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Media, religion and the marketplace in the information economy: evidence from Singapore

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Abstract. In this paper we suggest that the exchange of communication in a mediatized environment is transforming the nature of transactions in the religious marketplace. In this economy of religious informational exchanges, digitalization facilitates a process of mediatization that converts religious performance into forms suitable for commodification and commoditization. The intersection of digital media, religion, and the marketplace is demonstrated in the context of mega Protestant and Buddhist organizations in Singapore. We show how these large organizations embed media relations in their sacred spaces through a process of hybridization. In turn, hybrid spaces are converted into material outputs that may be readily transacted in real and virtual spaces. Hybridization attends to a postmodern audience and consumers who value experience and sensorial stimulations. It integrates retail, entertainment, and the aesthetics into a space of ascetic performance that is digitally transportable. Digital transactional spaces thrive on the abundance of information, and information multiplies when communication is unfettered by the absence of proprietary safeguards. The religious marketplace may therefore be understood as a medially driven performance space where points of interaction are digitally convertible for further reproduction, reconsumption, and redistribution in media form.

Keywords: information economy, digital media, religion, hybridization, Singapore, Buddhism, Protestantism

Introduction

The confluence of media, religion, and the marketplace has long been central to the ministry of clergy (Clark, 2007). Media reinforce the material and symbolic qualities of spiritual texts, information, and experiences. In turn, religious material culture thrives on consumer capitalism, supported by a model of industrial transmission that locates production in the hands of publishing and music houses. However, the emergence of 'Wikinomics' (Tapscott and Williams, 2010) has facilitated the integration of geographically separate production and consumption processes that characterize Fordist and post-Fordist industrial spaces. Under Web 2.0 and other digital technology, consumers are becoming part of the production process. In turn, increased consumer engagement leads to the cocreation of value in the marketplace (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004). Digitalization is encouraged by a process of technological convergence. Here a variety of media forms and functions may be combined through conversion into digital data, facilitating the reproduction and recirculation of information. In this paper we suggest that commoditization of the communication process

is central in the religious economy. Religious exchanges are increasingly shaped by the logic of digital media production, consumption, and distribution of information. We examine such an economy in the context of Singapore's mega Protestant and Buddhist organizations, based on data collected from 2006 to 2010.

Commodification of communication in the information economy is hastened and facilitated by the creation of hybrid space among religious organizations. Hybridity of sacred space is manifested in two ways. First, it occurs as the permutation of two mediums; that is, religious performance space and media. Interrelations between these two mediums alter the nature of sacred space, which is traditionally devoted to the codification and ritualization of spiritual meanings held dear by a community of worshippers. Second, digitalization of media has generated new spatial and temporal relationships through the creation of networked spaces. Protestant and Buddhist religious performances are traditionally conducted as live events, requiring the copresence and spatiotemporal proximity of clergy and followers. Mediation by information and communication technology implies that copresence is also being subjected to representation in which the strategic use of symbol, projection, and coengagement is being played out in real and virtual spaces. Coengagement in the networked religious economy reflects a postrelational mode of exchange which is centered less and less on physical and material interactions that characterize Fordist and post-Fordist industrial spaces, and more on a combination of material, virtual, and digital modes of interactions in time and space.

There are several reasons why Singapore and its Protestant and Buddhist organizations are the focus of this study. First, Singapore is a cosmopolitan world city whose emergence on the global economy is correlated with a vast improvement in material life. This improvement has been driven by a consumer-oriented society, where major leisure activities are associated with shopping and eating (Peebles and Wilson, 2002). Religious practitioners are a visible segment of Singapore's consumers: Goh (2005) shows, for instance, that Christianity is strongly associated with a consuming middle class, and that Christians form a significant segment of the population that owns the city's most expensive homes.

Second, the proliferation of religious organizations goes hand in hand with Singapore's emergence as a religious hub. Given its multiracial population, the city houses a 'full religious spectrum' that ranges from traditional to independent spiritual movements. Singapore has recently proclaimed its ambition to become an interfaith hub, serving "as an international center for inter-religious dialogue" (Lai, 2008, page 692). Because of its religious heterogeneity, Singapore has been deemed "an ideal center for the dialogue and study of world religions" (Chew, 2009, page 16).[1] The focus on Protestantism and Buddhism also demands some defense. Among the four major religions in Singapore—that is, Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam—Buddhism and Christianity are practiced by 51.6% of the population. Buddhists alone form 33.3% of religious practitioners (Department of Statistics, 2011). In terms of Christianity, Protestantism is highly Americanized, although influences from Australia are also present. This influence has seen the establishment of American-like mega churches with memberships in a few instances of over 20 000.[2] Buddhist organizations are largely associated with Mahayana Buddhism, although Tibetan, Theraveda, and other syncretic denominations may be found.

[1] In announcing his Faith Foundation's collaboration with the National University of Singapore in August 2009 to launch a course on faith and globalization, Tony Blair also observed that "Singapore is truly a multi-faith society. The level of religious tolerance, openness and engagement between the faiths is extraordinary, and makes Singapore a genuine inter-religious hub" (*The Straits Times* Singapore, 16 August 2009).

[2] Catholic organizations were originally included in the authors' fieldwork. But it became apparent over time that they have not, at least in the Singapore context, embraced new and digital media as enthusiastically nor as extensively as their Protestant and Buddhist counterparts. Hence they are not examined here.

Like their Protestant counterparts, Buddhist mega organizations also mark their visibility through media. The size and medial practices of mega organizations render Buddhism and Protestantism relevant religions for understanding the religious hybrid space.

Third, Singapore is one of the most wired cities in Asia (Internet World Statistics, 2010). This wiring is paralleled by mediatization of the urban environment, with mega churches and temples highly embedded in the media landscape. Use of media is central in the 'staging' of the consumer experience (Nelson, 2010) through the immersion of worshippers and visitors in mediatized environments, real and virtual. By `staging' (see also Couldry, 2008), we mean to suggest that religious performances are increasingly a product of representation through their interrelation with media. Digital media amplify the modulation of sensorium and social experiences by allowing sound, the visual, and action to be integrated. Such modulation creates a hybrid space in which religious identity is not only performed and reinforced, but which also facilitates the conversion of performance into data that may be transported and transacted. The staging of media also means that religious leaders in mega organizations have become just as concerned about entertaining their congregations and the aesthetics as they are about the practice of offering spiritual meaning. In this sense, the religious hybrid space is constituted from the integration of market and media relations, transforming ascetic experiences into a kind of postrelational stimulation that has come to characterize contemporary consumption.

The study draws on a multimethods approach, including personal interviews with Christian and Buddhist religious leaders in mega organizations, ethnographic visits to churches and temples and participation in their worship and chanting services, as well as content analysis of newspaper reports and websites of the organizations, blogs, and other social media. The diversity of data examined is built on the premise that text and technologically mediated relations are useful for directing our attention to the intersecting religious processes taking place in multiple sites. In turn, this should help us to examine the corners of the religious hybrid space in ways that render their connections visible.

Religious hybridization in the information economy

Rituals and ceremonial acts have historically been integral practices in sacred space (Holloway, 2006). As sacred sites, churches and temples are a medium through which devotees reflect upon the divine and spiritual order. Since the 1960s scholars have observed a trend of mass mediatization and the mass consumption of religion with the emergence of the electronic church and evangelical radio via network broadcasting—especially in the United States (US) (Schultze, 2003). Tele-evangelism is facilitated by an industrial model whose success depends on mass production in religious broadcasting and publishing houses (Borden, 2007; Reeves and Campbell, 1994). Such a model, however, promotes the separation of production and consumption spaces (Power and Scott, 2004). In the information age, new media, particularly those associated with digital technology, are reintegrating production and consumption, driven by greater collaboration and engagement between producers and consumers, as well as increased consumer agency (Pratt, 2000; Tapscott and Williams, 2010).

Among cultural media theorists, digital and communication technology is said to have significantly transformed both the quality and quantity of market relations by creating unprecedented access to information. Jenkins (2006) argues that networked consumers in the information economy are part of a "participatory culture". Generation Y consumers, for instance, participate relatively heavily in the creation of media content, including fan video making and fan fiction writing. They also shape media content through blogging and tweeting. Increased levels of participation stem from web-savvy consumers' demands that their subjective encounters with products be incorporated in the production process (Jenkins, 2006). Increased consumer agency is also reflected in consumers' transmission

and distribution of products. Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) suggest that firms must be prepared to cocreate products with their customers in the information economy—best seen in collaborative projects such as Wikipedia. According to Tapscott and Williams (2010), the Wikipedia workplace is underscored by openness and sharing of ideas and knowledge. In this case, the 'product' is an aggregation of the collective knowledge of individuals who contribute information and solutions to the production process. In this space of collective knowledge and resources, information and communication are digitalized and commoditized for exchange and reproduction in real and virtual spaces.

The information economy is distinguished from the Fordist economy in two ways. First, it is based on a capitalism of abundance, rather than of scarcity (Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010). Information begets more information, and data production and circulation multiply the reproduction and recirculation of media as communication products (see also Zook et al, 2004). Digitalization in particular has encouraged the cosharing of innovation, production, and distribution by expanding forms of communication. Blogs, microblogs like Twitter, YouTube, and other social media offer enormous flexibility over older analogue technologies in the commodification and recommodification of communication outputs. In the religious context this expands possibilities for new authorship, music composition, art, and their geographical spread.

Second, scholars have noted that terms like 'consumers', 'producers', and 'users' are becoming less relevant for describing market relations in the information economy. Proliferation of user-generated content (UGC) platforms has meant that traditional users and consumers are no longer just passive recipients of industrial outputs. By demanding to participate, or by engaging in the information market, they are also leveraging expertise in mutual exchanges of knowledge (Jenkins, 2006). Consequently, the term "produsage" (Bruns, 2008) has emerged to describe the consumer's hybrid role and increased agency in the market process. Bruns (2008) suggests that produsage captures the increase in consumer agency under Web 2.0, and contemporary integration of production and consumption spaces in the information market. Produsers are continuously engaged in reciprocal production and transmission of knowledge as well as the reproduction and recirculation of media. The produser is committed to an information commons where production is part of a social collaborative project—such as Wikipedia, or, in the religious context, Wikireligion. While the consumer also possesses some agency in the Fordist model of industrial transmission, through product choice and boycott, Bruns maintains that agency is strengthened under Web 2.0 because consumers and users are directly engaged in reproducing information content, and producers do not always have direct control over users' retransmission (Dijck, 2009). For example, users can introduce their own sound, music, and media content to an existing product and transmit the 'mash-up' product on YouTube and Facebook. The term mash-up' refers to "compositions, combinations, assimilation and appropriation of things that already exist to create something—and this is crucial—that need show no allegiance or even connection to the original work" (Jackson, 2009, page 730).

In the context of new media and the Internet, this implies that a good share of exchanges may be free, or priced at next to nothing, because they are based on "peer production" (Benkler, 2006). In this economy of peer production, consumers, readers, and viewers reproduce, represent and redistribute information and data that are less easily controlled by corporations, including religious organizations. Production that relies on virtual collaboration flourishes best in a nonmarket context because, as Benkler has pointed out, commoditizing information through market relations in the form of intellectual property rights and exclusive rights stifles postrelational production that thrives on unfettered communication and social sharing of ideas.

Taken together, the affordances of digital technology and its UGC platforms suggest that the information economy is distinguished from the Fordist industrial model through its multimodal, many-to-many communication and exchange relations.[3] Communication and its material manifestation—that is, information—constitute the main object of economic transaction. In such a market, supply cost is low because UGC platforms facilitate the role of consumers as distributors. Additionally, the 'product' may be immaterial since media content reflects consumers' desire to communicate experiences. In turn, media products are increasingly influenced by opinions, ratings, rankings, and reviews that are now relatively accessible on the Internet. However, it is important to note that the proliferation of produsers does not mean a diminished role for corporations or, in the context of this paper, religious organizations. Rather, the same sociotechnical framework that underpins the information economy also thrives on digital surveillance—specifically, the tracking of consumers' and users' social behavior online. In browsing Amazon.com, for instance, users leave behind data trails of their shopping preferences, enabling the company to recommend related books or CDs to the user. Similarly, as we will show below, digital surveillance is also used by religious organizations to track the consumption behavior of their viewers online and to market their media products.

Historically, the religious marketplace is associated with the production and consumption of media—specifically, text and music (Kong, 2001; 2010). Protestant ministry demands the regular physical presence of worshippers in churches. Its worship consists of a performance dimension, with clergy and the choir assuming center stage in the sacred space of communication. Like any concert or theater, the performance requires a presentation with purposeful design in props, bodies, actors, utterances, sound, and action (Thrift, 2003), as well as the presence of an audience. As a medium, the religious performance space facilitates the dissemination of spiritual experience. Although Buddhist devotees are not held to weekly worship services like their Protestant counterparts, nonetheless the sacred space is also marked by performance: at various hours of the day, monks and nuns perform chants and incantations, supported by props (eg, beads and corporeal items), and devotees are encouraged to engage in similar activities in the physical presence of monks and nuns (Cheong et al, 2011).

In large organizations, the religious performance space is frequently accompanied by media installations. Unprecedented mediatization transforms the sacred space of mega churches and temples into simulacra and simulation (Baudrillard, 1998). Through the deployment of symbols, metaphors, and representation, simulations resensibilize social relations and experience. More importantly, hybridizing the performance space enables such a space to be converted into digital media forms that may be transacted in the information economy. Nowhere is the digital commoditization of hybrid space better illustrated than in the United States, where mega churches have dominated the spiritual marketplace, led by "holy mavericks" (Lee and Sinitiere, 2009). Holy mavericks are celebrity pastors whose appeal lies less in ecclesiastical authority than in motivational narratives and best-selling books. Their power stems from their ability to engage in discourses that are culturally relevant, or that strike a chord with national sentiment. Holy mavericks' theatrical performances and the contemporary music of these churches draw large audiences, reflecting their ability to bridge culture and religion. By blending pop culture with spirituality, they alter worship experiences, adopting new spaces of storytelling that facilitate their insertion into the information economy. They manage and run their organizations like chief executive officers, and their books and music enjoy a significant presence in national and global online markets.

[3] Older media (eg, television) is characterized by one-to-many communication and is also credited with the rise of mass consumption targeted through broadcasting in the Fordist economy (Dijck, 2009).

The reputation and influence of holy mavericks are not only derived from the size and scope of their operations, but also from the power of their online digital narratives and media representation.

America's Christian holy mavericks are not the only evangelicals who have successfully built global markets for their books and music. The popularity of Tzuchi, which draws on the Bodhisattva way to nirvana, is associated with the charismatic personality of its Buddhist leader, Master Cheng Yen. While the organization's headquarters is located in Taiwan, it has offices in forty-seven countries and its thousands of followers may be found across Asia, Canada, the US and France (http://www.tzuchi.org, available in English, Chinese, and Spanish). Cheng Yen successfully connects her diasporic followers through the narration of a home for the "homeless mind" by encouraging them to return to their spiritual abode in Hualian, Taiwan, for retreats, camps, and spiritual revival (Weller, 2009). Like her American Protestant counterparts, the nun's global geographical reach is predominantly realized through media—in particular, new media. Indeed, holy mavericks' teachings are widely encountered in media forms. Their books and music performances are ranked and rated on Amazon.com and widely marketed on the Internet and social media.

Like their American counterparts, the rise of Singapore's mega churches is linked to their prosperity messages (Chin, 2009; Connell, 2005; Einstein, 2008; Ekelund et al, 2006). In the Buddhist context, providence is encouraged through the acquisition of merits, and merits are increased through religious consumption that leads to sound financial investment. Despite their differences, hybridization may be observed in mega organizations in both religions, although they are construed rather differently. Whereas hybridization is constituted out of the integration of real and digital presence in religious performance among mega churches, it is presented as a curation of art to encourage coengagement in both real and virtual contexts among mega Buddhist temples. This difference results in both the immaterialization and the materialization of communication relations in the religious information economy, as will be discussed below.

The Singapore context: media and religion

Singapore is one of the world's most 'wired' nations. Since the early 1980s the Singapore government has been actively building a digital infrastructure and vigorously promoting the adoption and use of the Internet in peoples' everyday lives. According to Internet World Statistics (2010), Singapore has one of the highest Internet penetration rates (77.8%) in the world. In 2009, 81% of all households had Internet access (up from 65% in 2003), with 80% of households using broadband connections (up from 40% in 2003) (Infocomm Development Authority of Singapore, 2010). Beyond access, several other indicators evince ways in which Singaporeans use new and social media interactively. Consumer shopping over the Internet has also grown steadily from 2003 to 2008, with 40% of the online population engaged in electronic commerce in 2008 (Infocomm Development Authority of Singapore, 2010). Singaporeans also exhibit a high level of engagement with social media, with more than 83% of its online population visiting a social networking site in February 2010 (comScore, 2010).

Singaporeans' relatively high access to the Internet has meant that their use of religious sites for religious information online has increased in recent years (DeBernardi, 2008; Kuo et al, 2002). Research suggests that religious leaders of all faiths in Singapore are aware of and would encourage the use of innovative practices, including the Internet, to mobilize interest and participation in, as well as learning about, their religions (Kluver and Cheong, 2007).

The current religious landscape and identity have been shaped by the transnational flows of commodities, information, and labor (Kitiarsa, 2010, page 269), with much of it tied to the city's historical development as an international port of call. Historically, Christianity in Singapore was considered the "religion of empire" (DeBernardi, 2008, page 118),

with traditional mainline Christian denominations established during her early colonial period. Newer Christian denominations arrived in the period after the Second World War until the 1980s (Tong, 2008), and independent churches, including mega churches with Sunday attendances of 10 000 or more, have been established mainly since the late 1980s (DeBernardi, 2008). While immigrants from China and India also helped to bring Buddhism to the city during the colonial period, Goh (2009) contends that not only is "Christianity in Singapore … inevitably seen as a relatively recent entrant, very much an outsider compared to the 'Asian' religions of Buddhism, Islam and Hinduism" (page 9), it is also differentiated from other religious groups in Singapore by an outward form of globalization that is underscored by evangelical activities outside of the country. In contrast, while Buddhism in Singapore today is also impacted by cross-border religious mobility, it is one where the Buddhist landscape is constituted from external influences (Kitiarsa, 2010). Not surprisingly, therefore, many Singaporean Chinese Buddhists have continued to practice a syncretic form of Buddhism, one mixed with Taoism and Chinese folk beliefs (Kuah-Pearce, 2008), albeit with a growing number becoming adherents of the purer forms of Buddhism, such as Chinese Mahayana, Theravada, and Tibetan Vajrayana.

Data and methodology

Data for this paper are drawn from a large multimethod study on religion and Internet use in Singapore, conducted from 2006 to 2010. Of the twenty-two Buddhist and thirty Protestant organizations we interviewed, about half a dozen may be considered to be mega churches and temples [defined by Chin (2009) as organizations with memberships of over 2000]. In qualitative research design, case selection is purposive (Yoshikawa et al, 2007). This paper focuses on mega organizations for the following reasons. First, because of their size, such organizations are structured similarly to corporations—with a department that is devoted to media and communication. Second, the organizations and their growth are largely associated with mediatized ministry, charismatic leadership (that is, holy mavericks), and business affiliations in the marketplace—whether in the form of publishing and music houses, restaurants, or, in the case of this study, shopping centers. Extensive media use and considerable business interest render mega organizations relevant for investigating hybridization in the religious marketplace.

The National Council of Churches' directory, as well as Buddhist directories available online (such as Singapore DharmaNet and Buddhanet), do not report membership size, and a thorough web search indicates that, although a few organizations post such data on their websites, many do not. However, our estimate that Singapore has between a dozen and twenty mega churches and temples was corroborated by six of our interviewees (four pastors and two priests); however, only five of these (three churches and two temples) agreed to be interviewed.[4] The interviews were conducted with principal clergy or designated leaders of the organizations between mid-2007 and mid-2010; in some organizations, more than one leader was interviewed.[5] Three of the five mega organizations in our study (that is one church

[4] Our fieldwork was conducted at a time when mega churches and temples were under intense scrutiny by the Singapore government for their commercial activities. One of the pastors we interviewed and another Buddhist priest received extensive media coverage nationally, and this adversely affected organizations' willingness to be interviewed.

[5] The interviews conducted with the mega organizations are part of a larger study that included Christian and Buddhist organizations of varying sizes. Interviews of one to two hours each were conducted in English for all the Christian leaders as well as webmasters; those for the Buddhists were either in English or Mandarin. The interviews covered three key areas: their Internet use; their views on the Internet and Christianity/Buddhism, respectively (eg, in the production, consumption, and circulation of information and communication), and the ways clergy do their everyday work (eg, changes in leadership); and their organization's utilization of the Internet (eg, construction, management

and two temples) are highly significant cases not only because of their size but also because of the scope and geographical breadth of their economic activities. We augmented the sample with ethnographic visits and a web-content analysis of the five mega organizations: several of the pastors also host their own websites and social networking sites such as Facebook, and these were extensively analyzed. We further performed a content analysis of newspaper reports (of government speeches and press releases), as well as the annual reports of the organizations, blogs, YouTube videos, and other social media. Collating data from multiple sources allows us to examine qualitative data in a variety of forms that should yield richer and complementary insights (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996).

To generate analytical categories and themes (as guided by our conceptual questions), the interview transcripts, web analyses, and field notes were subject to triangulation and reiterative reviews by the research team members. This process not only contributed to the quality and verification of the interpretations presented, but also ensured convergence and consistency of opinions with regard to the extracts selected for inclusion in the paper.

Media and religion in the information economy

Religious hybrid space

Media and the marketplace increasingly play a role in how religious norms are defined. Studies of the religious marketplace in the US have shown how religious identity is shaped by the logic of the market (Twitchell, 2004). Furthermore, media is frequently marshaled to legitimize the power of the market. In the religious hybrid space, however, media also helps to recreate the ascetic. This not only transforms the nature of religious performance, but also brings on new methods of representation that may be extended in digital form. Among mega churches and temples, the space of performance involves combining retail, entertainment, and aesthetic experiences as part of the devotee's spiritual journey. Through hybridization, such performance space becomes readily commoditized for exchange in the information economy.

Among Protestant mega churches, religious performance is associated with theatricized displays of American-style holy mavericks that may be illustrated by the two largest mega churches in Singapore—namely the New Creation Church (NCC) and the City Harvest Church (CHC). Both churches claim to have memberships of over 25 000. The NCC currently occupies one section of a large shopping center, Suntec City Mall, which is located in the shopping district and adjacent to the central business district. Explosive growth has resulted in plans to relocate the church to One-North at Biopolis, which is the hub of Singapore's information and media industries. The planned building is expected to be a "civic, cultural and retail complex" (http://www.newcreation.org.sg/one-north/introduction/retail_management.htm). Potential retail tenants contain a mix of global retail and local stores, including Clarins (a cosmetic store), The BreadTalk (a local bakery chain with international franchises), Café Iguana (a Mexican restaurant), and PageOne Publishing (a local bookstore). Religious hybrid space draws on multiple spatiotemporal points of entry: in addition to retail facilities, The NCC's Star Performing Arts Center is expected to host media facilities providing a "world class experience for … large scale musical

[5] (continued)
and use of their websites). We also interviewed forty-seven members of the organizations to find out how they used the Internet to develop their faith, for worship, and to develop ties with other believers. While the use of self-reporting narratives served to enhance our understanding of personal and cultural experiences (Gergen, 1991), participant observation—which we did through visits to a handful of churches/temples and participation in their worship and chanting services—assumes that researchers can learn much through observing real people in real places and communities (Cloke et al, 2004). In combination, qualitative research is thought to be particularly useful in revealing the complex issues and subjective experiences related to the spiritual domain (Boston et al, 2001).

theater and dance performances" (http://www.rockproductions.com/one-north/introduction/potential-usage.htm). Indeed media, retail, and entertainment are so closely intertwined that the CHC recently attempted to purchase a significant stake at the Suntec Convention Center, Singapore's premier convention facility, with the objective of relocating its worship service from the more industrialized western part of the city.

To examine religious hybrid space further, the authors visited a mega church with a membership of 5000, and which is made up of a relatively young, wired congregation. This church was designed by DP Architects, which also designed one of Asia's largest malls—the Dubai Mall. The director of DP Architects described the building as: "tell[ing] a story—the gospel story—in a silent way, through the buildings, the landscape and the interior" (http://www.trinity.net/building_payalebar.htm). Stories unfold through a seamless connection of retail and entertainment sites. To get to the chapel from the main entrance, one must walk past a popular local food and beverage restaurant—one of two cafés on the church premises that encapsulates the city's regular social meeting site for friends and families. The cafés, which were packed with church-goers during each of our two visits (one at midday on a weekday and another on a Sunday evening), function as a social space to share a meal, coffee, and conversation before worship. On the same floor, there is a museum, while a level below hosts more restaurants and a bookstore. The highly mediatized museum helps mark the church's identity by educating members and visitors about the organization's history and relevance, linking its hybridization process to Singapore's transition to the information economy. The theme of one exhibit, "Raising a generation", for example, showcased the church reaching out to youth through iPhones and smart phones.

As a pastor of another church explained to us, the number of telephone texts or SMSs among his church's youth averages over 100 a day. Electronic and digital connection is now a principal medium used to communicate with Singapore's youth. For example, during the service at the mega church we visited, the pastor asked the congregation to text or SMS regarding a prayer session. Insertion of communication technology into the sacred space implies that, instead of being passive recipients of information, the congregation is invited to interact with the pastor. Mediated communication transforms a one-to-many exchange to many-to-many exchanges as members began in turn to text friends and other members of the community about the pastor's request. But mediated interactions are a two-edged sword. On the one hand, the congregation is invited to interact digitally in real time hybrid space. On the other hand, mediated exchanges are converted into data that are assembled and transported in media form. Such data become a source of market intelligence that may be used to commodify communication and to track the community.

The major pastors of the NCC and the CHC, Joseph Prince and Kong Hee, respectively, are known to exhibit considerable stage presence. Geographical presence is amplified with technology directing congregations' attention to the virtuality of projected images creating a sort of double presence, real and virtual (Fewster, 2010). Double presence plays to a packed audience: the auditoriums are so packed that latecomers often participate in another building through media. At other times, the multiple services mean that congregants participate in the NCC's service via video recordings. Blogs suggest that the following experience is a regular feature, where mediated performance by the pastor intersects with a live audience to project copresence:

> "No, he [Joseph Prince] wasn't physically present; instead I went to the 5pm service on Sunday to watch a recorded preaching. Nonetheless … the congregation made it seem like he was present … it still felt like church" (http://irreligiously.blogspot.com/2010/04/my-impression-of-new-creation-church.html).

The popularity of the pastors' performances lies in their entertainment value, as they are accompanied by rock music and frequently choreographed by in-house music directors.[6] Many of the performances are digitalized, inviting collaboration and coengagement with fans online. This last, in turn, extends the performances for further consumption and distribution on YouTube and Facebook. Indeed, both pastors have a large fan base online, with over 100 000 viewers on their Facebook sites; moreover, fans regularly edit, recompose, and re-present the performances on their own Facebook pages and blogs, creating mash-ups. The religious hybrid space thus modulates senses in two ways. The first attempts to forge interpersonal connections through common consumption: that is, eating and shopping. The second transforms ceremonial occasions to carnivalesque performance, rendering a musical and theatrical version of worship, where the congregation immerses and rocks with the music. Both are embedded in media to establish modalities of experience.

In contrast to Protestant mega churches, Buddhist mega organizations do not hold weekly worship services, although clergy are involved in regular recitations and chant sessions with laity. Despite this, two of the city's largest temples we visited had over 25 000 members on their e-mail listings. The Buddhist religious economy in Singapore is distinguished from the Protestants' retail-and-entertainment model by linking art to their faith. We found that museums have become a major component of mega Buddhist temples, with the museums adopting an instructional or educational role that illuminates the spiritual within a space that is aesthetic and creative at the same time that it is emotive and ascetic. Museums transform by civilizing, inspiring, and educating (Falk and Dierking, 2000). McCracken (2005) suggests that museums have become the surrogate for religion, bestowing spaces of cathedral scale and demanding an atmosphere of reverence from their visitors.

McTavish (1998) and Falk and Dierking (2000) further contend that successful museums rely on a good medium of communication for consumers to attain a level of engagement with their art and objects. Visitors engage exhibits through the unfolding of stories; in turn, the museum's instructional dimension consists of mediated textual dialogues between individuals and the exhibits. The recently built Buddha Tooth Relic Temple and Museum (BTRTM) attracts not only devotees but also tourists because it hosts one of five rare teeth believed to belong to Buddha. The tooth was discovered over 200 years ago in Myanmar, and was recently handed over to the BTRTM's chief abbot for safekeeping. It is kept in a "bullet-proof" stupa in a gold-tiled chamber and its ability to confer "big merits" on followers is expected to help the temple be "the best Buddhist cultural complex in the [Southeast Asia] region" (BTRTM Annual Report 2007/08).

Corporeal objects, or *saririka* (eg, tooth, hair, or bone relics), are considered to be amongst the most sacred of Buddhist religious objects. The museum contains a collection of some 300 Buddhist exhibits, and is designed primarily to instruct on the lives of Buddha Sukyamuni, the Maitreya, and Bhodisattva Avalokitesvara. Visitors coengage in several ways. They may extend their dialogues with the exhibits on the museum's blog (http://btrtm-bcmuseum.blogspot.com), or on various tourist sites on the Internet. They may also request to participate in the lighting of lamps and candles in the main halls on the Internet for a fee. Indeed, a common form of postrelational engagement is captured in blogs and Facebook, where visitors post videos and pictures recurating the temple's various art exhibits. In a sense, the civilizing mission of Buddhist organizations is extended when visitors and the community also instruct through recompositions of storytelling and the sharing of ascetic experiences in social media.

[6] Some religious organizations even host their own music bands that have a following on the Internet. One such band, the Bodhicitta group, composes and produces its own music (http://www.invibes.net).

Like mega churches, the Buddhist religious space is embedded in a performative context with monks and nuns chanting in spaces between corporeal items, burning incense, and other religious artefacts. Unlike the hypermediality of mega churches, where media and its technical installations are highly visible during performance, Buddhist performance space is accompanied by a low media presence, lending itself to impressions of immediacy (Bay-Cheng et al, 2010) between devotees and clergy. That the performances are hosted as webcasts indicate that Buddhist clergy are no less immune to the strategic use of media. However, Buddhist hybrid space is more closely connected to the idea of immediacy in the sense that the sensibilization of experience appears to emphasize the physical and the live. In part, this may be due to the emphasis by clergy on face-to-face interactions in chanting and incantations (Cheong et al, 2011). Nonetheless, because sound is a regular feature of Buddhist rituals—for example, the role of percussions such as bells and idiophones—such performances are also represented digitally (eg, in podcasts) to encourage interactions and coengagement across time and space.

Hybridization of religious space reflects both a cultural and an economic response. It is a cultural response because digitalization enables clergy to cope with the current "short attention span" and the "visual, sight, and sound generation" of their congregations (interview, 10 August 2007). It is also an economic response because digitalization creates opportunities for the scaling-up of markets. Mega churches and temples produce music with their own signature brands. Joseph Prince and his team's music compositions and books target American markets and are sold online for US $20 per item, of which 10% is donated to the church while the remaining 90% is said to reflect "fair market value" (http://www.josephprince.org/onlinestore/US). Clearly, associating its commercial arm with fair market value reflects the church's attempt to link the religious marketplace to some form of just compensation supported by religious jurisprudence. The market here is constituted as one that is marked by an equitable principle of fairness; and fair market value purportedly removes excessive profit by encouraging transactions between willing buyers and sellers who also perceive that they are donating to the religious cause. However, in traversing Joseph Prince's online store, users and consumers are unwittingly supplying information to the organization. Under digital surveillance, consumers are recommended various media products for purchase that reflect their online browsing behavior.

Likewise, Kong Hee, his well-known recording artist wife, and the CHC's music directors also produce music albums in addition to best-selling books.[7] The church is said to have produced more than a dozen albums, including the widely popular *Cross*, which involves music producers from Australia and postproduction in the US. Albums like *Cross* are not only distributed by international distributors, in this case the Universal Music Group which is headquartered in New York City, they may also be found at amazon.com while individual tracks are hosted on various e-music sites for subscriptions. Some of these websites rank the CHC's album productions and fans are invited to judge and review the quality of the performances online. Establishing a fan base online achieves two outcomes. First, it encourages produsage as fans engage in mash-up activities. Second, it facilities retransmission, turning audiences and consumers into marketeers and distributors. For instance, over 100 mash-up videos of the CHC's and the NCC's various musical and worship performances have been uploaded on YouTube by individuals. Some of these videos are, in turn, retransmitted on blogs and Facebook, multiplying media content.

[7] All of senior pastor Kong Hee's books and albums were removed from CHC's Attributes online store in mid-2010 while the pastor was being investigated by the Commercial Affairs Department for his attempted financial acquisition of Suntec City Mall and its exhibition halls (*The Singapore Straits Times* 25 June 2010).

It is fair to say that the religious hybrid space is articulated predominantly among mega churches and temples, and many smaller organizations that we interviewed clearly lacked the resources to produce and market their own in-house music and books. One explanation of such concentration of market power lies in the relatively small domestic market of Singapore. Another explanation lies in laity's reluctance to engage in online shopping. Our interviews with forty-seven Protestant and Buddhist members indicated that, although they are avid Internet users, only 10% actually buy anything online and the majority of their purchases are associated with services, such as airline tickets. In analyzing Internet shopping in Singapore, Teo (2006) concluded that online shopping is still in its infancy.

Nonetheless, the power of media among mega churches and temples lies in its multimodal representation of the hybrid performance space. Multimodality enables hybrid space to be a marker of identity in virtuality—as one church leader suggested, a 'homepage' that links virtual senses to the comforts of its physical religious space. When asked about the relevance of their websites, he said:

"If you have a company … the first thing people will ask is where is your website you know. So the thing is a website doesn't just fulfill the function of a business portal. But I think it gives people some idea of who we are, what we're doing and stuff like that. It's almost like if you don't have a website, then 'hey what do you do?' and it's almost like you've got to have an address on the Internet to do that, yeah" (interview, 14 August 2007).

Protestant churches in particular view identity-formation to be a central objective of community building (see Brace et al, 2006), which they attribute to a 'very tribal' generation. This comprises relatively young[8] and 'very intellectual' congregations who are wired and adept at information gathering and processing. Wired members seek ways of constructing modern and newer versions of themselves and the community. Churches respond by classifying place identity on the basis of technologies of work and organization (Cheong et al, 2011). This is particularly relevant to a predominantly professional congregation that has seen important and ongoing changes in the industrial structure of Singapore's modernization to an information economy. Du Gay (1997) points out that identity construction depends on an organization's ability to define difference by foregrounding some things and backgrounding other things. The hybridized church establishes identity by foregrounding the power and status afforded to the organization through media. Mediatized discursive space also requires clergy to master market relations, although Protestant and Buddhist organizations seem to master such relations quite differently in Singapore.

Constituting the marketplace

Protestant clergy believe that the voluntary nature of religious organizations compels them to engage directly in material market relations. This implies the development of economic practices that lead to innovative products on the marketplace that, in turn, enable them to exploit competitive advantages like any other corporation. One church, with a membership of nearly 25 000 members, declared: "we are like a big MNC". When asked about the motivation behind its relocation from the suburb to the city center, its pastor said:

"we want to be a church in the marketplace. But that also has another connotation, but it is not the real thing. We believe that the church is the temple of God as a Christian, so you are the church in the marketplace. So when you go to work, when you go there, you are our representation" (interview, 13 September 2007).

Churches and temples that operate like MNCs tend to have a clear organizational structure, with distinct divisions of labor: for example, ministry, finance, communication, and media departments. Because their products are predominantly associated with the production of text,

[8] Several pastors indicated that more than half of their congregations are under 50 years of age.

music, and art, mega churches and temples also have a creative arts or cultural department and, in a few cases, their own recording and mixing studio. This is where the organization's songs are written with its "own style, own flavor which identifies with the heart of people" (interview, 13 September 2007). Once turned into music albums or DVDs, mega churches will attempt to recoup some rent by selling them through bookstores, offline and online. In the previous section, however, we also suggested that consuming fans will frequently turn produsers by extending medial configurations for redistribution. Despite this, many pastors we interviewed do not favor property rights on the Internet that are central to the success of Fordist and post-Fordist economies—a point we will return to below.

Like their Protestant counterparts, the Buddhist economy is similarly centered on the production of text, music, and media. However, the Buddhist marketplace is also perceived to be a site for accumulating merit. Merit making is an investment made with the expectation that merit makers will attain enlightenment and achieve wealth and prosperity at a future stage. The accumulation of merit reflects personal achievement and even confers power on individuals who have accumulated unusual amounts of merit (Bao, 2005). Because it is associated with religious action, merit production draws both from market and from immaterial ascetic logic. Among the temples that we examined, mega organizations display the most innovative capacity. One temple, for instance, created its own mandala prayer wheel that condenses 'over 600 million mantras' that members may purchase online and offline. Despite its hefty price (US $650), it is popular among busy Buddhist professional workers because they can reduce time spent in daily recitation rituals by spinning the wheel (interview, 4 July 2007). Another mega temple decided to offer most of the building's religious artifacts (eg, Buddha statues) for financial 'adoption' on the Internet. Adoption prices of the statues run into thousands of dollars and adoption is transacted on the appeal of ascetic power: namely, the amount of merits that such a transaction would confer on the adopter.

Many religious leaders and devotees believed that the Buddhist ministry is associated with sacralized transactions that distinguish them from arm's-length market relations. One monk described Buddhism's transactions as motivated by the principle of *qing* (情), which translates into long-standing affectionate feelings and 'relational invitation'. This act of qing enables devotees to connect home to religious spaces by "bring[ing] the holy objects back to their homes":

> "There is a Buddhist reason for saying 'adopt' or 'sponsor', rather than buying a holy object. These are holy objects, they are not for sale. So what you do from a mental perspective is that you should say, 'I make a donation to the center, and I give you the holy object' " (interview, 12 July 2007).

Hence very few devotees we interviewed engage in online purchases because relational invitation involves items that should be physically "blessed by the Venerables" in real space (interviews, 3 April 2008; 4 December 2009). Virtuality is associated with a space that is desensitized from sacral and human sensibilities, whereas Buddhist exchange values physical participation and sociality. Adoption is regarded as a participatory act, and is compatible with other aspects of Buddhist social rituals such as chanting. In turn, these acts help to strengthen community relations, analogous to associational encounters in community organizations such as schools—as one priest suggested:

> "You can see the adoption is like not just to give money, but to change it into a participatory process. It's like you just put money into a school versus going to a funfair. You can meet the people there and suddenly it's a whole new experience" (interview, 15 July 2007).

Mediated exchanges in the religious hybrid space reinforce the transportability of media. This explains why a number of our interviewees—both clergy and laity—do not support a positive relationship between religious books or music and intellectual property rights. In particular, they regard the Internet with its scope for postrelational exchanges to be an

efficient tool for evangelism through mass participation. Successful evangelism relies on an economy of abundance that allocates communication in time and space. Hence Buddhist organizations are more likely to perceive digitalization and its commodification as a spiritual investment, even equating piracy with an increase in the value of their products because it reflects the popularity of the media content.

> "At the so-called out-of-the-world spiritual level, it is a sin to steal, to use someone's material, if you don't have explicit permission. That is consistent with the spirit of intellectual property. But intellectual property is engaging this at a worldly level and is using law, using traps that if you do this, I will sue you. But morally, I would never agree … . Because we are in the business of religion, we have to set a good example. Therefore, we, I, purposely put it [online CDs] there [without charging]" (interview, 12 July 2007).

In this context, protection of intellectual property is antithetical to the information economy and is more compatible with an economy of abundance. Here, media provides the means to extend ministry, and mediatized ministry is expected to charge next to nothing to encourage further multiplication. Unlike the Fordist model, which is oriented towards the protection of intellectual property for innovation, such protection is seen to act as a barrier to innovations. Clergy depend on amateur authors, editors, composers, and produsers online to extend and multiply digital performances that further evangelical goals. In this space of postrelational transactions, the exchange of communication is facilitated when regulatory safeguards associated with proprietary production are absent. This would seem to support Benkler's (2006) contention that the networked information society brought about by new and digital media will mean that the relevance of institutional principles designed to support the market based on intellectual property rights may no longer be relevant in an information economy. Rather, a large part of the creativity that drives consumers to extend production and distribution lies in the Internet's lack of innovation safeguards.

In sum, our discussion suggests that religious hybrid space is constituted from the staging of media where art, popular culture, and everyday lifestyle are represented in a medial process that is articulated through performance. In this sense, the hybrid space is also a multimodal space of text, image, sound, and action. Our study has highlighted the imbrication of digital media relations in hybrid space, transforming representations of temporal and spatial relationships into suitable forms for further commodification.

Conclusion

Guthrie (1980) has argued that religion is anthropomorphistic in that humans conceive of the divine in terms of their cognitive categories. This includes projecting social relationships between believers and clergy, and between believers and the superhuman. In this sense, the religious economy may be seen as part of mega religious organizations' application of a human model of digitally constituted transactional space to the sacred space. This implies that the divine may be represented, narrated, and medially projected. Such sensorial experiences are heightened in large cities like Singapore, where economic vitality is significantly encountered through media, in advertisements, billboards, art, literature, architecture, and consumption sites such as shopping malls and cafes. While sensorium modulation has historically been part of the sacred space, hybridization highlights the intersection of digitalization and the marketplace, bringing about new spatiotemporal relationships that amplify such modulations.

The emergence of mega churches and temples is coterminous with the development of a certain economic cosmopolitanism that creates desires for global goods that are rooted in local identity (Chua, 2003). Shopping, eating, and entertainment are all regarded as important symbolic activities that are regularly performed as part of the contemporary urban experience. Hence, consumption is central to the cultural economy—including the religious cultural economy (Amin and Thrift, 2004; Jackson, 2004). Under the discursively

constructed social domain of the religious performance landscape, discourse and exchange assume a commodity form in the marketplace. Commoditization is hastened by a digital landscape that is profoundly mediatized. The confluence of media and religious performance has meant that live sacral acts need no longer be physically enclosed and contained. Integration of media in religious hybrid spaces carries two advantages. First it helps build postrelational exchanges in real and virtual spaces. Second, within networked spaces, communication exchanges become the main object of exchange. The religious marketplace is thus constituted from the mediation of digital and social interactions, and value is created in the context of expansive or new forms of media representations. As such, it thrives when exchanges beget more information that is free of proprietary appropriations.

Christian holy mavericks design their worship events to communicate a social experience that combines the virtual and real. Hypermediality in these spaces implies that Protestant worshippers no longer rely solely on the one-to-many narration of the priest, but also on some level of many-to-many engagement through the act of visualization, mediated storytelling, and produsage of media content and information transmission. On the other hand, Buddhist clergy design their hybrid spaces to communicate the aesthetic and ascetic that in turn helps elevate their cultural and civic status. In both instances, delivery of the divine is brought closer to the human in visible material ways by combining goals of sociality and economic enjoyment with spiritual ends.

In sum, communication is commodified, exchanged, and encouraged to multiply in the information economy. When transported across religious transactional spaces, the sacred experience transforms from a place of solitude to one of dialogue, where shopping, entertainment, and art become an integral part of the religious culture. Furthermore, by establishing a relationship between sacred space, and the economic and functional needs of devotees, religious organizations mark their identity in ways that parallel Singapore's consumer city image. Singapore's mega religious organizations stand in close relation to the city that often appears as "one continuous shopping center" (Chua, 2003, page 12). The religious marketplace in the information economy therefore needs to be understood in the context of a social organization in which information and sensorial encounters are principal constituents, and in which points of interactions are embedded in a digital and mediatized processes that are convertible to material forms for exchange.

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