

Asian Christian Networks

Transnational Structures and Geopolitical Mappings

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Abstract

While religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam are still numerically dominant, often overwhelmingly so, in many of the countries of Asia, Evangelical Christianity has been making significant advances in the latter part of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century, particularly in a number of “hubs” such as South Korea, Singapore, Hong Kong, Malaysia, and the Philippines. These hubs mark the rise of a highly organized, globally networked, and socially transformative vision of Asian Christian identities that, unlike the missionary movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, are largely driven by Asian organizations and agencies.

Introduction

[1] This essay might be described as an attempt at a geopolitical analysis of evangelical Christianity in contemporary Asia, relying on a notion of geopolitics that is also very much a cultural mapping – a mapping of cultural contacts, contestations and transformations, not merely in the contexts of received and established political blocks (“Free West,” “developed countries,” “East Asia,” “Muslim world,” “Anglophone West,” “ASEAN,” and other such conceptions), but refined and revised by particular flows of influence and negotiation that may well complicate and even invalidate those blocks. It is a cultural and critical notion of geopolitics which draws on the work of humanistic geographers like Parker and Ó Tuathail. The kinds of affective links fostered by Evangelical Christianity in Asia – not merely the “hard” details of conversion rates, expenditures and monetary flows, numbers and sizes of churches, but also and perhaps more importantly the human and cultural sympathies, connections, and bonds that are formed in such processes – would be an interesting and significant part of the cultural data of a critical geopolitical re-evaluation of Asia in the twenty-first century. What is interesting, in particular, is the ways in and extents to which very recent evangelical developments in certain Asian nations suggest the development of an Asian Christian network, and what implications this might have for an older Christian geopolitics dominated by “sender” countries in the (especially Anglophone) West – the United States in particular, but also Britain, Australia, and other countries. For that matter, it is interesting to see how the secular geopolitical order which prevailed through most of the twentieth century, dominated by the U.S. and its erstwhile allies, looks to be affected by this form of Asian structural connectivity.

Evangelical Geopolitics and Cultural Baggage

[2] The older Evangelical geopolitics is not always easy to define, nor unanimously agreed-upon by scholars, but its basic characteristics recur with a certain predictability. Copley sums up the main scholarship attesting to the “distasteful arrogance and intolerance” attached to many missionary endeavors in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in countries with as disparate indigenous cultures as Paraguay, Venezuela, the South Pacific islands, India, and elsewhere (3-10). According to such scholarship, the consequences of such missionary endeavors include the

active or passive encouragement of the recruitment of Indians into modern industrial schemes, the disruption of the prevailing social equilibrium and exacerbation of religious, class, and caste conflicts, the radical transformation of traditional ways of life, and other related problems. Many studies agree that the question of the direct political role of missionary endeavors is often a problematic one: Copley's study of missionary activities in colonial India in the latter part of the nineteenth century acknowledges the fact that "tensions of a kind" persisted between the missionaries and the colonial government, so that the former's "romantic impulse to independence" prevented them from simply being an adjunct of the colonial power-machinery (5).

[3] If the "bearers of a spark from the sacred fire" were historically often inextricably bound with those "bearing the sword," in Conrad's memorable phrasing (29), missionary endeavors also changed with time and with changing historical conditions: Stanley observes that, whatever abuses of power might have occurred in some missionary contexts in earlier phases, in the 1960s the missions cultures and institutions in the main Western nations began their own process of self-examination and change, repudiating any earlier "racially superior attitudes" in search of a "sympathetic Christian response" to local conditions and cultures (18-19). It is not immediately clear if, in practical terms, Western missionary organizations were able completely to dissociate themselves from foreign power and the imperative of cultural transformation. Digan is inclined to think that the "decolonization of Asian Christianity" was not ever more than a putative gesture:

In the era of adaptation, the churches in Asia never in fact managed to be culturally much more than replicas of the parent churches. Without a change in that pattern, the intercontinental connection in Christianity could only serve to reinforce the North-South dependency relationship, at a time when everyone is at least aware of the need to counteract it. That need is acknowledged in the present-day acceptance on both sides of the more radical ecclesial goal of indigenization. Once again, however, it is one thing to agree that it should be Christian policy to counteract the dependency of the South on the North, but it is another thing to ensure that Christian practice does not in fact still reinforce it (28).

[4] Bhabha's analysis of cultural contact early in the history of British India insists on "the triumph of the colonialist moment in early English Evangelism and modern English literature" in the very culture of print and the logocentric superiority nurtured by European missionaries (105). Nevertheless, as Bhabha goes on to observe, any vaunted cultural superiority on the part of European Evangelism is also simultaneously undercut by "the subversive character of the native questions" it encountered, creating in the process something of a hybrid and syncretic cultural form (117). Specific case studies of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Christian encounters in Asian locales (for example, by Hudson, Bays) do suggest that the creation of syncretic cultural forms in the "synthesis" of local beliefs and Christian credos into an "eclectic" mix that by no means simply repudiated Asian beliefs and cultural practices, took place with some regularity.

[5] The negotiation of truly (rather than nominally) syncretic cultures, however often this takes place (and the existing local case studies do not indicate the relative extent of such incidences), does not exonerate Western evangelical endeavors from various kinds of cultural encroachments even up to the present day, nor disprove the occurrence of many countering episodes of cultural clashes and tensions. Indeed, cases of cultural-religious syncretism arguably indicate precisely the gap or distance between Western Evangelism and many Asian cultures, so that a syncretic

middle-ground (where this is even possible at all) in which as much is lost as it is retained by both cultural positions, is perforce perceived as the best option. In many scholarly accounts, hybrid and syncretic Christian cultures in Asia continue to be tense and fragile constructs, as much a nexus of “subversive” transformations and liberal translations of the originals, as they are a middle-ground of two opposing sides.

[6] Certainly the low percentage of adherents to Christianity in most Asian countries (with the conspicuous exception of the Philippines and South Korea), when compared to religions like Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, and so-called “traditional” religious forms and rituals, seems to confirm the view that Asian countries have posed something of a hostile ground to Western Evangelism from the nineteenth century to the present, fueled in part by the perception that Christianity inevitably brings with it a cultural baggage that is essentially inimical to Asian cultures and practices. The global religion internet database, Adherents.com, cites several sources which put the estimate of Christians in Asia between 283 million and 308 million, or between 7.9 and 8.9 percent of the total population. Hinduism, in contrast, is estimated as having from 728 to 786 million adherents in Asia, around 22.5 percent of the total population. Islam has between 778 and 836 million adherents, or between 22 to 26 percent of the population. The estimates for Buddhism vary quite widely, from 348 to 760 million, but even at a conservative estimate, its adherents clearly outnumber those of Christianity. Only Confucianism, Taoism, and Sikhism among the major belief-systems in Asia have lower figures of adherents than Christianity (although Confucianism poses the usual problem of the distinction between a “faith” and a “philosophy,” and the corresponding problem of accounting for the extent of its influence if it is reckoned as an inclusionary and influential set of tenets rather than an exclusionary religious affiliation).

[7] The statistical story in countries like India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and others is particularly daunting: only between 2 and 3 percent of the population of India is Christian, about the same proportion of the population in Pakistan, and only about 0.6 of the population in Bangladesh (Adherents.com). Other countries with significantly larger Christian populations nevertheless can hardly be said to have been nurturing grounds for Christianity over the years: one striking example is Sri Lanka, whose population is now about 7.5 percent Christian, almost exactly the proportion that was recorded by early Methodist missionaries near the beginning of the nineteenth century, and indeed lower than the figure of 21 percent reported by the Dutch near the beginning of the eighteenth century (Adherents.com; Hardy: 6).

Christian Hubs and Networks in Asia

[8] In other Asian countries Christianity has established a significantly stronger and wider hold: the most significant of these countries are the Philippines, which is 91.5 percent Christian, and South Korea, of whose population at least 32 percent is Christian, and some estimates go as high as 49 percent (CIA World Factbook, cited in Adherents.com). Yet these overall figures are not always useful in ascertaining geopolitical and transnational trajectories: despite its unique status as the only predominantly Christian country in Asia, the Philippines have a disproportionately small geopolitical impact as a Christian nation. In terms of internal significance, the annual growth rate among its adherents is estimated at 2.1 percent, compared to 3 percent for the Muslims, and an overall population growth rate of about 2.13 percent (Johnstone and Mandryk: 520-21). The Philippines has more than 3000 missionaries, but less than a third are missionaries to other countries, while most operate within the nation itself. Moreover, the Philippines continues to be a significant receiver of foreign missionaries, with some 2700 foreign

missionaries based in the Philippines (Johnstone and Mandryk: 749). The nation's many domestic problems – crime, poverty and the wide gap between rich and poor, natural disasters such as hurricanes and floods, political instability, and the ongoing struggle with Muslim insurgents – hinder its ability to provide evangelical outreach to other Asian nations in terms of finances, medical and educational aid, manpower, and other traditional evangelical means. The Philippines is also predominantly a Catholic country (67 percent of the Christian population). Thus, despite several centuries of struggling for greater ecclesial autonomy, the overwhelming majority of Christians in the country still recognizes and belongs to an hierarchical global church system whose center is in the Vatican. In contrast, most Protestant groups have a relatively decentralized (or multi-centered) structure, and have the tendency to proliferate new ecclesial and missionary initiatives with a considerable amount of autonomy. Indeed, among Philippine Christian denominations, Johnstone and Mandryk (521) suggest that the highest annual growth rates belong to the independent churches (9.1 percent) and Protestants (5.6 percent), while Catholics are essentially declining (growing at only 0.4 percent, slower than the overall population growth rate of 2.13 percent).

[9] A number of factors contribute to the Philippines being a significant hub of Christianity in Asia, quite apart from its predominantly Christian population. In particular, its close (if sometimes problematic) ties with the U.S., both historically and at present, facilitate the transmission (among other things) of Christian organizational ties and influences. The Filipinos' general fluency in English (among the best in Asia), together with the fact that many middle-class Filipinos have long turned to the U.S. for their higher education and as a cultural orientation-point, has also facilitated a long-standing channel of religious influence and networking, particular among campus ministries and Catholic organizations. Filipino Christians playing a leading role in the network of Asian Catholic communities with broader global and ecumenical (Catholic-Protestant) links through the Ang Ligaya ng Panginoon (LNP) Community in metro Manila, a transparochial covenant community of some 1900 members with charismatic and evangelical leanings. A founding member of the world-wide Catholic network "Christ the King Association," and of the international association of ecumenical communities "The Sword of the Spirit," LNP is a leading partner in missions and social work in the Philippines and in other Asian countries, and plays a significant part in building up, supporting, and working with other communities in Bombay (the "Jesus, Light of the World" community), Pune ("Pune Community"), Vasai ("Community of the Good Shepherd"), Singapore ("Servants of the Lord"), Jakarta ("Genesis Community"), and elsewhere. The emphasis on visits (whether casual, by ordinary members, or by leaders for purposes of training and administration), hospitality and warmth of fellowship, support and contact through email and other forms of communication, makes such an organization a paradigm for Asian Christian connectivity and cultural influence.

[10] In the case of South Korea, its Christians (primarily Protestants) form a smaller percentage of the total population than in the Philippines, but their internal and external impact is much greater. Christianity is now the largest faith group in South Korea, overtaking Buddhism, which represents 24 to 27 percent of the population (Adherents.com; Johnstone and Mandryk: 387). Christianity is also the fastest-growing of the large faith communities in South Korea, exceeded only by the Baha'i faith and Islam, both of which represent less than a tenth of a percent of the total population (Johnstone and Mandryk: 387). South Korea not only has one of the largest body of missionaries – estimated at more than 8100 missionaries in 2000, a figure which some sources judge to be a conservative estimate (Moon; Johnstone and Mandryk: 387) – but perhaps more significantly, the missionaries are all operating in other countries (an estimated 162 countries),

making South Korea the second-largest missionary sending country after the U.S., in the process overtaking the U.K. with its long missionary tradition (Moon; Johnstone and Mandryk: 6).

[11] South Korean Christians have long had a tradition of outward-orientation. Coupled with the nation's wealth (the World Bank gives the per capita income of \$9,400 in 2001, compared to less than a \$1000 for many countries in Asia), this outward-orientation makes South Korea both practically and symbolically the center of an Asian Christian geopolitics of the twentieth century. Although Christianity was only introduced to Korea in 1884, already by the early twentieth century there were Korean foreign missions to Manchuria and to Koreans in the diaspora as well as to the local inhabitants of their host nations. A relatively high degree of cultural (including ethnic and linguistic) homogeneity, especially when compared to many other Asian countries, helps ensure a close networking of Koreans in the diaspora and at home, and this extends to and benefits Christian networks as well. An example of the cohesive nature of Korean Christian and Diasporic networking is seen in the Korean-American Ministry Resources (KAMR) Webpage, started in 1995 as a means of connecting Korean-American Christians and Churches for more effective ministry. The KAMR webpage lists several hundred Korean-American churches by state, with links to their webpages, and identifying whether the church is a Korean-speaking or English-speaking ministry. A short section also has a list of churches with Korean congregations in other countries – a rather vestigial list at present with only 14 churches, but indicative of the KAMR's desired global reach for its Korean Christian clientele. The KAMR is thus representative of Korean Christians' networking tendencies, which have a global reach at least in terms of vision, and their desire to collaborate on outreach to other countries and communities. Thus as part of their celebration of the centennial of the arrival of the first Korean Christians in the U.S. (in 1903), the Korean-American United Methodists have pledged money to build a mission center in Ulan Bator, Mongolia (General Board of Global Ministries).

[12] South Korea, and in particular Seoul, remains the spiritual center of this Korean Christian network. In the early part of the twentieth century, Pyongyang (before it came under communist hands) was often known as the "Jerusalem of Asia" for its relatively high concentration of churches and Christians and for its spiritual leadership in church growth and revival movements (Chae). Seoul, the economic center of the Korean diaspora, is now poised to assume the position of spiritual capital, not just of Korean Christian work, but also of a global Christianity with a particular emphasis on Asia. Seoul is not only the headquarters of the two largest mainline denominations in Korea, the Presbyterians and the Methodists (and thus a vital part of the respective global denominational links and partnerships of those two large denominations), but is also home to some of the world's largest churches, including what is probably the largest church in the world, David Yong Gi Cho's Yoida Full Gospel Assembly, which reportedly has more than 850,000 members. While some church observers have pointed to the potential problems facing megachurches (see Bong: 67-68), such churches are each the headquarters of a global Christian enterprise, each constantly aiming to grow its sphere of influence larger and into more nations. This is true not only of their activities like missions and church planting, but also of their administrative and fundraising presences. For example, Yoida Full Gospel Assembly hosts an International Home Cell Fellowship that is really an electronic extension of its own home cell ministry held in the brick-and-mortar site of the church, making its counseling, advice and teaching available to "any other people who are interested in Biblically-based counseling." Yoida also has a 1-900 telephone number to call "if you are in the U.S. and want to participate in Dr Cho's ministry." Although the church's main webpage (<http://www.fgtv.or.kr/>) is in Korean, navigation and content are available in one's choice of English, Japanese, Chinese, French,

Spanish, Russian, or German. All this is both a practical exercise in creating global links, as well as an effective reminder of how much of an international phenomenon and symbol Yoida Full Gospel Assembly (like other megachurches) has become, and how it is able to excite interest and support not only from the growing churches in Asia, but also from people living in Europe, North America, and elsewhere.

[13] Older mainline denominations are also driving the Korean Christian phenomenon. The Methodist Church in Korea, the second-largest protestant denomination with more than 1,400,000 members, has taken a leading position (Korean Methodist Church: 54). It is the fourth-largest of the busy and far-flung Korean missionary-sending organizations, and is actively conducting missions, social and medical work, and church planting in countries like Thailand, Cambodia, Bangladesh, Japan, India, the Philippines, and China. The Korean Methodist Church has played a major role in the growth of Methodism in Bangladesh, which has been nothing short of phenomenal in a country which is so staunchly Muslim, and into which Methodism was only very recently introduced (in 1984). The Korean Methodist Church has also been a catalyst of the inaugural Asian Methodist Convention, held in Seoul June 14-18, 2002. At the end of the convention, a draft constitution for a new Asian Methodist Council was presented. It is the desire of the Korean Methodists that this Council will facilitate the work of individual country churches in different parts of Asia, as well as foster a greater degree of collaborative work, in which the Koreans quite naturally, and with good cause, see themselves as playing a leading role. It was almost a formality, under the circumstances, that a Korean bishop, Bishop Chang Kwang Young, President of the Council of Bishops of the Korean Methodist Church, was elected the first Chairman of the AMC Executive Committee (Teo: 20).

[14] While South Korea and the Philippines are home to the most prominent examples of Christian international networks operating in Asia, both Singapore and Hong Kong are also worthy of mention. Both have Christian communities that are large by Asian standards: Singapore's population is almost 15 percent Christian, while Hong Kong's is 10 percent Christian. Singapore, with its mercantilist ethos evident from its founding through its independence and to its present social structure, is for many reasons qualified to assume the position of a hub for evangelical activities and cultural influence in Asia and beyond. Singapore has one of the highest per capita incomes in Asia at \$24,740. Its people are well educated, mostly competent (to varying degrees) in English, bi- or multi-lingual (again to varying degrees), and have a multi-ethnic racial composition with elements of assimilation from the major Asian cultures. Singapore has a well-developed infrastructure and promotes a high quality of life through its competition in the global economy. Beyond this socio-economic logic, the spiritual symbolism of Singapore was given a major boost in the 1970s when a number of world-famous Christian leaders (including Billy Graham and David Yong Gi Cho) began to label Singapore as the "Antioch of the East [or of Asia]" – a reference to the Apostolic church of Antioch in the Book of Acts that was a center for prophetic teaching and the rapid spread of the gospel (*Impact*). Together, socio-economic and spiritual-symbolic logics have made Singapore a prominent base for both international and homegrown missions organizations, as well as a prominent and regular stopping-point for international Christian speakers and artistes. Some of the key international evangelical organizations with their headquarters or regional offices in Singapore include the World Evangelical Fellowship, Youth for Christ, Overseas Missionary Fellowship (formerly China Inland Mission, started by James Hudson Taylor), Asia Evangelistic Fellowship, Asian Outreach International, Operation Mobilization, OC International, Serving in

Mission, Youth for Christ, and Youth with a Mission (Johnstone and Mandryk: 568, 731-42; Coram Deo; agency websites).

[15] Hong Kong, like Singapore, is the logical base for a number of international evangelical organizations, and in particular, because of its position and culture, those organizations with an emphasis on East Asia. Many of these organizations are indeed targeted at groups internal to the territory – the Hong Kong residents themselves, as well as large groups of foreign workers and immigrants from the mainland. However, Hong Kong is also a base for mission organizations with a wider Asian scope, including the homegrown Asian Outreach International, which was established in Hong Kong in 1966, and now has offices in many Asian countries including Singapore, Thailand, and Malaysia. Hong Kong is also a significant hub for Christian print and media organizations such as the Bible Society, Media Evangelism, Far East Broadcasting Company, and Trans World Radio (Johnstone and Mandryk: 184).

[16] There are other signs and sites of an Asian evangelical upsurge, including in the close ties, associations, and collaborative efforts of diasporic Chinese churches throughout Asia. The linguistic, cultural, affective, and often familial ties which still bind many of the diasporic Chinese in Asia, also work among Chinese Christians to heighten a sense of kinship and collaboration, in the service of ministry not only to ethnic Chinese but to all peoples. One of the most significant global manifestations of this diasporic Chinese Christian community is the Chinese Coordination Centre of World Evangelization (CCCOWE), which has held regular meetings since 1976, each of which typically sees between 1500 and 2000 participants representing Chinese Christian organizations in the diaspora come together to network, report on activities, and share evangelism strategies and methods. Another international organization which brings Chinese Christians together for (among other things) missions work is the World Federation of Chinese Methodist Churches, which not only fosters links and fellowship between member churches in Singapore, Malaysia, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Australia, the U.K. and in other countries in which diasporic Chinese Christians are found, but also co-ordinates the efforts of member churches in missions projects in Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, China, and elsewhere. Such global Christian networks both reinforce as well as revise notions of ethnic communities in the diaspora: while there is certainly strong networking on ethnic lines, this is not to claim a stake for the ethnic community within the host nation in which they are located, but to participate in outward-oriented and globally-networked projects. While the early work was initially targeted at the Chinese in the local community and overseas (including, obviously, mainland China which looms large in the evangelical consciousness of the diasporic Chinese Christians), in recent years the CCCOWE has explicitly declared its “cross-cultural” and “multi-ethnic” evangelical emphases.

[17] Malaysia and Indonesia are also playing crucial roles as Asian outposts of Christian networking. Despite having Islam as the dominant religion and evincing certain conditions hostile to Christian evangelical work and sometimes even to the mere profession and practice of Christianity, both countries have significant Christian populations by Asian standards: 9.2 percent in Malaysia, 16 percent in Indonesia. The Christian communities in both countries are largely ethnic Chinese, with Indians also forming a significant part of the Christian population in Malaysia. This ethnic factor is a double-edged sword, which has almost certainly exacerbated the anti-Christian violence in Indonesia in recent years (Tahalele), but which also makes Christianity in that country more visible and resource-rich due to diasporic Chinese links and the ability of Chinese Indonesians to function in international Christian organizations. Malaysia’s stable socio-

economic climate and ethos of religious freedom (except that it is prohibited to evangelize to a Muslim) has actually allowed (and in some sense compelled) its Christians to take active roles in international Christian organizations and missions work – a recent example is Kuala Lumpur’s hosting of the Sixth Chinese Congress on World Evangelization in 2001.

Collaborative Cultures and Christianity in Asia

[18] The rise in the number and scope of evangelical organizations operating (and increasingly, based) in Asia in the latter part of the twentieth century plays a part in shaping a new network of relationships and links within Asia. While older and more influential organizations originally founded in the U.S., the U.K., and Australia continue to play a key role in bringing resources, leadership, and training for evangelical purposes into Asia, they are increasingly partnering with Asian churches and organizations, and in many cases setting up offices in places like Singapore and Hong Kong to recruit and train Asian administrators and field workers. Intra-Asian Christian collaborations and networks are also increasing, from the large-scale and more formal model of the Asian Methodist Council, to the small-scale level of individual churches in Singapore and South Korea “adopting” newly established churches and church-related establishments in Thailand, Cambodia, and India.

[19] As cultural networks and flows of influence, these recent initiatives imply that there is an explicit sense of an Asian responsibility for (and also a capitalizing on the opportunities in) Asia. Bishop Chang Kwang Young of South Korea put it forthrightly at his opening address of the First Asian Methodist Convention:

The long history and rich culture, the diversity in religions and national identities of Asia has [sic] been a cause for conflict and friction with Christianity. Some missiologists claim that Christianity has only succeeded in establishing a foot hold in Asia and has yet to gain the hearts of the Asian people. . . [The Asian Methodist Council] will . . . serve as a basis for the empowering of the communities of faith in Asia as they incorporate the diverse cultures and traditions of different nations into their life and witness.

There is a clear desire and expectation that a co-operative intra-Asian mission project will avoid the problems of cultural clashes and the violation of sensitivities that are assumed to be familiar features of the older mission movements of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The experience of the Korean Methodist Church seems to be lending weight to this expectation. Its work in countries like Thailand, Cambodia, and Bangladesh, often in various forms of collaboration with other Methodist communities in Asia, is resulting not only in the rapid growth of local church communities, but also in ties of friendship, gratitude, and cumulative networking and cultural capital. One need only look at the case of Bangladesh Methodism to see clear evidence of this. The sense of affection and gratitude that the Bangladeshi Methodist community feels towards their Korean brethren is evident throughout their account of their own growth, in the fact that Korean church history is offered as an academic subject in the Bangladesh Methodist Theological Seminary, and in the fact that the son of the Bangladesh Methodist Bishop, Nibaron Das, has undergone seminary training in South Korea (Bangladesh Methodist Church: 6).

[20] The sense of an Asian responsibility for Asia (in addition to other countries in the world) is also evident in other Asian missions and church organizations. Thus the Asia Evangelistic Fellowship International explicitly declares its focus on Asia, with a strategy of mobilizing and

equipping “national evangelists and missionaries in Asian countries to reach out to their own people groups.” Similarly, the Hong Kong-born Asian Outreach International, whose motto is “winning Asians for Christ,” prides itself in its knowledge of and adaptation to the various local needs and conditions of the many groups in the Asian countries in which it operates (“ActionLove”). Like many missions organizations operating in Asian countries, it stresses the training and equipping of local leaders to continue the work in their respective countries and to their respective peoples. Such local-leadership strategies are multi-pronged: while obviously a form of cultural sensitivity or commonsense which affirms that local workers are “ready-made” to carry out the work in their own milieu, thus avoiding the potential problems of having foreigners in longer-term positions of leadership, it is also a kind of economy that frees up a limited pool of international workers to move on to other areas in the shortest possible time. The longer-term results are not only that the networking is maximized over more countries and peoples over time, but that instead of a hierarchical and linear international Christian link, the growth of Asian Christian networks is likely to be more plural, proliferating, even “rhizomic” in nature (see Deleuze and Guattari: 5-18).

[21] It is also clear that to a certain extent, Asian Christian Networks follow socio-economic flows and hubs, which partly explains why South Korea is a more dynamic agent in this respect than the Philippines, despite the latter’s much larger proportion of Christian adherents. (However, Asian Christian flows do not merely replicate and follow the economic ones – thus Japan, still the leading economic nation in Asia but with a small and necessarily inward-oriented Christian community, plays little or no role in Asian Christian flows). This reinforcement of Christian flows by socio-economic ones, also means that Asian Christian networks in some sense follow the logic of global city competition as well. For Singapore to be known in spiritual discourses as the “Antioch of Asia” is, in the sub-set economic sphere of the global Christian ministry industry, analogous to the Singapore government’s own efforts to make the city a destination for global capital and tourist revenues. There are even similar economic consequences. Large global Christian conventions like that of the CCCOWE, the “Go Forth” missions convention, and the World Methodist Conference, are all capable of bringing thousands of people to Singapore, with the positive economic effect this has over the longer term. Global missions organizations opening offices in Singapore produces jobs and economic contributions in the form of rents and taxes. Hong Kong, Kuala Lumpur, Manila, and other cities in Asia that are conducive to such Christian conventions, are also competitors for the same events. However, there are certainly fewer claimants to this kind of global cities competition, which requires more specific qualifications (in terms of specific religious climate and strategic significance) than the secular competition, with the result that the leading cities are likely to receive a considerable amount of “repeat business” and thus to grow in reputation and popularity.

[22] This divide between Asian countries which are Christian hubs and the distribution centers for resources, and poorer Asian countries with only a “developing” pool of believers, also resembles the by-now familiar distinction between rich and poor Asian countries, and the typical give-take, lender-debtor relations between them. The major difference between the secular and Christian Asian relationships is that the latter is much more fluid, micro-level, and flexible, and “invests” in local opportunities in whatever country in which these appear, rather than necessarily following a macro-level and country-wide developmental plan. Relationships of gratitude, fondness, and affection are also more personal and lasting than that of the impersonal relationships between governments and corporations.

Conclusion

[23] In sketching the geopolitics of contemporary Asian Christian networks, and contrasting this not only to secular geopolitical mappings but also to an older missionary geopolitics, I do not suggest that the new networks are problem-free, nor that they do not sometimes replicate older socio-political problems. There is an inevitable tendency for Christian aid and mission work to flow to “underprivileged” groups in any given country, which are often segregated on caste, ethnic, and cultural lines (tribal groups in India, Myanmar, and Thailand; Dalits in India; the Chinese and outlying island peoples in Indonesia). Christian networks, even with the strong Asian organizational impetus of the present era, are thus likely to be seen by dominant religious-political groups as a foreign intervention that threatens in some ways to destabilize the status quo. The new Asian Christian networks are to a certain extent able, if not to avoid the teething pains that always accompany social change, at least to maintain a low profile and minimize adverse reactions, in large part because of an awareness of many of the socio-political sensitivities in the countries of this region. Aid from Asian sources and workers seems to benefit from a real spirit of respect and affection that has built up, at least between certain Asian countries and cultures, over the years. Christian flows between certain Southeast Asian nations are facilitated to a certain extent by the economic and institutional flows of that grouping, while Chinese and South Indian diasporic movements over the years have smoothed the way for the reception and transmission of Christian influences.

[24] There is no denying the overwhelming dominance of religions like Hinduism, Islam, and Buddhism in Asia, nor the inherent problems and uphill struggles which continue to face Christian workers, and the social tensions created by such work, in various parts of Asia. However, given the interesting and significant transnational flows and developments and the enduring and growing human contacts and ties that are being created by Asian Christian networks, it is certainly useful to conceptualize the re-mapping of an Asian geopolitics to include these networks. If, as Parker (1985: 156) has observed, “man, the measure of all things, was once more . . . restored to wholeness” in the change in geopolitical thinking after the 1970s, then the very real and developing networks of human relationships and affective ties that are being created by Christianity in Asia certainly have claim to constituting an increasingly relevant component in the geopolitical mapping of Asia. Asian Christian networks are only likely to grow in significance in the course of the twenty-first century, in the process changing not only local cultures, but also many of the ways in which different people-groups in Asia regard and relate to each other.

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