (OMF). Another initiative born out of the commitment to buttress the evangelical presence in Singapore was the founding of the Graduate's Christian Fellowship (GCF) in 1955. Formed by a group of university graduates, the GCF, along with its sectional groups (such as the Christian Medical and Dental Fellowship, the Lawyer's Christian Fellowship, and Teachers' Christian Fellowship) aimed to support Christian professionals and help them integrate their faith into their secular working environment. Lastly, the need for a clearer differentiation from liberal theology was also observable among Christian student organizations, resulting in

the disaffiliation of evangelical students from the liberal-oriented Student Christian Movement (SCM) and the formation of the Varsity Christian Fellowship (VCF) in 1952 and the Evangelical Fellowship of Students (FES) in 1958. Alongside other evangelical para-church youth organizations, such as YFC and ISCF, they would later become vital carriers of the charismatic renewal that initially took off among students in the early 1970s.

Apart from the evangelical-liberal controversies that were prevalent primarily during the 1950s and 60s, Singapore's postcolonial condition posed another concern for evangelical church leaders. Like liberal Christians, evangelicals were compelled to chart out a new national strategy and establish an independent church identity amidst the changing social environment induced by the state's accelerated urbanization and industrialization program after Singapore's independence. The question was how to align the evangelical imperatives of evangelism and church growth with the developmental agenda set forth by the PAP government. As commented by Anglican canon James Wong:

> New factories are constantly built, the skyline keeps changing, economic growth keeps space of increased productivity and new pattern of social living are emerging. The church, finding itself in the midst of this dynamic society, should keep abreast of all these changes. Indeed, it should grow more rapidly and even outpace Singapore itself (J.Y.K. Wong 1973: 3).

The expansionist strategy envisioned by Wong and others, however, was challenged on at least two fronts. First, the government's large-scale urban redevelopment project and implementation of tight zoning regulations made it increasingly difficult for churches to find suitable premises to accommodate the slow but steadily growing Christian population on the island. Churches located in private residential areas, for instance, found it continuously challenging to get their property re-zoned for religious purposes and were often pressured to relocate to another site or risk being de-registered. Land scarcity and the reduced availability of permanent physical facilities posed additional obstacles for churches intending to expand their ministries. Since the passing of the Planning Act in 1960, land for religious purposes was allocated by the state and put up for tender by groups of the same religion, which meant that Christians (both Protestant and Catholic) had to compete with each other for a single parcel of land to build a place of worship (Kong 2002). The tender system not only deliberately reinforced intra-religious competition but also increased

property prices and building costs, which smaller and financially less resourceful churches were generally unable to meet. Consequently, many church congregations were forced to find temporary solutions and rent facilities (such as hotel ballrooms, cinemas, and conference venues) across the city on short-term leases, often ending in a precarious cycle of tenure insecurity and constant relocation. Singapore's secular politics of urban religious space and restrictions on land use thus created a "crisis of accommodation" (Hinton 1985: 201) that jeopardized the evangelical aspiration of uncontrolled church growth. Contrary to Wong's projection, Christian growth rates neither accelerated nor 'outpaced' Singapore but remained relatively moderate during the 1970s, a point to which I will return to shortly.

A second difficulty arising from Singapore's independence was the lack of a clear strategy capable of responding to the fundamental societal changes brought about by the state's developmental agenda. While liberal Christians responded to the social ramifications of Singapore's rapid industrialization and massive population resettlement with community-based initiatives, evangelicals largely remained silent on these issues and "were decades behind liberals in theological and programme development" (D.P.S. Goh 2010: 65). Previous attempts for institutional differentiation and intra-evangelical cooperation, as seen in the realm of theological education, did not translate into the formulation of an evangelical practical theology grounded in the people's everyday realities, nor did they necessarily foster a shared and indigenized evangelical identity. Given the inherent heterogeneity of the evangelical religious field and the respective divergent ecclesiastical and theological lineages, evangelicals had difficulties finding a common denominator that could have served as a local reference point for constructing an emancipated Singaporean model of evangelical spirituality. Persisting denominational boundaries intersected with the grassroots dynamics of Chinese-dominated conservatism, while the success of para-church organizations, such as YFC, was primarily based on evangelism methods and organizational structures derived from the West. Further undermining the evangelical efforts for outreach was the prevalence of social class differences that disconnected the mostly middle- to upper-middle-class Christians from the life-worlds of the rest of society. "Christian isolationism," as Hinton argues, meant that evangelicals were "geographically, occupationally and socially separated from the largely

unevangelized sector of the community" (Hinton 1985: 198). Only a fraction of the approximately 187 churches operating in Singapore in the early 1970s were located in or near the newly developed public housing estates, thus "minimizing their capacity to witness to [the non-Christian population] in the course of everyday life" (ibid.: 114).

On a more fundamental level, the reasons for "the failure of the church to move with the people" (Hinton 1985: 198) can be traced back to the ambiguous nature of evangelical identity formation itself, which was, as we have seen, structured in direct opposition to liberal Christianity and fought out theologically along the lines of a self-declared "battle for truth" (Sng 2003: 238). The molding of an evangelical identity primarily through and against liberal Christianity resulted in a paradoxical configuration of reciprocal ascriptions whereby the identity markers of 'local' and 'foreign' came to carry multilayered meanings. On the one hand, Christian liberalism became a shorthand expression for 'Western imposition' that was considered heretical and 'alien' to the Singapore context, while evangelicalism signified its 'orthodox' and 'local' counterpart that resonated with the alleged conservatism of the largely Chinese population on the island. However, this essentialist contraposition functioned merely at a superficial level and was unable to condense into a credible foundation for the development of a distinct and stable Singaporean evangelical identity. While John Sung may have served as a vital identification figure for Chinese vernacular churches, for a new generation of English-educated Chinese Christians influenced by para-church organizations originating from the US, the spiritual point of reference was not China, but lying across the Pacific. Ironically, it was precisely the liberals who most overtly pursued carving out an indigenous church identity and sought to differentiate themselves from the Western ecumenical agenda by developing an 'authentic' Asian contextual theology that was rooted in the everyday struggles of the people caught up in Singapore's relentless path to modernization.

On the other hand, evangelicals themselves were subjected to processes of othering and primarily perceived as a legacy of British colonialism that was considered 'alien' to the Asian context. Unlike Buddhism, Hinduism, or Islam, Christianity did not have the legitimacy to be counted as a 'true Asian' religion but was rather conceived of as a recent entrant lacking a deep-rooted civilizational

heritage and therefore neither historically nor culturally embedded in the region (R.B.H. Goh 2009). Detached from ethnic ties (even if the majority of Christians were Chinese), Christianity became associated with Anglophone higher education, socioeconomic attainment, and an upwardly mobile class status and, as a result, was generally labeled as a religion of the elites. The deliberate antagonistic juxtaposition between liberal ecumenism and evangelical conservatism, therefore, proved to be insufficient for cultivating a localized identity that could have served as a foundation to overcome the perception of being an "exclusive religion of the Westernized middle-classes" (D.P.S. Goh 2010: 65). While such identity politics and theological boundary-making might have been significant in *attempting* to strengthen the evangelical position *within the ambits of the Christian community*, they remained mostly irrelevant to the non-Christian population at large. In other words, it was precisely because liberal Christianity functioned as the 'significant other' in the construction of an evangelical identity that made it difficult for evangelicals to develop an alternative theological program that was fully rooted in Singapore's postcolonial reality and able to build bridges to the people they intended to evangelize. Clearly then, if the "church's main business was winning souls", as argued by Robert Wuthnow (1988: 140) in reference to the US-American context, evangelicals in Singapore had to find ways to transcend their self-inflicted isolationism and become more relevant to the people they sought to reach.

The answer to the challenges posed by the limitation of space, lack of contextual theology, and identity crisis was believed to come in the form of house churches. Modeled after the early Christian fellowships as described in the New Testament Acts of the Apostles, house churches promised to be more flexible than the institutional church in responding to the social and spiritual demands caused by Singapore's rapid urbanization, providing an avenue to reach out to the thousands of new residents who had been resettled under the government's homeownership scheme since the mid-1960s. According to Wong's diagnosis, the new residents in public housing estates were prepared to "make a sharp break with old social ties," which at once opened up new opportunities for evangelism but equally necessitated the development of a "new style of church" that was not tied to the traditions and the edifice of Singapore's colonial past (J.Y.K. Wong 1974: 940). While the large-scale resettlement of people from urban slums and rural

villages into high-rise public housing estates would inevitably lead to uprootedness and social alienation, for Wong, it also showed "an openness to change, a receptivity to innovations, and conceivably *a disposition to change their religious allegiance as well*" (J.Y.K. Wong 1973: 127; emphasis added). Rather than ameliorating the social costs of the state's resettlement program and establishing inclusive communities out of multi-religious people as advocated by liberals (D.P.S. Goh 2010), for Wong, the evangelical mission was to "go beyond the meeting of social needs" and to "persuade men, women and children - within the family context to become followers of Christ and be made responsible members of his church" (J.Y.K. Wong 1974: 940). The establishment of small community churches "in every block of high-rise apartments throughout Singapore," as envisioned by Wong, would provide a more indigenous expression of the Christian faith, thus helping to dispel the perception of Christianity as an exclusive Westernized religion and ultimately lead to the "multiplication" of new congregations and the growth of Christianity in general (J.Y.K. Wong 1973: 13; J.Y.K. Wong 1974: 941).

By the 1980s, however, it became apparent that implementing house churches in the Singaporean context was difficult, and their future would be "one of uncertainty" (Sng 2003: 252). Government restrictions, such as the Societies Act[72] and the aforementioned Urban Planning Act, rendered regular religious meetings in private residential apartments technically illegal. Likewise, dedicated Christian worship and overt door-to-door evangelism in public housing estates could raise complaints from neighbors and create divisions among neighborhood communities. The establishment of house church communities within a multireligious and largely non-Christian environment was thus ultimately bound to lead to conflict, a problem that had already been anticipated by Wong (1974). However, according to Wong's evangelical hermeneutics, such frictions were inevitable and not as much grounded in the social reality of Singapore's religious pluralism per se as they were manifestations of Satan himself and his eternal interference with God's master plan by turning people away from Christ. Wong believed that "Satanic disruptions" were

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[72] The Societies Act regulates the formation, operation, and dissolution of societies, requiring them to register with the Registry of Societies and adhere to specified legal and operational standards. It aims to ensure that these organizations function transparently and do not pose a threat to public order or national security.

to be expected because Satan had "no desire to see people become Christians" and, as in any society, would "mobilize all his 'powers' to frustrate the Christian cause" (J.Y.K. Wong 1974: 942). Nevertheless, Satan could not trump the deep-seated pluralist secular framework of the Singapore state. Conscious of the religiously diverse context they were living in and careful to avoid attracting the ire of government officials, many Christian groups felt "morally obliged" not to use their homes as a site for worship (Hinton 1985: 200).

Ultimately, and perhaps more significantly, the house church model failed to take root because of institutional constraints. The fact that house churches were organized around the household as the basic social unit of Christian fellowship essentially limited the size of the congregation and, therefore, could not provide the broader social framework needed to interact with fellow believers outside the domestic realm. As Hinton (1985: 153) argues, house churches were lacking "the colour, flavour, richness and finish of the large celebrative experience" found in established churches, which particularly appealed to young Christians. Sensitive to the quality of ministry in a church, young people were often attracted to large churches that had "better facilities, better music…, larger crowds of peers" and altogether were better equipped than house churches in providing a wide "range of services and activities" (ibid.: 136). Furthermore, house churches faced challenges in competing with the increasing appeal and influence of evangelical para-church organizations such as Youth for Christ (YFC), Inter-School Christian Fellowship (ISCF), Eagles Evangelism, and others. Operating alongside church-initiated youth ministries, these non-denominational agencies primarily targeted English-stream secondary school and junior college students. By initiating various extra-curricular activities, such as youth camps, gospel rallies, bible studies, and prayer groups, they effectively channeled the young to the churches they cooperated with and became the prime catalysts for the attraction of evangelical Christianity among the youth in Singapore. The localization of evangelicalism in Singapore, therefore, did not come through the avenue of house churches as initially envisioned by Wong and others but was primarily stimulated by evangelical grassroots organizations that were effective in mobilizing the youth and instilling in them a strong evangelical conviction. Alienated by the liberal position of some church leaders and contrary to some of their Christian peers who became

involved in social activism, they "threw in their lot with the embryonic [para-church organizations] whose conservative position provided a good counterpoint" (Sng 2003: 263).

Interlude: religious change and conversion, 1950-1980

It is often assumed that Christianity in Singapore grew exponentially from the end of WWII until the late 1970s. Hinton (1985: 23-28), for example, characterizes the era between 1950 and 1980 as a period of "harvest time" in which many churches saw an unparalleled growth of their congregations stimulated by a rising number of mostly young Anglophone-educated Chinese converts switching their religious affiliation to Christianity. According to Hinton's church growth survey from 1982, 69% of the people in the congregations surveyed were between 15 and 29 years old, and the average age of conversion stood at 14 years (Hinton 1985: 117 and 118). Similarly, Sng (2003) observes an increase in conversions among the youth, which he traces back to the effective evangelism methods of various para-church organizations starting from the 1950s and the charismatic revival that took off in the mid-1970s. Writing from a Christian perspective, Hinton and Sng interpret these developments as signs of God's providence and thus part of His divine plan to turn postcolonial Singapore towards Christ. However, a closer look at the available data casts doubt on the claim of an upsurge in conversions during this period.

First, the assumption of rapid Christian growth between 1950 and 1980 is usually based on statistical evidence derived from comparison between the censuses of 1931 and 1980, covering a period of almost half a century in which no data on religion had been collected in Singapore. The purported percentage increase in Christians (both Catholics and Protestants) from 5.3% (in 1931) to 10.3% (in 1980) has, therefore, limited explanatory power when analyzing long-term changes within the Christian community as the demographic profile of Singapore's population and census methods were qualitatively different in 1931 compared to 1980 (Tong 2007). Data collection on Christianity in 1931 was, for instance, restricted to ethnic Chinese and Indians, with no further differentiation between Protestant and Catholic Christians or inclusion of other demographic variables such as age and language use. Hence, without reliable benchmark
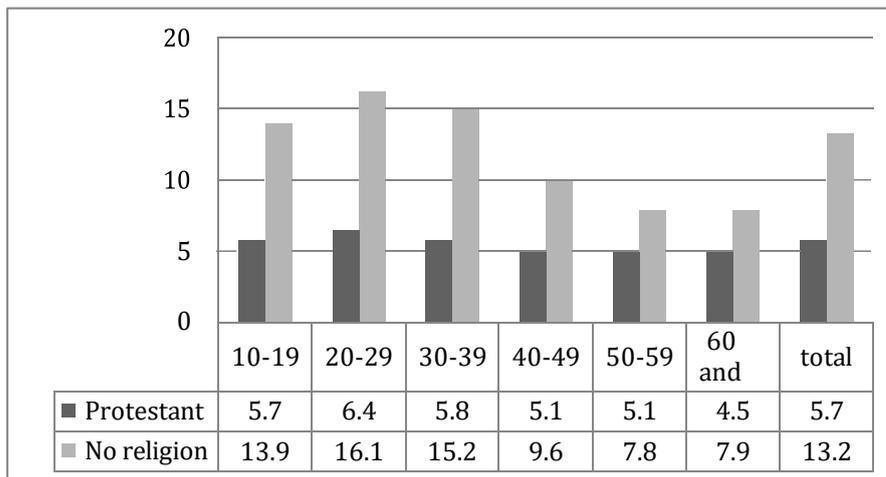
statistics for comparison, the 1980 census data alone does not provide much insight into persistent patterns of Christian conversion since the 1950s (E.C.Y. Kuo 1989: 14), nor should such a comparison of growth rates be interpreted as representing a simple linear conversion trend (Tong 2007: 60).

Second, what tends to go underreported in the enthusiastic accounts of unprecedented Christian growth is that even if Christianity did gain strength in terms of numbers and followers, the majority of people in Singapore either retained their religious affiliation or came to self-identify as non-religionists (E.C.Y. Kuo 1989). A closer look at the age distribution among Protestants from the 1980 census shows no statistical evidence of "any dramatic trend of mass conversion into Christianity among the young" *before 1980* (ibid.: 38). As shown in Chart 2, the variation between the age groups was moderate, and the proportion of Protestants in the young age cohorts was only marginally higher than among the older ones. This suggests a relatively even spread of conversion rates across the different age segments of the Protestant population. On the other hand, when considering the age composition *within* the Protestant community as a point of reference, one can indeed notice a higher proportion of young people across the age ranges, with 10-29 year-olds representing 57.2% of the total share of Protestants (Census 1980). Yet, as Kuo points out. and contrary to Hinton's assessment, this numerical dominance was not caused by an acceleration of conversions but can be explained as reflecting Singapore's general demographic structure in which the young de facto constituted the majority of the total population.

Interestingly a different age distribution pattern emerges within the category of No Religion. In contrast to Protestants, the proportion of young people self-identifying as non-religionists was significantly higher than that in the older age groups (see chart 2). No Religion appeared to be particularly attractive to Chinese-educated youth coming from a Taoist or Buddhist background, for whom Christianity represented a "Western" religion and thus constituted a less attractive alternative (E.C.Y. Kuo 1989). Conversely, Christianity seemed to appeal mainly to English-educated Chinese, while the majority of those self-identifying as Muslims and Hindus remained faithful to the religions into which they were born, reflecting the close interrelationship between religion and ethnicity among the Malay and Indian communities. Religious switching was thus mostly confined to No Religion

and (to a lesser extent) Christianity and primarily took place among ethnic Chinese. According to Kuo (1989: 39), both categories were "competitive in attracting potential 'converts'" and associated with "prestige", "socio-economic status" and, as such, appeared to be "compatible with a modern Singapore."

Chart 2: Percentage of Protestants and Non-Religionists by age group 1980

	10-19	20-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60 and	total
■ Protestant	5.7	6.4	5.8	5.1	5.1	4.5	5.7
■ No religion	13.9	16.1	15.2	9.6	7.8	7.9	13.2

source: census 1980; E.C.Y. Kuo 1989

Even though the 1980 census does not reveal any significant conversion trends to Christianity among the youth, it does confirm Hinton and Sng's observation that by 1980 English had gradually advanced to become the lingua franca of the Protestant community in Singapore. This marked language shift can be explained against the backdrop of the government's bilingual education policy, which promoted and subsequently institutionalized English as the principal medium of instruction in schools and universities. Introduced after independence, the policy was part of the government's overall language regime, which consistently pushed English as the primary means of communication for administration and commerce. As Rappa and Wee (2006: 81) point out, from the government's perspective, English served a purely instrumental function for access to science, technology, and business, while the assigned ethnic 'mother tongue' (Mandarin, Tamil, and Malay) provided Singaporeans "with a link to their traditional cultures and values" that would help to "counter any undesirable effects of Westernization." In addition, English was ideologically conceptualized as a 'race-neutral' language that would help to bridge ethnic divisions, foster inter-ethnic harmony, and, as hoped, enhance social mobility (B.H. Chua 2010). The state's bilingual language policy thus came to serve as an

essential vehicle for Singapore's modernization and nation-building project. It reflected the government's desire to ensure Singapore's economic competitiveness in the global marketplace while aiming to anchor the identity of Singaporeans in their state-defined ethnic and cultural origins.

The conjunction of the state's language policies with the emergence of a new generation of English-educated Christians had considerable long-term effects on the language composition of Singapore's Christian landscape. It not only led to an increased linguistic fragmentation between English and non-English speaking churches along generational lines but also amplified the uneven distribution of Christians in terms of church membership and growth rates. As Sng (2003: 287) observes, church growth mainly occurred among English-speaking congregations, while the memberships of ethno-linguistic churches, such as Tamil and Chinese dialect-speaking congregations, rose at a much slower pace or even declined. A church survey conducted in 1979 further revealed that the percentage increase in church membership among English-speaking congregations between 1970 and 1978 was more than double that of their Chinese counterparts (ibid.). These developments closely mirrored the educational patterns observable within the Protestant community. By 1980, 62% of Protestants were English-stream educated, whereas only 37% came from a Chinese-educated background, indicating a gradual decline of the vernacular school system in Singapore (Clammer 1980: 91). According to John Clammer,

> ...most English-speaking churches sprang from older, established Chinese churches. When the children of these members grow up in an English-educated world, they introduced a congregation consisting mostly of the younger generations with a young pastor, worshipping in English. Initially, both language streams mingle and still consider themselves as one church, but as the time passes and new members are introduced, the congregations separate and incline towards their own language. And especially if the two groups have no common dialect to converse in, contact between the two congregations can be severed (Clammer 1978: 19).

The generational gap, as described by Clammer, however, was more than just about language. It also revealed vital differences in outlook between a younger generation groomed to embrace rapid change and an older generation that was more concerned about preserving its traditions. Raised in post-independent Singapore, the social identity of young Anglophone Christians was neither rooted in

the past nor necessarily tied to ethnicity but rather shaped by Singapore's nation-building process and path to modernization. Amidst the vast social and political shifts, they were searching for spiritual connections that would bring meaning to the current postcolonial condition and provide a sense of direction towards an ever-evolving future. For some, as we have seen, this meant a call for social activism and a critique of the state-imposed status quo. Taking their cues from various strands of liberation theologies, they saw the Christian faith as a force for social justice and change. For others, however, the response was one of spiritual introspection. Influenced by evangelical para-church organizations, they remained largely removed from any kind of social action and instead longed for a spiritual renewal that would draw them to a more profound encounter with God.

In hindsight, and returning to the initial argument of my discussion, the era between 1950 and 1980 was less a period of "harvest time," as Hinton suggested, than a phase of transition that brought about significant qualitative changes to the Protestant community. New church patterns evolved along linguistic and generational lines, with the English-educated youth becoming a dominant force among Protestants. Emancipated from ethnic ties and receptive to changes and new ideas, they developed contrasting visions on how to reconcile their faith within the context of Singapore's rapidly modernizing environment. While for some young Christians, social change was to be brought about by transforming society from within, for others, such change was conditioned upon the transformative power of the Holy Spirit alone. Thus, two differing "Christian imaginations" prevailed within the spiritual and social ecology of Singaporean Christianity in the 1970s (Poon 2012b). In contrast to evangelical church leaders, however, for young evangelicals, the question was not so much about developing a national church agenda or engaging in theological 'battles for truth,' but how to develop a more meaningful faith that was authentic and true-to-life. They were searching for spiritual answers that the institutional church could not provide, thus turning to para-church organizations for guidance. Equipped with high degrees of religious commitment that emphasized personal salvation and a deeper experience of faith, they helped to create a spiritual ferment that injected a fresh impetus into the churches, consequently laying the ground for the subsequent charismatic revival and nationwide evangelism that took off during the late 1970s and 1980s.

Enter charismatic revivalism

A detailed historical account of the charismatic revival, whose origin is commonly dated back to the year 1972 and has locally come to be known as the "Clock Tower Story," can be found elsewhere (see Khong 2012; G. Lee and Lee 2015; Poon 2012a; Poon and Tan 2012). Rather than giving a meticulous re-reading of the events, the following evaluation serves to accentuate the distinct structural features of the renewal by (1) focusing on the contexts and underlying predispositions that provided the ground for the beginning of the charismatic movement in Singapore, (2) delineating the variegated trajectory of the revival, and (3) assessing its impact on the Protestant landscape.

In a nutshell, the postcolonial revival that emerged in Singapore during the 70s can best be understood as being both part of and shaped by an emergent evangelical-charismatic assemblage of national and transnational networks, organizations, mediators, and global Pentecostal media flows that catalyzed and helped to reinforce the growth and transmission of charismatic practices and doctrines within the Christian community. However, as we will see, the unfolding of the charismatic movement was anything but a smooth process. Different church politics of regulation and interpretive frameworks for understanding the nature and role of the *charismata*[73] resulted in an uneven dissemination of the movement. Instead of fully embracing the revival, many church leaders were cautious in maintaining the ecclesiastical status quo and selectively accommodated charismatic practices into their denominational traditions and church governance structures. Upon closer examination, the revival, therefore, neither led to a pervasive 'charismatization' of the Christian landscape nor did the appropriation of charismatic practices necessarily engender radical discontinuities on the institutional level, even if some church members would eventually break away to establish their own independent congregations. More significantly, the revival arguably helped strengthen the churches' evangelical basis, providing a renewed sense of purpose that reinvigorated the evangelistic fervor among Christians while imparting a spiritual meaning to the postcolonial trajectory of the Church and its

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[73] In a broad sense, charismata (or spiritual gifts) such as speaking in tongues, prophecy, and healing are believed to be expressions of the Holy Spirit that are manifested in the life of believers to serve the mission of the Church.

role in society at large.

Historically, the experience of revivalism was not something entirely new to the Christian community in Singapore. John Sung's revivalist meetings during the 1930s and born-again Hong Kong actress Kong Duen Yee's itinerant ministry in the early 1960s had both left their marks on the local Christian landscape.[74] However, the social contexts in which the earlier revivals occurred differed from the incidents in 1972. Most importantly, they took place during Singapore's pre-independence times when the idea of a Singaporean national identity was still absent. Capitalizing on the vast Chinese diaspora networks, Sung's and Kong's revival campaigns in Singapore were thus part of their broader evangelistic outreach to the Chinese Christian communities in Southeast Asia, whose key reference point of identity and sense of belonging were to a great extent geared towards their 'homeland' China (Poon 2012a: 14). Consequently, the impact of the revival campaigns was mainly confined to Chinese dialect-speaking communities and, as in Sung's case, mostly reached those at the lower socio-economic strata of society.

In contrast, the charismatic renewal that took off in the early 1970s occurred within the social environment of Singapore's postcolonial modernity. Neither church-based nor institutionally-led the revival emanated from students, "who were groomed by the new nation to be proficient in English, which made access to English-based Christian literature and social networks possible (Poon 2012a: 14). In their quest for a deeper spiritual encounter with God, the students formed informal prayer fellowships on school campuses and deliberately turned to Pentecostal publications as a source of inspiration. The Singapore Evangelism Center (SEC) led by the American Assemblies of God pastor Hugh Baker served as a central location for distributing English Pentecostal literature in Singapore at that time. Books like *The Cross and the Switchblade* by David Wilkerson, *Run, Baby, Run*

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[74] Kong's short presence in Singapore has been mostly sidelined in the church historiographies of Singapore. Invited by the Assemblies of God (AG) in 1963, Kong's Pentecostal message which emphasized Spirit baptism, speaking in tongues and healing drew many followers, particularly from the Chinese Brethren Churches. The radicalism of Kong's theological standpoints, however, increasingly caused controversies among the Chinese-speaking congregations, prompting the AG churches to eventually withdraw their support from her (G. Lee and Lee 2015: 5). Nevertheless, Kong was a major catalyst in the formation of the Church of Singapore, which was established in the same year and lays claim to the distinction of being the first independent and indigenous charismatic church in Singapore.

by Nicky Cruz, or *Pentecostal Baptism* by William Caldwell, which were already widely circulating among revivalist groups in the US, became increasingly popular among young Singaporean Christians. Another influence that nurtured the spiritual fervor among the youth can be traced back to the numerous youth rallies held across the island from the 1950s to the 1970s. Events like Youth for Christ's 'Saturday Night Rallies' that started in 1958 or the Keswick Conventions in the early 1970s are just two examples of the increased efforts of church and para-church organizations to reach out to the masses of young Singaporeans (Poon 2012a). Arguably one of the most influential actors propagating the need for spiritual renewal was the Assemblies of God (AG), by then the largest Pentecostal denomination in Singapore. By holding regular campaigns and hosting international faith-healing evangelists such as Adolpho Clarence Valdez and Morris Cerullo, the AG and its various youth ministries became a significant catalyst for the nascent charismatic movement in Singapore, instilling a growing desire among students to personally experience the transformative power of the Holy Spirit themselves (G. Lee and Lee 2015).

The encounter with Pentecostal practices, exposure to rallies, and Pentecostal literature all accelerated the youthful desire for spiritual transformation, eventually culminating in the simultaneous 'outpouring of the Holy Spirit' among pupils of the prestigious Methodist Anglo-Chinese School (ACS) and the Dunearn Technical Secondary School in the summer of 1972, as reported in various testimonies (Poon and Tan 2012). Overwhelmed by their experiences, some ACS pupils turned to Hugh Baker for mentorship and soon moved their weekly prayer meetings from the ACS school premises to the SEC.[75] Alongside the extensive network of evangelical youth groups run by YFC and the ISCF, Hugh Baker and the SEC acted as important facilitators for transmitting the charismatic renewal to other school campuses. However, the actual number of students who claimed to have experienced an encounter with the Holy Spirit remained small and likely did not exceed 200 by the end of 1972 (G. Lee and Lee 2015: 26). Therefore, it is more accurate to describe the emerging charismatic formation at this stage as a loose student network rather than a cohesive movement. More importantly, the revival

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[75] The student's prayer meetings were first held inside the school's clock tower, hence the later framing of the beginning of the charismatic movement as the 'Clock Tower Story'.

that gradually gained traction across some school campuses was not confined to established Pentecostal circles but transcended denominational boundaries. Even though the AG, through the agency of Hugh Baker, arguably played an influential role in pushing the revival from the outset, most pupils retained their church affiliations, consequently paving the way for the subsequent dissemination of charismatic practices into other church denominations – much to the dismay of the church authorities.

It was not long before the 'unusual' manifestations among pupils would come under increasing scrutiny. An internal church report revealed the growing concern among Methodist church leaders about the incidents taking place among 'their' ACS students, highlighting that their exposure to "a Biblical approach called Fundamentalism" had "culminated in several occasions of speaking in tongues, highly emotional meetings, and anti-Methodist sentiments" (cited in Poon 2012a: 5). The report inferred that the reason for such disturbing developments was to be found in the weak state of the school chaplaincy, which had been left understaffed over the years and thus been ineffective in caring for the spiritual needs of the growing numbers of ACS students. This situation had, in turn, opened up the opportunity for "non Methodist, non CCMS [Council of Churches in Malaysia and Singapore] groups" to step into the breach and exert their influence on the students (ibid.). In conclusion, the report referred to several measures the Methodist Church had introduced to prevent similar incidents in the future, including: restricting student prayer meetings to the presence of one adult, strengthening the school's chaplaincy personnel, and introducing counseling services to better address the students' religious needs (ibid.).

Nevertheless, the matter did not remain confined to the internal forum of the church institution for long. Picking up the story, The Straits Times subsequently ran an article titled "Students Go into Trance at Prayer: Some End Religious Sessions in Hysterics" (The Straits Times 1972a). At first glance, the news report painted a troubling picture of the events, claiming that the students had either gone into "trance" during prayer meetings or "ended up with the opposite reaction, screaming for a full minute or more, sometimes bursting into tears and whimpering at the end of it." However, on closer reading and drawing on the testimonies of several student leaders involved, the report equally revealed that such episodes were far from

ordinary and only occurred infrequently, if at all. As one student testified, "the ability of getting into trance" was "only achieved by a few people," and not every person could "work himself or herself into such a stage." On the occasion that "hysterical outbursts" did happen, they were generally perceived as idiosyncrasies that needed to be contained: "hysterics" had to be brought back to "normal" again by "sprinkling iced water on the person's face," or by giving "a few sharp claps on the cheeks," while some leaders decided "to reduce the time allotted for prayer and meditation" in order to "prevent such abnormalities from taking place." Interestingly, the students did not attribute their experiences to the Holy Spirit, or saw them as instances of a nation-wide charismatic revival. Instead they used expressions derived from medical-psychological terminology (such as "trance" and "hysteria") to describe the incidents. Whether this was simply a matter of adopting the vocabulary of the journalist and thus grounded on "mere misinterpretations or generalisations" that had "little to do with what happened" as suggested by Poon (2012a: 4), or if such terms were indeed genuinely used by the student leaders themselves is difficult to evaluate in retrospect. What the article did reveal, however, was the ambiguity with which these events were interpreted by some of those who had observed them first-hand.

Even so, the report was alarming enough to trigger moral panic among leaders of the Anglican, Lutheran, Methodist, and Presbyterian churches. In a joint statement published in *The Straits Times* just four days later, they warned the students "against being 'victimised' by an unhealthy religious movement" and condemned them for being part of a "religious cult" that "could slowly control their whole personality and minds" (The Straits Times 1972b). In a striking analogy, they compared the "hysterics" to the drug and 'hippie' culture, stating:

> The trouble with young people is that they think it is a great experience to end up in hysterics. It's just like the drug problem – youths think that it is a big thing in life to pop pills into their mouths, or smoke pot (ibid.).

The intensity of the criticism revealed that the issues at stake ran deeper than some internal theological debates about the biblical foundation for the proper use of 'spiritual gifts'. Similar to the *Straits Times* news report, no reference was made to the Holy Spirit, nor did the church leaders label the students as charismatics or see them as part of a broader revivalist movement. Far more worrying to them was that the incidents originated outside the confines of the church institutions

and spread beyond the control of the church authorities (Poon 2012a). According to the statement, they were concerned that such practices were "slowly infiltrating into innocent religious meetings organized by the students" and feared that these gatherings were becoming "controlled by immature people" (The Straits Times 1972b).

Still, it is difficult to imagine that the church establishments of some of the largest denominations in Singapore would have been unable to deal with a small number of "immature" students and their idiosyncratic practices within the ambits of the Christian community. For one, the Methodist Church responded promptly to the incidents and implemented measures to curb the further "infiltration" of "fundamentalist" streams within the ACS. Likewise, some of the student leaders themselves testified of having developed techniques to contain the "hysterics" or even tried to prevent such "abnormal" manifestations from happening among their peers. The strong reaction of the church leaders thus bared no proportion to the actual threat that these events posed to the church, especially since the news only warranted a short article in *The Straits Times* and did not garner much public interest. Indeed, private or public displays of devotees entering into a state of trance and ritual ecstasy were not unusual in Singapore's multi-religious context, as could be observed, for instance, in the annual Thaipusam procession of Hindus or the spirit medium practices among 'traditional' Chinese religious practitioners. Accordingly, and as Poon (2012a: 7) rightly points out, the "public could well put up with idiosyncratic practices, however unusual they were, within the confines of churches." The decisive reason for triggering the alarm was, therefore, not so much about a few ecstatic students ending up in hysterics, as disturbing as this might have been to some clergymen, but that such behavior was happening "in a prestigious Christian *school*, among *teenagers* on whose shoulders rested the *young* nation's destiny" (ibid.; emphasis in original). For the church leaders, the media's report of uncontrolled Christian youths being in 'trance and hysteria,' however accurately understood, made for bad publicity and, in the end, had the potential to impugn the efforts of the churches to carve out their space in the nascent republic.

As discussed earlier, the government expected Christian institutions in helping to build a 'rugged society' by inculcating moral values to the post-

independence generation and fostering a disciplined citizenry deemed necessary to ensure the nation's economic survival. The expectation for Christian and other religious communities to serve as a repository of morality became even more relevant in the context of the PAP's growing concern about the continued 'westernization' of Singapore's populace. As Hill and Lian (1995: 245) point out, the government's concept of social discipline began to shift in the 1970s and "constructed more explicitly in terms of a reaction to alleged Western decadence - symbolized in the figure of the long-haired hippie - and the assertion of 'Asian' values in the face of what was argued to be potential deculturation." For the government, any disruptive social movement or permissive and deviant behavior associated with what was ominously termed 'hippism' posed a potential threat to the moral fabric of society and the state's ambition of nurturing a resilient citizenry to bolster Singapore's economic progress. As early as 1970, Defense Minister Lim Kim San warned about the "degenerating and weakening influence of 'hippie' culture," appealing to the youth that "we cannot slacken in discipline, and we must never allow ourselves to become self-indulgent and soft." 'Hippism' and its association with drug abuse, promiscuity, and hedonism thus came to be defined as the new social evil that needed to be eradicated. Religious communities were expected to assist the government's efforts in curbing such foreign sub-cultures by providing moral guidance and shielding the youth from the dangers of "West-toxification" (C.J.W.-l. Wee 2007).

It was within this context that the 'hysteric outbursts' of the pupils posed a challenge to the reputation and societal relevance of the Church, calling into question whether Christians could fulfill their role in climbing "the sharp face of the cliff towards a higher ledge in human civilization" as outlined by Lee Kuan Yew back in 1967. After all, mission schools, like the ACS, were reputable educational institutions that were recognized as vital agents for fostering Singapore's human capital and socializing the youth into becoming model citizens. Furthermore, the school incidents occurred the same year as the controversy surrounding the Singapore Industrial Mission at Jurong. It can thus be argued that some church leaders were concerned that further publicity would cast a negative light on the churches and question their ability to maintain full control over their community. Both incidents were framed as 'foreign' intrusions into national and internal

church affairs, prompting the churches to ward off any suspicions of working against national interests.[76] By connecting the school events to the 'drug and cult movement' and condemning them as threats to social order, the church authorities thus found a way to publicly demonstrate their alignment with the government and its national goals. Coopting the state's narrative of 'deculturation', the incident was interpreted as an attack on the moral fabric of society and constituted an "unfortunate blemish that should be excised from institutional memory" (Poon 2012a: 9).

It turned out that the call for collective amnesia was premature. In an ironic twist of events, the further impetus and consolidation of the charismatic revival would come from the ranks of two respected Anglican church leaders themselves. Only six weeks after denouncing the students as being part of a "religious cult," Joshua Chiu Ban It, the first Asian Anglican Bishop of Singapore and then acting chairman of the EACC, testified of having been 'baptized in the Holy Spirit' (Poon and Tan 2012). Chiu's self-professed encounter with the Holy Spirit happened while attending the mission conference organized by the World Council of Churches in Bangkok, themed 'Salvation Today'. To Chiu, however, the conference's liberal ecumenical agenda and re-interpretation of salvation as an act of liberation from oppression and social injustice set uneasy with his own convictions and could not relieve him from his nagging self-doubts and feelings of emptiness that had troubled him for some time. As he recounts:

> Somehow there was no peace within me as to whether we as a Christian church were proclaiming the whole of Christ's gospel. I was broken and in despair because I felt that we seemed to be relying more on the power of politics and economics than on the power of God. Although these factors are extremely important, I was finding that without God's power they brought no solution. In the end, all my positions were empty (ibid.: 72).

Yet, to Chiu, the very topic of salvation became more real than he had probably anticipated. In a remarkable inversion of the conference's original intent, salvation turned out to be a matter of his personal deliverance rather than one of social redemption. According to Chiu's testimony, his feelings of disempowerment

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[76] Notably, the 'Clock Tower' revival coincided with the prohibition of the Singapore Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses due to the refusal of its followers to perform national military service and pledge allegiance to the state (Chong 2016: 98).

and "sense of depression about the state of the church" had completely disappeared after experiencing the power of the Holy Spirit, and he was "filled instead with joy and peace" (ibid.: 73). Just one month later, in January 1973, Canon James Wong had a similar spiritual encounter after meeting with Ralph Wilkerson, pastor of the Californian Melodyland Christian Centre, a leading charismatic church in the US at the time (Poon and Tan 2012: 51). Like Chiu, Wong had felt "inadequate" and "powerless" in his position as a pastor and, while initially skeptical about charismatic Christianity, embraced it fully after being "filled with the Holy Spirit" (ibid.). Enthusiastic about their revitalized faith, Chiu and Wong became influential figures in institutionalizing the charismatic revival within their Anglican parishes, facilitating its continued expansion to other mainline denominations.

By the end of the 1970s, the charismatic revival had gained traction both within and outside church institutions. Starting from a small number of pupils and their prayer networks, it had spread beyond the confines of the school environment and developed into a nation-wide movement that even reached the Catholic Church.[77] According to a survey conducted by Sng in 1979, over one-third of Christians surveyed (n= 2321) had attended a charismatic gathering at some point. Additionally, two-thirds of the pastors surveyed (n= 67) reported that their congregation was involved in charismatic meetings in some capacity (Sng 2003: 274). Although hardly representative, the surveys still reflected the increasing influence and appeal of charismatic practices and doctrines among Christians in Singapore. Many church leaders who embraced charismatic Christianity viewed the revival as a divine intervention that would bring about the much anticipated spiritual renewal for Singapore's Christian community. It offered a solution to the perceived identity crisis that had afflicted the Church in the immediate post-independence era, bearing the promise of strengthening the evangelical position within the Christian landscape and enhancing its socio-political relevance at the national level. According to Poon (2012a: 11), the challenge ahead was to transform a conceptually "socially disruptive movement" into one that would be "politically acceptable and socially respectable to the Singapore nation." Consequently, Chiu, Wong, and other church leaders were eager to legitimize the charismatic revival

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[77] For a more detailed account of the charismatic renewal in the Catholic Church, see C. Chua 2007.

by promoting it as a national movement and linking it to the global charismatic network. Several initiatives sprang out of this commitment, such as the Spiritual Renewal Seminars, which were organized with the help of the World Missionary Assistance Plan, a US-based mission organization; the establishment of an interdenominational short-term Bible school in 1978 "to equip the fast-growing Charismatic community in Charismatic theology and ministry skills"; and the founding of the Singapore Christian Conference Centre by Hugh Baker that provided facilities for charismatic Christians to conduct training seminars, retreats, and church camps (G. Lee and Lee 2015: 123, 124).

While the institutional support and the establishment of transnational links were undoubtedly influential in raising the public profile of the nascent charismatic movement, the vital carriers of the renewal were to be found among ordinary laypeople and their extensive network of informal home groups that began to grow all over the city from the mid-70s onward (Poon 2012a).[78] As Lee and Lee (2015: 94, 122) suggest, these self-organized home meetings among lay charismatic Christians provided a more intimate communal setting where believers could experience the tangible power and presence of the Holy Spirit, transforming their "otherwise ordinary living rooms into active stages where stories of the transformed lives of Charismatic Christians could be physically enacted and recounted." Meanwhile, another influential charismatic lay organization, the Full Gospel Business Men's Fellowship International (FGBMFI), took fresh roots in Singapore and became an effective platform for further disseminating charismatic practices among Christian business people and professionals (Tan-Chow 2007). It was from this lay basis and the emerging interdenominational network of like-minded believers that charismatic Christianity began to become entrenched into the broader Christian community.

Nevertheless, the integration of charismatic practices and doctrines into the *institutional* life of churches was far from being a smooth or uniform process. Neither was the idea of transforming the revival into a cohesive national movement

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[78] The inter-denominational charismatic home groups were generally not formed with the intention of establishing independent house churches. Most of the participants retained their church memberships and continued to attend the services of their respective churches. Nevertheless, some home groups eventually evolved into new churches, particular under the supervision of James Wong (see G. Lee and Lee 2015: 95-96).

equally supported by church leaders, nor was everyone convinced that the anticipated spiritual renewal of the church should come through the avenue of charismatic Christianity. Opposition arose from both conservative evangelical and Pentecostal factions. While some conservative evangelicals doubted the overall scriptural legitimacy of spiritual gifts, Pentecostals, who, in line with their theological self-understanding, generally embraced the revival, counted the spiritual practices among charismatic Christians as not sufficiently rooted in Pentecostal theology. As James Wong recounts:

> [By 1981], not only were Evangelical Christians suspicious and critical of us in the Charismatic Movement, our own brethren in the Pentecostal circle were also suspicious, envious and felt uncomfortable about us. We were regarded as 'fakes' and not true blue-blooded Pentecostalists! (Wong 2008, quoted in G. Lee and Lee 2015: 129).

Issues concerning the determination of the authenticity in claims of revelatory experiences and criteria for the functioning of charismata (such as healing, prophecy, and speaking in tongues) surfaced and fed into a general concern among church leaders about how to theologically ground and sustain the renewal over the long-term (Sng 2003). Different politics of regulation and interpretive frameworks for understanding charismatic practices resulted in different outcomes for leaders located in established mainline denominations and independent church organizations. Many mainline churches were confronted with the difficult task of aligning the burgeoning charismatic movement with their denominational tradition and church governance structure. While the Anglican Church, through the leadership of Chiu and Wong, generally embraced the charismatic revival, other church denominations, such as the Methodists, were more cautious in adopting charismatic practices into the church's institutional life. As Sng (2003: 310) points out, Methodist church leaders did not view the charismatic renewal as necessarily offering "a total alternative to church life but rather as a corrective, a cleansing and a revitalisation to its thinking and structure." Hence, even as the revival was spreading and cutting across denominational boundaries, there was great uncertainty about how to incorporate an inherently lay-based movement marked by flexibility and spontaneity into existing church hierarchies and prevailing liturgical traditions without jeopardizing the ecclesiastical status quo. The initial aspiration of transforming the charismatic renewal into a nation-wide movement,

therefore, soon gave way to more particularistic and pragmatic institutional concerns. Internal disagreements emerged regarding the extent to which charismatic practices and doctrines should be integrated into church structures, propelling some members within mainline churches to join independent charismatic churches or establish new ones. Others still opted to turn to the Assemblies of God in their search for a new spiritual home. As a result, independent charismatic churches and those affiliated with the AG were growing at an unprecedented level, eventually surpassing the growth rates of established mainline churches (Hinton 1985; Sng 2003). Yet, despite ongoing disputes and fissions, many mainline churches succeeded in accommodating their internal doctrinal and institutional differences by incorporating charismatic elements into their denominational traditions and organizational structures, albeit to varying degrees and with different outcomes (DeBernardi 2008b: 120). Although the momentum of the charismatic movement began to wane in the late 1980s, the church politics of accommodation and appropriation arguably helped normalize charismatic practices and doctrines without causing significant intra-denominational schisms.

In hindsight, the charismatic revival did not necessarily engender a pervasive 'charismatization' experience of radical discontinuity, at least not at the institutional level. Rather than fully embracing the charismatic renewal, church leaders selectively appropriated charismatic practices into their ecclesiastical polity as a means to revitalize their congregations and ensure continued church growth. More importantly, the partial embracement of the charismatic movement reinforced the evangelical basis of the churches in Singapore and provided a renewed impetus to engage in mission work and evangelism. According to Michael Poon (2013a: 17), the renewal "commissioned a spiritually invigorated Singaporean Christian community to make their faith publicly visible and socially relevant amid huge social transformation that was taking place in the nation and the wider region". Consequently, conservative evangelicalism began to set the theological tone among the churches, gradually pushing the non-evangelical wings of mainline Protestantism to the margins, a development that has remained unchanged to the present day. As noted by James Wong at the turn of the millennium:

> Today the church scene in Singapore has changed a great deal. Most of the mainline

churches from the historic denominations are now evangelical and evangelistic as well as mission-minded. There is no need to make an artificial distinction as to which church is evangelical and which is not ... (Wong 2000, quoted in Sng 2003: 331).

A vision and its perils

The growth of the charismatic movement in the late 1970s intersected with an increased focus on evangelism. Large-scale evangelistic 'outreach crusades', conventions and rallies became a regular feature in Singapore, turning the island into a "City of Campaigns" (Methodist Message 1978) and projecting the entire nation as a mission field that needed to be 'reached for Christ.' Prominent leaders within the global evangelical and Pentecostal/charismatic scene were invited to stage mass evangelistic rallies and revival meetings. Perhaps one of the most significant events in terms of scale and impact was a rally conducted by US-evangelist Billy Graham in December 1978, which drew over 337.000 people to the National Stadium during his five-days stay. Unlike previous events, the Billy Graham Crusade garnered nation-wide interest and received extensive media coverage. It was an unprecedented national event whose main success arguably did not lie in the high numbers of conversions (allegedly, over 12,000 conversions were recorded) but in successfully uniting 237 out of 265 Protestant churches to cooperate and work together towards a common goal (Sng 2003). Other outreach events followed suit, such as the Gospel Rally in 1982 featuring South Korean pastor Yonggi Cho (founder of Yoido Full Gospel Church in Seoul, then one of the largest Pentecostal churches in the world), the campaign of German-born evangelist Reinhard Bonnke in 1985, or the rally by Argentinian evangelist Luis Palau one year later. The unifying experience and success of mobilizing a majority of local churches to stage large-scale evangelistic events testified to the growing self-confidence and self-awareness of the local Christian community of being on par with their global counterparts. In the eyes of many, Singapore was no longer to be situated in the periphery of the Christian world map but called to be the "Antioch of Asia", a shining light and epicenter for the spread of Christianity to the masses of 'unreached' people both inside Singapore and throughout the region (DeBernardi 2008b). Singapore now had a divine purpose, and the hopes and aspirations of Christians were set against the goal of fulfilling its God-given destiny as the 'Antioch of the East' and usher in a Christian era as (allegedly) prophesied

by Billy Graham (see chapter 4).

The concerted efforts of evangelizing non-Christians not only spurred church growth through new conversions but also helped to raise the public profile of evangelical and charismatic Christianity on a national scale, with leading figures from the civil service, academia, and the business establishment openly expressing their strong commitment to their new-found Christian faith. As the *Straits Times* noted in its 1978 Christmas Day feature, Christianity was "discovering new muscle" and given "new impetus" through the "emergence of prominent citizens as converts…and crusades like Billy Graham's" (The Straits Times 1978). The testimonies of public figures such as Member of Parliament and professor of economics Dr. Augustine Tan, Minister for State Education Dr. Tay Eng Soon, or Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Environment Tan Gee Paw, raised the public awareness of a growing Christian influence that reached beyond the confines of the church. Together they represented an emergent Chinese-Christian network that spanned government, professional, and business communities, thus perpetuating the public perception of Christianity as a predominant Chinese-Anglophone and middle-to-upper class enterprise.

As Christianity grew among the middle-class, so too did the affluence of the churches. Unaffected by Singapore's first post-independence economic recession in 1985, church organizations were thriving and expanding. Buoyed by the financial support of their affluent members, some were "moving ahead with costly building and expansion programs, buying property for both religious and community welfare projects" (The Straits Times 1985). Still, others were renting closed-down cinemas or hotel ballrooms to accommodate the increasing number of adherents joining their congregations (The Straits Times 1983). Entering the 1980s, church leaders were optimistic about the prospects of Christianity in Singapore (Sng 2003). A 'spirit of enthusiasm' prevailed, prompting Keith Hinton to conclude his survey on church growth with the observation:

> The Spirit is moving in the city of Singapore at this time…Today the sheer numbers of first generation believers, by their zeal and evangelistic fervour, have created a momentum and wave of conversions that could not easily be stopped. Singapore is turning to Christ! (Hinton 1985: 208-209)

As we have seen, the evangelical realignment of the Protestant landscape and

concomitant decline of liberal Christianity found its provisional climax in the expulsion of the CCA in 1987 and the subsequent disaffiliation of mainline churches and the NCCS from the conference. The decision of the NCSS, in particular, to sever its ties with the CCA reflected the profound theological shift that had taken place among the churches. Starting as an organization that was "generally regarded by Singaporeans as the product and hobby of western Protestant liberals" (Harvey 2009: 264), the NCCS had evolved into a fully localized ecumenical body that was socially conservative and theologically evangelical. Freed from the "stigma of being labeled either liberal or western" (ibid.), the revived NCCS put its primary focus on practical issues that were perceived to be relevant to the churches and reflected the social and political realities on the ground. This organizational and theological reorientation of the NCCS provided new incentives for interdenominational cooperation, prompting many churches under evangelical leadership that had previously rejected any involvement in the national council to join as members. Similar realignments were evident in the realm of theological education. As Cheng-Tian Kuo observes, "the prestigious Trinity Theological College made a critical change in its faculty and curriculum between 1982 and 1999 to transform its specialization from liberal theology to conservative theology", noticing further a general "voluntary political apathy" of churches and "self-censorship" among theological seminaries regarding topics related to liberal Christianity, liberation theology and church-state relations (C.-T. Kuo 2012: 128). In terms of church institutions, the most notable shift towards evangelicalism could be observed within the Anglican Church. Invigorated by the charismatic renewal, Singapore's Anglicans began to doubt whether they had much in common with the Church of England anymore, leading to discussions of a possible breakaway from Canterbury and the creation of an autonomous Anglican Church of Singapore (Far Eastern Economic Review 1987). Traditional Anglicanism was foreign to Singapore, Wong was quoted as saying, further proclaiming that: "We want to be a national church ... It is best to describe ourselves as a national, evangelical and charismatic Anglican church in Singapore" (ibid.).

Not surprisingly, the evangelical 'takeover' evoked strong reactions among ecumenical Christians in Asia. In his inquiry into the expulsion of the CCA, which was commissioned by the conference's International Affairs Committee in 1990, Ron

O'Grady condemned the churches in Singapore for being "caught up in internal church growth, new buildings and such theological issues as demon worship, speaking in tongues and the second coming" (O'Grady 1990: 29). Quoting an Anglican leader from Malaysia, O'Grady further criticized the Singapore Anglican Church for being dominated by "a sectarian, inwardly pagan group" that promulgated a "fundamentalist" form of Christianity "tailored to suit the interest of the rich" and no longer respected traditional ecumenism but instead forged new alliances with Pentecostals (ibid.: 35). According to O'Grady's verdict, the Singapore Church had become a "tame servant" of the government, and its response to the expulsion of the CCA had been deplorable: "years of domestication" had "intimidated the Singaporean churches into following government directives without question", thus failing to demonstrate any solidarity with the ecumenical workers in trouble, whether they were Catholics or affiliated with the CCA (ibid.: 36).

While the CCA's disparaging critique could be construed as a reaction to the already weak positioning of Asian liberal ecumenism as discussed earlier, it also points to the general unease with which the rapid rise of evangelical conservatism from its charismatic middle-class base was received; not only among Christian observers abroad but also increasingly so among Singapore citizens themselves. The evangelical vision of 'turning Singapore to Christ' did not sit well with a people that was largely non-Christian and inherently religiously diverse. Christianity was still widely perceived as a Western religion introduced by foreign missionaries and thus 'alien' to the Asian context, as reflected by Lee Kuan Yew:

> In Singapore, from about 10 per cent in 1980 (the proportion of Christians has) gone up to about 12 per cent in 1986…A very good increase, and we are not against it. But I want to sound a word of caution. Because a young generation of pastors have taken MAs and PhDs in American universities and they go there and see Jerry Falwell, holding forth on television, Moral Majority, a power in the land, supporting Reagan[79]…**In case they have any misconceptions about our society let me remind them...we are different, we are not a society where there is a broad-based acceptance of Christian values and faith.** And…it's unlikely that we are going to be Christianised…because the same missionaries who went to China, to India, because they are old civilisations with old established values and systems of life, they never Christianised the place. It's like Japan. You have some Christians but Japan is not a Christian nation and Singapore is not likely to be one" (The Straits Times 1987k, emphasis added).

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[79] Jerry Falwell was a prominent US-American evangelical televangelist who founded the political lobbying organization *Moral Majority* which was closely associated with the Christian Right and the Republican Party and an active supporter of Ronald Reagan in the Presidential election in 1980.

It did not take long before the religious fervor exhibited by evangelicals would fall into public discredit. Proselytizing activities such as door-to-door evangelism and the public distribution of Christian literature and tracts raised growing concerns among members of other religious groups regarding the nature and scale of Christian mission strategies. A report compiled by the ISD revealed that the Government had received "numerous complaints about aggressive and insensitive evangelization mostly carried out by some Protestant churches and organizations" (White Paper on Religious Harmony 1989: Annex at 13, para 2).The zeal with which evangelism was pursued especially caused resentment among the Muslim community, prompting then Mufti Syed Isa Semait to openly appeal to Christians to stop their proselytizing activities among Muslims and urging them to "respect each other's faith and maintain the existing harmony"(Berita Harian 1986a, own translation). Feeling increasingly exposed to Christian missionizing efforts, the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS) saw the need to take counter-measures, warning the Muslim community to be vigilant of Christians "who fiercely want to mislead us" and report to the Council if they were continued to be "disturbed" (Berita Harian 1986b, own translation). To prevent further escalation, the ISD called up eleven Christian organizations evangelizing among the Muslim community and advised them "to avoid activities which could cause misunderstanding or conflict" (White Paper on Religious Harmony 1989: Annex at 14, para 7).

Meanwhile, the growing presence and visibility of evangelical and charismatic forms of Christianity also caught the critical attention of the international press. Reporting on the upcoming Anglican Consultative Council to be held in Singapore in 1987, *The Economist* commented on the "unusual" conservative bend within the Singapore Anglican Church, which the author of the article saw closer aligned to "American fundamentalism" than with the theological principles of the worldwide Anglican community (The Economist 1987*: 39*). Along similar lines, the *Far Eastern Economic Review* picked up on the recent developments of Christian revivalism and intensified evangelism among non-Christians, cautioning about the potential disruptive social implications of Singapore's "new aggressive form of Protestantism" (Far Eastern Economic Review 1987). To be sure, Christians were not the only ones to publicly express a renewed religious commitment. Reformist and revivalist

undercurrents were also observable among Muslim, Buddhist, and Hindu communities.[80] However, and following Robbie Goh's argument, it was the particular combination and cumulative effect of "the evangelical imperative, eschatological fear, compassion for the salvation of others, exclusive monotheism and injunction against idolatry" that placed Christianity "in a highly disjunctive and segregated position in relation to all other religions" (R.B.H. Goh 2009: 8).

It was only a matter of time before the growing inter-religious tensions induced by 'insensitive and aggressive' proselytism and heightened religious fervor would draw the state into the arena. Similar to the 'Marxist Conspiracy', the intensified competition for followers and converts challenged the government's policy of governing religions through a pluralist secular framework. This time, however, the issue did not pose a potential threat to the government's political legitimacy, but instead carried the risk of weakening the social fabric of society. The PAP leadership feared that a collision between religions would adversely affect Singapore's delicate inter-religious harmony and, ultimately, had the potential to undermine the state's underlying ideology of multiculturalism and its hegemonic role as the ultimate and secular arbiter in religious affairs. Alarmed by the potential resurgence of religious fervor among different religious communities, the Ministry of Community Development commissioned a team of social scientists at the National University of Singapore to conduct research on the changing nature of religion in Singapore. The research project was completed within a year and published in five government reports (Hill 2004).[81]

Overall, the findings confirmed the perception of a renewed religious vitality, highlighting "the shifting trends in recent years, both in the size of membership and in changing attitudes and activities, [that] may threaten to disrupt the subtle and delicate equilibrium which has characterized the religious scene in Singapore for decades" (E.C.Y. Kuo et al. 1988: 2). Although remaining a minority religion, the reports documented a substantial increase in the proportion of people professing

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[80] For Hindu reformist movements see Sinha 1997; on the trajectory of the Muslim dakwah movement in Southeast Asia see Alatas 2009; on Buddhist revivalism see Kuah-Pearce 2009.
[81] The year-long study included a literature overview (Quah 1987), an analysis of the 1980 census data (E.C.Y. Kuo 1989), case studies on religious revivalism (E.C.Y. Kuo et al. 1988), a national survey on religion in Singapore (E.C.Y. Kuo and Quah 1988) and a report on religious conversion and revivalism among Christians (Tong 1989).

Christianity resulting from an accelerated number of conversions among the young, English-educated, and those from a middle-class background. According to the authors, the strong correlation between Christian conversionism, socio-economic stratification, and English-stream education indicated that Christians were exercising a political, social, and economic influence disproportionate to their numbers (E.C.Y. Kuo et al. 1988: 11). In this sense, Christianity was becoming "a dominant religion in Singapore" (E.C.Y. Kuo and Quah 1988: 64) and had the potential to "incorporate a social class dimension into religious conflict" (E.C.Y. Kuo et al. 1988: 11).

Another source of conflict that the surveys drew attention to related to the intensified proselytizing activities exhibited predominantly by evangelicals, which were "often perceived by members of other faiths to be aggressive and showing little sensitivity to their feelings" and thereby carried the risk of disrupting the fragile inter-religious stability in the long-term (E.C.Y. Kuo et al. 1988: 31). Notably, the research summary also pointed out to the state's indirect role in promoting religion by introducing the compulsory Religious Knowledge (RK) program into the national education system during the early 1980s (ibid.: 40-41). Implemented in 1984, the RK curriculum aimed to reinforce moral values for upper secondary school students in order to ensure that they would not lose their moral compass "in the onslaught of Westernization and hedonism" (E.K.B. Tan 2008: 71). However, in doing so, the government had also inadvertently created opportunities for Christians and other religious groups to engage in proselytization, thereby contributing to the accelerated competition for converts. Reports from concerned citizens about the overrepresentation of Christian teachers in schools, who were using RK classes to propagate their Christian faith, revealed the detrimental effect the program had on ethnic and religious relations (The Straits Times 1987h: 16).[82] Instead of nurturing moral values among school students to counter the perceived negative ramifications and 'moral decay' associated with 'Western' modernity, the religious education policy had the unintentional consequence of emphasizing religious differences and generating discord between ethnic and religious groups. By using

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[82] According to The Straits Times 1987d: 15) the percentage distribution of school teachers by religious affiliation amounted to: 37.5% Christian; 20.8% Buddhist/Taoist; 9.8% Muslim; 4.9% Hindu; 16.4% other; and 10.5% with no religious affiliation.

religion as an expedient to promote supposed 'conservative' values in schools and by designating only certain religious subjects as compulsory in the school curriculum, the government not only had given the impression of favoring particular religions over others but also undermined its overall credibility in being neutral and even-handed in managing religious affairs.[83] As stated in the report:

> The introduction of the religious courses as part of the Moral Education programme since the early 1980s ... implies an indirect role of the state in religion. ... As long as the state, represented by the Ministry of Education, decides on the specific religions to be taught as options in this programme, the decision itself already implies official endorsement of such chosen options.... Since most religions are not internally homogenous, the educational authority, through such programme planning, may have to endorse a particular (usually mainstream) ideological stance out of several theological traditions of a given religion. If this is the case, obviously the state would have entered a domain which is strictly speaking that of religion (E.C.Y. Kuo et al. 1988: 40, 41).

Retrospectively, the government acknowledged that by incorporating religion into the realm of state education it had violated its own principle of secularity. Consequently, this raised the question of whether it had been appropriate for the government to act as the main agent in teaching religious knowledge to school children in the first place. In a speech delivered to parliament, Tony Tan, then Minister for Education, addressed these issues, and attributed the 'failure' of the RK program to the fundamental changes in circumstances since its implementation in 1984, declaring:

> In my view, [...] one fundamental change has taken place. Unlike 1982, there is today a heightened consciousness of religious differences and a new fervour in the propagation of religious beliefs...It is not possible for Government to ignore this new development. We must take cognizance of it and we must implement measures to ensure that it does not upset the present climate of religious tolerance in Singapore... [T]o avoid any suspicion of partiality in formulating and implementing the measures, it is essential for Government to be seen to be scrupulously neutral and even-handed in the handling of religious matters in Singapore... But to be neutral and even-handed in a matter of religions must mean, at the very least, that Government should not give the appearance even unintentionally of giving preferred status to any particular religion or of using Government institutions or Government-supported institutions such as schools to help propagate any particular faith. It follows then, [...] that schools as Government-supported institutions should, in my view, not be used as a means to impart religious beliefs to children. The teaching of religious beliefs, of what guides a person through life, what impels a person to be what he is, this is the province of the home. It is not the province of the schools. And parents cannot abdicate

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[83] The subjects the students could choose from were confined to: Bible Knowledge (either Catholic or Protestant); Islamic Religious Knowledge; Buddhist, Sikh or Hindu Studies, or Confucian Ethics. Other minority religious traditions, such as Taoism, where not offered as subjects.

this responsibility to the schools or to Government. It is the responsibility of parents to be moral exemplars, to set examples for their children, to teach them their religious beliefs and to bring them up in the religion in which they would like their children to follow. Schools can at most play a minor supporting role but the prime responsibility must remain that of the parents (*Hansard,* 6 October 1989 col 575 – 580 [Electronic Version]).

Tan's assessment mirrored the general shift of thinking among the political elite regarding state-religion relations. Confronted with the new realities on the ground, it was evident that the government's endeavor to utilize religion as a moral repository to counter the perceived excess of Western liberalism had reached its limitations. Rather than a tool for social cohesion and nation-building, religion had become a potentially divisive force that needed to be contained and 'privatized' to minimize social frictions in the public sphere. Moreover, the PAP leadership was concerned that the rise in religious appeal could be used to politically mobilize the masses, thereby threatening the legitimate basis of the government's political power and control. From the government's perspective, the underlying problem was that the demarcation line between politics and religion had increasingly become blurred, thus allowing religious organizations to be 'politically' active under the pretext of exercising their right to religious freedom. According to Christopher Tremewan (1996: 198), the state, therefore, sought to ensure that religion was kept out of the political arena by 1) redefining "legal religious activity as the direct institutional concerns of religious bodies in their own organisational affairs," and 2) categorizing "[r]eligious activities concerned with changing Singapore society according to religious understandings of the nature and destiny of human beings" as political and prohibited. Consequently, several policy measures were implemented to prevent further incentives for the politicization of religion, or conversely, the religionization of politics, which included: the termination of the Religious Knowledge syllabus in secondary schools and its subsequent replacement by a civics and moral education program in 1992; the formalization of a set of 'shared values' in 1991 to forge a cohesive national identity based on communitarian ideals; and the introduction of the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act (MRHA) in 1990 as a means to legislatively strengthen the boundaries between religion and politics.

Evangelical reactions and the rise of megachurches

Entering the 1990s, the evangelical endeavor of 'turning Singapore to Christ' seemed

to have reached an impasse. The implementation of the MRHA not only sent a strong signal to evangelicals to "tone down their intensity of evangelistic activities" (G. Lee and Lee 2015: 148) but also substantially curtailed the possibilities to attract new converts through public evangelism. Consequently, evangelicals remained decidedly ambivalent about the reinforced state-church separation and the government's interventionist forays into the religious realm (D.P.S. Goh 2010). On the one hand, the institutional separation of religion and politics did not pose a fundamental contradiction to the theological tenets held by evangelicals who viewed the government as part of God's providential ordering of society and thereby divinely ordained to secure justice and enhance the common good of society. Following Apostle Paul's biblical injunction to readily submit to the governing authorities (Romans 13:1), they had little incentive to either cross the line with the government or interfere with the government's day-to-day running of society (Sng 1989a: 57). Unlike their liberal counterparts, evangelicals, therefore, did not necessarily interpret the government's actions as a 'presumptuous' secular intervention into the religious realm. Wary of any form of politicization, they were careful to distinguish the Church's temporal responsibilities from its non-temporal tasks, thus recognizing the distinction between the two institutions and their different corresponding functions (cf. Chia 2013). Yet, as much as evangelicals did not take issue over the principles of institutional secularism, the more they were concerned about the government's move to extend its control over the public sphere and relegate religious life to the private realm. Similar to the CCA's objection, evangelicals were critical of the government's attempt to enter the domain of theology and define the parameters of permissible Christian doctrines and behavior in relation to the state and wider society.

From an evangelical perspective, the Christian presence in the world was, by definition, indispensable to the mission imperative and, as such, ultimately linked to the biblical mandate to expand the 'Kingdom of God' through evangelism and conversion. Proselytizing individuals of other faiths and spreading the "Good News" of Christ's redemption "to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8) formed an integral part of evangelicals' self-understanding and inevitably shaped the nature of their relationship with the non-Christian society at large. Furthermore, Christians were also called to be the "salt of the earth and light of the world" (Matthew 5: 13-16),

which meant socio-political involvement rather than a quietist withdrawal from the world. While the decline of liberal Christianity and the incidents surrounding the 'Marxist Conspiracy' and expulsion of the CCA may have played in the hands of evangelicals, it also propelled them to critically reflect on their own shortcomings concerning their engagement with wider society (cf. Sng 1989b). According to Sng (1989b: 66 and 67), the one-sided evangelical focus on spiritual needs and failure "to see the harsh realities of the world" had led to the "sad neglect of social concerns and responsibilities." Despite their deep-seated antagonism towards the political agenda of liberal theology, evangelicals equally recognized that God was challenging them through liberal Christianity, believing that the church owed "liberation theology the timely reminder to be practically oriented and involved with the 'bread and butter' issues of societies" (F.C.H. Lee 1989: 25). Taking their cue from the social teachings of liberation theology (while carefully eschewing its political leanings), evangelicals thus believed that the church, as part of the broader political community, had a responsibility to engage in civic life and be profoundly concerned with issues of justice, equality, and peace. Consequently, Christian submission to the state's sovereignty was not absolute but circumscribed by the ethical demand to seek the welfare of others and the common good of society, which implied the obligation to voice critique at government policies if they happened to infringe on the moral and social convictions of the Christian community (Sng 1989a: 57). Against this background, Christian faith and the actions motivated by it were always inherently political and, therefore, could neither be compartmentalized nor separated from public life.

Ultimately, the evangelical inclination towards a politics of public engagement and espousal of a comprehensive worldview based on proselytism and salvational exclusivity was difficult to be reconciled with the state's regulative framework, which required religions to adopt doctrines that were conducive to religious harmony and demanded religious leaders to draw a clear distinction between the religious and the political. The implementation of the MRHA and consolidation of Singapore's secular framework thus exposed the limitations of the evangelical expansionist ethos within a religious pluralist setting and, in the end, carried the risk of undermining the very raison d'être of the Church to fulfill its core evangelical purpose. At the same time, it also revealed the difficulties for Christians to act upon their faith and live up to their

moral and social responsibilities without falling into the danger of being construed as political acts of opposition to the government. Caught on the horn of a dilemma, evangelicals were thus forced to develop flexible strategies that would conform to the new state regulations while also allowing them to position themselves within the nation as a rooted aspect of the national community without compromising their evangelical and outward-oriented identity (R.B.H. Goh 2009).

By the turn of the century, it became apparent that the optimistic prediction of a continued rapid growth of Christianity had failed to materialize. The strategic move to redirect much of the evangelistic efforts towards the elderly Chinese population (a direct response to the constraints imposed by the MRHA) did not pay off as intended and was primarily undermined by the growing influence and consolidation of Buddhist revivalist movements that had gained a foothold on the island as far back as the 1980s (Rice 2003). According to the 2000 Census, Buddhism was the fastest-growing religion in Singapore between 1990 and 2000, increasing from 31.2% to 42.5%. In comparison, the overall share of Protestant Christians only modestly rose from 8.5% to 9.8% during the same period (Singapore Census of Population 2010).

Concurrently, the numerical growth among most mainline Protestant churches was steady but tepid. For many congregations, the years of rapid expansion following the charismatic revival did not last through the 1990s. The "spirit of renewal and transformation" had all but petered out and given way to a gradual "institutionalization and routinization" of charismatic practices (W.H.B. Chua 2015). As Daniel Wee (2017: 164) observes in his study of the Anglican community, the Diocese of Singapore experienced a significant decline in growth rates, particularly among English-speaking congregations, dropping from a peak of 197% in the 1980s to 10% in the 2000s. Similar patterns of stagnant growth were evident among the Methodist and Presbyterian churches (see D.P.S. Goh 2010: 55, Figure 1). Confronted with the waning influence of the charismatic movement, stabilizing growth rates, and state-imposed regulations, "churches entered the 90s under a cloud of uncertainty" (Sng 2003: 337).

Yet, despite the faltering church growth evident among most mainline denominations, some independent churches were proliferating and expanding at an exponential rate. Stepping into the breach was a new generation of young,

charismatic, entrepreneurial pastors, who, equipped with strong evangelical convictions and expansionist visions, took the revivalist fervor to the next level. Typically started as small offshoots or breakaways from mainline churches in the aftermath of the charismatic revival during the 1980s, some of them eventually developed into large-scale congregations with average weekly attendances reaching 10.000 people and above. By the late 1990s, so-called independent *megachurches*[84] became a salient feature of the Christian landscape in Singapore, outstripping their denominational counterparts in terms of growth rates, membership numbers, and economic power.

What distinguished the success of some megachurches from their mainline counterparts was a combination of at least three factors: First, their effectiveness in deploying corporate and marketing strategies to establish a global church brand identity for advancing congregational growth (cf. Yip and Ainsworth 2013, 2016). Second, their positioning as "seeker-friendly" churches that intended to break down the boundaries between the church and the outside world by imparting the Christian message with "powerful visual aesthetics and the technologies of pop culture which encourages a highly intense personal religious experience in a mass setting" (Chong 2015b: 217) And third, their achievement in re-contextualizing and developing various strands of prosperity theologies that placed faith and material success in a causal relationship which resonated with the socio-economic aspirations and therapeutic self-help ethos of an emerging middle-class (cf. Berg-Chan 2018; Chong 2017).

However, the rising prominence and affluence of megachurches, as epitomized through the image of jet-setting pastors, mass congregations, and costly state-of-the-art church-cum-commercial buildings, combined with their organizational and theological forays into the 'secular' domains of business and the economy did not go unchallenged. The aggressive expansion of megachurches raised fears, particularly among mainline and independent church leaders, that such growth

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[84] The most prominent megachurches in Singapore, including City Harvest Church, New Creation Church, Faith Community Baptist Church, and Lighthouse Evangelism, are non-denominational and adhere to diverse strands of Pentecostal theologies and practices. For more detailed accounts on Pentecostal megachurches in Singapore and Southeast Asia see: Berg-Chan 2018; Chong 2015b, 2018a, 2018b; Chong and Hui 2013; D.P.S. Goh 2018; D.P.S. Goh and Chong 2022; Rakow 2022.

had been primarily achieved at the expense of their own congregations (i.e., through membership transfers) rather than by first-time conversions (The Straits Times 2010: 3). Similarly, theological concerns about the market-driven ethos of megachurches came to the fore. The "prosperity gospel" with its emphasis on individual wealth and well-being promoted by some megachurch pastors was found to distort the basic tenets of the evangelical faith and denounced as "one of the most pervasive and disturbing trends in charismatic Protestant Christianity today" (Chia 2011). Yet, regardless of whether such criticism was warranted or not,[85] the sheer economic weight of megachurches was a matter of fact that could not be ignored. The affluence of certain churches was such that New Creation Church, one of Singapore's largest megachurches, was able to raise a total of S$21 million in a single day in 2010 to advance its $S500 million commercial building project (The Straits Times 2014). Financed to a great extent through the generous donations of their members, megachurches had evolved into large global enterprises, operating their own media outlets, business arms, charities, mission outreach programs and theological training seminaries.

The perils of such massive financial accumulation became drastically clear to the public in June 2012, when Kong Hee, founder and senior pastor of City Harvest Church (CHC), along with five members of the church's leadership team were arrested for misappropriating a total of S$50 million in church funds designated for a church building project. Part of the sum had been invested in sham bonds to finance and promote the international music career of Kong's wife, Sun Ho, as part of the church's evangelistic "Crossover Project" to spread the gospel through her pop music (Chong 2018a). Another portion of the funds was subsequently used to cover up their

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[85] As a survey by Terence Chong and Hui Yew-Foong (2013) has shown, the concern of megachurches "stealing sheep" was mostly unfounded. The research indicated that growth in megachurches was primarily due to conversions rather than membership transfers. Moreover, as we have seen, the accusation of charismatic/Pentecostal Christianity as being "tailored to suit the interest of the rich" was nothing new but already formulated (against mainline churches!) in the late 1980s by liberal Christians (O'Grady 1990: 29). Thus, the wheel of criticism had come full circle, with the ironic twist that this time the former accused have now become the main accusers. In regard to theological teachings, it is crucial to understand that not all megachurches subscribe to the "prosperity gospel." Among those that do, there are significant variations in the way they have adapted and re-contextualized this strand of theology, leading to diverse localized and competing expressions of prosperity theologies within Singapore's Pentecostal landscape (see Chong 2017; D.P.S. Goh 2018). Characterizing the presence of "prosperity teachings" as a "pervasive trend" among Christians in Singapore thus tends to overestimate their actual influence within the broader Christian community in Singapore.

tracks after church auditors had questioned the legitimacy of the bond investments. The incident evolved into one of the most prominent and expensive criminal breach of trust cases in Singapore's recent history and was extensively covered by the media. Nevertheless, while Kong and his leaders admitted to negligence and mistakes, they did not plead guilty to the criminal charges brought against them. As Daniel Goh (2019) points out, they believed that by using church funds to advance Ho's pop career, CHC had simply acted out on its divine "cultural mandate" and thus in alignment with the church's prophetic mission to "crossover" into the secular sphere of pop culture in order to Christianize it. Consequently, Kong and his leaders could not view their actions as a criminal act but instead claimed that their motivations were morally justifiable on the grounds of their religious convictions. By interpreting the law through the lens of the church's religious mission, they inadvertently challenged the "secularism of the law" (D.P.S. Goh 2019: 275), leading to a confrontation with the state in the courtrooms and ultimately the conviction and imprisonment of all six accused in October 2015. As a result, City Harvest's congregation size decreased by more than half, from a peak of approximately 33.000 in 2010 to 16.049 in 2018.[86] While certainly not indicative for all megachurches, the period of exponential growth observable during the 2000s had arguably come to an end. Today many of the larger megachurches, such as City Harvest and New Creation, have carved out their own niche within Singapore's highly diversified church landscape and tend to operate largely autonomously from the rest of the local Christian community while continuing to expand their distinct church brand beyond the shores of Singapore (cf. Rakow 2022).

Conclusion

This chapter has underscored the multifaceted role of Christianity in Singapore, demonstrating its adaptability and resilience across different historical periods. From its colonial beginnings to its current position within a secular, multicultural state, Christianity has continually negotiated its identity, aligning with global Christian movements while responding to local cultural and political dynamics.

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[86] see CHC annual report 2018, available under
https://web.archive.org/web/20201128014117/https://www.chc.org.sg/annual-report-2018/ (accessed 15.01.2021)

As a religion historically linked to colonial rule and Western modernity, Christianity has faced ongoing challenges in redefining its role within a rapidly evolving postcolonial socio-political landscape. Since its independence, the secular framework established by the state aimed to regulate religious expression, ensuring that Christianity, along with other religious communities, conformed to a national ethos of religious harmony and multicultural inclusivity. However, within these constraints, Christianity itself underwent significant theological and institutional transformations, shaped by both external political forces and internal doctrinal debates.

One of the most notable shifts was the growing divide between liberal ecumenical Christianity and conservative evangelicalism. The postcolonial period saw an initial emphasis on ecumenism, as mainline Protestant churches engaged in social justice initiatives, aligning themselves with broader Asian theological movements that emphasized liberation, contextual theology, and interfaith dialogue. However, the rise of evangelicalism, particularly among the Chinese English-educated middle class, gradually superseded this orientation. Evangelicals positioned themselves as defenders of doctrinal orthodoxy, emphasizing personal salvation, biblical inerrancy, and the necessity of moral conservatism. This theological reorientation, coupled with the influence and appeal of charismatic revivalism, led to a significant expansion of evangelical churches, which became increasingly influential within Singapore's Christian landscape. Yet, this growth also brought challenges. The government's concerns over religious exclusivism and proselytization led to greater scrutiny of Christian organizations, particularly as evangelical groups gained visibility in the public sphere. The challenge for Singaporean Christianity, therefore, has been to navigate between theological distinctiveness and national integration – to assert its religious identity while remaining within the boundaries of the secular state's regulatory framework.

Another significant aspect explored in this chapter is the intersection between Christianity's socio-economic status and its perceived cultural deracination or uprootedness. Christianity in Singapore is disproportionately represented among the Chinese English-speaking, highly educated middle and upper-middle classes, leading to its association with Western influences and cosmopolitanism. This socio-economic distinction has further implications for how Christianity is integrated into

Singapore's national narrative, where race and religion are tightly interwoven. Unlike other religious communities that are strongly linked to their respective ethnic groups, Christianity's trans-ethnic appeal both enables and complicates its position in Singapore's multicultural model. Furthermore, the state's efforts to regulate religious expressions and maintain religious harmony place constraints on Christian evangelism. While religious freedom is constitutionally protected, there are strict legal and social limitations on proselytization, particularly in interactions with the Malay-Muslim community. These restrictions necessitate a careful negotiation of public faith expression, requiring Christians to balance their commitment to evangelism with the broader national ethos of religious harmony.

Despite the challenges of navigating Singapore's secular and multicultural framework, the city's Christian community has continued to evolve, shaping its identity in response to both global and local influences. The aspiration of Singaporean Christianity has not only been about maintaining theological distinctiveness but also about envisioning a greater purpose beyond national boundaries. Increasingly, many churches and Christian organizations have embraced the idea of Singapore as the "Antioch of Asia." This vision positions the city-state as a missionary hub, drawing inspiration from the biblical Antioch, a center for early Christian evangelism. However, as the next chapter explores, this concept is far from monolithic. While widely accepted within Singapore's Christian community, the Antioch vision carries multiple meanings, serving as a prophetic call, a strategic mission framework, and a national aspiration—all at once. The following chapter critically examines the discursive complexity of the Antioch narrative, tracing its historical evolution and unpacking the different ways it has been interpreted within evangelical circles over time. It explores how the Antioch vision has been entangled with and shaped by Singapore's urban development, socio-economic status, and global positioning, reflecting both religious and state-defined aspirations.

4. EVANGELICAL ASPIRATIONS, THE CITY AND THE ANTIOCH CALL

If one of the key characteristics of megachurches lies in their "performance of the mega," as Robbie Goh (2008a) has convincingly argued, then the same can be said for Singapore's contemporary Christian landscape in general. Although the numerical growth of Protestant Christianity has plateaued over the past two decades (see Appendix A and B), Christians have emerged as a dominant and influential force in Singapore, using their "excess" of cultural, social, and economic capital to advance their interests on both a global and domestic scale (R.B.H. Goh 2016). Over 750 homegrown and international churches and Christian organizations exist on the island today,[87] testifying to an increased awareness among Christians that Singapore is positioned to be Asia's next Antioch – a pivotal Christian gateway for apostolic missions in Asia and beyond.

At first glance, the evangelical self-ascription of being Asia's new Antioch seems unsuspicious. As Michael Poon has pointed out, "[i]t is an 'insider' cultural knowledge - in the bones of Singaporean Christians - that needs no explanation" (Poon 2015: 70). Yet, on closer inspection, the term proves to be far more polysemous than it appears. Throughout the course of my research, I encountered numerous different iterations of the Antioch idiom, and each time I thought I had captured its significance, it eluded my mental grasp, presenting itself as a semantic enigma. Fortunately, it became evident that I was not the only one who was lost in translation, judging from the numerous conversations I had with my interlocutors and as aptly reflected in a blog entry on the Christian online portal thir:st, where the writer observed:

> Ask the average Christian in our local churches: they would be excited about being the "Antioch of Asia", but would possibly be quite clueless as to what it means. A gateway to the nations? A mission hub? What does it exactly mean to be an Antioch? (Ng 2019, February 13. 2019).[88]

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[87] The number is based on research, taking the NCCS church directory, the government's Registry of Societies entries and Charity Portal as a source (last updated 2019). For a geographical distribution of churches see https://www.google.gr/maps/d/edit?mid=1oDJEVqu3uKO1evUu-V0LTZdXIPwandll=1.4226952092360614%2C103.84950045212398andz=11 (last updated Oct 2016).

[88] https://thirst.sg/blog/gateway-to-the-nations-is-the-singaporean-church-mission-minded/ (accessed 20.02.2019)

What makes the Antioch trope so difficult to pin down is its various discursive uses and interpretations. Some view it as a prophetic call that is ultimately bound to Singapore's history and destiny as a nation and city-state. Others have used it interchangeably as a comparison, an analogy, or a metaphor. Still others (albeit a minority) reject the notion altogether. However: if Antioch is a metaphor, what does it stand for? If it is a narrative, what is its story? If it is a prophecy, what does it foretell? Is Singapore the Antioch of Asia (in the present tense and as a matter of fact) or going to be one (in the future tense and thus an aspiration)? Moreover, what kind of Antioch is Singapore: is it *the* Antioch of Asia, *an* Antioch of Asia, or *one of* the Antiochs of Asia? Is it an Antioch *of* Asia or an Antioch *for* Asia?

As much as the idea of Singapore as the Antioch of Asia has become a dominant trope within evangelical circles, there is still surprisingly little understanding of how the concept has emerged in the first place. The term is often uncritically taken over as a shorthand for Singapore's role as a missionary–sending hub, with little examination of its historical origins or evolution over time (cf. DeBernardi 2008a, 2008b; R.B.H. Goh 2016; Tan-Chow 2007; but see Poon 2015: 70-71). Such neglect is unfortunate, as the notion of Singapore as the 21st century Antioch of the East has arguably become a powerful motif in the evangelical imaginary and, as such, can serve as a valuable entry point for exploring how Christians reconfigure and negotiate their identities in relation to the city, the nation, and the world at large.

In the following sections, I will engage with the Antioch of Asia idea by looking at it from two angles. First, I will frame the discussion within the broader context of Singapore's ongoing nation-building process and struggle to construct a national identity, stemming from the conflicting demands of simultaneously being a nation-state and a global city. Since gaining independence, Singapore has undergone rapid urbanization and pursued a policy of cosmopolitan openness to attract global capital and talent, essential for sustaining its economic growth. However, this approach has proven difficult to reconcile with the need to cultivate a national identity that emphasizes continuity and coherence of place, thereby anchoring its citizens to the clearly-defined territory of the nation-state. While Singapore's continuous urban renewal and fundamental future orientation have presented challenges in fostering an enduring sense of national belonging and rootedness among its population, it has

also opened up spaces of possibilities to re-imagine the island city-state's past, present, and potential futures otherwise. It is within this context of nation-building and identity formation that the aspiration to become the "Antioch of Asia" emerges as a powerful narrative, seeking to infuse the city with spiritual significance and re-inscribe the nation's postcolonial development as an act of divine providence. The Antioch trope, therefore, not only denotes an already materialized Christian "utopia," but also carries a significant ideational, or immaterial component, which will be the main focus of my analysis.

The second aspect of this chapter will investigate the history of the Antioch trope by providing a more comprehensive account of its evolution over time. The objective here is not to trace and fixate the actual origin of the Antioch narrative (in the sense of a singular primordial beginning), but rather to highlight the conditions that have shaped the idea to its present form. The central argument put forward is that the social construction of the Christian Antioch identity should not solely be thought of as a theological category, but also understood within the context of Singapore's status as an island nation-state and its global city aspirations. Antioch-thinking affords city-thinking, and in Singapore this implies above all one thing: to think in terms of speed and change.

4.1   Singapore: a city built for the future

> *«The destiny of Singapore remains very much a rewriting and a re-imagining by each generation of what is possible…How can it be otherwise for a nation that was born of imagination, erected on dreams and has created a network of internal, unseen information to reach beyond itself? »* (Ban 1992*: 23*)

> *«Life in Singapore is hardly senang or easy. Everything changes so fast. You blink your eyes once, and a building disappears. You blink another time, and a whole street disappears. Then taller buildings and malls shoot up, and suddenly a McSpicy meal costs $7. (Remember last time was below $5?) Walao eh! Very scary one – but it's liddat here lor. It's how we could go from Third-World to First-World in one generation and got to spiak or showy. If this red dot is full of anything, it's change»* (Sui 2017*: 46).[89]*

Singapore is a city constantly on the move – a thriving metropolis caught in a state of continuous renewal and self-transformation where the future tends to slip out of

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[89] The excerpt is written in Singlish, a colloquial form of standard Singaporean English which is characterized by a mixture of local expressions and the usage of loanwords from Malay, Tamil, Mandarin and Chinese dialects (such as Hokkien, Teochew, and Cantonese). I abstain from an exact translation as its general gist should be comprehensible to the reader.

touch with the past. Imagine Singapore a few years from now, and much of the urban landscape will have changed for good. New skyscrapers will have been raised, old buildings torn down, replaced or altered beyond recognition, wiping out memories and filling those that are left with a bittersweet feeling of nostalgia, a sentiment that all the same remains ephemeral against the unbound flux of urban redevelopment. As the late Singaporean poet, Arthur Yap tells us, in Singapore, "there is no future in nostalgia/ and certainly no nostalgia in the future of the past." The old passes by in "various variations and permutations" while the present perpetually "goes on," at once escaping and superseding its historical context (Yap 1977, cited in Phillips 2005). Change, as one is made to believe, is Singapore's inevitable destiny, a *fait accompli* from which there is no turning back. In anticipation of the future, the past is selectively remembered or forgotten – not lost, for sure, but unreachable to serve as a reference point for making sense of a present that is constantly unfolding.

The question of what constitutes Singapore's identity and how to construct and anchor an enduring sense of nationhood amidst the city's "endless cycle of erasure and reconstruction" (Yeo 2003: 247) has been a persistent one throughout the history of the young nation-state. Having emerged from almost 150 years of British rule, Singapore's first generation of leaders embarked on a nation-building project that was geared towards economic development and deliberately eschewed the use of history to create a sense of community and identity. Singapore's survival, as the state's official rhetoric went, could not depend on the past but was to be premised on its ability to build a future-proof city, resilient and adaptable to a volatile and ever-changing environment. As then Minister of Foreign Affairs and Labour, Sinnathamby Rajaratnam emphasized back in 1968:

> We do not operate on the assumption that our society is and should be static. Our stress is always on the fact of change; that progress and survival are dependent on constant change; ...Similarly, we do not lay undue stress on the past. We do not see nation-building and modernisation as primarily an exercise in reuniting present generations with a past generation and its values and glories. This sort of nation building could be disasterous [sic] for Singapore. A generation encouraged to bask in the values of the past and hold on to a static future will never be equipped to meet a future predicated on jet travel, atomic power, satellite communication, electronics and computers. For us the task is not one of linking past generations with the present generation, but the present generation with future generations (S. Rajaratnam, speech at the *Sixth Asian Advertising Congress*, 1 July 1968).

For a nation so radically embracing the future and obsessed with the idea of

progress, forgetting the past was "not an accidental or ignorant act, but [seen as] a 'structural necessity'" (Devan 1999, quoted in Kong and Yeoh 2003: 131). It was only by the mid-1980s that the government began to realize that its politics of historical amnesia and single-minded focus on material affluence had left an "ideological vacuum" that needed to be filled (Chong 2010b). What Singapore lacked was a founding myth that was able to imbue the nation with symbolic meaning and reinforce the PAP's image as the main guarantor and guardian for stability and economic progress (ibid.). Unlike other nation-building projects, however, the construction of an "imagined political community" was not to be achieved through the "invention of a tradition" or by reconnecting the present to a glorious, primordial past (cf. Anderson 1983; Hobsbawm 1983). Instead, the government pursued to craft a national (his)story that was predicated upon the island's presupposed innate vulnerability and fashioned the state ideologies of survival, pragmatism, meritocracy, and multiracialism into a teleological narrative of Singapore's "improbable" rise from "From Third World to First" (Lee Kuan Yew 2000). In its essence, the "Singapore story" is thus a tale about the city-state's progress and success – a success, however, that is inherently precarious and which only can be sustained through constant adaption and change. As such, Singapore's official national history resists narrative closure. It is a teleology without a determinate *telos*, at once fundamentally oriented towards the future and constructed around a myth of origin that recasts Singapore's postcolonial genesis as a "traumatic" event whose national survival was only made possible through the capable leadership and pragmatic foresight of the ruling PAP government and its founding father, Lee Kuan Yew (cf. Loh et al. 2017).

Yet, while the Singapore story conveys an authoritative didactic narrative of Singapore's postcolonial coming-into-being, the city's constant perpetuation of change has made the prospect of attaining a settled sense of identity over time elusive, if not unrealistic (Yeo 2003). A general sense of loss and disconnection seems to permeate Singapore's collective consciousness, perpetuated by the city's relentless need for adaption and 'upgrading' that counters any claims of permanence or stability of place. The feelings of being 'culturally uprooted' and suffering from 'historical amnesia' thus remain deeply ingrained in Singapore's national psyche, so much so that Member of Parliament Zaqy Mohamad would lament only a year before

Singapore's 50th anniversary: "are we a nation that has built a lot, achieved wonders, but has no soul?" (AsiaOne 2014). Was Singapore, after nearly five decades of nation-building and urban redevelopment, still a soulless artifice – a blank slate dispossessed of its past and cultural roots (W.S.W. Lim 2004) – or perhaps more than ever so?

Figure 2: Panoramic view of Singapore's skyline overlooking the Marina Bay Area and the Central Business District (photo: Shutterstock/1640537836)

Walking through the city, with its iconic skyline and impeccably manicured urban landscape, one is ultimately reminded of Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas' (in)famous portrayal of Singapore as a "Potemkin Metropolis," where the city appears elaborated and impressive but lacks any substance and authenticity (Koolhaas 1995). In his seminal essay "Singapore Songlines,"[90] Koolhaas argues that Singapore represents the archetypical "generic city," where "history has been almost completely blotted out, the entire territory has become artificial [and] the urban tissue does not endure in any kind of stability beyond a relatively short period of existence" (ibid.: 1031). Everything that happens in Singapore appears to be accorded to an aim for tabula

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[90] A "songline," or "dreaming track," is a concept in Australian Aboriginal culture referring to the paths across the land that were created by ancestral beings during the Dreamtime, the period of creation. These paths are recorded in traditional songs, stories, dance, and art, and they serve both as navigational aids, guiding people across vast distances, and as cultural and spiritual links to the land, connecting the people to their ancestors and to the sacred geography of their country.

rasa and complete rebuilding, perpetually morphing the city to the next state and thereby freeing it from the straitjacket of context, history, and identity (ibid.: 1075; 1249). For Koolhaas, the unabated (re)-construction of Singapore's cityscape and desire to tame its 'natural wilderness' into familiarity and orderliness ultimately reveals the country's "deep primordial fear of being swallowed up by the jungle, a fate that can only be avoided by being ever more perfect, ever more disciplined, always the best" (ibid.: 1083).

However, *if* Singapore's relentless desire for growth means the erasure of history on the one side and the creation of the new 'generic city' on the other, how are collective memories and shared local identities created? When does abstract space become a place of home? Can Singapore no longer imagine itself as anything other than what it has become? Is it consequently "doomed to remain a Potemkin Metropolis" (Koolhaas 1995: 1077)?

One main problem emerging from readings such as Koolhaas is that they tend to depict an overdetermined and totalizing picture of Singapore's state-led urban modernization and thus ironically remain as much on the surface in their analysis as the very object they intend to criticize. As John Phillips argues:

> [Koolhaas'] diagnosis recreates the rhetoric of a peculiarly western architectural idiom in the history of modernity [which] tends to hyperbole about material structure, and leads to an at least implicit overvaluation of the visible environment…The notion of the tabula rasa – the blank slate that hypermodernity creates in order to build its history-free edifices – will turn out to be significantly more complex than Koolhaas has allowed (Phillips 2005: 148 and 150).

Viewing Singapore merely as a "Potemkin Metropolis" based on "tabula rasa" and bereft of depth and alterity crucially overlooks the more fundamental socio-political dynamics and historical continuities that have structured both urbanization *and* nation-building processes since independence. As Lily Kong et al. point out, unlike other global cities such as New York, Tokyo, or Hong Kong, "for Singapore the city *is* the country [and] the local *is* the nation" (Kong et al. 2015: 83, emphasis in original). The attempt to describe contemporary Singapore through a totalizing metaphorical framework thus risks obfuscating the deeper underlying contradictions and tensions that have informed the country's continuing search for identity (or soul) arising from its peculiar position of being at once a nation and a city.

Alluding to this, Terence Chong argues that Singapore's identity is "destined to be a schizophrenic one" and essentially characterized by the conflict between "the economic desire to be a global city and the primordial need to be a nation - both of which require different social psyche and anticipation to thrive" (Chong 2006, 2014a: 17). While the global city "is defined by constant change and competing narratives" of modernity, the nation in return "demands permanence, spatial durability, and authenticity" to create a stable sense of collective belonging and identity over time (Chong 2006, 2015a: 167). As Chong points out in reference to historian Prasenjit Duara (1998), the success of nation-building crucially hinges on the "regimes of authenticity" that enable a nation "to install timeless values within the idea of the nation such that it is seen as eternal and thus 'authentic', in contrast to the volatility of modernity" (Chong 2010a: 504). Notably, the term authenticity, as used here, is not to be understood in a materialist sense, but linked to the political project of nation-building and its challenges to produce a unitary and enduring national imaginary, "where citizens can find security in the collective memory and go on to form emotional bonds" (Chong 2014: 18). Imbued with a 'sacred' and timeless quality, the nation is apotheosized as the guarantor of stability, standing against the volatile nature of capitalism and the ever-changing tides of urban modernity.

However, for Singapore, this ideal is difficult to be realized as its global city aspirations demands to constantly adapt to the exigencies of global capitalism and thereby undermines the efforts of constructing a 'regime authenticity' that could serve as an anchor to form an enduring national identity. Built as a vision of the future while defying its past, Singapore lacks the narrative resources to craft myths of heritage and tradition that enable to impart the postcolonial nation with a stable and unifying meaning *beyond* its economic success and global city ambitions. Indeed, as Chua Beng Huat reminds us, Singapore's identity in terms of a continuous and authentic cultural marker of nationhood has been questionable from the outset:

> Until 1965, Singapore as an independent political entity was an 'absence'; it was not an idea which a population was trying to realize. This 'absence' accounts for the desperate need and successive attempts to 'define', to 'substantiate' and to eventually 'realize' a national identity at every level of social and political life. **Unlike economic development, however, success in identity building has been elusive - the ontologically real has tended to continuously and cunningly slip away from all attempts to represent it** (B.H. Chua 1996: 52; emphasis added).

It is precisely because Singapore slips away from any positivist representation or the "ontologically real" that evokes its elusiveness both as an idea and as a physical place. As Joanne Waghorne points out, Singapore's ever-changing built environment poses a constant challenge to our imagination and the assumptions we make about the relationships between orientation and disorientation, authenticity and artificiality, myth and reality (Waghorne 2020: 7). As a fully constructed space that "feels so real and yet so unreal" (ibid.: 4), Singapore consistently appears to defy our attempts to describe it "as it is." However, as I would argue, rather than a "Potemkin Metropolis," where the city is conceived of as a blank slate devoid of context, history, and identity, and therefore "inaccessible to our imagination and interpretation" (Koolhaas 1995: 1041), Singapore can be read as a place that transcends the notions of authenticity and artificiality. Each time Singapore has "remade" itself, it has created another version of itself and thereby assumed a new identity without completely erasing the past or discarding its previous identities. As Singaporean poet Alvin Pang (Pang 2017: 9) comments:

> ... [Singapore's] story was not inscribed whole upon some tabula rasa: no nation's is [*sic*]. Building upon countless elements old and new, from near and far — whether imposed, inherited, invented or fashioned anew to suit — the Singapore we have today is the outcome of a long continuum of accommodation, adaptation, reimagining and risk. More to the point: we are not done with our changes. We continue to become.

In other words, Singapore's urban landscape breathes continuity, standing in a long line of urban future aspirations that began with Sir Stamford Raffles' colonial ambition to create "a great commercial emporium and fulcrum" and was succeeded by Lee Kuan Yew's postcolonial vision to transform the island into a model global city. What Singapore represents is the ability to re-contextualize itself and transform its very "city-stateness" through re-imagination and re-invention, thus underscoring Singapore's potentiality to constantly evolve into something new, even 'authentic'. Consequently, the fluidity and perpetual change that characterizes Singapore as an island city-state are neither totalizing nor determined by some abstract finality, but also opens up spaces of possibilities to imagine Singapore otherwise.

It is here that we enter into another dimension of the urban, one that exceeds the mere physical representation of the city and its officially constructed maps to what Néstor García Canclini (2008) has called urban imaginaries - spaces of co-existing, competing, and also contested urban perceptions and meaning structures

that create symbolic territorialities or alternative geographies and temporalities of the city with their own coordinates. It is a dimension that escapes the observations of most people coming to Singapore. One that is, however, not to be found hidden beneath the surface of Singapore's carefully manicured urban landscape but very much part of it. Other songlines exist that infuse the city with spiritual meaning and overlay the nation with a 'sacred' or even prophetic quality: Imagine Singapore as the Antioch of Asia.

4.2   Imagining Singapore as the Antioch of Asia

«We believe Jesus has raised Singapore up as a leading global city to equip our nation to fulfill her call as an apostolic training, resourcing and sending center for the final frontiers of the Great Commission in Asia» (www.antiochforasia.org, about) [91]

«In fulfilment of its prophetic destiny as Antioch of Asia, Singapore has an instrumental role in spreading the gospel and bringing revival to the nations»
RiverLife (2016)[92]

At first glance, it is not difficult to imagine Singapore as a 21st century hub for Christian missions in Asia. Having transitioned from a missionary-*receiving* country, the city-state has progressively evolved into a missionary-*sending* nation over the past decades and today serves as a prominent base for both international and domestic missionary organizations, training institutes, and Bible schools (DeBernardi 2008b). Most churches maintain a mission outreach program or partner with one of the various national and international mission agencies that operate in the city, channeling vast amounts of money to fulfill the "Great Commission" and to bring the gospel to the millions of "unreached" people in Asia and beyond. Throughout the year, countless mission teams are sent out to be a "blessing to other nations," providing medical and poverty relief to the destitute, teaching and training leaders of local partner churches, or staging mass evangelistic rallies "to bring revival and save the lost." Short-term mission trips have become a central rite of passage for Christian youth, at once exposing them to the larger "harvest field" abroad and enhancing their spiritual capital at home. Various seminaries prepare aspiring

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[91] see https://www.antiochforasia.org/ (first accessed 04.08.2018; last checked: 02.08.2021, website has become defunct)
[92] Quote   taken   from   RiverLife   church   camp   flyer   2016 (https://riverlife.g.shopcadacdn.com/sites/files/riverlife/camp_web_flyer_updated.pdf   ;   last accessed 03.08.2021)

Christians for their anticipated future as missionaries, providing practical and theological education on sharing the "good news" across different cultural contexts. Conferences and networking events are being held on a regular basis to chart out new mission strategies, foster mutual trust, and enhance cooperation between the different stakeholders of the growing missionary enterprise. Against this background it hardly comes as a surprise that Singapore has often been called the "Antioch of Asia."

In their engagement to build the Antioch of Asia, Christians in Singapore have become, what Burchardt et al. (2023: 149) have termed, "spatial entrepreneurs," seeking not only to "enhance their material and symbolic presence and public visibility" in the city-state but also to create sacred geographies that align with their evangelical aspirations. Following Marian Burchardt and Mariske Westerndorp's proposition to incorporate the "immaterial dimensions" into the study of "urban religion" (Burchardt and Westendorp 2018), we can thus read the Antioch vision as an expression of "urban aspirations" through which Christians have re-engaged the imaginary of the global city to advance their own goal of disseminating their faith both on a domestic and international level. More than just a metaphor representing Singapore as a contemporary Asian mission hub, Singapore's Antioch imaginary denotes a Christian collective imaginative space that generates meaning and provides a shared sense of identity and purpose, while finding its symbolic expression through various narratives, myths, and prophecies. To think with and through Singapore's Christian Antioch aspiration thus implies venturing into prophetic dreamscapes where the concept of space becomes relative, linear time assumes a cyclical nature, and the boundaries between the tangible and the mythical dissolve. It further involves engaging with the numerous modern-day prophets, spiritual warriors, apostles and intercessors who, building upon Billy Graham's legacy, have assumed the responsibility of championing Singapore's redemptive call in fulfilling its divine destiny and to emerge as Asia's next Antioch.

Yet, how has the idea of Antioch evolved into such a significant leitmotif within the contemporary evangelical imaginary? What narrative does it seek to convey? And how does the Antioch prophecy relate to Singapore's broader context as both a city and a nation? It is to these questions that I turn next.

4.2.1   The genealogy of a vision

Early beginnings

Tracing the trajectory of the Antioch of Asia narrative is not without its challenges. The fact that the term is commonly associated with Billy Graham and his alleged prophetic call for Singapore to be an Antioch of the East during his evangelistic crusade in 1978 tends to overshadow the deeper historical layers from which the idea emerged. Yet, a closer look at the history of the concept reveals that the notion was already being used prior to Graham's visit and initially emerged within Singapore's Brethren network during the 1960s.

Perhaps the earliest documented reference to Antioch can be found in a commemorative booklet compiled by church elder Matthew Finlay in 1964 and published to celebrate the 100th anniversary of *Bethesda Gospel Hall,* the oldest Brethren assembly on the island (Finlay 1964). Drawing upon the church's early record books, Finlay recounts the history of the assembly and draws parallels between its "humble" beginnings and that of the Antioch church described in the New Testament, writing:

> In fact, **we found it quite natural to compare the beginnings of this church in Singapore, with the beginnings of the church in Antioch**, **as recorded in Acts chapter eleven.** Let us notice one very striking point of similarity. In Acts 11:19 we read, "Now they that were scattered abroad…travelled as far as Phenice, and Cyprus and Antioch they spoke unto the Grecians, preaching the Lord Jesus. And the hand of the Lord was with them and a great number believed and turned to the Lord." We notice that those early Christians were not sent to Antioch by any human appointment, they were not delegates from Jerusalem apostles – they were simply scattered believers who made their home in Antioch and in that great centre of trade and commerce where they earned their daily bread, they spoke faithfully of their Lord. In the same manner, the little group of believers whose names are found in the old Record Book of Bethesda were men and women who made their way by devious routes and for various reasons to Singapore, the newly-begun trade centre of South-East Asia, and there began to live and do business and witness for Christ. This was not, as in many other places, a planned missionary programme. No committee organized the coming of the different ones who labored in the Gospel, but surely we can see the evidence of a Divine Appointment as the Lord of Harvest chose businessmen, civil servants, men of the Armed Forces and citizens of Singapore to take their place in the building of a simple New Testament church! […] We have noted the distinct similarities between the formation of the Church in Antioch and that in Singapore. **Both were founded by travelling believers who settled in great centres of commerce and multi-racial and multi-religious communities. Neither were the result of human planning or mission strategy, but were obviously a part of the Divine strategy.** This shows us that God does frequently take the weak and foolish things to bring about His purposes (Finlay 1964: 6, 19; emphasis added).

According to Finlay, the early Christian church in Antioch during the first century, as described in Acts 11:19-30, had clear parallels with the establishment of *Bethesda Gospel Hall* in Singapore. Both locations were melting pots for different cultures and, due to their strategic locations on the maritime trade route between the East and West, emerged as important commercial and trading hubs in their respective regions. Analogous to the church in Antioch, *Bethesda Gospel Hall* was established with the help of missionaries and comprised various diaspora groups that had migrated to Singapore from different parts of the world in anticipation of a better future. Neither premeditated nor part of a larger mission strategy, the founding of *Bethesda Hall* was an outcome of *'divine providence'*. Furthermore, it was in Antioch that the foundation of a Gentile Church was laid, which subsequently played a crucial role in disseminating the Christian faith throughout the Roman Empire. Consequently, Finlay believed that *Bethesda Hall* was ordained to produce local missionaries who would emulate the historical trajectory of the early apostles, as he noted:

> Now we draw attention to another comparison between Antioch and Singapore. When the small Christian community began to make an impact upon the surrounding populace, and opportunities began to increase, the Holy Spirit then directed several missionaries to share in the work of the infant church on a full time basis. At Antioch they were greatly blessed by the arrival of Barnabas that "good man", who busied himself in the work of ministering to the believers and preaching the Gospel to the unsaved. **In the same way, the Singapore assembly began to ask the Lord of the harvest for labourers to be thrust out into the great field around them** (Finlay 1964: 19-20; emphasis added).

By the late 1960s, the vision of Singapore as a missionary-sending base began to take shape among some of the evangelical church leaders in the city. Benjamin Chew, an elder of the Brethren *Bethesda Katong* assembly and already recognized as an influential spokesperson for the evangelical community in Singapore, was the most prominent advocate of this idea. Chew played a significant role in establishing various para-church organizations, such as the Graduates' Christian Fellowship and Youth for Christ, and, among other leadership functions, served as chairman of the Overseas Missionary Fellowship (OMF) Singapore home council until 1987.[93] According to former Anglican Bishop Moses Tay, it was during the OMF home council

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[93] The OMF (formerly China Inland Mission) is an international mission organization that was founded in 1865 and has its headquarters in Singapore. In each country that OMF operates it maintains regional home councils that coordinate the mission affairs on-site.

meetings in the late 60s that the idea of building up a strong Antioch mission identity for Singapore was initially formulated (Poon 2015: 70). Concurrently, and in a similar vein, Tan Kok Beng, a former Bible studies student of Chew at *Bethesda Katong*, became convinced of Singapore's strategic significance for missions. As he recounts:

> During the 1960s, I conducted many small-scale mission seminars in local churches. We would often have about up to 20 such seminars in churches per year. It was during some of these meetings in the late 60's that I challenged the small audiences to consider making Singapore the "**Antioch of the East**." This "slogan" was picked up later by others (Tan cited in Tay 2010: 7; emphasis in the original).

It is difficult to ascertain the precise manner in which the Antioch vision for Singapore was conveyed between the respective church leaders or the extent to which Finlay's booklet served as a source of inspiration for the birth of the idea. Given his Brethren background, it is probable that Chew was familiar with Finlay's analogy or, at the very least, aware of the Antioch metaphor through his association with *Bethesda Hall*. However the term was initially adopted, its usage did not appear to have been widespread among the Christian community at that time but remained confined to a smaller circle of like-minded evangelical leaders who were convinced of Singapore's potential to become a significant hub for missions in Asia.

With the precise origins of the Antioch idea remaining somewhat obscure, perhaps a more productive approach is to examine the broader historical context that helped to catalyze its genesis. Notably, the missionary aspiration expressed in the Antioch allegory did not emerge in isolation but was shaped by Singapore's path to independence after World War II. Two factors warrant reconsideration in this regard. First, it is important to recognize that the idea of Singapore as a missionary-sending base had already begun to materialize before the 'Antioch' vision was circulating among some evangelical leaders. During the 1950s and 60s, various mission and para-church organizations began to establish their branches and headquarters on the island, partly in response to the Communist takeover in China, which resulted in the expulsion of almost all foreign Protestant missionaries from mainland China by 1953. Singapore's strategic location, comparatively high living standards, and relative political stability and security made the city-state a preferred choice for mission organizations to establish their bases from which they could safely operate in other parts of Asia.

The Overseas Missionary Fellowship (OMF), as mentioned above, demonstrates this point. Following its operation in China for nearly a century, the OMF was compelled to withdraw all of its 750 missionaries in the aftermath of the Communist Revolution (1945-1950) and subsequently relocated its headquarters to Singapore in 1951, where it evolved into one of the most influential mission organization in the region. Other mission societies, training institutes, and ministries followed suit or were initiated by local missionaries and pastors. Considering the accelerated mission presence and the formation of new mission and para-church organizations on the island, it was not difficult to envision Singapore becoming another modern-day Antioch.

Second, we have to recall that the idea of building an 'Antioch of the East' entered the evangelical imaginary shortly after Singapore's independence. Confronted with Singapore's newly-gained sovereignty, the Christian community was searching for a localized identity that would both transcend the Church's colonial legacy and address the challenges posed by the state-led nation-building process. However, and as we have seen, the persistent fault-lines between 'liberal' and evangelical church leaders rendered any attempt to formulate a unified national church identity challenging from the outset. For evangelicals, the ecumenical support of 'liberation theology' and the emphasis on social activism were perceived as a threat to the Church's very foundations and incompatible with its purpose of fulfilling the Great Commission. As a result, evangelicals found themselves in the difficult position of simultaneously responding to the prevailing liberal currents within mainline churches and developing an agenda that would correspond to their core evangelical tenets and strengthen the evangelical basis of the Christian community in Singapore. Against this backdrop, the Antioch metaphor opened up a new avenue for evangelicals to carve out their own space within the Christian landscape, conveying the powerful message of a unified evangelical Church collaborating to realize its ambition to serve as a catalyst for missions in Asia.

Even so, the Antioch motif at this stage was neither referred to as a *prophecy* nor interpreted in terms of an eschatological call for Singapore to fulfill its *divine destiny* as a nation. Instead, and similar to Finlay, it functioned as a *tertium comparationis* that deliberately related the New Testament church of Antioch to the one in Singapore. Yet, while Finlay's analogy aimed to retrospectively imbue

the early beginnings of *Bethesda Gospel Hall* with spiritual meaning and primarily addressed his assembly members, the Antioch idea put forward by Chew and others served as a mission strategy encompassing the Singapore Christian community *at large.* As evidenced by Tan Kok Beng's testimonial statement, it was used as a "slogan" to challenge and strengthen church leaders in their commitment to missions, thereby fostering the anticipatory vision of transforming Singapore into Asia's next Antioch.

A prophesy that was none

It was not until the early 1980s and 90s that Singapore's mission identity as the Antioch of Asia would gain momentum and become more widely recognized. One main reason for this can be traced back to the charismatic movement that took a foothold in Singapore from the mid-1970s. As discussed earlier, the Christian landscape in Singapore underwent several significant changes during the 1970s and early 1980s, starting with the charismatic revival that strengthened the churches' evangelical basis and was followed by city-wide evangelization campaigns leading to increased numbers of conversions and a period of unprecedented church growth. Although remaining a minority religion, Christians were "discovering new muscle" (The Straits Times 1978) and becoming more visible in the public sphere, eventually prompting the government to intervene and secure the delicate status quo of its multi-religious polity by introducing the MRHA in 1990. Picking up on the evident Christian revivalism and intensified evangelism among non-Christians in Singapore, the *Far Eastern Economic Review* featured an article and recounted:

> A church pastor who says he cannot keep track of the increasing numbers of people joining his congregation said **God told him that Singapore is to be the Antioch of Southeast Asia, ushering in a Christian era.** A young man calls Singapore's new aggressive form of Protestantism "high-octane" religion. Some observers compare it to American-style "praise-the-lord" Protestantism – God-fearing and Right-leaning (Far Eastern Economic Review 1987: 62, emphasis added).

Not coincidentally, the Antioch concept was primarily embraced by charismatic church leaders who sought to legitimize the revival by promoting it as a national movement and connecting it to the global charismatic renewal network. In subscribing to a theology that emphasized the prophetic gifts of the Holy Spirit

through visions and dreams, charismatic Christians projected Singapore as a spiritual center form where the 'fire of revival' would be ignited across Asia. "Battleships" would depart from Singapore and "landing crafts" deployed to other Asian nations to support the "Revival movement" there (G. Lee and Lee 2015: 143). The charismatic revival provided evangelicals with a renewed sense of purpose, imparting a spiritual meaning to the postcolonial trajectory of the Church and assigning an eschatological role to the Christian community. Many church leaders interpreted the revival as a divine intervention in the spiritual history of Singapore that would prepare the Church for its God-given purpose to become a Christian gateway to Asia. Singapore was to transition from a peripheral position on the Christian world map to its destined role as the Antioch of Asia, serving as a beacon and hub for the propagation of Christianity to the masses of 'unreached' people both inside Singapore and throughout the region (DeBernardi 2008b).

In a striking way, the strategic thrust of the 'Antioch of the East' vision ran in close parallel with the state's aspiration to transform Singapore into a cosmopolitan global city. The foundations of this vision had already been laid in 1972 by S. Rajaratnam, then Minister for Foreign Affairs, arguing that

> …times are changing and there will be less and less demand for the traditional type of entrepot services Singapore has rendered for well over a century. Its role as a trading city of Southeast Asia, the market place of the region, will become less and less important. This is because it is transforming itself into a new kind of city – the Global City … If we view Singapore's future not as a regional city but as a Global City then the smallness of Singapore, the absence of a hinterland, or raw materials and a large domestic market are not fatal or insurmountable handicaps … because for a Global City the world is its hinterland (Rajaratnam 1972, cited in Kwa 2006: 229-232).

Similar to Rajaratnam's speech in 1972 where he envisioned Singapore as a global city in which the problem of the city-state's lack of territory was to be resolved by embracing the world as its hinterland, the Antioch imaginary positioned Singapore as the new apostolic sending base with the world as its mission backyard ready to be 'harvested'. As Lee and Lee point out:

> Stripped of its spiritual references, these metaphors shared a similar vocabulary with the state-sanctioned narrative of Singapore as a modern metropolis: A progressive, cosmopolitan and harmonious oasis of calm and prosperity, in an ocean surrounded by backwardness and danger (G. Lee and Lee 2015: 143).

Meanwhile, the idea of Singapore as an Asian Christian hub was confirmed and

reinforced by some of the world's most prominent evangelists. During the Gospel Rally, which was organized by the Full Gospel Business Men's Fellowship International in 1982, South Korean mega-church pastor Yonggi Cho referred to Singapore as being in a "wondrously strategic position both geographically and spiritually to serve God as a centre for evangelism in Southeast Asia and other parts of the world" (Cho cited in G. Lee and Lee 2015: 143). Cho's statement echoed Billy Graham's earlier observation during his Singapore evangelistic crusade in 1978, where he proclaimed:

> I feel that in Singapore now is the hour…the hour for God to work…so that we become a mighty spiritual army to touch all of Southeast Asia…now is the hour and each of us has a responsibility (Billy Graham 1978, *Singapore Decision*).

Both declarations carried particular weight for the evangelical community as they were made by two highly respected and globally influential Christian leaders at that time. Through their spiritual authority Billy Graham and Yonggi Cho helped to legitimize and authenticate Singapore's redemptive call as Antioch of Asia. Importantly, however, and based on the primary sources available, neither of them referred directly to Singapore as the Antioch of Asia or, for that matter, *prophesied* that Singapore would become the Antioch of the East. This holds particularly true for Billy Graham and his evangelistic campaign in 1978. Upon conducting archival research at the Billy Graham Center Archives at Wheaton College (IL, USA), no public mention of the Antioch metaphor was found either from Graham or among other leaders involved in the crusade. None of the documents I reviewed referred to Singapore as the Antioch of Asia, not even in passing.[94] To be sure, this does not necessarily preclude the possibility that Graham may have encountered the idea through private conversation. If so, he would most likely have heard about it through Benjamin Chew, who then acted as the general chairman of the crusade. Thus, the main point here is not to suggest that the Antioch allegory was never used during the crusade, but rather to emphasize that Graham most certainly did not *openly proclaim* or *prophesy* that Singapore would become Asia's next Antioch. Further

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[94] The extensive archival research included materials such as: newspaper clippings; audio recordings of Billy Graham's sermons at the National Stadium; press releases and statements; full documentation on the crusade preparations, activities and proceedings including correspondence between the organizers, and the Singapore Crusade film released after the event. For a listing of all materials sighted see Appendix C.

evidence casting doubt on this claim stems from some of the key figures involved in organizing the crusade. Based on a personal email conversation between Henry Holley (who was then the director of the crusade), Jim and Ernest Chew (both sons of Benjamin Chew who held important positions within the crusade's organization committee), neither of them could recall or confirm that Graham referred to Singapore as being like Antioch during his stay (personal email communication 24/26.06.2015).[95] All of these findings indicate that the alleged prophetic call for Singapore to become the Antioch of the East was not, as commonly believed, given by Billy Graham himself but ascribed to him retrospectively.

A brief stint into the international political arena

While there is no evidence to support the assertion that Billy Graham would have issued a prophetic call regarding Singapore's destiny as a modern-day Antioch, the 'slogan' nonetheless gained recognition beyond the shores of Singapore. American journalist Sharon Mumper was possibly the first to introduce Singapore's Antioch mission identity to a wider Christian audience outside Singapore. Assigned to cover the Luis Palau evangelistic crusade in 1986, she authored two short features, which were published in *Christianity Today* and the *Pulse* magazine of the Evangelical Missions Information Service the same year.[96]

In her *Pulse* article entitled "Singapore's Christian leaders see future as Antioch of Asia" (Mumper 1986a), Mumper recounts the profound evangelical shift that had taken place within the Christian community, leading to a reinvigoration of the churches and an accelerated commitment towards missions, both in terms of financial support and the number of missionaries serving overseas. Drawing on her interview with Benjamin Chew, she asks in her concluding remarks:

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[95] This is further corroborated by the testimony of Jim Chew given at a private forum held for local church workers to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the Crusade. See: Remembering the Crusade: A Church United for the Gospel, Part 02 at 10:05, available under https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PKKXWl3h1GQ.

[96] There seems to be a reference to Singapore as the 'Antioch of Asia' in the Operation World prayer guide predating Mumper's articles. Edward Pousson, an American missionary based in Singapore, alludes to this in a newsletter, recounting his initial encounter with the term in writing: "I first came across it in 1983….I was following Patrick Johnstone's Operation World prayer guide and I came across the entry on Singapore. It said, 'Singapore is the Antioch of Asia.'" (Pousson 2008). Most probably Pousson refers here to the "Operation World: A Day-to-day Guide to Praying for the World" edition of 1983. The exact source, however, remains to be verified.

> What does this mean for the future? "I believe Singapore will become a Christian center," said Chew. Singapore Christians are more evangelistic than ever before. They are committed to spreading the gospel in Singapore, Asia, and throughout the world. **The city bears a striking resemblance, some leaders believe, to another famous city of 2,000 years ago. It is possible, they say, that Singapore could become a new Antioch - perhaps, the Antioch of Asia** (Mumper 1986a: 3; emphasis added)

Expounding on Singapore's new-found evangelical and mission-oriented identity, Mumper writes in her *Christianity Today* article headlined "Singapore's Tiny Church Pursues a Giant Vision:"

> Like a young David gathering stones to battle Goliath, Singapore's small but feisty Protestant church is preparing to reach Asia's unsaved millions [...] The church in Singapore is characterized by a sense of unity, exhuberant [*sic*] faith, and an almost naïve optimism [...] **With money and manpower dedicated to the gospel pouring out of Singapore, the island nation may yet become the Antioch of Asia** (Mumper 1986b: 51; emphasis added).

The articles authored by Mumper make it evident that Singapore was not perceived as an already established Antioch of Asia. Instead, it was considered a possibility that could materialize in the near future. Notably, the articles were published almost a decade after the crusade, and no reference was made of a prophecy allegedly given by Billy Graham.

Mumper's feature in *Pulse* would later take on a life of its own, serving as a piece of evidence to affirm Singapore's commitment to religious freedom and refute accusations that the government had persecuted Christians based on religious grounds (Poon 2015). The allegations raised against the Singapore state revolved around the detention of several members of the *New Testament Church* back in March 1986, who were arrested by the ISD for having formed an unlawful assembly to stage demonstrations against the Deputy Trade Representative of Taiwan and the Singapore government.[97]

The event provoked demonstrations among members of the *New Testament Church* branch in the United States, who accused the Singapore police of "illegally" arresting "gospel-preaching Christians" and claimed that the Singapore government was denying their fellow believers the right to exercise freedom of religion (The

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[97] Founded by Pentecostal revivalist and former Hong Kong movie star Kong Duen Yee (the same person that visited Singapore in the early 1960s and acted as a catalyst for the establishment of the Church of Singapore) the Taiwan-based New Testament Church was known for its radical millenarian theology and opposition to the Taiwanese government.

Straits Times 1986a). In response to the incident, the US-based human rights organization Asia Watch issued a letter expressing concern about the "nature of official actions against Church members," including the alleged use of excessive police force during detention (*Asia Watch*, 22 May 1987). However, Singapore government officials maintained that the accusations made by the *New Testament Church* supporters were unfounded, prompting Singapore's then-ambassador to the US, Tommy Koh, to write a letter in rebuttal, asserting that Christians in Singapore were free to practice their faith and enclosing a copy of Mumper's *Pulse* article as evidence.[98] Koh's letter and the attached article by Mumper were subsequently submitted to the U.S. House of Representatives hearings before the Subcommittee on Human Rights and International Organizations of the Committee on Foreign Affairs in July 1988 (Recent developments in Malaysia and Singapore 1988; Appendix 5: 244). The purpose of these hearings was to evaluate the human rights conditions in Malaysia and Singapore, with a particular focus on the human rights violations in Singapore that occurred in the aftermath of the so-called 'Marxist conspiracy' in 1987.

Thus, in a rather obscure way, the Antioch trope became entangled with international politics. As Poon (2015: 71) points out, "to [ambassador] Koh, the Antioch of the East self-understanding testified to Singapore's religious freedom" and thereby demonstrated the creative ways in which the imagining of Singapore as Antioch could unleash Christian energy "into a celebration of Singaporean spirit and divine mission, regardless of ethnic groups and political situation, outside the island-state". Nevertheless, despite its brief stint in the global political arena, the Antioch trope remained firmly anchored within the Singapore evangelical imaginary, gradually developing into an even more expansive iteration of itself.

Fulfilling the Antioch call and the perils of unbelief

During the 1990s, various forms of prayer evangelism gained popularity among

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[98] Interestingly the official stance of the Singapore government was also confirmed by Christian leaders in Singapore, as evident in a joint public statement published in the Straits Times reading: "We do not regard the so-called 'New Testament Church' a Christian Church on biblical and New Testament grounds. Their allegation is completely erroneous because there is freedom and respect of religion in our society and nation" (The Straits Times 1986b).

churches, influenced by the *AD2000 and Beyond Movement* and its associated *United Prayer Track* (DeBernardi 2008a; Tan-Chow 2007). This movement was represented in Singapore by Peter Wagner's *Spiritual Warfare Network* (SWN) and spearheaded by Lawrence Khong, the senior pastor of Faith Community Baptist Church (FCBC).[99] Khong's connection to Wagner's SWN laid the foundation for the establishment of the interdenominational LoveSingapore movement in 1995. LoveSingapore united around one-third of Protestant churches, with the objective of fulfilling "God's destiny" for Singapore as the "Antioch of Asia" and serving as a "Bridge of Blessing" to the nations (LoveSingapore 2000).[100] Grounded in a Pentecostal soteriological framework, intercessory prayer, spiritual mapping, and spiritual warfare became strategic means for evangelism, holding the promising power to transform Singapore's spiritual climate and ignite another national revival (Tan-Chow 2007: 60). As Tan-Chow points out, the objective of LoveSingapore was nothing less than to redirect the entire nation towards God and raise a "spiritual army" of intercessors and "prayer warriors", who would reclaim the spiritual territory of Singapore from demonic strongholds, thereby unlocking "the floodgates of revival and bringing healing to the nations" (ibid.: 61,68). Thus, consistent with the strategic aim of the *AD2000 and Beyond Movement*, LoveSingapore proclaimed "a major harvest wave" of conversions to take place in 2001, which would bring about national salvation and propel Singapore towards its spiritual destiny as the Antioch of Asia (LoveSingapore 2000: 111). "Today Singapore, Tomorrow the World" was the motto used by Khong, who envisioned a spiritual breakthrough that would fundamentally transform Singapore's society, declaring:

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[99] Established in 1989 at a meeting of the Global Consultation on World Evangelism (GCOWE) in Singapore, the *AD2000 and Beyond Movement* was a global evangelical network committed to world evangelism with the vision to "reach the Gospel for every person by the year 2000." As a part of the mission strategy the *AD2000 United Prayer Track* was formed to help mobilize the movement through prayer, intercession, and spiritual warfare. Participating in the *Prayer Track* were well-established Pentecostal/charismatic prayer networks such as Peter Wagner's *Spiritual Warfare Network*, Ed Silvoso's *Prayer Evangelism*, John Dawson's *International Reconciliation Coalition*, and Cindy Jacob's *Generals of Intercession*. According to a plan in place from its inception *the AD2000 and Beyond Movement* was disbanded in 2001. For a more detailed discussion on the history of the *AD2000 United Prayer Track* in Singapore see DeBernardi 2008a; Tan-Chow 2007.
[100] On its homepage LoveSingapore states the aims of the movement as follows: "In a nutshell, since its inception, LoveSingapore is all about God's greatest glory seen through – a life changed, a church revived, a nation transformed, a world evangelized." (http://www.lovesingapore.org.sg/; last accessed 21.04.2017). For a review on the beginnings of the LoveSingapore movement see Tan-Chow 2007: 52-68.

Spontaneous prayer and praise will erupt. Crime will drop and moral standards improve. Families will reconcile. And a harvest force of new laborers will rise to their calling to move out and serve God on the mission field, with massive support from the church (ibid.).

However, by the end of 2001, it became apparent that the anticipated conversion of two million had failed to materialize. The optimistic expectation of an unprecedented revival that would profoundly impact Singapore remained unfulfilled. Despite the mass mobilization initiated by LoveSingapore and its affiliated churches, only around 3,000 conversions were recorded (Tan-Chow 2007: 77).

The crucial point here is not so much the fact that the outcome of the outreach fell short of expectations but rather that its failure was retrospectively interpreted as caused by a lack of faith. As Lai-Kheng Pousson of LoveSingapore commented in an interview with Tan-Chow:

We struggle with unbelief in a very deep way. I think all along unbelief has been a key thing. That's why it constantly surfaces in prayer too. In spite of its show of faith - there is an unconscious unbelief even within the leadership. **We want to believe but really in the innermost core of us we struggle** (Tan-Chow 2007: 77; emphasis added).

To Lai-Kheng Pousson, the salvific promise of another nation-wide revival failed not because of a lack of commitment but because of a deep-seated struggle to believe in it. What became clear was that national salvation first and foremost depended on the spiritual maturity and unity of churches in Singapore. The "failure" of the "National Grand Harvest" thus questioned whether Singapore's Christian community was spiritually equipped to fulfill its divine responsibility and act as a "bridge of blessing" for Asia. "Was Singapore Antioch yet" (Pousson 2008) or was it merely aspiring to be one?

Nevertheless, despite such setbacks, the vision of Singapore as the Antioch of Asia continued to resonate deeply within the Christian community and was most notably reaffirmed in 2017 by US evangelist Lou Engle during the 5th *Kingdom Invasion* conference. Referring to a prophetic dream of his fellow evangelist Chris Berglund, Engle proclaimed that Singapore "was about to graduate into an apostolic sending place, that would carry prophetic clarity to transform economies and

nations."[101] In his sermon, titled "the seed of a dream", Engle underscored the significance of Billy Graham's evangelistic crusade to Singapore in 1978, prophesying that a "cyclical review" was imminent in 2018, during which God would revisit the prophetic word delivered by Graham nearly 40 years ago:

> I would like to suggest that, coming into this 40th year, something of a cyclical review and potential greatest visitation in history [will happen].[...] I believe there is something about 40 years or a generation that God comes to nations and reviews them and sees if they're going to qualify for the fulfillment of the promise [...] When Billy Graham turns a hundred years old next year, I wonder if his mantle is falling for a whole new wave of evangelism and apostolic power to be released into the nation. [...] Will you see the greatest revival or will you live for self-preservation? [...] Maybe He's coming with a review for Singapore and wondering if you are well-satisfied, rich, and in need of nothing, or maybe He's coming to a people that are so hungry to fulfill their divine destiny that they are willing to do anything to fulfill it.

Lou Engle's prophetic declaration in 2017 was well received by Singapore's Christian audience and reconfirmed one year later at the 2018 edition of the *Kingdom Invasion* conference. This time, Engle extended the 40-years review cycle to include John Sung's visit to Singapore in 1938. Thus, eighty years after John Sung's revival and forty years after Billy Graham's crusade, God had come for an inspection in 2018 to determine if the Church was prepared to fulfill its anointing as the Antioch of the East. Singapore, as Engle emphasized in the aftermath of Graham's death,[102] was at a "pivotal time in its history" that would determine the course of its future. Cautioning against taking their prophetic destiny lightly and highlighting the gravity of the situation he warned:

> Singapore has the invitation to be the Antioch of Asia – but if you don't choose Antioch, you will end up with arrogance on one side and apathy on the other. You have to choose Antioch. It means sacrificing everything to see this Antioch vision come forth [...] You don't just dream your own dreams—you dream the dreams for your time. When Daniel understood it was time, he set his face to fasting. To turn the nation back, to lose the bonds of the captives. There should be a hunger for the voice of God when we sleep. Ask God for dreams. Stop doubting your dreams! Whatever was planted in 1938 and 1978 will see a harvest in 2018 (*Thir.st*, 14 March 2018; *CityNews,* 17 March 2018).[103]

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[101] The following quotes are taken from a transcribed excerpt of Lou Engle's sermon during the 5th edition of the Kingdom Invasion conference in Singapore, March 2017. (https://www.kingdominvasion.sg/ki-vi18; last accessed 20.07.2019). The video has since been taken down from the website.

[102] Billy Graham passed away in February 2018.

[103] https://thirst.sg/blog/dont-choose-antioch-end-arrogance-apathy-lou-engle-warns-singaporeans-kingdom-invasion-2018/ (accessed 05.10.2018).
https://www.citynews.sg/2018/03/17/kingdom-invasion-2018-the-rising-up-of-daniels-and-esthers/ (accessed 05.10.2018).

However, by the end of the year it became evident that 2018 did not turn out to be a "kairos moment" for Singapore's Christian community as it had been prophesied by Engle. The "seeds of the Antioch dream" failed to germinate. There were no signs of a divine visitation and the grand revival had to be postponed - once more.

4.2.2 Prophetic temporalities and the destiny of the nation

If, as the late historian Carl L. Becker (1955: 330) once reasoned, the "historical fact is not the past event, but a symbol which enables us to recreate it imaginatively," then Billy Graham's evangelistic crusade to Singapore in 1978 can be seen as the symbolic reference point through which Christians have reimagined their city-state as the Antioch of Asia. Accordingly, the significance of Graham's crusade does not derive from the event itself but from how it is historicized and retold (or re-dreamed) in the present. Graham's visit to Singapore serves as a critical juncture in the historical narrative of the local Christian community, and as such, takes on almost a mythic quality that imbues Singapore's postcolonial trajectory, present, and future with spiritual significance, while helping to create and legitimize a shared sense of purpose for transforming Singapore into a Christian hub for Asia.

Yet, the *realization* of Singapore's Christian future aspirations as expressed in the Antioch prophecy is not predetermined, but contingent upon the choices and actions made in the present. There is a certain ambiguity or fragility built in the prophecy that aggravates collective anxieties about the possible failure to live up to Singapore's Antioch call: What when the future does *not* happen as promised? As we have seen earlier, the possibility of failure is deeply embedded in Singapore's Antioch narrative: God comes for a cyclical review to judge *if* Singapore has fulfilled its call; Singapore risks succumbing to arrogance and apathy *if* it does not choose Antioch. While Singapore's future as the Antioch of Asia has been prefigured in the past through Billy Graham's (alleged) divine revelation, the prophecy only becomes actualized if it is properly understood and acted upon in the present.

If we read the Antioch narrative as a myth (or at least a narrative that borders to the mythical), we must recognize that it is not based on a Greek or Roman

mythological conception of time, where the past is represented as an everlasting foundation (i.e. primordial time) and the present as a continuous progression that transcends the limitations of past and future. Nor is it merely grounded on a modernist representation of linear time, which starts from the present and separates the past from the future, with the latter being fundamentally indeterminate. Instead, the Antioch narrative plot works primarily through a cyclical eschatological timeframe, where the end (eschaton) precedes the beginning and thereby turns the past into an effect of the future. As Karl Löwith (1949: 6) has argued:

> In the Hebrew and Christian view of history the past is a promise to the future; consequently, the interpretation of the past becomes a prophecy in reverse, demonstrating the past as a meaningful 'preparation' for the future.

Two observations can be drawn from this. First, the Antioch prophecy is a *conditional* statement that does not simply seek to predict the future but to transform the way that Christians live and act in the present. The warning about the potential failure to realize Singapore's spiritual destiny is meant to prompt Christians to repent, undergo spiritual renewal, and lead lives that will persuade God to unlock the "floodgates of revival" and transform the nation once more. Second, while prophetic time functions in the temporal mode of a 'future present' (i.e., a present that does not yet exist but will become real later as a result of today's actions and decisions; cf. Esposito 2011), it does not follow that the future is undetermined or indeterminate. On the contrary, from an eschatological time perspective, the future pre-exists; it is pre-determined and most significantly known to God. Singapore's spiritual destiny as an Antioch of the East is part of a broader divine end-time purpose, in which the future is already decided. The Singaporean Christian community can either choose to live up to its Antioch calling or forfeit it. As such, the Antioch prophecy can be read as a 'future history' where the past and present becomes the preparation for a future that has already been (partially) fulfilled.

The Antioch narrative thus acts in two interrelated and mutually reinforcing modalities. On the one hand, it operates within a heterotemporal frame in which the present, past, and future are intermeshed, and the concept of time is treated as continuous and oriented toward an eschatological *telos*. On the other hand, it acts as a future possibility bound to the logic of cause and effect that requires agency in the present to bring about change in the immediate future. In this regard,

fulfilling Singapore's destiny as the "Antioch of Asia" becomes much more than just an option; it is an *obligation* to act.

Singapore's prophetic call *must* be realized, not only because the nation awaits God's judgment if it has obeyed to his calling or not, but for the reason that God has blessed Singapore and only by his grace was able to move from 'third world to first.' As Yang Tuck Yoong, senior pastor of Cornerstone Community Church expounded during his sermon one year before Singapore's 50th anniversary:

> How could a nation, so backward just one generation ago, in 49 years, transform itself into one of the most admired and desired nations in the world? How could a tiny sleepy little fishing village become a first-world nation in just a short span of time? Our meteoric rise from third-world nation to first within 49 years is one transformation story other nations are still talking about. Yes, it's a fact that we have an honest and a good government. Yes, we are strategically located between the East and West. And yes, we are a hardworking people, but I want to suggest that there are reasons more than meets the eye. **We are where we are only because God has blessed us.** It is God who has shown favour to our land and on the 49th anniversary of our nation, let us in our celebrations not forget to thank the Lord for all He has done for us...Why has God blessed Singapore? In 1978 Rev. Dr. Billy Graham prophesied that Singapore would become the Antioch for Asia. Many other significant prophets have affirmed the prophetic word ... So what does that mean to us? I believe with all my heart that Singapore is a called nation...that **embedded and hidden within the DNA of our nation is the divine end-time purpose for God.** We are conceived in the mind of God and brought forth in this last hour of human history as a testimony to the nations. That's what we are. ... we have an eternal destiny in spite of what's happening now in the nation ... I believe that God's plan for the nation is not going to be changed or distorted...**our survival depends on us fulfilling our destiny**..." (Yang Tuck Yoong, 10 August 2014, emphasis added).

Yang's "redemptive appropriation" (Tan-Chow 2007) of Singapore's national story is instructive as it reconnects the prophetic narrative to Finlay's original idea of divine providence. God is seen as having raised Singapore as a leading global city in order to equip the nation to fulfill its divine destiny and function as an "apostolic sending base" for "the final frontiers of the Great Commission in Asia." As a nation blessed by God's favor, Singapore thus carries the responsibility to be a blessing to other nations. From this perspective, Billy Graham and the other prophets that have and certainly will follow are merely divine messengers to reveal what has already since long been "hidden within the DNA" of the nation: God's divine end-time purpose for Singapore to be the Antioch of Asia.

What makes the Antioch narrative so compelling is how it successfully integrates Singapore's dual (or "schizophrenic") identity as a global city and a

nation. As argued earlier, the state's global city aspirations and the speed and constant change upon which it is predicated have made the prospect of attaining a settled sense of a Singaporean identity elusive, if not impossible. Singapore lacks a "regime of authenticity" that can provide a stable sense of collective belonging and impart the nation with a 'sacred' and timeless quality that reaches beyond its global city ambitions. The teleology of the "Singapore story" thus resists narrative closure precisely because it is so radically oriented towards the future, a future, however, that remains undeterminable and is always imperiled by the capricious nature of global capitalism. It is against this background that the Antioch prophecy gains its significance. Fashioned into a nation-based apologetic framework, it reinscribes the national narrative with a spiritual meaning, thus constructing a divine "regime of authenticity" that assigns an eschatological telos to the nation while simultaneously endorsing the state's developmental ethos by interpreting Singapore's transformation into a prosperous global city as an act of God's providence. Accordingly, the Antioch vision does not provide a competing or even revisionist account of the national narrative. Instead, it remains closely aligned to the PAP's political and economic agenda, an agenda that has notably enabled an emergent Christian middle class to reap the "God-blessed" benefits of global capital accumulation. At a closer look, the Antioch vision thus turns out to be almost a mirror image of Singapore's political culture which consistently reiterates Singapore's exceptionalism. The idea of Singapore as a Christian hub feeds into and is reinforced by secular forces of global capitalism, communications links, and global citizenship, reflecting the government's management of Singapore's internationally-driven economy and underlying national ideology (cf. R.B.H. Goh 2003a). Similar to the state's global city ambitions, the Antioch vision figuratively expands the horizon of the small island city-state and encourages a greater sense of possibility to re-imagine Singapore's future otherwise.

And yet, the evangelical endeavor to bring about revival to the nation and reclaim its "spiritual inheritance" has repeatedly failed, less because of a lack of belief in it, as for the reason of the state's deep-seated "pluralist secularism" (D.P.S. Goh 2014b) that has kept the realization of another Christian Antioch at bay. As we have seen throughout this thesis, the secular state remains decisively unapologetic in its position to keep religion out of the realm of politics. The

ambits of Christian articulations and actions in the public sphere are carefully circumscribed and ultimately bound to the state's policies to maintain racial and religious harmony. Consequently, and despite the evangelical Antioch mission's attempts to align with the nation's developmental ethos and transform Singapore into a Christian hub, it has thus far been unable to significantly move the state-set boundaries between the secular and the religious. However much Christian prophecies envision Singapore's future as a new "Antioch", the secular state and the diverse aspirations of other religious communities ensure that what is to be written for the future remains firmly embedded within Singapore's pluralist framework, thus precluding the hegemony of any single religious perspective in shaping the nation's destiny. As such, Lee Kuan Yew's assertion still holds true today, as he commented back in 1987: «Singapore is not a Christian nation and unlikely going to be one».

5. CONCLUSION

Framing the Inquiry and Revisiting the Research Questions

This thesis opened with a set of interrelated questions that arose not solely from theoretical inquiry but from the entangled textures of lived experience and field observations. Central among them was the question: How do Christians in Singapore construct and negotiate their religious identity as a minority within a plural religious landscape and in relation to the regulatory framework of the secular state? Closely linked to this was a second line of inquiry: How has the idea of Singapore as the "Antioch of Asia" emerged as a powerful and enduring leitmotif within contemporary evangelical discourse, and what imaginaries of identity, nation, and mission does it animate? These two questions have shaped the conceptual architecture and empirical investigations of this study. It is here, in the conclusion, that they are brought into sharper alignment with the findings of each chapter and with the broader intellectual aims that have guided the project.

At its core, this research set out to examine how Christian identity is negotiated at the intersection of religious diversity and secular governance in postcolonial Singapore. It was driven by a commitment to move beyond static or essentialist portrayals of Christianity in Asia, particularly those that frame it either as a residual effect of colonialism or as a sign of global religious resurgence, without attending to its entanglement with local regulatory regimes, secular logics, and national imaginaries. Rather than simply documenting the presence of Christianity in Singapore, this study sought to understand how Christians navigate their dual positioning as religious subjects and national citizens within a system that tightly manages religious diversity through state-defined boundaries and expectations.

To this end, this thesis has pursued three interrelated objectives. First, it offered a historically grounded account of Christianity in Singapore, tracing its evolution from colonial missionary origins to its present configuration as a locally rooted yet globally entangled religious tradition. Second, it examined how Christian communities engage with the regulatory logic of the secular state, how they accommodate, reinterpret, and at times strategically contest the constraints it imposes. Third, it examined how the 'Antioch of Asia' vision functions not merely as a theological reference, but as a dynamic narrative through which Singaporean

Christians articulate their commitment to evangelizing the region, position their faith within the national socio-political context, and navigate the tensions between their missionary zeal and the boundaries of state-managed religious pluralism. Together, these objectives frame a multifaceted inquiry into how Christian identity in Singapore is continually negotiated at the intersection of state regulations, national imagination, and transnational evangelistic ambitions.

Chapter 2 laid the theoretical groundwork by arguing that religious diversity and secularism are not neutral or self-evident features of modern society but historically contingent and politically constructed regimes of governance that shape how religion is classified, constrained, and authorized in public life. The chapter challenged dominant secularization narratives that equate modernity with religious decline or privatization, contending instead that in Singapore, religion remains publicly salient, not in spite of secularism but precisely because of a state-led model of governance that actively regulates and shapes religious life. Drawing on the concept of "multiple secularities," the chapter positioned Singapore as a distinctive case within broader comparative debates on secularism and religious diversity, emphasizing the specificities of its state-mediated model of pluralism.

Chapter 3 grounded these conceptual concerns in the historical and institutional development of Christianity in Singapore. It demonstrated that Christianity, far from persisting as a Western transplant, has undergone significant processes of localization, theological adaptation, and internal diversification, particularly through the rise of evangelical-charismatic movements, which have gradually displaced the influence of earlier ecumenical and more liberal Protestant traditions. The chapter also demonstrated how Christian communities have responded to Singapore's regulatory environment not by withdrawing from public life, but by adopting discourses and strategies that align their religious identity with dominant narratives of moral responsibility, national development, and social cohesion.

The dynamic between adaptation and assertion was further explored in Chapter 4, which examined the theological and symbolic imaginaries shaping contemporary Christian discourse, most notably the vision of Singapore as the "Antioch of Asia." In direct response to the second research question, the chapter traced the genealogy, circulation, and resonance of the Antioch narrative. Drawing

on sermons, mission materials, interviews, and archival sources, it showed how this vision functions not merely as metaphor, but as a structuring narrative that links Singapore's global city ambitions with Christian aspirations for regional spiritual influence. The Antioch motif thus becomes a means of navigating the very tensions it evokes: between national rootedness and global outreach, citizenship and spiritual calling, regulatory constraint and prophetic calling.

Taken together, the chapters demonstrate that the research questions posed at the outset have not only been answered but have also served as generative points of entry into broader theoretical concerns. Through historical analysis, interpretive inquiry, and sustained engagement with field-based materials, the thesis has shown that Christian identity in Singapore is continually negotiated in relation to and often in tension with the frameworks imposed by the secular state. Christians do not merely accommodate these constraints; they also reinterpret and repurpose them, articulating their religious aspirations through idioms of national development, global connectivity, and moral legitimacy. This process is inherently contingent and often ambivalent, but it is precisely within these liminal spaces, where regulation, aspiration, and adaptation converge, that Christian identity is enacted, reimagined, and rendered socially meaningful.

This study contributes to a deeper understanding of how Christians in Singapore navigate a plural, yet state-regulated religious landscape through a combination of narrative framing, institutional engagement, theological interpretation, and strategic positioning. In doing so, it highlights the generative interplay between regulatory constraints and religious ambitions – between the boundaries imposed by secular governance and the expansive horizons of Christian mission. These are not opposing forces but mutually constitutive dynamics, and it is within their entanglement that this thesis seeks to make its central contribution.

Christianity in Context – Synthesizing Chapter Findings

The preceding chapters developed a multi-layered and interdisciplinary account of Christianity in Singapore, drawing on historical, sociological, theological, and ethnographic perspectives. While each chapter addressed a distinct facet of the inquiry, they are best understood as interwoven threads within a broader analytical tapestry, one that examines how evangelical Christianity both shapes and is shaped

by the socio-political arrangements of religious diversity and secular governance. This integrated perspective reveals that Christian identity in Singapore is not simply asserted or inherited but is actively negotiated through institutional adaptation, theological reflection, and strategic engagement with the state. Together, these strands form a textured and context-specific understanding of religious life within a plural yet tightly regulated national landscape. This section draws those threads together, offering a synthetic reading of how the chapters collectively illuminate the dynamics of religious identity, state regulation, and theological imagination in the city-state.

Chapter 2 laid the theoretical foundation for the thesis by interrogating religious diversity and secularism as historically contingent and politically structured regimes of governance, rather than as neutral or self-evident features of modern life. Drawing on the work of Talal Asad, Saba Mahmood, and Marian Burchardt, and others, the chapter situated the Singaporean case within broader critiques of the secularization thesis, challenging linear accounts that equate modernity with religious decline. It also engaged critically with postsecular perspectives, arguing that while these frameworks attempt to transcend the secular–religious binary, they often retain normative assumptions about secular modernity and overlook the institutional mechanisms through which religion is regulated. In the Singaporean context, secularism is characterized not by state withdrawal but by its active, strategic management of religion, a mode of governance through pluralism. Building on the "multiple secularities" framework developed by the project *Multiple Secularities: Beyond the West, Beyond Modernities* at Leipzig University, the chapter offered a context-specific reinterpretation that foregrounds secularism as a political rationality shaped by Singapore's postcolonial nation-building agenda. Within this configuration, religion is not privatized but mobilized to promote national unity, social cohesion, and multireligious stability under state-defined imperatives.

These theoretical claims were grounded in an empirical analysis of how the Singaporean state actively structures religious diversity through a tightly woven system of legal, bureaucratic, and institutional control. These mechanisms do not simply accommodate existing pluralism but actively produce it by delineating normative boundaries for religious expressions and prescribing acceptable forms of public engagement. While religious communities operate within these constraints,

they are not passive recipients. Rather, they develop adaptive strategies to navigate the tension between doctrinal commitments and the state's regulatory expectations, especially its imperative to maintain religious harmony and social cohesion. This ongoing negotiation highlights the mutually constitutive relationship between state regulation and religious self-positioning within Singapore's model of secular governance.

Building on the foundations laid in Chapter 2, *Chapter 3* turned to the historical and socio-political trajectory of Christianity in Singapore. It traced how Christianity, though a numeric minority, has accrued significant institutional, educational, and socio-economic influence since colonial times. Initially introduced through Western missionary efforts, Christianity was gradually reshaped through processes of contextual adaptation, theological rearticulation, and selective alignment with national priorities, such as education and moral formation.

The chapter's key contribution lies in showing that Christianity's influence in Singapore has been both empowered and contested. Its association with the English-speaking, highly educated, and socio-economically privileged sectors of the population, particularly among ethnic Chinese, has bolstered its institutional visibility and public legitimacy. Yet this same positioning, tied to Western modernity and transnational evangelical networks, has also provoked ambivalence within Singapore's multicultural framework, where religion is often interpreted through the lens of ethnic affiliation. This dual status of structural privilege and perceived cultural dislocation renders Christianity both highly visible and politically sensitive, complicating its place within the national imagination and the state's vision of harmonious pluralism.

Chapter 3 further traced the internal diversification of Singaporean Christianity, focusing on the post-independence rise of evangelical-charismatic movements that have reconfigured its institutional, theological, and socio-political landscape. These groups gradually displaced earlier ecumenical and liberal traditions, introducing new worship styles, doctrinal emphases, and flexible organizational forms. Theologically, they emphasized revival, mission, and public morality, casting themselves not merely as spiritual communities but as agents of national transformation. This self-positioning enabled them to cultivate a more assertive public presence by engaging in national debates on education, morality,

civic responsibility, and regional outreach. In doing so, they positioned themselves as moral stakeholders in the nation's development, aligning with the state on values, such as discipline, ambition, and social order. Yet their growing visibility also generated tension, particularly when evangelistic fervor was perceived as threatening to interreligious harmony. Chapter 3 thus underscored the Christian community's internal differentiation, institutional strength, and political circumscription, highlighting the strategic ways in which evangelical-charismatic actors negotiate the expectations of secular governance and Singapore's multicultural framework.

While Chapter 3 examined the historical and institutional trajectories of Christianity in Singapore, *Chapter 4* shifted focus to the theological imaginaries and symbolic articulations that animate contemporary evangelical identity in Singapore. Central to this discussion was the vision of Singapore as the "Antioch of Asia," a phrase that did not originate in a single prophetic declaration, but evolved through the cumulative force of mission discourse, charismatic revivalism, and postcolonial ambition. The chapter traced the genealogy of this narrative and analyzed how it gained traction as a polyvalent motif within Singapore's Christian landscape, functioning simultaneously as a strategic mission framework, a prophetic claim, and a vehicle for collective meaning-making. Drawing on sermons, mission literature, and church media, the chapter demonstrated how the Antioch vision offers a theological template for linking Singapore's global city status to a redemptive role in regional evangelism. The narrative imagines Singapore not only as economically exceptional, but also as spiritually designated, a hub divinely equipped for leadership in mission through its geography, affluence, and sense of national purpose.

At the same time, the Antioch idea helps mediate key tensions in evangelical public life: it enables religious leaders to frame their civic engagement in terms of national contribution and international calling, while navigating the constraints of state-managed secularism and religious pluralism. In this sense, the Antioch vision does not function as a fixed theological framework, but as a flexible and affectively charged idiom, one that allows evangelicals to reconcile global aspirations with local loyalties and assert spiritual ambition within the pragmatic boundaries of a tightly regulated socio-political order. Yet while this narrative opens space for symbolic agency and imaginative self-positioning, it ultimately operates within parameters

defined by the state. Evangelicals may reinterpret and adapt to these constraints, but they cannot transcend or transform the structural boundaries that govern religious expression in Singapore's secular and pluralist regime.

Taken together, the findings of Chapters 2 through 4 converge on a central argument: that Christian identity in Singapore is formed not in isolation from the state but in dialectical relation to it. Evangelical Christians, in particular, operate within a landscape shaped by legal constraints, social expectations, and theological aspirations. Their identity is neither wholly oppositional nor fully compliant. Instead, it is forged through a continuous process of negotiation – at times strategic, at others conflictual, and often ambivalent.

This process unsettles binary distinctions such as "secular vs. religious," "private vs. public," and "national vs. global." Evangelical Christianity in Singapore traverses these boundaries, generating hybrid forms of engagement that are simultaneously cosmopolitan and local, spiritual and political, regulated and resistant. The Antioch narrative crystallizes this hybridity, offering a theological idiom through which to navigate, and sometimes reconcile, the contradictions of being both a minority religious community and a disproportionately visible social force within a secular, multicultural state.

In sum, the chapter findings not only respond to the research questions but also reveal their broader significance. They demonstrate that Christianity in Singapore, far from being a passive recipient of global religious currents or domestic regulation, actively participates in shaping and being shaped by the wider dynamics of postcolonial governance, urban modernity, and transnational Christian circulation. This, in turn, sets the stage for the next section of the conclusion: a reflection on the study's contributions to the field of religious studies and its implications for ongoing debates on religion, secularism, and global Christianity.

Significance, Implications, and Contributions to Religious Studies

The insights generated by this thesis extend beyond the specific case of Christianity in Singapore, and are not confined to the dynamics of religious communities navigating diversity within a pragmatically secular city-state. Rather, the findings contribute to broader theoretical and disciplinary debates that have shaped the study of religion over the past two decades. These include efforts to decenter Eurocentric

narratives of secularism and modernity, to pluralize the study of global Christianity beyond Euro-American frameworks, and to interrogate the enduring role of the nation-state in regulating religious expression and shaping the terms of religious visibility and public engagement in postcolonial contexts. In this light, the significance of the thesis lies not only in its empirical contributions, but also in the conceptual and methodological perspectives it offers for rethinking the global study of religion.

Decentering Secularism: Pragmatism Over Principle

One of the central contributions of this thesis is its effort to decenter secularism as a universal or ideologically neutral framework for managing religion in modern societies. Rather than collapsing *secularism, secularity*, and *secularization* into a single theoretical arc, the thesis distinguishes between them, where *secularization* refers to sociological processes of religious decline or differentiation, and *secularity* describes the lived condition of inhabiting a secular age, *secularism* is treated here as a mode of political rationality and governance. Classical secularization theory often posited a linear movement from religiosity to secularity as an inevitable trajectory of modernity. In contrast, more recent work, particularly in critical secular studies, has emphasized that secularism is neither singular nor uniform but rather a historically contingent and contextually embedded framework through which states classify, manage, and mobilize religion. This thesis builds on and critically extends that body of work by offering a grounded case study on how secularism functions in a postcolonial, non-Western, and religiously plural setting.

Singapore's model of pluralist or pragmatic secularism, as discussed in Chapter 2, illustrates a form of governance that does not aim to exclude religion from the public sphere, but instead seeks to manage and shape it. In Singapore, religion is not regulated through a model of strict separation but through the logic of calibrated proximity. The state does not position religion outside the bounds of national life; rather, it incorporates religious institutions and discourses into broader frameworks of governance. This is achieved through an intricate regulatory apparatus (legal, bureaucratic, and discursive) that simultaneously constrains and mobilizes religion. Religious communities are expected to contribute to social cohesion, moral education, and national identity, even as their activities remain subject to careful

oversight and control. Through this dual approach, religion is framed as both a potential source of social volatility and a strategic partner in the project of nation-building.

To make sense of this configuration, this thesis draws on the "multiple secularities" framework developed by Burchardt, Wohlrab-Sahr, and colleagues. This approach offers a valuable corrective to Eurocentric models of secularism by conceptualizing it as a plurality of historically and culturally specific arrangements, rather than a singular normative model. While this framework is useful for comparative analysis, this thesis also pushes its boundaries. In the Singaporean case, secularism is not simply a differentiated arrangement between religion and state; it operates less through ideological distancing and more through instrumental incorporation. Religion is not privatized but rendered productive through its alignment with state-defined priorities. Thus, the thesis offers a critical appropriation of the multiple secularities concept, arguing that it must better account for contexts in which secularism is deployed not just to manage difference, but to actively co-opt and refunction religion for governance ends.

By examining how Christian actors respond, adapt, and occasionally contest this regulatory logic, the thesis challenges assumptions that secularism always functions as an oppositional force vis-à-vis religion. Instead, it highlights how the secular and the religious are often mutually constitutive, with religious communities internalizing, negotiating, and at times strategically reinterpreting secular norms. Understanding secularism not merely as the absence of religion but as a dynamic mode of governance and normative ordering places this study within the growing field of critical secular studies while emphasizing the need to examine how secularism is constructed and operationalized in postcolonial, non-Western contexts.

Global Christianity Without the West at the Center
A second key contribution of this thesis lies in its critical engagement with the study of global Christianity. Much of the literature in this field has emphasized the rapid growth of Christianity in the global South, particularly in Africa, Latin America, and parts of Asia, and has framed this transformation through the concept of "reverse mission," where former mission fields are increasingly seen as emerging centers of vitality, leadership, and theological innovation. While this narrative has been

valuable in decentering Western dominance and redrawing the global map of Christianity, it often retains a binary logic that juxtaposes an older Western "center" with newer Southern "peripheries." This framing risks reifying the very hierarchies it seeks to disrupt, by continuing to define global Christianity in relation to a Western reference point, even if that point is now positioned as declining.

This thesis complicates that framing by focusing on Singapore, a case that resists easy classification within conventional center–periphery models. Although often grouped within the so-called "global South," Singapore does not fit neatly into that category, which itself is a contested and uneven construct. The term "global South" tends to mask significant internal differences and often functions as a residual label for contexts defined in contrast to the West. Singapore, however, cannot be readily cast as a peripheral or dependent site of Christian expansion. Instead, it emerges as a strategic node in global evangelical networks, a space where theological discourse, institutional innovation, and missional ambition intersect. Singaporean churches and mission organizations are not only embedded in transnational flows; they also actively shape them, adapting and exporting models of church governance, leadership training, and mission strategies across Asia and beyond.

The Antioch narrative, explored in Chapter 4, crystallizes this dynamic. It enables Singaporean Christians to imagine themselves not simply as local believers within a small city-state but as participants in a divinely ordained regional mission. The vision of Singapore as the "Antioch of Asia" affirms a distinct theological agency, one that fuses national identity with global aspiration and casts the city-state's geopolitical position as spiritually significant. Through this narrative, Singaporean Christians assert both a sense of spiritual responsibility and claim to regional influence, often portraying themselves as uniquely equipped to bring the gospel to other parts of Asia.

This vision of spiritual exceptionalism exemplifies a broader pattern explored throughout the thesis: Singaporean Christians do not merely absorb global religious influences; they actively participate in shaping them. By tracing how religious narratives, institutional infrastructures, and transnational networks are mobilized, the study reveals the agency of Singaporean evangelicals in constructing and disseminating distinct Christian imaginaries. This challenges the spatial assumptions that often underpin studies on global Christianity, particularly the idea that influence

flows in a linear direction, whether from North to South or vice versa. What emerges instead is a more complex, multidirectional field of religious circulation. Singaporean actors are not passive recipients of theological trends or institutional models; they are producers of religious meaning, practice, and strategy across regional and global scales. Global Christianity, in this light, is not simply a shift in geography but a dynamic, multipolar constellation in which actors like those in Singapore play a central, if often overlooked, role.

Postcolonial Religious Subjectivity and National Imagination
A further thread running through this thesis is its engagement with postcolonial religious subjectivity; the ways religious actors in formerly colonized contexts navigate the legacies of imperialism while constructing forms of national belonging and spiritual agency. This tension is particularly pronounced in the case of Christianity, which, due to its entanglement with colonial histories, often occupies an ambivalent position in postcolonial societies. As this study shows, Christians in Singapore must continually negotiate between their affiliation with historically Western religious traditions and their desire to articulate a faith identity that is both locally grounded and regionally relevant.

The Antioch narrative captures this negotiation in particularly vivid terms: Drawing on a biblical reference and aligning it with Singapore's geopolitical position and national aspirations, the narrative reconfigures Christianity as a localized and future-oriented force rather than a residual colonial inheritance. It enables Christians in Singapore to see themselves not as passive recipients of Western missionary legacies but as empowered agents of regional evangelism, called to play an active role in shaping the spiritual landscape of Asia.

At the same time, the Antioch vision resonates with broader narratives of national development and global ambition. It mirrors Singapore's self-understanding as a small but strategically influential city-state that is efficient, disciplined, and globally connected. In this sense, the theological imagination of Singaporean Christians does not operate apart from secular nation-building narratives; rather, it intersects with them, offering a form of spiritualized nationalism that aligns with the city-state's technocratic ethos and developmental ideology. These forms of identity construction illustrate how global religious aspirations are localized within

postcolonial frameworks of governance, enabling Christians in Singapore to negotiate a sense of purpose that is both theologically grounded and nationally intelligible.

More broadly, this study positions Singapore not merely as a site of analysis, but also as a productive lens for understanding how religion is negotiated in urban, postcolonial, and religiously diverse societies. By examining how Christianity navigates the intersecting logics of nation-building, global city aspiration, and religious governance, the thesis offers an analytical framework applicable to other contexts in which religious actors engage with state agendas, transnational networks, and localized socio-political imaginaries. The conceptual approach and empirical insights developed here thus contribute to a broader comparative conversation on the entanglements of religion, modernity, and pluralism in diverse urban contexts.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Like any scholarly project, this thesis is marked not only by its contributions but also by its boundaries: methodological, epistemological, and practical. These constraints do not undermine the study's core findings. Rather, they offer critical points of reflection that can inform both critical self-assessment and the development of future research. In this section, I turn to some of the most significant limitations encountered over the course of this project and consider how they might serve as productive openings for further scholarship on religion, secularism, and evangelical Christianity in postcolonial and urban contexts.

Field Access, Researcher Positionality, and Institutional Silences

Methodologically, this study offers valuable insights to scholars working in religiously sensitive and politically regulated environments. Conducting research on religion in Singapore required careful negotiation of field access, ethical responsibility, and researcher positionality. These challenges were not treated as setbacks but as generative sites of reflection and knowledge production. By foregrounding the ethical dilemmas, institutional gatekeeping, and power asymmetries involved in fieldwork, the study contributes to ongoing conversations about the politics of academic research in contexts in which religion is both protected and policed.

Perhaps the most formative limitation was the difficulty in securing field access, especially in relation to mission activities beyond Singapore's borders. As outlined in the introduction, the original aim was to conduct a multi-sited ethnography tracing mission practices from Singapore into neighboring parts of Indonesia, particularly the Riau Archipelago. However, this approach proved untenable owing to a combination of logistical constraints, political sensitivities, and ethical concerns raised by local Christian leaders. Fears around visibility, surveillance, and the risks of proselytism in Muslim-majority contexts often led to frequent hesitation or refusal. My positionality as a "Western" researcher (despite longstanding personal ties to Singapore) was sometimes perceived as a liability, particularly in settings where Christian outreach is met with deep suspicion and carries tangible risks.

This limitation necessitated a reorientation of the project toward a more domestically focused analysis. Yet it also served as an instructive reminder of the inherent complexity of studying religion, especially where it intersects with proselytization, minority-majority tensions, and securitized discourses. It underscored that fieldwork is never neutral or frictionless but deeply embedded in structures of power, institutional boundaries, and the sensitivities of those being studied.

A related challenge involved the institutional silences surrounding certain aspects of evangelical life in Singapore. While many churches were open in sharing theological materials, organizational histories, and personal testimonies, notable gaps remained, particularly around internal governance, financial transparency, or failed mission efforts. These absences are not unique to Singapore. They reflect a broader protective posture among religious institutions operating within tightly regulated environments, where religious freedom is not treated as an absolute right, but as a conditional privilege contingent on public restraint and interreligious sensitivity.

These silences, along with the performative nature of many public-facing materials (sermons, websites, and publications), have posed limits to deeper institutional analysis. Future research might benefit from closer collaboration with insiders, who can offer access to internal deliberations, conflicts, and dissenting voices that remain obscured in official narratives. Ethnographies of leadership

formation, pastoral decision-making, or lay participation in mission planning could provide valuable insights into the organizational dynamics and theological negotiations that lie beneath curated public messaging.

At the same time, the study's use of multiple methods (interviews, participant observation, archival research, institutional documents, and church media) enabled it to move beyond any single disciplinary or methodological frame. It demonstrates how Religious Studies can benefit from methodological pluralism, drawing from anthropology, sociology, theology, history, and urban studies to produce a more textured and holistic account of religious life in context.

The Constraints of Temporal Framing

Another limitation of this study lies in its temporal framing. The core fieldwork was conducted between 2013 and 2015, with supplementary observations extending into subsequent years. While this period captures a pivotal moment in Singapore's religious development (marked by the growing resonance of the Antioch narrative and the continued consolidation of evangelical-charismatic and Pentecostal currents) it does not account for more recent developments. These include the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on modes of worship and congregational life, the rapid expansion of digital evangelism, and potential generational shifts in Christian identity and practice.

Writing a thesis about a phenomenon that continues to evolve is, in many ways, a surreal endeavor. One must decide where to end the story, even as the story itself carries on, indifferent to academic timelines or narrative closure. At times, events intervene that dramatically alter the trajectory of that story; shifts, whose full implications will only become legible in hindsight. The COVID-19 pandemic was one such event, but not the only one. Singaporean Christianity continues to evolve in response to broader regional and global dynamics, including shifting geopolitical alignments, changing East–West relations, and intensifying debates on nationalism, postcolonial identity, and moral authority. These forces are likely to reshape theological priorities, missionary strategies, and institutional affiliations in the years to come.

In an era of accelerating social, political, and technological change, religious life is continually being reconfigured. Important questions remain: How do younger

Christians in Singapore relate to the Antioch vision? Do they continue to embrace its nation-centric missional outlook, or are they drawn instead to newer theological paradigms, ones centered on social justice, ecological responsibility, or decolonial critique? It also remains to be seen how Christian institutions will respond to rising numbers of religious "nones," the visibility of interfaith relationships, and the growing cultural prominence of LGBTQ+ rights, issues that may produce new sites of tension, negotiation, or transformation within evangelical communities. A longitudinal study or youth-focused ethnography could offer valuable insights into how these evolving dynamics unfold over time.

Conceptual Boundaries and Analytical Frames

At the level of theory, this thesis has sought to balance analytical precision with contextual sensitivity. In engaging with dominant academic categories, such as "evangelicalism," "charismatic Christianity," or even "religion" itself, I have been aware of their epistemological baggage and the risk of reinscribing the very frameworks I set out to interrogate. While I have foregrounded emic understandings and the fluid, lived boundaries of Christianity in Singapore, the analytical language employed nonetheless remains shaped by global academic discourses, with their embedded genealogies, exclusions, and normative assumptions.

This recognition opens space for a more radical methodological question: What would it mean to begin not with inherited analytical terms but with the categories, metaphors, and theological grammars used by religious actors themselves? How might our understanding of Christian life shift if we took "discipleship," "revival," or "kingdom work" as foundational starting points, rather than "identity," "belief," or "practice"? Such a move would not only recalibrate our descriptive frameworks but would also invite deeper reflection on what constitutes valid knowledge in the study of religion.

This, in turn, calls for more experimental and decolonial approaches, methodologies that seriously take into account the epistemic authority of religious actors and the generativity of their symbolic worlds. It also suggests the need for deeper interdisciplinary collaboration, not only between anthropology, sociology, and theology, but with pastors, missionaries, and lay leaders, whose embodied and interpretive work often exceeds the limits of academic discourse. Their lived

theologies, ethical negotiations, and institutional innovations can unsettle inherited conceptual boundaries and broaden our collective imagination on what religious knowledge is and what it might yet become.

From Critique to Construction: Building on This Work

In light of its methodological and conceptual limitations, this thesis nonetheless contributes a grounded case study that may inform future research on religion and society in Southeast Asia and beyond. It has demonstrated the value of approaching religious actors not merely as bearers of belief but as agents embedded in complex systems of governance, global connectivity, and national imagination. In doing so, it underscores the need for more granular, comparative, and ethically attuned research that is capable of extending the questions raised here into new contexts, publics, and modes of inquiry.

The "Antioch of Asia" vision, while rooted in Singapore's specific theological and historical milieu, is emblematic of a broader phenomenon: the ways in which minority religious communities seek to assert public relevance, transnational agency, and divine purpose within secular and pluralist regimes. Comparable dynamics can be observed elsewhere, whether in Muslim revivalist movements in Malaysia, Hindu political mobilization in India, or Buddhist nationalism in Myanmar. Comparative studies that examine how religious groups across different socio-political settings negotiate questions of mission, legitimacy, and national belonging would offer valuable insights into the shared logics, and divergences, of religion and statecraft across the region.

Ultimately, the limitations of this study are not endpoints but openings. They point toward a vision of Religious Studies not as an effort to neatly categorize or delimit religious life, but as an ongoing, reflexive inquiry attuned to the entanglements of religion with governance, public life, and global aspiration, and grounded in how religious actors themselves produce theory, interpret their histories, and imagine futures.

Final Thoughts: Navigating Pluralism, Imagining Futures

This thesis has traced the contours of evangelical Christianity in Singapore through a framework that is at once sociopolitical, historical, and theological. It has shown how

Christian actors navigate a landscape structured by religious diversity, secular governance, and national ambition, a landscape in which the boundaries between religious commitment and civic responsibility, national belonging and transnational aspiration, institutional constraint, and theological vision are continually renegotiated. At the heart of this dynamic lies the vision of Singapore as the "Antioch of Asia," a theological motif that has informed Christian self-understanding for over four decades and continues to orient aspirations toward national purpose and regional mission.

In revisiting this vision one final time, it is worth pausing on what it reveals, not only as a theological expression but also as a lens into how religion functions as a mode of social imagination. The Antioch narrative does more than invoke a biblical precedent; it reshapes the present. It tells a story of divine appointment, of national exceptionality, of spiritual readiness, and global responsibility. In many ways, it serves as the religious counterpart to Singapore's own developmental narrative, a parallel expression of the belief that this small island is called to "punch above its weight," to lead, to model, and to influence beyond its borders.

Yet, as this thesis has argued throughout, the power of such narratives does not lie in their doctrinal coherence or institutional consensus. Rather, it lies in their capacity to mediate tension. The tension between being a minority and being central, between regulation and agency, and between spiritual mission and political pragmatism. The Antioch narrative is not merely a claim to power; it is a way of making sense of limitation, of transforming the constraints of secular pluralism into a space for faithful presence, and of turning legal boundaries into theological frontiers.

This insight reflects a broader contribution of the study: to show that religious actors are not merely constrained by the secular state or shaped by global religious flows. They are also theorists of their own conditions: interpreting, adapting, and reconfiguring their social environments in ways that are both locally grounded and yet resonate across broader contexts. In the Singaporean case, Christians have developed a nuanced symbolic grammar to navigate the specific demands of a state-managed religious field. In doing so, they have articulated locally grounded yet widely relevant ways of being Christian in a modern, plural society: publicly engaged yet politically cautious, globally connected yet nationally rooted, ambitious, yet

restrained.

The study's findings therefore extend beyond the Singaporean context or Christianity alone. They invite reflection on how religious communities respond to, and sometimes anticipate, transformations in the public sphere: how they adopt discourses of civic responsibility, institutional credibility, and personal conduct to assert their place in public life; how they draw on theological narratives to align spiritual vocation with the demands of organized religious life; and how, in doing so, they play an active role in defining the place of religion within contemporary society, not in resistance to modernity or statehood, but as an integral part of both.

The methodological and theoretical commitments of this thesis have reinforced this perspective. By treating secularism not as a binary opposition to religion, but as a modality of governance, the study contributes to a growing body of scholarship that sees secularism and religion as mutually implicated. Similarly, by resisting rigid typologies and foregrounding local categories of identity, practice, and meaning, it responds to calls for more decolonial, reflexive approaches to global Christianities, approaches that recognize the epistemic authority of religious actors and take their categories seriously, not merely as data, but as interlocutors in theory-making.

This approach also foregrounds the importance of scale and space. As a fully urbanized city-state, Singapore offers a distinctive vantage point for studying how religion is practiced under conditions of dense regulation, national visibility, and intense global connectivity. Yet its very specificity (its small size, infrastructural sophistication, and legal architecture) complicates generalization. What holds true for religion in Singapore may not translate directly into contexts such as Jakarta, Bangkok, or Kuala Lumpur. And yet, it is precisely through this specificity that comparative insights emerge. The Antioch narrative, the strategic accommodation of state authority, and the blending of theological and political discourse are not exclusive to Singapore but are refracted through its particular history of postcolonial governance and multicultural calibration.

What this suggests is the need for further research that takes seriously the question of *how* religion is localized, not just in ritual or language, but also in its institutional logics, public negotiations, and aspirations for influence. It calls for comparative inquiries into how minority faiths engage dominant secular paradigms,

how theological visions adapt to urban infrastructures, and how mission discourses are reshaped by digital technologies, migration flows, and shifting demographics.

In closing, this thesis does not offer final answers but rather a set of reflections and openings. It has shown that Christian identity in Singapore is a site of tension, but also of creativity. That state regulation is not merely repressive, but also generative of new forms of religious life. That global religious discourses are never simply adopted wholesale, but are always localized, translated, and transformed.

Perhaps most importantly, it has demonstrated that religious actors are neither passive recipients of modernity nor marginal to the workings of the secular public. They are, in fact, central to the very processes through which modernity, secularity, and pluralism are themselves made intelligible. In their sermons, mission trips, urban engagements, and theological reflections, they enact a form of public religious reasoning that demands our sustained attention, not only as scholars, but as fellow inhabitants of shared, plural, and increasingly uncertain futures.

As Singaporean Christians continue to imagine their nation as the Antioch of Asia, they remind us of religion's capacity not only to preserve tradition but to generate new futures. Futures that are always partial, contested, and evolving, but no less real for that. It is in attending to these futures, and the narratives that animate them, that the study of religion continues to find its urgency and its relevance.

In returning to the metaphor of being "worlds apart," which framed the opening encounter of this thesis, I find myself not so much closing a circle as learning to sit with its ambiguity. That brief remark from a mission team member in Batam stayed with me, not just as a comment about geography or culture, but as something that encapsulated the layered tensions I kept encountering throughout this research. Between spiritual longing and bureaucratic limits. Between deep local roots and wide transnational horizons. Between the boldness of a prophetic call and the caution of navigating state-managed pluralism. These are not separate domains, they are interwoven realities, felt, and negotiated in the everyday lives of Singaporean Christians.

The Antioch vision, in this light, is less of a goal to be reached than a horizon to be continually reimagined. It is a space where prophecy meets policy, where the imagination of faith unfolds not in opposition to the secular state but within its frameworks and constraints. To be "worlds apart" is not simply to occupy different

spaces, but to dwell in the thresholds between them, where identity is stitched together across contradictions, over time, in community.

If there is one thing I carry with me from this journey, it is that these liminal places (uncertain, unresolved, often uncomfortable) are where some of the most meaningful forms of faith take shape. Not in the clarity of resolution, but in the ongoing work of making sense, making space, and making witness. It is there that the lived tensions of faith take on their fullest meaning.

6. APPENDIX

(A) Table 3

Religious Composition of Resident Population Aged 15 Years and Over (1980-2020)

	Population					Percentage				
	1980	**1990**	**2000**	**2010**	**2020**	**1980**	**1990**	**2000**	**2010**	**2020**
Total	1,746,491	2,078,842	2,494,630	3,105,748	3,459,093	100	100	100	100	100
Other Christians	101,416	165,946	245,107	350,111	411,674	5.8	8.0	9.8	11.3	11.9
Catholic	81,055	98,935	118,890	219,133	242,681	4.6	4.7	4.8	7.0	7.0
Christianity	*182,471*	*264,881*	*464,240*	*569,244*	*654,355*	*10.4*	*12.7*	*14.6*	*18.3*	*18.9*
Buddhism	471,234	647,859	1,060,662	1,034,879	1,074,159	27.0	31.2	42.5	33.3	31.1
Taoism	511,767	465,150	212,344	339,149	303,960	29.3	22.4	8.5	10.9	8.8
Buddhism + Taoism	*983,001*	*1,113,009*	*1,273,006*	*1,374,028*	*1,413,700*	*56.3*	*53.6*	*51.0*	*44.2*	*39.9*
No Religion	228,850	293,622	370,094	527,553	692,528	13.1	14.1	14.8	17.0	20.0
Islam	278,776	317,937	371,660	457,435	539,251	16.0	15.3	14.9	14.7	15.6
Hinduism	63,652	77,789	99,904	157,854	172,963	3.6	3.7	4.0	5.1	5.0
Other Religions	9,741	11,604	15,879	21,635	21,923	0.6	0.6	0.6	0.7	0.6

source: Singapore Census 1980; 1990; 2000; 2010; 2020

(B) Chart 3

Change in Population by Religion and Average Decadal Growth Rate in Percent (1980-2020)
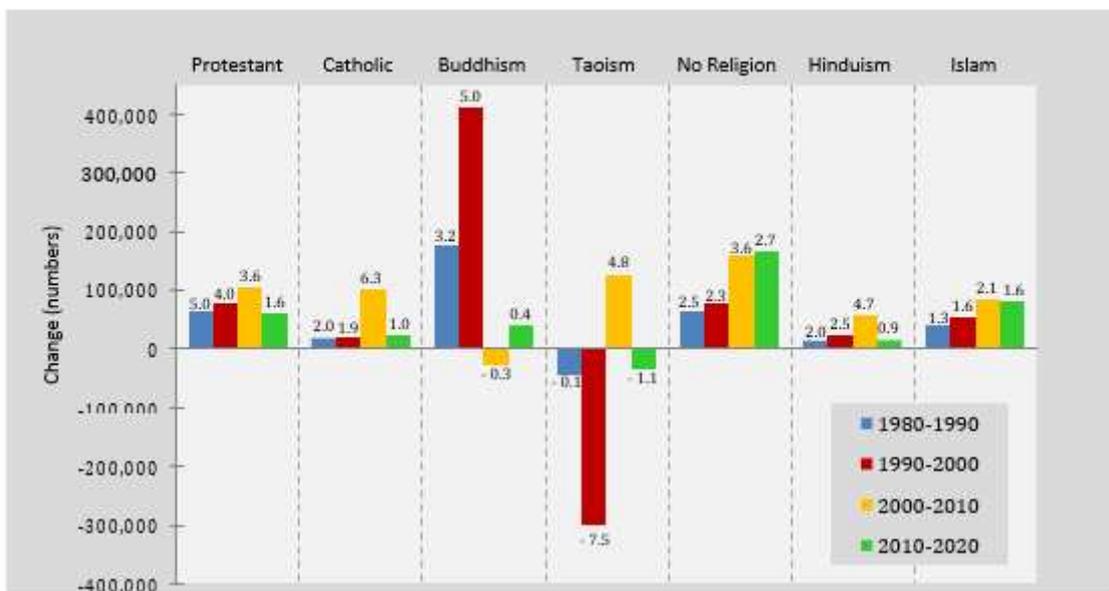
elaboration by the author based on Singapore census data 1980-2020

(C) List of materials Billy Graham Crusade Singapore 1978 (BGEA Wheaton College)

collection	box	folder	other	remarks
10: BGEA: Board Books	2	7		Pictures: a) „Famous Lion Dance at airport arrival. Typical V.I.P. reception" b) "National Stadium. Singapore, December 6-10, over 60,000 attended each night with 19,631 recorded decisions"
16: BGEA: Team Office - Crusade Procedure Books	-	-	Singapore Crusade 1978	- Photos
17: BGEA: Crusade Activities	194 195 237 238 239 240	4 9 7 9 7 5		238/9: Christmas Card Henry and Bettie Holley, Singapore Crusade 239/7: correspondence for preparation Singapore Crusade/team correspondence 194/4: preperations a) Singapore Crusade Report on Preparation (Jan-Jun 1978) b) Report on Preparations by Henry Holley 237/7: effects/ after Singapore Crusade Correspondence 1978-1981 195/9: Crusade Information Fact Sheet (Washington Crusade) 238/9: Chrsitmas Card greeting Holley 240/5: Church Area Map
24: BGEA: Records of News Conferences	-	-	T 121	- Dec.02.1978
26: BGEA: Audio Tapes	-	-	T 3217 T 3218 T 3220 T 3221 T 3222 T 3225 T 3226 T 3227 T 3230 T 3231 T 3232 T 3235 T 3236 T 3237 T 3240 T 3241 T 3242	T 3217 - 3218: Dedication Night 5.12. (Psalm 23) T 3220 – 3222: first night 6.12. (John 3; title: born again) T 3225 – 3227: second night 7.12. (Marc 10, title: The Rich Young Ruler) T 3230 - 3232: third night 8.12. (Romans 1:28- 2:2) T 3235 – 3237: fourth night 9.12.(Luke 15; young people's night; title: judgment; Noah) T 3240 – 3242: fifth night 10.12. (Matthew 24)
113: BGEA: Films and Video	-	-	F 367 V 607 V 895	
265: BGEA: Graham, Billy – Sermons Online)	14 26 30 66	33-39 72 7 139		66/139: all sermons transcribed (no permission to photocopy); NO reference to Antioch of Asia- double checked with audio tapes! Rest: Crusade sermon notes (available online; downloaded); NO reference to Antioch of Asia
345: BGEA: Records of the Media Office	-	-	Photo File Folder Title: BGEA: SINGAPORE CRUSADE, 1978	- Need permission from BGEA/granted - No scanning on my own/ scan costs 35US$ per photo
360: Billy Graham Evangelistic Association Clippings File	-	-	Reel 50 (microfilm) CN#: 360 Scrapbook 814 (441) Scapbook 815 (442)	- Newspaper clippings on Crusade in Singapore media - Christian media clippings

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