



Article

# Secular space, spiritual community and the hybrid urbanisms of Christianity in Hong Kong and Singapore

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## Abstract

This article seeks to explain the rapid growth of evangelical Christianity in Hong Kong and Singapore over the last few decades in the adaptation of Christianity to the secular urbanization experienced in the two cities. The author argues that Christian responses involve both the innovation of Christian territorial practices to meaningfully navigate and engage the planned city as well as community practices seeking to produce place-bound Christian community life. The author shows that the innovation was driven by the postcolonial aspirations of Christians reacting to state-led urbanization to resolve decolonization crises in the 1970s and 1980s. Local churches with differing theological beliefs experimented with various hybrid territorial-community spatial practices adapted to the respective urban contexts. When urban redevelopment was intensified by the respective states to transform Hong Kong and Singapore into global cities, the Christians contributed and participated in the reurbanization and globalization of the two cities.

## Keywords

Community, culture, religion, urban development, urban space

## Christianity and the city

Writing in the revolutionary 1960s, in his influential *The Secular City*, American theologian Harvey Cox (1965) found the secular city to be crucial for a theology of social change that would rejuvenate the church and make Christianity relevant to the times. The secular city represented humanity attaining cultural maturity and autonomous responsibility, as society outgrew traditional religious practices and sought new

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moralties. At the same time, the change was located in urbanization, which represented the search for more equitable and socialized ways of life. The church, with its urban heritage, could contribute as the *avant-garde* to positively effect social change by healing urban fractures, especially in the slums and ghettos, and fostering fellowship to construct the City of Man, the Kingdom of God on Earth.

Around the same time, Peter Berger (1967) wrote of the shattering of the sacred canopy that provided the normative order for social life, as secularization in modern societies led increasingly to differentiation of life into separately regulated spheres. Religion was privatized, becoming one institution among the many institutions of modern life. The urban became a differentiated sphere, increasingly regulated and planned by state institutions, as well as made and remade by the productive and consumption economies of capitalism. The old religious logic of cities where the churches and temples provided the stabilizing focal point of civic life gave way to the rationalizing logic of efficient and maximizing use of resources for growth and profit. It was in this sociological context that Cox sought to make privatized Christianity relevant again, by confronting the secular city head on and pushing Christianity into the public realm of urban fractures.

More recently, in *The Hybrid Church in the City*, British theologian Christopher Baker (2007) updated urban theology in the wake of globalization and the collapse of Western multiculturalism. Drawing on contemporary postcolonial theory, Baker saw the hybrid city as the new key for a renewed Christian activism. Economic globalization had fragmented and dislocated the modern city, producing a hybridity of urban services and ethnic-class quarters. Baker yearned instead for authentic hybridity of open-ended translations and negotiations between cultures. Building on the heritage of Christian Realism, Baker conceived of the hybrid church that would seek salvation in human history and the making of a better society by ecumenically engaging other non-Christian groups and agencies to analyze and act on social and political issues, towards creating urban spaces of inclusive hope.

By the time Baker wrote the book, Peter Berger (1999) had revised his thesis and pointed out that secularization was an exception that took place in the West, while in the rest of the world, the modern differentiation of life has brought on the resurgence of religion. However, it was not the revival of an overarching sacred canopy, but the blossoming of varieties of religious lives and spiritual practices, especially in the pluralistic cities. Again, it was in this sociological context that Baker engaged the religious and spiritual pluralism of the hybrid city, rather than the secular city, seeking a Christian activism based on ecumenical cultural exchange.

Published 40 years apart, and drawing on current social theories, Cox's and Baker's theological interventions represent the cutting edge of Christian adaptations to rapid social and spatial changes centered on urban civilization, where the change has in itself shifted qualitatively from secularizing modernization to hybridizing globalization. More so than any region in the world, Asian cities have experienced this social change intensely. Hong Kong and Singapore, arguably the most Western-influenced cities in Asia open to global capitalism and dominated by Anglophone elites, due to their shared history as British colonial metropolises in Asia, have rapidly urbanized from colonial port cities to global cities in one generation. Protestant Christianity has grown in tandem with the urban boom, growing from 20,000–30,000 members in the 1960s to over

300,000 in 2010 in both cities, comprising 11% and 5% of the population in Singapore and Hong Kong respectively (Department of Statistics, 2011: 156; Information Services Department, 2011).

The percentages belie the disproportionate political and economic influence the Christians wield in both cities, as most of their members belong to the business and governing elites and the rising middle classes. Furthermore, both cities have become known for the growth of Asian megachurches involving mass worship in stadium-like venues, the extensive use of technology and market mechanisms for proselytization. Both cities have also become key postcolonial hubs for the spread of Christianity into their respective hinterlands, Southeast Asia for Singapore and China for Hong Kong, creating networks of independent churches across cities that adapt new global Christian movements to local urban contexts. As Thumma and Bird (2015) have noted, these megachurches are particularly adapted to megacity urbanization. This is the reason the largest megachurches in the world are located in Asia, particularly in Seoul, Singapore and Hong Kong, and also growing fast in Manila, Jakarta and Kuala Lumpur.

In this article, drawing on ethnographic and documentary research on megachurches and historical sociological research on Christianity in the two cities, involving annual month-long field trips from 2009 to 2014, I make three interrelated arguments. The first argument is that, in the same decades between the 1960s and the 2000s, the tension between secular urbanization and preservation of community life witnessed in both Cox and Baker's urban theological interventions was also present in the attempts by the Christians in the two cities to engage rapid urbanization. The key difference in Hong Kong and Singapore, compared to the Western experience, is the dominance of state-led urban planning. Thus, similar to the two modes of spatial practices Abramson (2011) found in the revival of Chinese folk religion in Chinese cities where state-led urban planning also dominates, Christian responses in Hong Kong and Singapore involve both the innovation of Christian *territorial* practices to meaningfully navigate and engage the planned city as well as *community* practices seeking to produce place-bound Christian community life.

My second argument is that the Christian adaptations in Hong Kong and Singapore have been driven by aspirations that are predominantly postcolonial. In this sense, I follow Peter van der Veer's (2015) reworking of Arjun Appadurai's (2004) future-oriented concept of aspirations as a complex field of hopes, values and desires that invoke postcolonial and national discourses, urban-rural imaginaries and the reworking of traditional values with modern ideologies. Unlike Baker's hybrid city formulation, I show that the postcolonial aspirations of the Christians in Hong Kong and Singapore were brought on not by economic globalization and the attendant urban consumption culture it produced, but historically by the different postcolonial crises experienced in the two cities during the 1970s and 1980s.

My third argument combines the previous two in a historical explanation of the success of urban Christianity in the two cities. The different postcolonial crises, subsequent urbanization and Christian responses led to two different trajectories. They created conditions for the dominance of Pentecostalism in Singapore, and competing liberal and evangelical strands in Hong Kong. Among the various megachurches, I focus on three to compare their urban practices: Faith Community Baptist in Singapore, and Wing Kwong and Yan

Fook in Hong Kong. I also use cases of associated churches and missions associated with two Christian urban movements, We Love Hong Kong and LoveSingapore. Though differing in theological beliefs, the various churches had established *hybrid* territorial-community spatial practices adapted to the respective urban contexts. Thus, by the time the respective states intensified reurbanization in the late twentieth century to transform Hong Kong and Singapore into global cities, the Christians participated in the reurbanization and globalization of the two cities. In Berger's terms, the Christians successfully negotiated the collapse of their sacred canopy in the postcolonial transition of the cities to modernity, engaged the secularization of urban society with their new theologies, and contributed to the resurgence of religion that marked the two Asian global cities.

### **Singapore: Postcolonial crisis, urban redevelopment and Pentecostalism**

Postcolonialism in Singapore was marked by a deep sense of political fracturing and social crisis. Singapore became an independent city-state after its forced separation from the Federation of Malaysia in 1965, after 10 years of tumultuous decolonization marked by leftist urban revolts and Chinese–Malay racial strife over the terms of nationhood. Sprung alone into the escalating Cold War situation in Southeast Asia and with absolute dependence on the world economy, postcolonial Singapore was in a state of undeclared emergency for the ruling Anglophone elites of the People's Action Party. Urban redevelopment became a key strategy for economic and social development to ensure Singapore's survival. With the assistance of the United Nations, the entire island was planned as a modern high-rise city comprising the southern commercial and business center extending from the old colonial town, an industrial town to the west with the port in between, and satellite residential estates situated along arterial roads to the northwest, north, northeast and east of the island.

Through the 1970s, more than half of the population was relocated from downtown shophouses, urban slums and rural villages into public housing flats. Close to 89% of the population resided in public housing flats in 1995 (Department of Statistics, 2006). Public housing was instrumental for successful industrialization by providing for the social and financial infrastructure to transform the population into a modern workforce. The public housing nuclear family household became the basic unit targeted by governmental social engineering programs and campaigns. Rules dictating the conduct of everyday living and policies providing incentives and disincentives for marriage and parenthood socialized the population. Local community life was shaped by carefully planned town amenities such as schools, markets, clinics and playgrounds, anchored by government-run community centers. Government-controlled resident committees dominated local political life. Home ownership was strongly promoted and financed through social security. Almost all residents were owners by the 1990s and this made the citizens stakeholder in the corporatist party-state and provided them the incentive and motivation to labor.

Under the British colonial regime, Christianity enjoyed patronage as the unofficial state religion in Singapore. It dominated the education scene and became a bulwark of anti-leftist conservatism, providing badly needed social services after the Second World

War. By the 1960s, the church had indigenized its leadership. Divisions followed. The church split into liberal activist and conservative evangelical factions through the 1970s, while the Pentecostals emerged as a major force in the 1980s. Each responded to state-led urbanization in different ways, with the Pentecostals turning out to be the most successful of the lot.

Church leaders and activists influenced by liberal theology found the social gospel particularly pertinent in the context of the formation of an urban class society. However, the aid and mobilization of worker community organizations would not be tolerated by the authoritarian developmental state. The government closed activist urban missions and centers ministering to workers. Along with the extrajudicial detention of liberal Catholic activists in the late 1980s, the ecumenical Protestant regional outfit, the Christian Conference of Asia, was expelled from Singapore. The crackdowns ended the career of liberal Christianity in Singapore (Goh, 2010).

Through the 1970s, evangelical Christians grappled with the rapidly changing urban environment. Citing the new town of Toa Payoh as an example, Anglican minister James Wong (Study Group for Church Growth and Evangelism, 1971: 3) criticized the fact that new church groups had not 'seriously faced up to the long term consequences and effects of Singapore's programme of urbanization and industrialization' and were 'responding to the housing development estates merely on an impulsive basis'. The Study Group that Wong convened strongly advocated the 'multiplication of house churches' of 'small action groups for Bible study and discussion, prayer and evangelism' (1971: 28). For Wong, house churches enabled Christians 'to experience the full meaning of Christian fellowship' (1973: 131) and were scripturally ordained in the Acts of the Apostles. It was also strategic, for by placing a 'Christian church in every block of high-rise apartments throughout Singapore' (1973: 133), the church would become community centers reaching out to the residents and fulfill its prophetic calling to contribute to nation building.

By the end of the decade, it became apparent that the house church movement had failed because of government restrictions, 'satanic disruptions' from hostile neighbors, and the mushrooming of school and work-based Bible study groups among the young middle-class Christians. The newly arrived Charismatic Renewal also posed a challenge to the established churches, with more than two-thirds of pastors reporting charismatic meetings among their congregation in 1979 (Sng, 1980: 273, 293). Significantly, in 1973, Anglican bishop Chiu Ban It retired from the leadership of the East Asian Christian Conference, the predecessor of the Christian Conference of Asia, embraced Pentecostalism and launched the Renewal in the local Anglican Church. Its mission in Queenstown, which originally ministered to Indian railway workers, embraced the Renewal in 1978 and the small congregation grew rapidly along with the public housing new town being built in the area and became the Church of Our Saviour, one of the strongest Pentecostal parishes in the local Anglican diocese. As church membership grew to over a thousand in the 1980s, the Church moved into a renovated former movie theater in the town center. By the early 1990s, at least seven churches, six of them charismatic, were using former cinemas in public housing areas to worship and reach out to the local residents.

One of the churches was Faith Community Baptist Church, established by former Southern Baptist pastor Lawrence Khong, who was expelled from his former church after embracing the Renewal. Based in an ex-cinema in Marine Parade town center, it

grew to become the largest independent Pentecostal church in Singapore. Its success was due to the close alignment of church life with the geography of the new towns. Faith Community Baptist reworked the house church format as mid-week 'cell group' fellowship meetings between members living close to each other gathering in a member's flat. While the cell group meetings connected church life with the everyday resident life of the members, Sunday worship at the town center followed the paths tracked by residents for their weekend marketing and leisure activities. Community life matched the territorial positioning of the church in the town center.

In one Sunday session in which I followed an acquaintance, I was embedded in his cell group community and was obliged to have lunch with them at the nearby public food center after service, where we chatted about our lives as well as the pastor's message that Sunday. The intimate became intertwined with the urban and the religious. As one of the cell group members told me, when I asked about the significance of the place to them, Marine Parade felt like a holy place to him, mainly because of the memories of intense spiritual encounters as well as close friendships with church-mates forged in places such as the dirty food center we were sitting in.

The Church also offers a wide range of social services to adults and youths through its charity arm, Touch Community Services. It became a community center that gelled with the public life of the town center, thereby fulfilling the prophetic role advocated by the evangelicals without intruding into residential life like the house churches. Unlike the liberal activists, the Church focused on complementing the government-run community center and stayed away from political mobilization and issues. This earned the Church the state's patronage and secured its position in the town center despite the fact that urban planners had zoned the space for community and commercial usage and not for religious purposes.

## **Hong Kong: Decolonization crisis, urban renewal and the awakening church**

In Hong Kong, it was impending decolonization that instilled the deep sense of political fracturing and social crisis among the elites through the 1980s. Like Singapore, the Hong Kong government responded with an urban renewal strategy to revive the fortunes of the island city-state as capital and the middle classes threatened to flee the uncertainties of the 1997 Handover. In 1988, the Land Development Corporation was established and the Housing Authority was reorganized. The British colonial governments in Singapore and Hong Kong first launched public housing projects in the two colonies in the 1950s. While the postcolonial Singapore government expanded the project to a scale unprecedented in the world to remake the city-state, the Hong Kong colonial government did not lag far behind. As in Singapore, satellite new towns populated by public housing flats and well connected by trains were built in the New Territories to alleviate overcrowding in the city center in Kowloon and Hong Kong Island. By the early 2000s, half of the population lived in public housing, although only over one-third of the residents owned their flats. However, in comparison to their Singapore counterparts, Hong Kong public housing flats were smaller and the estates were densely packed high-rise blocks with a commercial center. Public amenities such as parks, schools and religious buildings were

often situated at the edge of the estates. Another key difference was the fragmented private ownership of property in the residential areas of the city center, which made it difficult for large-scale urban redevelopment in Hong Kong. Redevelopment led by the private sector tended to be small in scale, resulting in higher pencil buildings and residential density.

As in Singapore, Christianity enjoyed the patronage of the colonial state, but the difference is that prolonged colonial rule meant the church was largely lulled into a state of complacency. It too dominated the education scene and social services in Hong Kong and was also a bulwark of anti-leftist Anglo-Chinese elitism. The proximity and influence of Communist China was also an important factor in the church remaining conservative and cool to the social justice message of liberal Christianity. The exception was the Ecumenical Community Development Project established by the Church of Christ in China, the Lutheran, Methodist, Anglican and Catholic Churches and the Salvation Army in the Tsuen Wan, Tai Wo Hau and Kwai Chung Resettlement Estates. It focused on providing social services to the urban poor and developing local community capacity and later adopted advocacy and petition methods to lobby the government on redevelopment issues affecting the estates, but held back from political campaigns (Mak, 1978).

The conservatism of the Hong Kong church extended to its reception of the Charismatic Renewal, which had very little impact on Hong Kong Christians. The largest Pentecostal church in 2011 is the 6000-strong Wing Kwong Pentecostal Holiness Church founded in 1977 by a fellowship of high school students studying at the Pentecostal Holiness Church's Wing Kwong College. In turn, the College was established in 1973 to serve the newly minted Wong Tai Sin public housing estates. The Pentecostal Holiness Church in Hong Kong traces its origins to China's first Pentecostal missionaries arriving in the early twentieth century just after the founding of the Pentecostal Holiness Church by evangelists breaking away from the Methodist Church in the American South. Wing Kwong Church grew into the thousands in the 1990s and built an architecturally award-winning high-rise church representing a densely stacked giant bookshelf with a towering steeple and stained glass to match Hong Kong's skyscrapers.

Yet, it does not blend into the urban fabric, which is the cost successful congregations pay for building a church of their own to house their worshippers, as town planning pushes non-commercial building uses to the edge of estates. Taking its place between parks and a Buddhist hospital at the edge of Lok Fu public housing state in Wong Tai Sin district, Wing Kwong Church stands aloof from the town. I visited the church twice, traveling to it by taking the rapid transit train to Lok Fu station. Coming out from the shopping mall on top of the station, I walked through a quiet park where residents took their leisurely stroll on a Sunday morning among the greenery. Unlike my visits to Singapore's Faith Community Baptist Church, where I had to wade through crowds of bible-carrying churchgoers in the town, who would be keen to talk to you if you would, I did not meet any churchgoers until I reached Wing Kwong Church. There, not knowing anyone, I was left alone, while church members worshipped and fellowshiped in their close circles, going their separate ways after service without venturing into the city together.

Despite the embrace of Pentecostalism, Wing Kwong's Southern roots have made it hold fast to a conservative brand of evangelicalism that has traditionally

emphasized a strong separation of state and church. Before the 1980s, the separatism extended to social concerns, which was also reflected in the separation of the church life from city life, and evangelicals were often criticized for not fulfilling the prophetic role of the church (Leung and Chan, 2003: 45). This began to change in the early 1980s. The immanent coming of the Handover caused evangelical leaders to reflect on their separatist stance. Pastor So Wing-Yui of the Evangelical Free Church of China, wrote in his 1983 Doctor of Philosophy dissertation for the Fuller Theological Seminary that the evangelical churches could no longer confine themselves to providing a 'little circle of light and folk for the lost souls'. Evangelical churches needed to transform themselves to a community church to be relevant to Chinese cultural and religious identities and the historical development of Hong Kong and China. Attention to history, So argued, showed that 'only those churches with social services will be tolerated in the Communist regime' (quoted in Ko, 2000: 10) while churches serving only middle-class needs might not.

Like many other evangelical churches, the Evangelical Free Church originated from the work of American missions to China in the early twentieth century, most of which relocated to Hong Kong after 1949. From Hong Kong, the evangelicals smuggled bibles and supported the successful house church movement in China, but had been slow to engage Hong Kong itself. As 1997 approached, with Hong Kong soon to become a Chinese city and no longer a safe base of exile, the evangelicals awoke to the city and back to its future as the gateway to its original mission field, just as the coastal Chinese cities were in the previous century.

## **Urban movements: We Love Hong Kong and LoveSingapore**

In an unprecedented move, evangelical leaders came together in 1984 to discuss the role and future of the church in Hong Kong. In the statement of faith they jointly adopted (quoted in Leung and Chan, 2003: 162–165), the evangelicals affirmed the 'unchanging principles of the Church' in the face of social and political change, while acknowledging the need to engage 'historical change and face reality with the wisdom that God gives us'. As 'citizens of Hong Kong', the evangelicals declared, Christians also had a role to help Hong Kong become a democratic society. As evangelicals, their responsibility was to preach the gospel so that Hong Kongers 'might enjoy the grace of God and live fuller lives'. As Chinese, the evangelicals proclaimed their commitment to the Chinese nation and looked forward to the Chinese people 'being able to share the human rights and freedoms bestowed by God'. The evangelical leaders called for renewal to develop 'relevant church models and patterns of Christian service' and, in the persistent attempt to carefully balance social engagement and evangelical conservatism through the text, to preach messages 'relevant to the times and faithful to the truth'.

Soon after the declaration of faith, evangelical leaders joined other Christian leaders to draft a joint statement on religious freedom (in Leung and Chan, 2003: 167–168) that was eventually supported by the main denominations and over 200 churches. A detailed list of 17 freedoms to be respected for the church as a whole, from the 'freedom to organize religious activities at different hours and venues and in different forms' to the

'freedom for local churches and international missionary bodies to lawfully purchase, manage and utilize property', betrayed worries that the urban freedoms that religions had enjoyed would be lost after the Handover. A delegation of leaders then traveled to Beijing to present the declarations.

Another statement was drafted to represent the opinions of the church 'on the future of Hong Kong' (in Leung and Chan, 2003: 171–173). Views concerning good governance, rule of law, democracy, education, social security and social morality were made, along with a crucial emphasis that 'Hong Kong's international connections should be maintained and furthered' and 'Hong Kong people's right to travel freely to and from the territory is essential if Hong Kong wants to keep its status as an international city'. On the church, the leaders emphasized respect for religious freedom, the church's contribution in education and social services, and its need to 'interact with churches and Christians of other countries' and participate in 'the global Church'.

Assurances by the Beijing government turned into dismay as the Christians watched the 4 June events unfold in Tiananmen Square in 1989. Under the leadership of the Hong Kong Christian Council, church leaders launched the 11 months-long We Love Hong Kong campaign in 1991, involving public outreach activities such as essay, art, film, poster and photography competitions, dances, conferences, concerts, forming a human chain across Hong Kong Island, distribution of 'stride past '97' (跨越97時間) bags, culminating in a We Love Hong Kong Day. The overall aim was to encourage Hong Kong citizens not to emigrate and to unite for the city regardless of religion and profession. It also helped the churches to regain the trust of the non-Christian majority who, unlike the Christian elites, did not have the option and resources to emigrate. An earlier study in the late 1970s showed that over half of Christians and over a third of church leaders were eager to leave Hong Kong (Ko, 2000: 10).

More significantly, the We Love Hong Kong campaign established a very visible way to express and promote a popular Hong Kong identity. It introduced a social mobilization method that was repeated later by government agencies and corporations during the SARS crisis. On top of it all, the campaign promoted an emerging reflexive urban consciousness emphasizing democratic stakeholderism and ownership of the urbanization process. The activities expressed the hope that 'Hong Kongers would cherish the place where they were born and bred, feel proud of Hong Kong's accomplishments, and thus bear greater responsibility for its development today' (Su, 2004: 184). One of the aims was to 'bring out the status of Hong Kong people as masters and makers of the city's past and future development' (2004: 185). They encouraged Hong Kongers to see themselves not as colonial subjects about to become Chinese subjects, but citizens of a great city that has been China's gateway to the world and the world's doorway into China. By leading the charge in fostering a Hong Kong civic identity, the Christians staked their claim as key intermediaries in the remaking of Hong Kong as China's world city.

A few years later, a similar campaign called LoveSingapore was launched in Singapore. While the Hong Kong campaign was born in the evangelical awakening to the possibilities of remaking Hong Kong as China's world city, LoveSingapore traces its origins to the global Pentecostal movement, the International Spiritual Warfare Network, inspired by American evangelist C Peter Wagner, which first gathered in Seoul in 1993. The aim of the movement was to unite churches for revival and the transformation of

cities around the world. Pastor Lawrence Khong of Faith Community Baptist Church was invited to the gathering and, in the following year, took charge of the Singapore chapter. In 1995, while he stood at the entrance to the City Hall subway station to help raise funds for Touch Community Services, he had an epiphany while he prayed for 'the throngs of people' surging past him (LoveSingapore, 2000: 9). The LoveSingapore vision comprised five goals: unite conservative evangelicals and Pentecostals, serve the community, revive the old evangelical plan to establish a prayer cell in every block of flats, launch a 'Seven-Wave Harvest' of mass conversions in 2001, and adopt 'unreached people groups' beyond Singapore (LoveSingapore, 2000: 12).

Unlike the We Love Hong Kong campaign, which adopted a ecumenical civic framework, LoveSingapore adopted a spiritual warfare framework. Khong saw Singapore as his Jericho. The strategy was to 'establish God's perimeter' by calling together 'the faithful remnant', 'secure the perimeter by fostering unity', expand it by including all who wish to take part, 'infiltrate Satan's perimeter by establishing prayer cells in each neighborhood', 'destroy Satan's perimeter' in concerted evangelical efforts and 'reestablish God's perimeter by reclaiming former strongholds of darkness ... and implanting vision to reach other cities' (LoveSingapore, 2000: 23, 24). Instead of the ecumenism and democratic fellowship adopted by We Love Hong Kong, LoveSingapore relied on 'territorial apostleship', a concept borrowed from Wagner. It drew on the vivid imaginary of the Acts of Apostles, in which the Apostles, anointed by the Holy Spirit after Pentecost, fanned out across the cities of the Greco-Roman world to spread the gospel.

The territorial aspect involved close attention to the geography of the city. The entire city was covered by 26 'geo-networks' headed by local pastors tasked to carry out goals such as planting prayer cells in every housing block and coordinating local outreach events complementing the main national events. 'Spiritual mapping' featured centrally in the latter. When the movement first started in 1994, a prayer drive involving 140 pastors was held. Divided into four groups, the pastors were bussed to the 'four major gateways' of the city – the airport in the East, the Causeway to Malaysia in the north, the port in the south and the factories in the west – praying 'as they drove through the land'. The next year, the pastors were brought 'from the "macro" to the "micro" perspective' and 'prayerwalked' the city center on foot. At the local level, 'geographic prayer drives' and neighborhood prayerwalks involving church members were organized. In 1996, prayerwalks continued and led up to the Day to Change Our World event at the Indoor Stadium. At the stadium, participants were asked to stand within a large floor map of Singapore 'as a sign of owning the land'.

In 1997, a national 40-day fast was organized in the lead up to National Day and Friday lunch 'City@Prayer' meetings were held downtown. In 1998, the first major city prayerwalk was organized as a national charity walkathon, where the prayer route followed 'Singapore's original southern shoreline before land was reclaimed from the sea' to enable 40,000 participants 'to intercede for the healing of the land' (LoveSingapore, 2000: 76–79). The city prayerwalk in 2000 saw 60,000 participants, about a quarter of the number of Protestants recorded in the census that year. The LoveSingapore leaders felt that they had grappled with the city and were at the cusp of turning the global city into a spiritual 'hub', able to utilize its trade and transportation links, technology and 'English-speaking citizens' to reach out to Asia. Singapore was no longer to be a

city-state locked in a secular postcolonial crisis, but ‘the Antioch of Asia’, going back to the future as the ‘strategically placed, prosperous, multi-cultural, maritime city’ that was the base of the early apostles, now the would-be apostles of rising Asia (LoveSingapore, 2000: 109).

## **Hybrid Christian urbanism and the global city**

The LoveSingapore leaders did not simply borrow its territorial practices from American Pentecostalism and apply them to Singapore. They had to adapt them to the urban landscape crafted by state-led urban redevelopment and in the process indigenized the model. In the 1990s, urban redevelopment of the city center was well underway, with old residential and civic neighborhoods cleared out and resettled. The Urban Redevelopment Authority enjoyed strong institutional support and led other government agencies in a comprehensive large-scale central planning process for the orderly transformation of the city. In 1989, the Authority became the national planning and conservation authority with expanded powers and resources tasked to transform Singapore into a global city.

The total dominance of urban planning by the developmental state, characterized by zoning of the entire island for urbanization and close regulation of land use, leaves little room for the private sector and civil society to participate in urban redevelopment. LoveSingapore’s territorial practices matched the totalistic spatial worldview of the state, mapping the whole city so that its activism would be articulated along the same key axes of state-led urban redevelopment. The annual prayerwalking calendar covers the public housing heartlands in the ordinary months to culminate in the national walkathon and 40-day prayer and fasting in the global city center. Prayer drives traverse the internal transportation networks to reach the city gateways to the world for further spiritual activism. The territorial practices follow the state’s treatment of urban space as territory to be mapped, planned and worked upon, treating the people, buildings and other things in the space as resources to be managed rather than as organic parts of a place-based community.

This was not a mere reaction to state-led urban planning. Spiritual mapping and prayerwalking provided the Christians with conceptual tools to contemplate and rethink the spatial environment in their own terms. The territorial activities prepared them for effective social activism in the public housing heartlands. The territorial practices also opened up the church to the surrounding community and fostered trust between the church and non-Christian residents. This was particularly important for middle-class Anglophone Christians seeking communion with working-class Sinophone residents. In the following Yishun Mission and Living Sanctuary cases, the territorial practices led to community practices, as the churches integrated and became part of the living local community, turning from a middle-class transplant into a neighborhood church.

In 1996, Methodist minister Benny Ho led a group of 40 people from his church to plant a mission in the northern new town of Yishun. For six months, the missionaries went into intensive preparations involving ‘training via video, prayerwalks, and prayerdrives through Yishun’. They then rented a container for services and a shophouse to start a gift shop as a ‘contact point’ in the community. A visiting preacher prophesized the church would be full of children and youth, which at that time bewildered Pastor Ho.

As Ho spent more time spiritually mapping and prayerwalking Yishun, he began to lose his middle-class assumptions and realized that the working-class residents were not aspiring to upward class mobility but to earning a basic living. With work consuming their lives, parents could hardly take care of their children, whom the Mission was attracting. The Mission began to launch projects targeted at the children and youth. Activities such as 'craft work, games, storytelling, study sessions, family picnics, and camps' were offered to all residents without any strings attached. Soon, a family service center was established to help families with material and counseling needs. In just over three years, attendance at the Mission's service grew to about 500, a fifth of whom were children (LoveSingapore, 2000: 53–57).

Starting as a house church in 1974, Living Sanctuary Brethren Church bought a piece of land from the Housing Development Board in 1995 to set up home in Hougang, a public housing estate in the northeast. Supported by just 160 members, the large and grandiose town hall-looking church building, complete with Greek columns, was at risk of becoming a middle-class gated community in a working-class estate. Furthermore, due to zoning requirements, the purchasing of land rather than the more flexible option of purchasing commercial property meant that the Church had very little choice over the site of the building. It found itself situated at the edge of the estate far away from the town center. After moving into the church in late 1997, church members spent nearly two years prayerwalking and held a 'Jericho March' around the neighborhood to befriend the residents before any evangelistic activities were organized. The church invited residents to 'no preaching, no testimony, and no prayer' parties during festivals and sought to turn the church building into a community center accessible to everyone. Chinese-language services were started. When evangelical activities began, the church grew threefold in a year (LoveSingapore, 2000: 57–61).

Unlike in Singapore, urban redevelopment in Hong Kong since the Handover has been split between the private sector and the state, with civil society gaining an increasingly influential voice. Just before the Handover, the Land Development Corporation was reformed and turned into the Urban Renewal Authority, which now, like its counterpart in Singapore, possessed greater powers to force land assembly, resources to take up large-scale redevelopment projects without need for partnership with private developers, and expertise to conduct systematic urban planning. However, the increase in state power in urban redevelopment has also inspired civil society and democracy activists to save Hong Kong's unique urban heritage and identity from what they saw as destructive and autocratic public-private overdevelopment in rapidly modernizing Chinese cities.

As a result of the acceleration of urban redevelopment and rising civil society activism over urban issues, the Christians have found themselves caught up in the growing reflexive urban consciousness of the younger generation of 'post-97' Hong Kongers. In the 2000s, the Community Development Service arm of the St James' Settlement, a large social service organization founded in 1949 and heavily supported since by the Anglican Church, began to rethink their traditional approach to serving the Wanchai community. Wanchai is a quaint commercial town neighboring the Central area on Hong Kong Island with old tenement houses, traditional industries and street market stalls that has been earmarked for extensive redevelopment. Together with other non-governmental organizations, the Service helped craft the Home Affairs Bureau's 2005 position paper

on participatory and sustainable community development. Subsequently, the Service developed its own six focus areas: 'participatory urban planning', 'community economy development', 'sustainable community development', 'community based social enterprise', 'vulnerable groups empowerment' and 'community culture and community art' (St James' Settlement Community Development Service, 2009: 15–17).

These focus areas converged in the Service's campaign for the conservation of the Blue House community. The Blue House is a balcony-type tenement block representing hybrid Sino-Western buildings built in the 1920s in southern China. It happened to be located on the same street just a few doors down from the St James' Settlement headquarters in Wanchai. When the Urban Renewal Authority announced a proposal to preserve the Blue House and turn it into a Chinese tea and medicine museum in 2006, the Service worked with the Wanchai District Council to mobilize a concern group of professionals, academics, artists, activists and residents. It counter-proposed to preserve not only the building, but also the Blue House's existing community of 20 households of largely aged residents and their social networks and cultural knowledge. It also planned to use the Blue House to revive Wanchai community's culture and enhance its livelihood in a sustainable way through social enterprise, community bazaars, performances, and the setting up of a community college and community art center aided by residential researchers and artists.

The Service criticized the urban renewal pursued by the Authority in Wanchai since 1997 to tackle urban decay, by bulldozing vibrant living communities in the pursuit of gentrification, for causing 'community decay' instead (St James' Settlement Community Development Service, 2009: 33). To stake its territorial claim, the Service quickly set up the Wanchai Livelihood Museum in the lower ground floor unit of the Blue House in early 2007. It became a base for exhibitions, workshops, cultural tours and heritage walks organized to 'encourage local participation in deciding the future of the district and cultivate a sense of belonging and cultural identification', and to 'celebrate the spirit of multi-culturalism in Wanchai' (St James' Settlement Wanchai Livelihood Place, 2011). The Authority relented, partly to relieve the heat of conservation battles being fought with more radical conservative activists over the nearby Wanchai Market and Tai Yuen street market redevelopment.

The inwardly oriented Wing Kwong Church has also taken steps to overcome its evangelical separatism from the secular city by adopting territorial practices in sync with the politics of heritage conservation and urban renewal. The Church announced in early 2011 that it was spending \$30 million, including a small start-up grant from the government, to restore a cluster of stone houses built in the 1930s in old Kowloon City close to the Church. The Church plans to build a cafe, a visitor information center, an open theater for public performances and 'an area for meditation and prayer' at the site. Calling it 'a community revitalization project', the Church will use the stone houses 'to reinforce the value of "family"', which it believes 'is vital for the inheritance of core values from generation to generation' (International Pentecostal Holiness Church, 2011). The houses were part of a new village constructed around the historic Hau Wong Temple built in 1730 and dedicated to a legendary Chinese general who defended the last Song Emperor in Kowloon against the Mongols. The houses and the temple were situated right next to the Kowloon Walled City, today a park, which was the peculiar enclave of Chinese

sovereignty and resistance in Hong Kong throughout the colonial period. The Church is replacing this layered political and religious identity of the site with its own conservative Christian interpretation of Chinese values.

Houses have important symbolic value to evangelicals because of the house church movement. House churches were initially successful and popular among Hong Kong evangelicals because of the prohibitive cost of property. But as residential density increased and living space shrunk over the years, house churches gave way to the sharing of community venues such as schools and rented spaces by multiple congregations. While the evangelicals have been standing aloof from state and society, they have long been concerned about building their own small local communities. But as expanding church communities outgrow spatial capacity, evangelical churches began to change their approach to their urban organization by adopting new territorial practices while trying to preserve their community practices. In so doing, like their Singapore counterparts, they developed hybrid territorial-community urban practices that allowed the churches to successfully adapt to the reurbanization of Hong Kong as a global city.

A good example is Yan Fook Church, a church of the Evangelical Free Church of China. The Church was formed when the Waterloo Hill Church headed by aforementioned Pastor So Wing-Yui, in order to alleviate overcrowding in its youth fellowship, carved out a group of 120 members to start a new mission based in a primary school in Kowloon Tong in 1984. After Patrick So Wing-Chi returned from theological studies to lead the group as its pastor in 1986, the church grew quickly to 450 worshippers in 1989. In 1999, the church had 4500 people attending services and was renting an entire floor in a high-rise commercial building and holding six worship sessions every week. It had by then moved several times, like Christian nomads across Kowloon City, at times dividing its congregations among different spaces and losing some members along the way (Evangelical Free Church of China Yan Fook Church, 2004: 4–8).

In 2001, the Church took a major leap of faith to construct an entire 20-floor building of its own in a commercial district in Cheung Sha Wan district. After moving into the gleaming glass-clad Yan Fook Center in 2004, the Church kept growing and reached 10,000 worshippers in late 2009, one of the largest congregations in Hong Kong. The Center is indistinguishable from any other modern commercial building in the area and is well served by the subway system, thereby transforming the nomadic Kowloon city church into a cosmopolitan megachurch sitting on the urban transportation network rather than a town church like Wing Kwong Church. Blending into the urban fabric of commercial Hong Kong, the Church fully identifies with the global city and therefore opens itself to enchant the city and its world of visitors and migrants, especially those from China.

When I visited the church, I met its members not in town spaces as with Faith Community Baptist Church, not at the church itself, but in the train on the way to Yan Fook Center. Realizing quickly that I could not speak Cantonese, the members who talked to me switched to Mandarin and invited me to the Mandarin service. They walked me to the service, joining the queue for the lift and taking the lift with me, thus making sure I did not feel alienated by the otherwise indistinguishable urban environment where pedestrians and commuters kept to themselves and protected their personal space in overcrowded Kowloon.

The secret to its success in keeping the community largely intact and communal ties between members intimate is its house church approach to cell group organization.

Pastor Patrick So (2008) has made it a point to distinguish his Church's approach from Faith Community Baptist Church's approach. Yan Fook's small groups are mostly called fellowships and involve adult members at about the same phase of their life course. While Faith Community Baptist's cell groups are heavily directed in terms of the thematic content, worship format, meeting schedule and organization so as to enforce corporate unity in the pursuit of territorial spiritual warfare, Yan Fook fellowships have large autonomy to run their sessions and activities as long as they focus on Bible study. Fellowships make their own decisions as to meeting time and places and organizational matters. They are also encouraged to explore different parts of the Bible they deem relevant to their lives. The emphasis is on making members 'feel at home' (Li, 2007) in the Church and catering to individual spiritual needs.

The reworking of the house church approach as Yan Fook blended into the cityscape allowed the Church to retain the balance of territorial and community practices, thus overcoming the limitations of evangelical house churches to grow in the dense urban context of Hong Kong. While it has not sought the development and renewal of the wider urban community as St James' Settlement has as a secularized church, or as a territorial church seeking communal links with the surrounding urban community, Yan Fook has been developing its networked urban communities in which the church serves as a node sustaining and supporting the communities.

## Conclusion

Caught up in historical moments of social transformation in the West, Cox and Baker have provided the terms of urban theologies useful for us to understand the interaction between the church and the city and how Christians grapple with the urbanisms they face. These terms are the secular space of the modern city and the place of the spiritual community, and how these two should be balanced in the adaptation to the changing urban fabric. I have shown that Christians in Hong Kong and Singapore have been doing the same in the past four decades, except that they were already grappling with what Baker termed the hybrid city due to the respective postcolonial crisis they faced in the 1970s and 1980s. The crises brought on particular urbanization strategies in the two cities that saw the prevalence of state-led planning, industrial satellite towns and public housing estates. This was more pronounced in Singapore than in Hong Kong because the former experienced the postcolonial crisis of independence in 1965 as both political and economic exigencies, while the lead up to the 1997 Handover was mainly a political exigency.

Those decades were the period where the Christians experimented with different blends of territorial-community practices. The liberal Christians' activism among industrial urban spaces faced major obstacles in the authoritarian and conservative political climate in the two cities. Their experiments with forming what Cox had termed *avant-garde* churches generally failed. The evangelical house church approach integrating Christian community life with secular residential spaces also did not succeed, as the dense and regulatory character of public housing spaces prevented expansion of house churches. In both cities, the Pentecostal model of setting up a central church for mass worship in the public housing satellite town worked to build up large Christian communities. However, as the Faith Community Baptist case shows, the model adopted by the Christians in Singapore to occupy disused buildings in town

centers, rather than building a landmark building for an introverted community at the edge of town as Wing Kwong had done in Hong Kong, worked better in integrating the church into the urban fabric.

These experiments culminated in the urban movements, We Love Hong Kong and LoveSingapore, which saw different approaches adopted by the Christians. Both movements, I have shown, were conditioned by the respective postcolonial crisis experienced in the city. The Christians responded to the state's autocratic and totalistic urban planning to solve the political-economic exigencies in Singapore by focusing on territorial practices of spiritual warfare. In Hong Kong, the political uncertainties leading up to the Handover led Christians to campaign for an authentic civic community that could protect its urban freedoms against an autocratic regime. However, the most important contribution of the urban movements was to foster reflexive theologies of the city that the Christians subsequently developed to spur evangelical and social activism.

Therefore, in response to the intensification of urbanization for the building of the global city, I have shown that the Christians in both cities converged by developing hybrid territorial-community urbanisms from their initial emphasis on territorial or community practices. In Singapore, the middle-class Pentecostals found ways to engage working-class communities in burgeoning satellite towns through spiritual warfare, thereby fostering new sacred canopies in otherwise urban secular spaces. In Hong Kong, community-oriented evangelicals discovered ways through the innovation of the meaning of the house to challenge or integrate into the urbanization process, thereby creating new spatio-religious hybridities that kept religion resurgent in the relentless commercial urbanscape.

The key implication of this comparative study is that the aspirations of Christians, born from postcolonial crises, drove the creation of new ideas and practices to bridge the gap between secular space and the formation of spiritual communities, between the urban and the sacred. From thence, the Christians were already constructing the hybrid city, before Baker postulated its possibility in the West, through their innovative religious practices grounded in new urban theologies that made sacred meaning of the secular city. In light of the sociological discussions about the exception of secularism in the West and the resurgence of religion in the rest of the modern world, this study of Christianity in Hong Kong and Singapore shows religious practitioners engaging the forces of secularization with experimental urban theologies and practices actively worked to achieve the resurgence. The remaining question then is why, despite producing coherent theologies in Cox and Baker, Christians in the West have failed to achieve the resurgence.

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## Résumé

Cet article cherche à expliquer l'essor rapide du christianisme évangélique à Hong Kong et Singapour au cours des dernières décennies à travers l'adaptation du christianisme à l'urbanisation séculière à l'œuvre dans les deux villes. J'avance que les réponses chrétiennes mettent en jeu à la fois l'innovation dans les pratiques territoriales des chrétiens pour se déplacer dans la ville planifiée et s'y impliquer de manière significative, et des pratiques communautaires appelées à créer une vie communautaire chrétienne liée au lieu. Je montre que l'innovation a été stimulée par les aspirations postcoloniales de chrétiens qui réagissaient à l'urbanisation dirigée par l'État pour résoudre la crise de la décolonisation dans les années 70 et 80. Des Églises locales aux différentes croyances théologiques ont expérimenté différentes pratiques spatiales hybrides, territoriales et communautaires, adaptées aux contextes urbains respectifs. Lorsque le réaménagement urbain a été intensifié par chacun des deux États pour transformer Hong Kong et Singapour en villes de l'ère globale, les chrétiens ont contribué et participé à la réurbanisation et à la globalisation des deux villes.

## Mots-clés

Communauté, culture, développement urbain, espace urbain, religion

## Resumen

Este artículo trata de explicar el rápido crecimiento del cristianismo evangélico en Hong Kong y Singapur en las últimas décadas mediante la adaptación del cristianismo a la urbanización secular experimentada en las dos ciudades. Se argumenta que las respuestas cristianas implican tanto la innovación en las prácticas territoriales cristianas para moverse e implicarse significativamente en la ciudad planificada, así como en las prácticas de la comunidad que buscan producir vida comunitaria cristiana ligada al lugar. Se muestra que la innovación fue impulsada por las aspiraciones poscoloniales de los cristianos que reaccionaron a la urbanización dirigida por el estado para resolver la crisis de la descolonización en los años 1970 y 1980. Las iglesias locales con diferentes creencias teológicas experimentaron con diversas prácticas espaciales híbridas, territoriales y comunitarias, adaptadas a los respectivos contextos urbanos. Cuando los estados respectivos intensificaron la remodelación urbana para transformar Hong Kong y Singapur en ciudades globales, los cristianos contribuyeron y participaron en la urbanización y globalización de las dos ciudades.

## Palabras clave

Comunidad, cultura, desarrollo urbano, espacio urbano, religión