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Christianity, Transnationalism, and Indian Identities

The Problematic Role of Religion in Diasporas

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Abstract

There have been a number of accounts of Christianity as a “global” religion: in terms of its rapid growth (Jenkins), its extensive media network and cultural hegemony (James and Shoemith), the momentum of its cultural legacy in terms of mission schools, hospitals, and their knock-on effects, its alignment with a self-reinforcing Anglophone culture, and other factors. While there is considerable cultural data to support this claim, there also needs to be counterbalancing arguments about the costs and limitations of global Christianity in order to arrive at a more nuanced theory of Christianity as a global religion, and thence of other religions in the context of globalization. In particular, we need to consider the relationship between global/transnational Christianity and the “ethnos” – which is the root word of “nation” as well as “ethnicity” or “race.” While the Bible’s “Great Commission” commands Christians to “Go . . . and teach all nations (*ethne*), baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost” (Matthew 28:19), it does not say what becomes of the “*ethne*” as a consequence of their being taught or disciplined into the faith. This paper will examine the dialectical pull of Christianity as a global religion: its simultaneously unifying/homogenizing as well as segregating/compartmentalizing tendencies. The paper will go on to illustrate this in relation to the case of Indian Christians in the diaspora, and finally to extrapolate this account of transnational Christianity to a comparative view of other religions like Hinduism and Islam.

Introduction: The Sociology, Institutionalism, and Theology of Christianity as Global Religion

[1] If it is true, as Jenkins declares, that “Christianity should enjoy a worldwide boom in the new century” (2), it is due not only to the demographic changes in “Southern” nations in

South America and Africa that Jenkins speaks of, but also because of a number of sociological, institutional, and theological factors. After all, Jenkins also points out that “Muslims stand to benefit from exactly the same global demographic trends that are producing the unimaginably rich harvest for Christians” (191), which strongly qualifies any predominantly demographic argument for Christianity’s dominance of the present century or any other period of the future. The religious implications of demographic changes in certain countries dominated by a particular religion – for example Christianity in Brazil, Islam in Indonesia, Hinduism in India – will necessarily be moderated and influenced by the politics and socio-economics of religion in those countries, by the history and structure of religious institutions, by transnational influences, and other such factors. It is clearly difficult to speak of such large and complex factors in comprehensive terms, but it is possible and necessary to sketch some of the structural arguments for Christianity’s present growth, and thus to extrapolate an argument for its continued one.

[2] Doctrinally, Christianity (like the other large monotheistic religion, Islam) has a strong agenda to reach out to and influence non-believers – a program variously called “evangelism,” “proselytizing,” “outreach,” “conversion activities,” “witnessing,” and other terms, according to one’s perspective, and the way in which it is performed. For Christians, this agenda is embodied in the oft-quoted passage in Matthew 28:19, where Christ commands his disciples to “Go . . . and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost” – an injunction known as the “Great Commission.” The imperative for Christians resides in the belief in the theological exclusivity of Christ: that Jesus is “the way, the truth, and the life,” and that “no man comes to the Father [i.e. to God], but by me” (John 14:6). A belief in the exclusive rightness of one’s own religion is arguably the trademark of an earnest follower of any religion – certainly the prevalence of religious controversies, disputes, and even violence, instigated by followers of diverse religions, would suggest as much. While Christianity is in no way unique in this respect, it seemingly places more emphasis on outreach than other major religions, and ties the need to bring “salvation” and “eternal life” to those presently outside the religion with the proper responsibility and attitude of compassion in the individual Christian. The “Great Commission” does not receive the same emphasis among all Christians – so-called “nominal” believers, and “liberal” or “progressive” Christians who tend to believe in the “relativity of spiritual truth” (Kaufman: 118-20, 140), do not consider it as crucial as do “fundamental” or “evangelical” Christians – but it does constitute an inherent doctrinal spur to religious outreach at the heart of Christian teaching. It is also an intrinsically transnational doctrine, emphasizing the need to reach out to “all nations,” whatever the cost, and not merely to one’s own convenient surroundings.

[3] In addition to this doctrinal imperative, there are a number of historical, social, and structural reasons for Christianity’s present global momentum. In the first place, Christianity’s global influence today rides on the wave of Protestant missions in the nineteenth century (and Catholic missions that began even earlier) – missions which in turn often derived a considerable boost from European colonial expansion. The relationship between colonialism and missions was at times problematic, as in the case of the British East India Company’s early refusal to allow missionaries into India, and the British colonial government’s decision in Malaya to protect the natives’ unique position and way of life,

which included a policy of non-interference in Muslim affairs (Frykenberg: 55; Chai: 27). Yet it is also clear that British missionaries saw the colonization of new territories, with the promise of the *pax Britannia* and other forms of support, as an invitation to establish missionary work in those territories; thus the interest of British Methodists in Upper Myanmar began in earnest in 1886, after the British annexed that territory (Goh 2003a: 89). There are also examples of “opportunistic and pragmatic” co-operation and mutual exploitation of colonial governors and missionaries: for example, the respective colonial governments’ reliance in places like Singapore, Malaya, Sri Lanka, and elsewhere on missionary schools to provide the general education to the native population that the colonial government lacked the means and will to provide (Frykenberg: 55; Goh 2003a: 44-47, 100-102).

[4] Notwithstanding those colonial prohibitions and constraints, the European (and, from the late nineteenth century onwards, American) missions in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries gained momentum from their coincidence with European colonial expansion and the global dominance of Western Europe and North America until the rise of Asian powers close to the end of the twentieth century finally qualified that dominance. This laid the foundation for the cultural-political centrality of English as a global language (and to a much lesser extent, French, Spanish, German, and Dutch), models of Western European and North American education and educational institutions, Anglophone and Western media centers, and other cultural flows and influences from the West.

[5] Christianity today is reaping the historical momentum, as well as the institutional synergies, of that long colonial/neo-colonial period (i.e., late eighteenth to end-twentieth centuries). Thus while other religions have also had their period of transnational flows bolstered by the political-economic dominance of a particular country or region (the spread of Buddhism from India to other parts of Asia from the third century BCE onwards; Islam under the Caliphs and later under the Mughals, and through trade and cultural flows into Southeast Asia), these took place in much earlier periods of history. More recent “cosmopolitan” pockets within these religions, such as Ottoman Istanbul or nineteenth-century Alexandria under Islam, were characterized by “personal and cultural mixing across communal boundaries,” albeit one sustained by European colonial influence; thus the influence of the dominant religion was also qualified by the presence of other religious communities (Zubaida: 37, 40). In contrast to such pockets of cosmopolitan openness, there have been countries and regions dominated by other religions which have exhibited traits of religious “antiglobalism” (Lechner; Juergensmeyer). These may include overtly politicized examples such as the much-sanctioned Myanmar military junta (the State Peace and Development Council, or SPDC) with its official Buddhist-socialist doctrine; or regional examples like the practice of “Hindutva” (literally “Hindu-ness,” but often associated with right-wing religious ideologies and communal violence) in parts of India that have come in for criticism for the violation of human rights and the rule of law from parties both within and outside India; or the interpretation of Sharia law in some countries contrary to the mores of Western-style democracy (for example, the strict prosecution of permissive behavior deemed as public indecency in countries like the UAE).

[6] Such clashes of civilizations and cultures may beg all kinds of questions of national hegemony, different moral codes, political ideologies in the guise of nationalism, and cultural

imperialism masquerading as universal values, and it is not my intention (and beyond the scope of this paper) to consider such questions in detail. My point is simply that Christianity today derives a considerable cultural-political currency from its association with the Western European and North American political and cultural expansion of (especially) the nineteenth and twentieth centuries – the most recent epoch of transnational imperialism, and arguably still the most relevant one to date.

[7] Beyond broad historical alignments, Christianity's global character today is also founded on particular institutional structures, mechanisms, and networks, which have proven highly successful in adapting to conditions of transnational conditions. These include educational institutions, hospitals and clinics, welfare and social organizations, and a wide range of agencies meeting local needs such as microcredit facilities, agricultural initiatives, disaster relief efforts, orphanages, women's shelters, old age homes, counseling centers, and so on. While other religions have many such agencies and institutions as well, the scope and reach of these is relatively limited and constrained compared to Christian institutions, which are more extensive in both their functions and reach. Hinduism, for example, has specific ayurvedic principles of healthcare, which run counter to, and are in some sense competitive with, the principles and practices of Western medicine. Christianity, in contrast (apart from the strictest of "faith" healing teachings), has no conflict whatsoever with Western medical treatment, and many Christian groups and denominations (particularly the Seventh-Day Adventists, the Mennonites, and the Catholics) actually used clinics and hospitals as main strategies of outreach to their communities. While Sikhs have a very strong notion of *sewa* or "service" (i.e., philanthropy, volunteerism), it tends to be aligned with the Sikh political consciousness of "Khalistan" and oriented toward Punjab, or at any rate to sites of the Sikh diaspora and to their local communities (Murphy: 339, 349).

[8] Similarly, while there are many Muslim madrasahs, the emphasis that they place on the study of Arabic and the Quran limits their broad appeal; in contrast, many Christian educational institutions have made curricular adjustments to suit the secular and multi-cultural societies in which they operate, and manifest their Christian character in their non-curricular traditions and rituals, or in the beliefs, practices, and general influence of their faculty and staff, rather than in specific parts of their curriculum. This broadens their appeal to non-Christians who are in fact very averse to the prospect of converting or having their children convert to Christianity, but who feel confident that they can get a quality education in a Christian school without real fear of proselytism and conversion. Thus among the Hindu middle class in India, a "convent education" not only bears no particular stigma or anxiety, but is actually a desirable status symbol.¹ Although this may partly be due to vestiges

¹ Apart from anecdotal encounters with well-educated, cosmopolitan Hindus who had been educated in convents and other Christian schools, and from the fact that some of the best-known and most sought-after schools in countries like India, Singapore, Malaysia, and the Philippines are Christian schools, this phenomenon is also borne out in many references in Anglophone Indian literature. Thus, for example, in David Davidar's *The Solitude of Emperors*, the high social standing of one of the characters, Brigadier Sharma, is reinforced by the fact that his daughter Maya has a "convent-bred accent" (177). In Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*, one character, Jemubhai Popatlal Patel, is sent to "the mission school" by his "peasant-caste" but highly ambitious father – a move which pays off when, with the advice and patronage of the White principal Mr. McCooe, Jemubhai obtains a scholarship to "Bishop's College" and later a place at Cambridge (64-67). The protagonist of Manju Kapur's *The Immigrant*, Nina, receives her early education at "Loreto Convent" in Lucknow, while her

of a colonial cringe wherein the institutions of the White man (even those now handed down to natives) are seen as being better, there are also practical and structural reasons to prefer a mission school education: the strong Anglophone basis, the orientation of the curriculum to accord with curricular standards and structures of the Western countries in which many parents aspire for their children to go to college and/or work, and some of the advantages (such as recruitment and postings of teachers from overseas, or the perception of easier entry into connectional schools and colleges) which accrue from being part of a transnational denominational network.

[9] Denominational networks are an inherently transnational part of global Christianity, of course, and these manifest themselves in active and concrete ways, not merely in nominal affiliations. Methodist churches around the world meet every five years at the World Methodist Conference, at which (among other business) practical programs and initiatives are planned. Such a world body facilitates quick response in the form of disaster and humanitarian relief; for example, on the occasion of the Haiti earthquake, the President of the Eglise Methodiste de Haiti Rev. Gesner Paul testified to the “outpouring of support and offers to come in person” from the World Methodist Council and the United Methodist Committee on Relief (Paul). It was at a World Methodist Conference, the 16th, held in 1991, that the International Association of Methodist Schools, Colleges and Universities (IAMSCU) was established; the IAMSCU connects 775 Methodist educational institutes in 69 countries. The United Methodist Church leverages on its wide international network of affiliated churches and educational institutions and large body of congregational members to establish, administer, and fund a number of educational initiatives, and to offer advancement opportunities for students around the world. Its work includes marshalling global Methodist resources to establish and fund Africa University, a Methodist institution founded in Zimbabwe in 1992; administering a wide range of undergraduate and graduate scholarships, among which are scholarships to fund Methodist students studying in any accredited U.S. college, and graduate scholarships for faculty and staff of United Methodist colleges, universities, and schools; and other forms of leadership and co-ordination of international educational initiatives.

[10] The United Methodist Church is not unique among Christian organizations in this kind of transnational networking and resource-marshalling, although it is certainly true that Methodism is a denomination that has historically invested a lot into education in most of the countries in which it has operated, and is now in a position to reap the benefits of that investment. Catholicism has a longer tradition of Christian education than any Protestant denomination, and there are a large number of Catholic convents, schools, colleges, and universities around the world. The Paris-based International Federation of Catholic Universities (IFCU) is the global coordinating body for these Catholic institutions, and counts some 200 Catholic institutions of higher education among its members (IFCU

future husband Ananda’s mother teaches and his sister studies at “the Convent of Jesus and Mary” in Dehradun (5, 13). Many other such convent and mission-school connections are to be found in literature, together with occasional references to the fear of the prospect of conversion, such as in R. K. Narayan’s *The Guide*, where Raju’s father refuses to send him to the mission school because “it seems they try to convert our boys into Christians” (23). Yet Raju himself longs to go to “the fashionable Albert Mission School” and would “have felt proud to call myself an Albert Mission boy.”

“About IFCU”). Possibly because of the large number of Catholic institutions, their diverse origins, sectarian affiliations, and operating conditions, the IFCU sees itself as a “federation” rather than a centralized body, in its own terms a “communal house built from all the materials of the world” (“About IFCU”). There appears to be closer operational ties between the members of its regional groupings, such as the Association des Universités et Institutions Catholique d’Afrique et de Madagascar ASUNICAM, or the Organization of Catholic Universities of Latin America ODUICAL, which capitalize on regional “cultural and geographical ties” (“Regional Associations”).

[11] Other well-known and globally-active Christian organizational networks include the YMCAs and YWCAs, the Salvation Army, the International Christian Chamber of Commerce (ICCC), Focus on the Family, and World Vision. Some of these entities represent huge networks of members: the World Alliance of YMCAs, for example, represents more than 14,000 individual YMCAs around the world, with a total of more than 45 million members. Apart from these older and well-established global networks, there are also niche regional networks, catering to specific interest groups and communities, such as the Chinese Coordination Centre of World Evangelism (CCCOWE), an initiative of the diasporic Chinese Christians, and the South Asian Connection (SAC), which plays a similar role for South Asians. This is only to mention some of the transnational Christian organizations with a wider social appeal and functions, and not to mention the many other transnational Christian organizations specifically concerned with missions, evangelism, prayer networks, and other core Christian activities.

[12] Without any pretence at a comprehensive discussion of transnational Christian organizations, the examples in this brief discussion should indicate the extent to which such Christian organizations push the agenda of transnational networking, organization, and mobilization; indeed, it can be said without much exaggeration that Christian organizations thrive within conditions of globalization. While globalization is an imperative that confronts all religions, Christianity’s relative advantage in this respect stems from the momentum conferred by the recent history of transnational Christian missions; the general alignment of Christianity with Western European and North American colonial and cultural expansion; the global dominance of the West (in the economic, educational, media, cultural, and other spheres) until at least the end of the twentieth century; the role of English (and to a lesser extent, European languages like French, Spanish, German, and Dutch) as a common unifying language for member organizations from different countries; and related factors that are not possessed to a similar extent and in a similar combination by any other religion in the world. All this has meant a certain commonality of knowledge and conditions, a transferability of structures and contexts, an ease of re-locating one’s social and spiritual life and identity, which has facilitated Christian transnational flows of employment, education, travel, media, finances, social networking, conferencing, and of course actual migration. Common manifestations of this facilitation include getting recommendations for a home church in a new city before arriving there, connecting globally as part of a dedicated group on internet sites such as Facebook (which South Asian Concern, among other Christian groups, does), plugging almost immediately into a support and social network when relocating abroad, regular conferencing and support transnational networks in certain core areas (education, healthcare, NGO, and faith-based organizational work), overseas

employment or training opportunities especially in those core areas, networking with overseas colleagues through Christian professional and business associations, choosing and getting funding for college or graduate education in an overseas Christian institute, even matchmaking in various levels of formality and overtness.

Global Christianity vs. Local Identities: Paradigms and Problems

[13] This Western-centered, largely Anglophone and strongly transnational character of Christianity has its drawbacks from the perspective of cultural diversity, the preservation of traditions, and ideologies of pluralism and liberal individualism. It might even be argued that aspects of the global Christianity agenda constitute a form of cultural homogenization aligned with other homogenizing forces in globalization (i.e., global capital, market ideology and processes, the “McDonaldization” of culture, a common “international” style of architecture, the rise of global language(s) at the expense of smaller local ones). This is obviously an extreme view, and does not take into consideration what Jenkins sees as Christianity’s “assimilation” of “the habits and thought-worlds of the regions” in which it is most rapidly growing (i.e., Africa, South America, and other “Southern” regions) (131). Jenkins also points to the many “Christian congregations labeled with some Asian ethnic title” in North American cities like Vancouver, as evidence of a strong culture of “Asian American Christianity” (121).

[14] At a structural level, both claims – that global Christianity has a potentially homogenizing force, and that there are sites and pockets wherein a locally adjusted version of Christian culture is achieved – have validity. In the context of South, Southeast, and East Asia, for example, it is true that there has been a rapid growth in the numbers as well as influence of churches, especially in countries like China (where Christianity is still a minority religion, but where the sheer size of China’s population makes even that minority a significant phenomenon), the Philippines (the only Asian country with a Christian-majority population, and with a higher rate of Christian adherence than most “Christian” countries in Europe and North America), South Korea (a strongly evangelical Christian country, second only to the U.S. in terms of missionaries sent overseas; see Johnstone and Mandryk: 387; Moon), and Singapore (where Christianity is also a minority religion, yet forms a very influential socio-cultural group, and exerts an overseas presence out of proportion to the small size of the nation and its Christian population; see Goh 2003b, 2009a). The rise of race- and culture-specific transnational Christian networks such as the Chinese Coordination Centre of World Evangelism (CCCOWE) and the South Asian Connection (SAC), which specialize in reaching out to and connecting believers in their own diasporic ethnic communities, also suggests at least the need for (if not necessarily the efficacy of) such specific ministries as an alternative to a homogeneous Western Anglophone model. Many churches and Christian groups in countries like India, China, South Korea, Indonesia, Cambodia, and others have services exclusively or largely in vernacular languages, and insert native cultural elements (dance, traditional musical instruments, local practices) into the liturgy.

[15] Having said this, however, there are a number of strong centralizing forces in global Christianity that counteract this cultural-vernacular diversity. Much of this has to do with the continued dominance of Western hubs of Christianity in the U.S. and U.K., and to a lesser

extent Australia, Canada, and New Zealand. The economics of global Christianity is still characterized by the outflow of finances from churches in “Northern” and developed countries to churches in many “Southern” and developing countries such as Nigeria, Tanzania, Kenya, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Cambodia, Indonesia, China, and many others. There are of course exceptions to this rule: geographically “Southern” churches in richer countries like South Korea, Singapore, and South Africa are also making financial contributions to Christian ministries in other countries in their region; the exceptions are few compared to the countries that prove the rule, however. The U.S., in particular, continues to play a uniquely influential role in world evangelization, as the headquarters and point of origin of many global ministries (including Billy Graham, “arguably the Evangelical of the 20th Century,” Benny Hinn ministries, Youth With a Mission, Mercy Ministries, and others), and has a huge Christian media industry with more than 1,100 Christian radio stations and more than 350 Christian TV stations (Johnstone and Mandryk: 659, 663). Some of the biggest and best-known Christian publishing houses – such as Zondervan, Intervarsity Press, Moody Publishers, Thomas Nelson – which publish Bibles, Biblical study material, Christian-themed books, and Christian material in other media, which are distributed around the world – are based in the U.S. Other big Christian publishing houses like Tyndale House are based in the U.K. The highly-influential Christian music and media industries are also dominated by the U.S. with major companies like Integrity Music and Maranatha Music, and world-renowned artists like Chris Tomlin, David Crowder Band, Tommy Walker, Michael W. Smith, and others. Outside of the U.S., other Christian recording labels and artists with a global reputation include Hillsong in Australia, and Parachute in New Zealand.

[16] The impact of this Western Christian media industry on Southern churches cannot be underestimated. James and Shoemsmith in their study of Anglophone Christian media on urban churches in India noted that “charismatic television” programming had a considerable impact, not just on urban Indian Christians, but even on Hindus. My own fieldwork among Southern Christian churches and congregations – including in Hong Kong, Singapore, India (Bareilly in Uttar Pradesh and Dimapur in Nagaland), Qatar, the U.A.E., Oman, and Trinidad – confirms the consistent and extensive reach and influence of the main and best-known groups, programs, artists and preachers from this media. The influence of such media on Northern and Anglophone churches and their congregations is even higher. There is thus a kind of “imagined community” (to adapt Benedict Anderson’s phrase to this transnational context) of Christians in various parts of the world, created by this largely centralized, common media experience: singing worship songs by Hillsong or Chris Tomlin (in English), watching programs and listening to sermons on God Channel or Trinity Broadcasting Network, downloading Christian music videos or other content from Tangle.com (formerly known as Godtube) and You Tube, and other such practices.

[17] It needs to be pointed out that the influence of Western Anglophone Christian media is not uniform throughout Southern Christianity. It is an influence that tends to be stronger in urban churches and congregations, in churches with “charismatic” or “international/contemporary” liturgies, and of course among those with some facility in English, particularly the younger congregation members for whom English is the prestigious global language. Conversely, there are congregations in large rural reaches of India who have never heard of Hillsong or Chris Tomlin, and who only sing worship songs in Hindi or other

vernacular languages. Conservative mainline churches throughout the Southern regions tend to be immured from the use of popular contemporary worship music (although even then some of them do use English hymnals inherited from founding missionaries from the West), and are less enthusiastic followers of the Pentecostal and charismatic programming that tends to dominate Christian TV. With these qualifications noted, however, it is true that the continued dominance of Western Christian media constitutes a strong centralizing influence throughout many churches and congregations of Southern Christianity, and even more so for Northern Christianity.

[18] The dominance of Anglophone Christian media of course also reinforces the role of English as the lingua franca of global Christianity, which then in turn reinforces the continuing dominance of Anglophone Christian media. While regional and race-based Christian associations can sometimes use other languages – Spanish in Central and parts of South America, Mandarin Chinese in China, Taiwan, and the Chinese diaspora, Hindi in North India and the diaspora – these alternative languages are severely limited as unifying forces. Brazil, one of the largest countries in South America and one of the most dynamic growth areas of Christianity (especially Pentecostalism), uses Portuguese rather than Spanish; many diasporic Chinese speak dialectal variants (such as Cantonese, Hokkien, Hakka, Teochew, and Foochow) and have difficulty understanding Mandarin; and the huge range of languages spoken among diasporic Indians (Tamil, Kannada, Malayalam, Telugu, Marathi, Gujarati, Punjabi, and Bengali, in addition to Hindi) severely restricts the efficacy of Hindi as a common tongue. Thus while Asian churches are beginning to take a more active role in world alliances, and to take leadership of regional alliances, the wide range of languages used just in South, Southeast, and East Asia alone, means that English is the primary or translation language at these Asian Christian conferences.

[19] Thirdly, Christianity (like the other major monotheistic religions) is inherently based on a central textual authority – the Quran refers to these religions as “Ahl al-Kitab,” the “people of the Book.” Christianity is arguably even more centralized in its textual authority than Islam, which has its different collections of Hadiths (pronouncements of the Prophet), and recognition of different spiritual authorities, leading to sectarian differences within Islam. By comparison, the difference between the Protestant and Catholic Bibles are relatively minor, and certainly within those 2 big branches of Christianity, a single textual authority is upheld. This still leaves room for differences of interpretation and teaching, and certainly the existence of quasi-Christian groups with beliefs at odds with orthodox Christianity (Mormons, Jehovah’s Witnesses) point to the possibility of “Christian” sectarianism; however, the orthodox Christian groups tend to see these other groups as cults rather than Christian groups, precisely because of their reliance on textual authorities other than the Bible. The majority of (mainstream) Christians actually conform to a set of doctrines, which is remarkably consistent, considering the size of the Christian population worldwide, and the diversity (historical, denominational, linguistic, cultural) within it.

[20] This consistency of doctrines is on the one hand theological, residing in the unique and central place of Jesus Christ in Christian beliefs on a wide range of important matters such as salvation, eternal life, the Godhead, the divine authority of the Bible, Christian morality and actions, evangelism, and so on. In other words, the very same theological uniqueness of Christ (as the only “way, the truth and the life,” John 14:6) that drives the characteristic

Christian evangelical imperative is also responsible for the relative unity of doctrine within Christianity as a whole. However, doctrinal coherence would be moot without the institutional means to effect and maintain it; Christianity also encourages a personal and individual knowledge of the Bible (for example, in the injunction to “take . . . the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God,” Ephesians 6:17). There is thus a culture of constant upgrading of the individual’s knowledge of and training in the Bible, and a related training industry in many forms and at many levels, from rigorous seminary training up to the level of Doctor of Divinity, to casual web-based courses, and everything in-between. As with Christian media, once again this training industry is dominated by Western Anglophone institutions and organizations, which bring their training to countries around the world.

[21] Two examples, out of the many Christian training organizations, illustrate how seriously such training is taken: BEE (Bible Education by Extension) World, is a Colorado-based organization that specializes in providing “seminary level Biblical training to pastors and church leadership that have no access to Biblical training.” The organization has a comprehensive curriculum whose ambitious nature is indicated in its promise of “seminary level Biblical training,” and is prepared to bring this to “Restricted Access countries in Asia and the Middle East,” through the use of “itinerant” teachers, and reinforced by their internet training site. Another organization, BSF (Bible Study Fellowship), which began in Southern California in the 1950s, targets ordinary individual Christians rather than pastors and church leaders. BSF takes a no-nonsense approach to Bible study, segregating learners into men’s, women’s, and young adults’ classes, taking attendance at classes, involving students in “challenging lectures” and “daily questions for individual Bible study,” and structuring 8 “comprehensive 33-week studies” on various key parts of the Bible (“Classes,” “Distinctives”). The courses are free, many of them running in the evenings to cater to working people, and are currently offered in 36 countries; but this accessibility is balanced by a disciplined approach to studying the Bible, which is intended to bring large numbers of ordinary individual Christians to an awareness of the Bible as “the supreme and final authority of faith and life” (“Statement of Faith”). Both BEE and BSF, out of many similar Christian training organizations, show how a Christian ethos of disciplining in the Word reaches out from Western centers and organizations to many nations and territories, bringing individual believers into rigorous and centralized systems of teaching and interpretation.

[22] Finally, despite the rise of “indigenous” and “independent” churches, global Christianity (partly for the reasons detailed above) still tends to cluster into larger associations, groupings, and affiliations. Catholicism and the mainline denominations, with their respective global associations, are obvious examples, but even the newly established “independent” churches show signs of this associative tendency, although it takes different forms compared to the older denominational alliances. To take a well-known example, Hillsong, the Australian megachurch, is affiliated with the Assemblies of God churches, although the affiliation appears to be a very loose one. Instead, Hillsong (as it has grown exponentially, in large part because of its popular Hillsong Music wing) has expanded to create its own extensive transnational network. It has established branches in London, Kiev, Stockholm, Cape Town, Paris, Moscow, and New York (to date, in an expanding list), besides its main Sydney church (“About Hillsong”). Apart from these extensions of the church, and from its hugely successful and influential Hillsong Music label, the church also exerts a strong transnational

influence on the leadership of other churches with its annual conferences and leadership retreats, and its active encouragement of “networking” with leaders of other churches (“Network”). This is intended to be a close and comprehensive relationship, rather than a loose association, as suggested by the amount and type of material and training that Hillsong promises: not just the more common “music and Bible study resources” or “ministry specific training manuals,” but also Hillsong’s own “downloadable staff meeting messages” and “administrative documents” – material clearly intended to replicate (to various extents) the church’s own organizational ethos and character in other churches (“About the Leadership Network”). It is not surprising that Hillsong has been successful in influencing other “independent” churches which have taken on board many of its operational, organizational, and liturgical features, and ultimately something of its success as well – New Creation church in Singapore, which has long had a close relationship with Hillsong, now has more than 20,000 worshippers, and is itself influential in regional leadership training and other events.

[23] Certainly there are all kinds of exceptions to global Christianity’s associational and paradigmatic character, but these exceptions only highlight the extent of those associations and models. The momentum, synergies, and integrated nature of the dominant centers and models of global Christianity mean that those centers and models are likely to extend their influence further in the course of globalization, into areas that at the moment are geographically and culturally distant and segregated. This will put increasing pressure on alternative liturgies and church cultures, and on churches intent on preserving their independent distance. Even for the holdout “local” churches, the prospect is of an increasing divide between them and the “international” churches, with the latter aided and empowered through transnational denominational or affiliational ties, support, funding, and other resources. Notions of “local” and “indigenous” Christianity will thus very likely be attached with pejorative notions of insularity, small and/or decreasing congregation sizes, and powerlessness, even as they are likely to attach to international churches the pejorative notions of conformity to Western models, playing a numbers/popularity game, and cultural loss and “inauthenticity.”

Diaspora, Ethnicity, Christianity: The Case of Indian Christians

[24] The Indian Christian diaspora is an interesting illustration of the effects of global Christianity. In India itself, Christianity is very much a minority religion (less than 2.5% of the total population), with a heavier concentration in certain pockets (South Indian states like Kerala and Tamil Nadu, North East ones like Nagaland and Mizoram, and to a certain extent the larger urban centers as well), and very thin in the rural areas of “Hindu heartland” states like Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. Thus while Christianity is a well-established religion with adherents representing a significant part of the population in states like Kerala and Nagaland, it is almost negligible in rural areas of a state like Uttar Pradesh, where Christians form less than 1% of the population, and often face social marginalization and even oppression and violence (see Krishna; Sarkar; Fernandes; and Chatterji).

[25] Apart from the regional variation in Christianity’s distribution and social significance, Indian Christianity is also shaped by the linguistic and cultural diversity in India as a whole. India has several hundred major languages, and thousands of regional dialects with smaller

speech communities. Not only are the major languages largely mutually unintelligible, they are involved in complex cultural politics and issues of communal pride, which seek to elevate or establish one language at the expense of another. Other inter-state and inter-regional differences and tensions (which ultimately link back to and feed into the cultural politics) have to do with economic migrants across state borders who put pressure on local jobs and housing; disputes over waterways and water supplies (especially during periods of drought); ethnic differences (between the main racial types of Aryan, Dravidian, and Tibeto-Mongoloid, which have broad regional clusters in the north, south, and parts of the north-east of India respectively), and other such issues.

[26] These linguistic-cultural differences carry over into the diaspora, and within the diasporic Indian Christian community as well. Indian transnational movements are strongly governed by family and social ties, reinforced by historical factors such as the work of local recruiters in collaboration with the colonial demand for labor. The result is that concentrations of Indian communities in various parts of the diaspora often reflect the original community in India from which they came. The reinforcement of this communal-regional character over time explains why the vast majority of the Indians of Trinidad and Tobago today trace their ancestry back to the state of Uttar Pradesh, why the Punjabis are by far the dominant Indian group in the greater Vancouver area, why Gujaratis dominate the greater Chicago area, why Tamils are the overwhelming majority among the Indians of Singapore, and so on. Other Indian groups subsequently come into countries and cities where there are job opportunities, but seldom in such numbers or at such a pace as to overtake the dominant group.

[27] Christianity does not immediately break down these linguistic-cultural divides in the Indian diaspora. There is still a tendency for Indian Christians in a particular area to stick to small congregations based on their place of origin and spoken language, and to advertise the specific linguistic-cultural orientation of their congregation in the name of their church or congregation, such as the “Telugu Christian Church” of Fremont, California; the “Chicago Tamil Church” which meets in Mount Prospect; the “Gujarati Christian Fellowship of Pennsylvania” (GCFP) based in Cheltenham, Pennsylvania, and so on. The communal nature of these churches is also marked by the common practice of estimating their congregation size in terms of “families” rather than individuals (as is more common in Western-style churches); thus the Gujarati Christian Fellowship of Pennsylvania declares that it is now “one of the largest Gujarati churches in North America with around 70 families” (“Welcome”). There is also characteristically a great concern with language-specific liturgical elements and material; again the GCFP is representative, with its webpage that offers “various Gujarati Christian music,” links to an electronic version of the “entire Gujarati Bible,” its library with a list of Christian titles in Gujarati, and so on (“Welcome,” “Library”). In terms of liturgy, such churches are often very similar to the churches in their home state or region in India, not just in the language used, but also in the worship songs (which are often traditional songs or hymns in the vernacular, rather than vernacular translations of popular modern English worship songs), the inclusion of traditional instruments (particularly drums – for example the tabla for North Indian congregations, the chenda in Malayalam congregations) in worship, and the participatory forms of prayer, testimony, sharing, and similar elements.

[28] Such smaller, specifically vernacular and intently communal churches are clearly very different from the model of large Western-style “international” churches where ethnicity and ethnic cultures are largely immaterial, where worship songs popularized by international artists are the staple, and where English is the common language used to unite congregations from diverse backgrounds. These small vernacular churches arguably play an important role in catering to their respective communities and fostering a strong sense of communal identification, as well as in helping to preserve the language and cultural identity of the vernacular community. The proliferation of such small, vernacular-based churches in countries like the U.S., U.K., and Canada (which have no shortage of popular megachurches and international congregations) suggest that they fill an important need, particularly among Indian Christian migrants who are less than comfortable in large, cosmopolitan, Anglophone church settings.

[29] However, two fairly significant factors work against the perpetuation of these vernacular congregations and churches: the evangelical imperative and demographic changes. The vernacular and traditional orientation of these churches and congregations clearly confines their main outreach and social impact to the same vernacular community – not even to Indians in general, or to Indians who come from a neighboring state in India, but specifically to migrants from the same state, speaking the same vernacular language, and in most cases those who were already Christians back in India and thus familiar and comfortable with the forms of worship used. Notwithstanding the cultural value of these vernacular churches and congregations, they can by no stretch of the imagination be called “open” and “seeker-friendly” churches, as are the cosmopolitan and contemporary large churches, which are strategically geared towards outreach to all sorts of non-believers.

[30] The problem that the evangelical imperative poses for such vernacular churches is exacerbated by demographic changes in Indian diasporic families over time. Vernacular churches may suit the spiritual needs and tastes of first- and even some second-generation migrant families, but later generations typically undergo shifts in their cultural identification and socialization patterns that make such small vernacular church experiences less acceptable. Typical changes in what Sam George (23, 34-36) calls the “coconut generation” of Indians in America include markedly higher levels of education, and consequently professional and white-collar occupations; fluency in English and the ability to work and live in cross-cultural settings; a corresponding loss of ability to speak and understand their vernacular language; a strong desire to assimilate into and belong to the culture of their adopted country (which sometimes in third-generation immigrants co-exists with a rediscovery of their Indian roots, but in quite different and romanticized ways from that of their grandparents); and a greater degree of interaction (including dating and marriage) with people outside of their ethnic group.

[31] Clearly this demographic poses a big challenge to older models of vernacular churches in the Indian diaspora. Pastors and congregation members of vernacular-based Indian churches that I have interviewed report that some of the main reasons younger Indian Christians want to leave their parents’ vernacular churches include a limited ability to understand the vernacular and thus to follow and participate in the service; finding the liturgical model boring; a desire to attend more lively services in large English-speaking churches; fear of being “match-made” to a spouse from the same ethnic group by their

parents; and conversely a desire to socialize within a wider and more culturally and ethnically mixed church group. Dissatisfaction with the older generation's vernacular church does not necessarily lead to attendance at a large cosmopolitan and Anglophone church, of course, and could also result in a waning of faith, nominalism, and rejection of church altogether. Thus the evangelical imperative, in the case of small vernacular churches facing declining or static memberships and the increasing apathy of younger members, is not even a matter of reaching out to a wider circle of non-believers (including those outside their ethnic community), but includes reaching out to the younger members of their own churches, and is really a question of the survival of their traditional way of worship and communal church experience. Many of the vernacular Indian churches are understandably small, comprising between twenty and thirty families – the Gujarati Christian Fellowship of Pennsylvania can justly call itself “one of the largest” Gujarati, or indeed Indian vernacular, churches in America, with “about 70 families” – and the loss of their younger members would indeed be a crisis of significant proportions. The choice then is to transform radically their vernacular and traditional liturgy and character to take on qualities of those dynamic Western churches that attract younger Christians (including Indians), or persist with their liturgy and see the gradual exodus of succeeding generations to Western churches and the decline of their memberships; either scenario represents the triumph of dominant Western church models at the expense of traditional Indian vernacular ones.

[32] This dilemma – caught between a contemporary Western Christianity that has considerable evangelical potential, and a vernacular traditionalism that reinforces an existing cultural identity and meets an important cultural need – is precisely the situation of the Punjabi Masihi Church (PMC) in Vancouver. The church grew out of the individual ministry of a woman named Jean Lind among the Punjabis – the largest group among the more than 208,000 South Asians in British Columbia – and continued in the form of a small fellowship of Punjabi Christians (Goh 2009b; Statistics Canada). The group, after experiences of growth and division, rose to about 30 to 40 members (it used the more Western “member” count, rather than the “family” count more familiar in vernacular Indian churches, at least for record purposes) in the late 1990s. Along the way, it came into contact with and grew alongside two other South Asian fellowships in the Vancouver area, a Kerala Christian Fellowship and a group of Fiji Indian Christians; a merger of the three groups was proposed, but in the final analysis the Kerala group decided to retain their existing format. The merger of the Punjabi and Fiji groups led to the formation of the Punjabi Masihi Church, which now has around 120-140 worshippers (Goh 2009b).

[33] PMC is unusual among Indian vernacular churches in North America in a number of respects: it is not isolated from, and does not position itself in distinction to, the Western church model, but instead was closely associated with the Delta Pentecostal Church (it functioned as the Punjabi outreach of the DPC before becoming a separate church entity), has some of the charismatic worship and liturgical elements familiar from Pentecostal-style services, and continues to be affiliated with the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada (PAOC). As its early history, involving the co-operative ministry and joint fellowship of Indian Christians of Kerala, Punjabi, and Fijian origin suggests, PMC is by no means a strictly communal and vernacular fellowship, but rather has been (and still is) open to interaction with people from outside the Punjabi community. Its services feature not only Indian

speakers, but also speakers (particularly Pentecostals and other charismatics) of other races, including Spanish-speaking pastors from South American congregations in Vancouver or who are passing through (one of the PMC's Punjabi pastors had lived in Bolivia and has close ties to the Bolivian and Spanish-speaking Christian community in Vancouver). English, Hindi, Urdu, and Punjabi are used in the worship service, with a mixture of contemporary worship songs by popular artists (sung in English), and the church's own contemporary-style worship songs composed in Hindi (by its worship pastor), while sermons are usually given in English with Hindi translation. With Spanish-speaking pastors, the sermons are given both English and Hindi translations, which can be a cumbersome experience. The church welcomes and seeks to minister not only to Punjabis but also to other South Asians, and indeed to any interested person in their surrounding area; there have been internal discussions about whether to change the name of the church to "All Nations Church," or a similar name that would reflect its desire to minister to the different ethnic groups in its area (Goh 2009b).

[34] Yet on the other hand PMC also has features and characteristics of, and faces similar problems to, the Indian vernacular church in the diaspora. Although its services are not carried out exclusively in Punjabi, the language is still crucial to its social and spiritual life, and central to its cultural identity, which is why the word "Punjabi" features so prominently in the name of the church, despite the fact that only about 40 percent of the present congregation is Punjabi (with another 40 percent Fijian Indians, and the remaining 20 percent a mixture of other South Asians and other races; Koshy and Sheena). Like most Indian vernacular churches, it has a distinct family orientation, unlike the more individualistic (and generally younger adult) demographics of large "seeker-friendly" Western churches. Several of the church pastors and congregation members (who were generally in agreement) explained the importance of the "Punjabi" in PMC's identity and mission: they see it as a means of attracting the attention and "curiosity" of the Punjabi community, which as the largest South Asian group in the area, is the most pressing outreach concern for the church. The language is viewed as an ethnic "hook" to affirm ties with not just the Sikhs, but also the Hindu and Muslim Punjabis in the area, particularly in the face of a common anxiety about losing cultural roots and vernacular competence, particularly in the younger generations. For these and other reasons, many of PMC's leaders and congregation members are very reluctant to lose the "Punjabi" identifier and character of their church, even as they recognize the need to grow the church and to relate to a larger and more ethnically diverse surrounding community.

Conclusion: Global Christianity and "Compartmentalization": Ethnicity on Display?

[35] PMC thus faces a dilemma in which its Western Pentecostal roots and characteristics, together with its calling to reach out to the different ethnic groups in the Vancouver area, are at odds with its specifically Punjabi characteristics and its desire to locate itself within the (Christian and non-Christian) Punjabi community. This dilemma, brought to the fore by PMC's current phase of strategic planning and self-review, is one that will eventually confront most, if not all, vernacular Indian churches in North America and elsewhere in the diaspora. While alignment with the strategies, liturgical forms, associative networks, and support structures offered by mainline denominations or large seeker-friendly churches is a

ready avenue to church growth (and thus survival) and the performance of the evangelical imperative, it comes at the cost of losing or at least downplaying vernacular and traditional Christian elements, and of losing vital links between vernacular Christianities and their respective ethnic (including non-Christian) communities. Nor is PMC's dilemma strictly an issue of Indian Christianity in North America: as a church which actively carries out missions (including church planting) in various parts of India, it also plays a role in replicating its cultural influence back into India.

[36] It needs to be pointed out that while much of the tension between a globalizing Christian influence and particular vernacular traditions resembles that between global capitalism and local cultures, global Christianity ultimately has a different moral impulse. While its Western-centered cultural and financial flows and institutional logic bear a strong resemblance to global capitalism, its ultimate goal is not economic hegemony, but spiritual unity under the Lordship of Christ, as envisioned in Biblical passages such as Isaiah 2:2-4 and Revelation 21:1-4. This apocalyptic and other-worldly flattening out of earthly power-cultural tensions generated by global Christianity today may not, however, be a perfect reassurance for vernacular Christianities under threat.

[37] Yet that global and ultimately homogenizing quality does seem to be an inevitable corollary to a religion that not only preaches transnational expansion, but also is organizationally and institutionally rationalized to carry it out. In other words, a certain degree of broad homogeneity might be the price of Christianity's global success. While vernacular and cultural differences are given increasing recognition as the sign of an increasingly pluralistic global church and also the means of reaching out to new regions and peoples, global Christianity has the capability to accommodate these differences as subordinated compartments within a larger dominant structure. Whether as smaller vernacular fellowships within a larger Anglophone and cosmopolitan church structure, or as signs and displays of ethnic difference (vernacular dance, instrumental or choral performances) at denominational world conferences, or as regional linguistic-cultural blocs that have limited autonomy within world associations, such differences cannot impede global Christian flows, and indeed may only endorse and reinforce it by their compartmentalizing alignment with it.

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