Editors’ introduction

Introduction: The sacred and the urban in Asia

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Abstract
The relationship between the sacred and the urban remains understudied. This special issue studies this relationship by focusing on urban religious aspirations in diverse globalizing Asian cities. The approach builds on the sacred geographies and sociology of secularization literatures. It is argued that religious practitioners respond to urbanization by inventing new conceptions of the urban to make sense of secularizing spaces. In turn, the secularizing spaces free up religious practitioners from the constraints of their traditions to innovate new practices to sacralize the urban spaces, in which the new conceptions of the urban play a crucial role. The direction and content of the innovations are driven by the aspirations of the religious practitioners with regard to the city and this provokes sacred politics challenging the state and capitalist market and aspirational contests to claim and control urban spaces vis-a-vis religious competitors, in which practitioners make use of state-market processes to do so.

Keywords
Asia, aspirations, ethnography, religion, urban sociology

The sacred and the urban in Asia
The city has long been symbolically and materially associated with many religions, but the relationship between the sacred and the urban remains understudied in sociology and anthropology. Since the definitive survey of world religions and their shaping

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of urban and economic histories in Max Weber’s sociology of religion, sociologists have taken the city as a site of secularization. Thanks to the theologian Harvey Cox’s bestseller *The Secular City* in 1965 the urban and the secular became almost synonymous. Even for José Casanova, whose work has put the public role of religion in modern cities firmly on the agenda in the sociology of religion (Casanova, 1994), secularity, if not secularization, in the sense of differentiated institutional spheres freed from religious beliefs and practices, remains the central point of departure for scholarship (Casanova, 2006).

Anthropologists have been more circumspect, especially those who had turned their ethnographic gaze back on the modern societies and cities they eschewed in their search for nativity in non-Western societies. Those anthropologists who were interested in the sacred in the city were focused on developing a cultural anthropology of civilization in which urban centres with their major shrines was of focal interest (Singer, 1972; Tambiah, 1973). The modernity of cities and their worldwide economic and cultural networks as well as the rapid urbanization of the world were neglected in favour of a more cultural-historical perspective. That made our efforts piecemeal and particularistic. Any further advance requires theoretical innovation and synthesis.

In this regard, geographers have taken the lead by looking at the relationship between the sacred and the urban through theories of space and place. The scholarship began with Lily Kong’s (1993) exploration into the state’s political influence on religious buildings and the symbolisms of religious space in the city-state of Singapore. Subsequent programmatic statements by Kong (2001) and Hervieu-Léger (2002) on mapping new geographies of religion have come to define a critical approach to studying the politics and culture of sacred spatiality in modernity.

The body of work by geographers on this subject is starting to shape a nascent subfield, as marked by a recent collection on *Religion and Place* (Hopkins et al., 2013). We believe sociologists and anthropologists of religion and city would do well to seriously engage the new geographies of religion. ‘All religious belief implicates space; all religious practice makes geography’, as the introduction to a virtual theme issue on ‘Sacred Space Unbound’ published online on the open site of the influential journal *Environmental Planning D: Society and Space* proclaimed (Dora, 2015).

But the urban is more than its spatiality and the city exceeds the places that give it heft and character. This special issue brings together six anthropologists and sociologists who have been working in the nexus of urban studies and the study of contemporary religion in Asia. Three of the special issue authors – Bosco, Goh and Hoon – have chapters published in Van der Veer’s *Handbook of Religion and the Asian City* (2015). This special issue is an extension of the pioneering work on the relationship between the sacred and the urban collected in the book, but with a particular focus on social conflict and cultural contestation with political economic grounding. Together with the *Handbook*, we envision this special issue will help shape the nascent field of the study of religion and the city. The focus on Asian cities in this special issue not only adds further balance to the international scholarship and its universalizing pronouncements based primarily on cities in North America and Western Europe, but also explores the contours of a shared modernity, in which Asian cities show up new and interesting dimensions because of the massive scale and spread of urbanization in Asia.
Urban religious aspirations

The authors in this special issue tackle Asian cities with different developmental trajectories and religious histories, as well as religious identities as diverse as Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam and Thai and Chinese popular religions that are practised in multi-religious contexts. We are united by our ethnographic approach to the study of religious practices in the city, but also conceptually by our focus on what may be termed as urban religious aspirations. There are three parts to this conceptual focus – the urban, the religious and aspirations. Each part corresponds to an argument that we are collectively making, and the three arguments articulated together make up our modest contribution to the sociological theory of the sacred and the urban. We discuss two of the arguments in this section.

Our engagement with sacred geographies seeks to emphasize the urban as more than a spatial category, but as a meaningful concept that religious practitioners are consciously and reflexively engaging with, as they transform and create their religious practices. The religious practitioners are consciously seeking to act as urban actors that take into account the diverse meanings of being urban citizens. This takes place in the context of rapid urbanization in Asian cities in just over a generation from the industrialization in the postwar period to the globalization of economies in the contemporary era. The state and the capitalist market have been defining the meanings of being urban through state-led urban planning, privatization of space and the making of consumer cities. Our studies show that religious practitioners are actively responding to the urbanizing processes by adapting their religious practices to the secular spaces of the globalizing city, as well as by inventing new conceptions of the urban to make sense of the constantly changing spaces. The new conceptions of the urban might take the form of new theologies for the great traditions or new senses of the sacred for folk practitioners. For Goh, evangelical Christians in Hong Kong and Singapore, who were awakened to post-colonial crises experienced by the city-states, drew on their theological traditions to invent new methods and theologies of urban practices. For Sinha, she found Hindu and Taoist folk religious practitioners continuously acting to sacralize the secular corners and pathways of the city in the face of pervasive state-led urban renewal in Singapore.

The conceptions of the urban also take the form of new religious moralities that might be expressed in unexpected political or economic ways. This is seen in the civic-religious moralities of urban political protests mapped by Bosco in Hong Kong and Kamaludeen in Malaysia and Singapore, and also in the consumption moralities of religious self-fashioning discussed by Kim in Seoul and Hoon in Indonesia.

The collection of cities here – Hong Kong, Jakarta, Kuala Lumpur, Seoul, Singapore – is an attempt to capture the historical moment in which Asian cities are rapidly modernizing, globalizing and secularizing. Though these are not among the ancient sacred cities of Asia, but are preeminent commercial capital cities, religion has traditionally been a key feature in the urban landscape and was strongly intertwined with the migrant societies of these cities. Over the past decades, the urban societies in these cities have been experiencing the social pluralization that, Peter Berger (1967) influentially argued, has shattered the normative order of the sacred cosmos into differentiated spheres of life. Religion is separated out as a private institution, and in these cities, it is regulated by the state in terms of
urban planning allocations of space for places of worship and the use of public space for processions and religious worship, as well as the relationship of religion to matters of citizenship belonging to the nation-state. At the same time, the differentiated economic sphere has become highly developed by capitalism and its rationalizing logic of calculating effective means to the ends of wealth creation, as well as the consumption culture of contemporary globalization, has increasingly impinged on religious beliefs and practices.

However, as Berger (1999) later observes, secularized Western European societies are an exception in a world where modernization has brought on the resurgence of religion instead. The Asian cities we study here have witnessed both the modernizing pluralization and the resurgence of religion in the public sphere. Secularization has proceeded with rapid urbanization and the differentiation of politics, the economy, society and religion has led to the making of public versus private spaces with specific functions that are regulated by the state and the market. Secularization has not brought atheism to displace religion, but, as Taylor (2007) argues, it has made religion an option and produced new thoughts and practices to destabilize the field of religion, even as religion is increasingly privatized. Indeed, as we show here in our case studies, the secularization of the city and urban spaces has freed up religious practitioners from the constraints of their religious traditions and institutions and challenged them to innovate new practices to desecularize and sacralize urban spaces dominated by the state and the capitalist market.

Thus, Bosco highlights the creativity of young Hong Kongers in carving out new streetscapes through the religious occupation of secular civic spaces. Similarly, Sinha describes the persistence of Hindu and Taoist Singaporeans in infusing new secular spaces with their own vocabularies of sacred architecture. Kamaludeen tracks the innovations of popular Islam, as the practitioners project their engagement with global realities onto secular commodity exchanges and turn them into vehicles for religious expressions as political boycotts.

In fact, we argue new religious conceptions of the urban come into play here, as the religious actors seek to produce new urban worlds and reshape urban everyday lives (Lefebvre, 1991 [1974]) that do not differentiate between the urban and the sacred. In the process the religious practitioners reach out beyond their immediate differentiated circles to attract new converts and transform conventional ethnic, religious and class identities. Goh’s and Hoon’s Christian minorities have been hybridizing global evangelical and Pentecostal resources with local Christian traditions to not only sacralize otherwise secular urban locales, but also to rework notions of Chineseness and being Hong Konger, Indonesian and Singaporean, as well as ideas of being cosmopolitan and multicultural in cities with large non-Christian majorities. Kim’s ‘city Buddhists’ are setting up contemporary oases of healing and meditation across Seoul, attracting young adherents seeking to cope with the stressful competitiveness of neoliberal capitalism and reviving previously dominant Buddhism which has lost much ground to Christian conversions in the previous decades.

**Sacred politics, aspirational contests in the city**

As conceptualized by Arjun Appadurai (2004), aspirations are forward-looking hopes of achievement grounded in cultural imaginations and ideas. For Appadurai, the ‘capacity
to aspire’ inspires collective agency to engage and overcome urban issues such as poverty and discrimination, as he argued for the case of advocacy groups working with communities in the slums of Mumbai. Focusing on aspirations allows us to see how the urban and the religious drive each other forward through the agency of the religious practitioners – where urban aspirations drive religious innovations and religious aspirations inspire urban creativity. This can be seen when religious practitioners rework rich Asian traditions in their dreams, hopes and desires, as they sought to advance their own socio-economic position in rapidly developing cities. The most vivid example is the Prosperity Gospels of some Asian Pentecostal megachurches, which have attracted many upwardly mobile middle-class converts in cities such as Seoul and Singapore.

But moving away from Appadurai’s developmentalist slant, we also see aspirations as providing for the drive for political contestations, couched in religious voices and symbolisms, over the urbaniity of Asian cities. This sometimes engenders conflict, but more often than not, it spurs religious competition. Our collective third argument is this, in relation to the first two arguments. Religious practitioners are actively responding to urbanizing processes by inventing new conceptions of the urban to make sense of the secularizing spaces. In turn, the secularizing spaces free up religious practitioners from the constraints of their traditions to innovate new practices to sacralize the urban spaces, in which the new conceptions of the urban play a crucial role. The direction and content of the innovations are driven by the aspirations of the religious practitioners with regard to the city and this would provoke two types of urban contestations. The first we call sacred politics, which are overt political conflicts that challenge the domination of the state and the capitalist market over secular urban spaces. The second we call aspirational contests, and are actions taken by religious practitioners to sacralize, claim and control urban spaces vis-a-vis religious competitors, in which practitioners appropriate or make use of state-market processes to do so.

The first two articles in this issue analyse sacred politics in the form of urban protests and the role popular religion as well as state power plays in the protests. Joseph Bosco looks at the uses of religious processions, shrines and symbolisms in the Occupy Central street protests, which express aspirations of freedom and mark Hong Kong spaces as sacred vis-a-vis the profane and secular power of the Chinese state. Kamaludeen Mohamed Nasir analyses consumer boycotts by Muslims as moral protests resulting from the negotiation of popular Islam, global capitalism and the regulatory state in Kuala Lumpur and Singapore. These moral protests reflect the divergent aspirations of the urban Muslim middle class sharing similar histories but living in very different socio-political circumstances that have developed since Singapore separated from Malaysia in 1965.

Conversely, Chang-Yau Hoon discusses young, middle-class Christians in Indonesian cities, especially Jakarta, and their use of prayer mega-assemblies to claim their own space in the public sphere and express their aspirations for a cosmopolitan Indonesia in the context of rampant Islamization. Daniel Goh also discusses the rise of middle-class Christianity among the ethnic Chinese in Hong Kong and Singapore and distinguishes between different types of engagement with rapid urbanization the Christians undertook to realize their aspirations vis-a-vis the postcolonial transition and economic transformation. Hyun Mee Kim follows up with an ethnographic analysis of young Koreans turning
to a new form of urban Buddhism in Seoul, which appropriates the consumption and competitive logic of neoliberal capitalism while seeking authenticity in aspirational self-realization. While sacred politics take on a less overt form in these three studies, they exist in the background as ethnoreligious majoritarian–minoritarian or secular-religious state–church conflicts. These conflicts spur the aspirational contestations over the city and motivate the Christians and Buddhists to produce their own urban spaces to safeguard and advance their own practices of the sacred.

The last article turns to sacred politics and aspirational contests of a more symbolic character that is no less embedded in the material culture of cities. Vineeta Sinha caps the special issue with an extended reflection on popular Hindu and, secondarily, Taoist use of ritual objects, religious commodities and holy symbols to sanctify and turn secular spaces in Singapore into transient sacred spaces that would face urban renewal and removal by the developmental state. The objects, commodities and symbols derive from the religious commerce across national boundaries and between Singapore and other cities in the region. The implication is that the transient character of magical items and of sacralized spaces persists against the secular in their circulation and becomes a permanent feature of the city.

Five of the six of the papers were presented at a workshop on ‘The Sacred and the Urban: Confluences and Conflicts of Aspirations’ convened by Daniel Goh and jointly organized by the Aspirations, Urban Governance and the Remaking of Asian Cities research project and the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences Religion Research Cluster, which took place at the National University of Singapore on 15 December 2014. They benefited from intense discussion with faculty and visiting professors at the university, as well as comments from discussant Peter van der Veer, visiting from the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity. The sixth paper, Hyun Mee Kim’s, was discussed at an international workshop on urban aspirations and futures at Harvard University attended by Van der Veer and Goh.

These scholars are part of a network of researchers who have been studying religious phenomena using the key of ‘urban aspirations’ for nearly half a decade now. This special issue is an event that arose from the international circulation of ideas about the possibilities of the sacred and the urban across cities in Asian cities. It is an aspirational contest in itself, over the conventional terms of space, time and the secular that define the study of sacred geographies and the sociology of religion.

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Résumé

La relation entre le sacré et l’urbain reste aujourd’hui peu étudiée. Ce numéro spécial, consacré à cette relation, s’intéresse plus particulièrement aux aspirations religieuses urbaines dans plusieurs villes globalisées d’Asie, en s’appuyant sur la littérature existante en matière de géographies sacrées et de sociologie de la sécularisation. Nous soutenons que les pratiquants, pour donner un sens à des espaces sécularisés, s’adaptent à l’urbanisation en inventant de nouvelles conceptions de l’urbain. Parallèlement, les espaces sécularisés libèrent les pratiquants des contraintes liées aux traditions en leur permettant d’innover et de créer de nouvelles pratiques de sacralisation des espaces urbains, dans lesquelles les nouvelles conceptions de l’urbain jouent un rôle essentiel.
La direction que prennent ces innovations, tout comme leur contenu, sont déterminés par les aspirations des pratiquants en relation avec la ville, à l’origine d’une politique du sacré qui conteste l’État et le marché capitaliste et de luttes pour réclamer et contrôler les espaces urbains face aux concurrents religieux, où les pratiquants emploient les mêmes mécanismes que l’État et le marché pour y parvenir.

**Mots-clés**
Asie, aspirations, ethnographie, religion, sociologie urbaine

**Resumen**
La relación entre lo sagrado y lo urbano sigue estando poco estudiada. Este monográfico estudia esta relación, centrándose en las aspiraciones religiosas urbanas en diversas ciudades globalizadas de Asia. Nuestro enfoque se basa en la literatura de las geografías sagradas y la sociología de la secularización. Se argumenta que los fieles religiosos responden a la urbanización inventando nuevas concepciones de lo urbano para dar sentido a los espacios secularizados. A su vez, los espacios secularizados liberan a los fieles religiosos de las limitaciones de sus tradiciones para innovar nuevas prácticas de sacralización de los espacios urbanos, en los que las nuevas concepciones de lo urbano juegan un papel crucial. La dirección y el contenido de las innovaciones son impulsadas por las aspiraciones de los fieles religiosos con respecto a la ciudad y esto produce una política de lo sagrado que desafía al estado y al mercado capitalista y una competición de aspiraciones para reclamar y controlar los espacios urbanos frente a los competidores religiosos, en la que los fieles hacen uso de los mecanismos del estado y el mercado.

**Palabras clave**
Asia, aspiraciones, etnografía, religión, sociología urbana