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INTRODUCTION

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The global success of Pentecostalism has made it necessary to speak of different Pentecostalisms. From the United States to Latin America, East and Southeast Asia, Pentecostalism has been shaped by different politics and cultures. One might even say that Pentecostal pluralism has ensured not just its survival but its continued cross-cultural flourish. Indeed, Pentecostalism's ability to adapt practices and theologies to local conditions has seen the faith emerge in a multitude of expressions while retaining enough common characteristics for global coherence. Its global spread began in the nineteenth century through the flow of Western missionaries, sometimes via the passage of colonialism, and has hinged on its simultaneously indigenizing and transnationalizing nature. For the most part, these Western missionaries, many of whom may not have been Pentecostals to begin with, in setting up churches in foreign lands had embarked on a *de facto* indigenization process through various actions such as their reliance on local interpreters, the communication of the Gospel through local idioms, and the eventual training of local clergy. The practical needs of proselytizing in a foreign land ensured that the Gospel was always understood through a local cultural prism, much in the

same way contemporary preachers are prone to framing sermons around topical national events and local issues from their pulpits to add just that touch of relevance to the Word of God. To be able to see the divine through the local has made the Pentecostal experience a unique one.

Furthermore, the numerous Pentecostal revivals around the world that pre-date the 1906 Azusa Street revival in Los Angeles suggests that the indigenization process was not merely driven by practice and methods but also by the careful choice of relevant messages. The Gospels, its parables, and message of hope and salvation were crafted not as straightforward Judeo-Christian narratives for consumption by different communities, but as divine restoration that spoke to the wants of different locales fashioned from a common text. Korean Pentecostalism's emphasis on divine healing resonates with the Korean worldview on the wounding of the *han* (or ethnic essence) of communities caused by wars, colonialism and poverty.¹ Indian Pentecostalism's embrace of Dalits not only energized its base, but it also enlarged the pool of missionaries.² Or as Anderson observed, "without minimising the importance of Azusa Street, we must also give due recognition to places in the world where Pentecostal revivals broke out independently of this event and in some cases even predated it."³ Hence, descriptions such as Latin American Pentecostalism or Asian Pentecostalism must be understood not only as geographical entities, but also as contextual theologies shaped by culture and politics.

This is not to say that the "foreignness" of Christianity was not useful. Embracing Christianity was also a political fillip for marginalized and oppressed communities. Christianity's assorted associations with colonial authority, empire, or the West, often lent local communities an alternative identity that, in different ways and to different degrees, eased the asymmetrical power relations they had with more powerful local communities or the state. Christian conversion, for example, was a useful alternative for the Hmong minorities in Thailand to retain their Hmong identity without being absorbed by the Thai state.⁴ In Indonesia, the rise of the New Order and the suppression of the Indonesian Communist Party coincided with the conversion of many Chinese people to Christianity in a public expression of anti-communist sentiments.⁵ It would thus seem that Pentecostalism has been successfully pluralist, at least in part because

it has lent itself to political agenda. Even in John Sung's early twentieth-century missionary trips to China and Southeast Asia, politics was never too far away from Pentecostalism. Abandoning an academic career, Sung evangelized in one of the most tumultuous periods in modern China's history. He often mixed his sermons with political denunciations of the civil war and deep rooted feudalism, and called for the salvation of China through prayer and healing. Such denunciations stirred the passions of overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia, many of whom were sympathetic to reform movements in the hinterland.

Beyond its pluralist and political dimensions, Pentecostalism's deeply personal and experiential nature has been another key reason for its global popularity. For one, it enabled Pentecostalism to travel. Direct experiences of God and baptisms of the Holy Spirit enabled mass conversions in foreign lands. By cutting out institutional requirements like catechism classes or waiting for a slot on baptism schedules, the believer-divine relationship is not mediated by institutional hierarchy; the transformation from unsaved soul to Christian is instantaneous upon acceptance of Christ as Lord and Saviour. This *modus operandi* is especially convenient in evangelizing hostile or rural communities. Second, the appeal of a *sui generis* sensation of God must not be underestimated. The Pentecostal religious experience is a tailor-made, one-of-a-kind bond between believer and Saviour that gives primacy to agency and that bypasses institutional intermediaries. The Pentecostal experience involves the believer being filled with the Holy Spirit, being gifted with the ability to speak in tongues, or experiencing the losing of oneself in the divine. Even though thousands upon thousands have claimed to have had these experiences, each believes that what they went through was unique to them. This emphasis on the personal encounter with God underlines the highly subjective, non-rational nature of the Pentecostal embrace, which not only edifies the self but also elevates the believer's experience over intellectual inquiry. The free giving of oneself to exuberance and spiritual bliss has become more attractive in this era of "ecstasy deficit".⁶ Religious ecstasy and its sensual satisfaction has nudged Pentecostalism more closely to mass consumption and popular culture than any other Christian denomination.

But what is Pentecostalism? If Pentecostal pluralism refers to multiple and specific manifestations across the world, how do we identify it as a coherent movement? According to scholars, Pentecostalism includes traits such as the religious-spiritual experience, the baptism of the Holy Spirit, and the speaking of tongues, or *glossolalia*.⁷ Charismatic Pentecostalism refers to the belief that Christians are offered gifts of the Holy Spirit described in the New Testament, such as the gift of tongues, the gift of interpretation, the gift of healing, the gift of apostleship, the gift of prophecy, as well as the belief in signs, miracles and wonders.⁸

A 2011 Pew Research Centre study estimated that there were 279 million Pentecostals worldwide, comprising 12.8 per cent of the world Christian population.⁹ There are no official figures for the number of Pentecostals in Southeast Asia. However, the percentages of Christians (including Catholics) in Malaysia, Indonesia, Philippines, and Singapore are 13.2 per cent, 8.8 per cent, 85 per cent, and 18 per cent, respectively.¹⁰ There are two reasons why it is difficult to pin down the exact number of Pentecostals. First, many country censuses have not discretized Pentecostalism from the broader Christian community; the more common discrete terms used in these censuses were Protestantism and Catholicism. Second, as a movement, Pentecostalism does not have strict doctrines or hierarchy, and exists as both distinct congregations as well as fringe congregations in mainline denominations. Nonetheless, according to some estimates, there are 7.3 million Pentecostals in Indonesia; 2.2 million Pentecostals in Philippines; 206,000 Pentecostals in Malaysia; and 150,000 Charismatic Pentecostals in Singapore.¹¹

One of the contemporary manifestations of Pentecostalism is the emergence of the megachurch. Thumma and Bird defined megachurches as Protestant churches that draw weekly attendances of at least 2,000.¹² Megachurches across the United States witnessed average weekly attendances of 3,857 in 2000, growing to an average of 4,142 in 2008. These figures need to be reassessed, especially in the context of Southeast Asia, because of the phenomenal growth since the 1990s. Beyond large attendance numbers, the Pentecostal megachurch is also known for adopting marketing strategies, technologies, and the use of a consumerist ethos to advance their brand of Christianity.¹³ In short, they are

not only very large churches that experiment with tradition, liturgy and doctrine, but also draw on popular culture and a consumerist logic in order to attract an audience more familiar with rock and roll, shopping malls, and self-help culture than with traditional church liturgies, hymns, or symbols.¹⁴

In some ways, this should come as no surprise, given how “Pentecostalism has always made ready use of mass media, at its beginnings with the use of periodicals and newsletters, and later by a ready acceptance and utilisation of new technologies.”¹⁵

The Pentecostal megachurch, especially if it is of the independent variety, is known for its close association to the so-called prosperity gospels. American-style prosperity gospels can be traced back to the nineteenth-century “New Thought” movement in the United States made up of Pentecostal pastors, mystic healers, and small-time entrepreneurs who combined metaphysics and Protestantism.¹⁶ The economic boom in post-World War II America gave rise to positive thinking in business and religion; by the 1950s, Pentecostal healing revivalism was underway with many pastors praying for freedom from not future, but present, pain and sickness. These healing revivals included prayers for financial well-being and by the 1960s and 1970s had spawned a prosperity theology that is, today, recognizable as prosperity gospels. As Bowler noted,

The prosperity gospels emerging from Pentecostals and mainline positive thinking shared a belief in the power of Christian speech to achieve results. Both rendered affirmative repetition, visualisation, imagination, mood direction, and voiced scripture as prayerful habits.¹⁷

Other scholars have observed the popularity of prosperity gospels “in large urban areas with middle-class constituencies”.¹⁸ Like Bowler, Coleman agrees that the prosperity gospels are a mix of “Pentecostal revivalism with elements of positive thinking”.¹⁹ Believers are encouraged to make “positive confessions”, which involves laying claim to God’s provisions and promises in the present.²⁰

Understanding the popularity of the prosperity gospels, however, must go beyond reductionist explanations such as baser desires for wealth and health. Undoubtedly, this brand of gospels conjures up images of millionaire pastors travelling in private jets and luxury cars, paid for by faith donations from congregations eager to demonstrate their conviction that they too will be blessed with such pleasures. These

megachurches have reconciled spirituality with the materialism that has allowed the middle class and the aspiring middle class to demonstrate conspicuous consumption without moral awkwardness. This correlation between the material and the spiritual also enables believers to measure the immeasurable. After all, if God desires Christians to be healthy and wealthy, then, according to this logic, these manifestations must be tangible signs of being in right standing with the Lord. In sum, the prosperity gospels are claims about God's promises to Christians in a variety of areas such as personal life, business, professional success, health, and wealth, to demonstrate a visibly victorious life in Christ.

This book seeks to understand the growth and popularity of independent Pentecostal megachurches in Southeast Asia. The greatest growth in the region has been in Indonesia and the Philippines; Malaysia and Singapore also face significant expansions. This growth began in the early 1990s during the so-called "Asian miracle" that saw a period of sustained economic development in the region before the Asian financial crisis in 1997. However, the seeds of this growth were planted a decade earlier. Different scholars have observed different revivals and movements in the 1980s. Theologian C. Peter Wagner, among others, observed a so-called "third wave movement" of Charismatic Pentecostalism that swept across the 1980s.²¹ This was after first and second movements in the 1900s and 1960s, respectively. Other scholars like Synan noted that the 1980s was defined spiritually by "Third Wave renewal Pentecostals".²² These revivals were characterized by signs and wonders, the prophetic word, and divine healing; church leaders played increasingly higher profile roles, such as modern-day apostles and prophets.

The centre of gravity shifted from mainline denominational churches towards more dynamic congregations led by vibrant individuals because of the latter's stronger emphasis on agency. The intertwining of the third wave movement with divine healing and signs and wonders not only made evangelizing a faith-based and highly personal experience, but elevated the role of the preacher, such that his — given how this is usually a masculine role — ability to heal and reveal God's Word became commensurate to his church's success in evangelism.

The elevated role of the pastor has also corresponded to the decline of scriptural authority and consistency. Congregants, especially new converts, were more likely to receive and understand God's Word as spoken through His prophet, rather than on their own terms or on accepted doctrine and theology. "Truth" was less often excavated from textual exegesis; instead, it was increasingly embodied by personal charisma. The rise of the charismatic individual was also a broader reaction to traditional mainline denominations. People picked up on how the latter had mundane hymns in old English, liturgies in Latin, older people in pews, and had congregants that compartmentalized Sunday services from the rest of their everyday lives; these traits fed the perception that the traditional mainline church was an institution that was quickly losing its relevance to an expanding middle class that had the world at its feet.

By the early 1990s, the direct relationship with God, the religious experience in times of ecstasy deficit, and having a respected leader who could personify the Word, combined to make Charismatic Pentecostalism a far more attractive choice compared to traditional mainline churches. High savings, the attraction of global capital, and the movement of labour from rural to urban centres, resulted in material affluence and the formation of the middle class in the developing economies of Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand and, to a lesser extent, the Philippines, and further entrenched Singapore as a developed economy.

Scholars have argued that the Southeast Asian middle class possesses its own characteristics because of the speed of its formation and expansion. In contrast, the pace of industrialization in Europe has been relatively slow because of the incremental change of technology. Furthermore, the rate of change in Asia in the 1990s compressed into a decade what took centuries in Britain.²³ The Southeast Asian middle class was perceived as being beholden to state-centric development, deferential towards authority, and steeped in the tropes of "Asian culture", such as the emphases on the value of education and family-centredness. It was also considered to be open to the flows of globalization, alert to entrepreneurial opportunities and market sentiments, and capable of synthesizing Western and local norms and practices.²⁴ These characteristics were complicated by the ethnic, linguistic, and cultural divides that cut across many Southeast Asian societies. The "Asian miracle" animated existing ethnic and cultural

constituencies in new ways; it allowed them to articulate interests differently. The increases in global capital and mass consumption were accompanied by a surge in contemporary identity politics, especially the politics of religious identity.

Several factors explain why it was so easy to reconcile Pentecostalism with the Southeast Asian middle class. First, Christian resistance to neoliberalism and championing of social justice in the 1960s and 1970s was gradually replaced by an attraction to narratives of redistribution. Anglican, Methodist, and Catholic Churches reacted to the consequences of neoliberalism and mass industrialization by engaging in liberal efforts in the 1960s and 1970s. These churches invested in tackling social inequality and injustice and attempted to bring the Gospel beyond church walls through advocacy for worker rights, industrial action, and community organization. However, this changed at the emergence of the region's middle class which was dependent on state-centric growth.

As modern skyscrapers, bellowing highways, and sprawling urban infrastructure began to sprout in Kuala Lumpur, Manila, Surabaya and Jakarta, multinational companies were less likely to be perceived as exploiters of local workers but entities to live with. Social inequality and worker exploitation were still decried but not condemned with the moral vigour of yesteryear because the church no longer chose to "identify Christ with the suffering multitudes".²⁵ Instead of organizing exploited workers for industrial action, the Pentecostal church prayed for them. Instead of resisting social injustice and condemning the consequences of neocapitalism, the Pentecostal church preferred narratives of distribution. Socially-oriented ministries, such as charity work, soup kitchens, fund-raising for migrant workers became more commonplace. What made these Pentecostal churches different from other churches was that they were made up of the middle class and business class and were less interested in addressing the root causes of social problems, but more interested in soothing the pain emanating from these problems. By the 1990s, Pentecostalism was less concerned with changing the world or the status quo but, instead, preferred to make it more liveable. The middle class had found its religious cup of tea.

Second, and a closely related factor, was the way the prosperity gospels resonated with a newly formed middle class eager to flex its economic muscles. Mass consumption and the desire for goods that elevated social status made the prosperity gospels popular, especially

“in large urban areas with middle-class constituencies”.²⁶ Questions continue about whether the prosperity gospels appeal to the aspiring middle class because it offers hope for upward mobility, or to the wealthy because it serves as divine legitimacy of their social status.²⁷ In spite of these questions, Pentecostals have had little doubt about the literal interpretation of the scriptures. They often cite Jesus’s promise in Matthew 19:29 that “every one that hath forsaken houses, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my name’s sake, shall receive a hundredfold, and shall inherit everlasting life.” (KJV) Steve Bruce found that Pentecostals interpret this literally: “God wants us to be rich, only a lack of faith holds us back, and the gifts given of God (well, to his earthly representative) will be returned multiplied by 100.”²⁸ For example, Joseph Prince, senior pastor of New Creation Church, one of the largest Pentecostal megachurches in Singapore, declared, “Read 2 Corinthians 8 for yourself. The entire chapter is about money and being a blessing financially to those who are in need. So don’t let anyone tell you that the verse is referring to ‘spiritual’ riches.”²⁹

Third, Pentecostalism in Southeast Asia is popular because of the centrality of spirituality and spirits to its core beliefs. For many ethnic Chinese Pentecostal converts previously from Buddhist, Taoist, or other pantheistic folk religion backgrounds, the supernatural world remained an active constant in their religious transition. Like adherents to folk superstitions, many Pentecostals believe that the affairs of this world are outcomes of battles between angels and demons in a spiritual dimension, which makes prayer and fasting, and not social activism, the better weapons against “spiritual forces of evil”.³⁰ Southeast Asian Pentecostals were “slain by the spirit” and casted out demons similar to how temple mediums could be possessed by spirits, which made Pentecostalism oddly familiar to many ethnic Chinese. The raising of hands to receive the Holy Spirit, the speaking in tongues, and the endowment of spiritual gifts on believers attested to the body as a conduit for the supernatural. This was especially the case for the ethnic Chinese in Singapore and Malaysia, many of whom continue to straddle different cultural worlds; for them, the animated spiritual world of Pentecostalism bears comforting resemblance to folk religions.

Each contributor to this volume examines a Pentecostal megachurch in the urban centres of either Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, or Singapore. Using an ethnographic approach, each chapter examines the development of the megachurch, set against the specific background of the country's politics and history. Collectively, they make several important observations about Pentecostal megachurches in Southeast Asia.

First, the need to reconsider conventional theories on religion, especially early twentieth-century European ideas about the traditional divide between secular and sacred. Southeast Asian megachurches have broken through this divide, albeit in different ways, with increasing frequency. For example, the corporatizing abilities of the megachurch has meant the co-option of secular spaces such as retail and commercial spaces by the church, thus changing the nature of these secular spaces and expanding the definition of sacred spaces. This is most obvious in the cases of Indonesia and Singapore. Hoon Chang-Yau in his study of the Bethel Church of Indonesia finds that the megachurch used hotel ballrooms, shopping malls, and other commercial spaces for services, not only as an outward sign of the church's financial muscle, but also as an important security measure against potential mob protests.

In the case of Singapore, Daniel P.S. Goh notes the sale of the sermons of Joseph Prince, senior pastor of New Creation Church, together with other services such as childcare and travel in its church bookshops. This "moral economy" effectively blurs the line between sacred and secular, compelling Goh to observe that money, as an impure secular unit duly sanctified by pure grace, becomes a sacred subvention of transcendental value.

For Chong Eu Choong, this blurring of the secular and sacred also takes place through vocation and skills. Looking at the Bethesda Church in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, Chong notes that the church encourages its members to engage in church activities by contributing their professional and technical skills to church ministries that, in turn, also project technical and professional competence. This makes the church attractive to the middle class. Not only have these megachurches co-opted secular spaces or capitalist practices such that they take on a sacred agenda, but these secularities have also been given sacred meanings and become an extension of the modern day Pentecostal church.

Second, the importance of the personal narrative of the charismatic leader. The charismatic leader is usually in possession of a biography of trauma and salvation. This trauma may have come in the form of childhood depravation, working class background, a broken family, alienation, or even crime; all these set the stage for a life-changing encounter with God, resulting in salvation and the dedication of one's life to serve the Lord. Biographies of trauma and salvation are useful devices — in which the personal is made public — in underlining God's grace for the wider congregation. Biographies of trauma and marginalization present the pastor as the living embodiment of God's grace and love. Chao En-Chieh makes these observations in her study on Gereja Mawar Sharon in Indonesia. Chao notes that the megachurch's senior pastor, Philip Mantofa, suffered from a series of childhood illnesses, anger management, teenage waywardness, and suicide attempts. After moving from country to country in his early childhood, Mantofa found God in Canada and returned to Indonesia to serve God. When the charismatic megachurch leader is a redeemed man of the world, the church is more confident in its beliefs that it is firmly rooted in, and will have a positive impact on, this imperfect world.

Third, many megachurch-pastors exhibit expansionist visions. In terms of domestic expansion, Joel A. Tejedo's chapter on megachurches in Metro Manila underlines the rapid growth of Pentecostalism in different strata of Filipino society. Tejedo argues that Pentecostal megachurches outnumber mainline churches in the Philippines because the former is better than the latter at meeting the spiritual, social, and physical needs of many Filipinos. These megachurches are popular among the poor and rural because of their emphases on miracles, signs, and wonders, which connect Filipinos to the spirit world. They are also popular in the middle class because of their ability to reinvent Christian witness in highly urbanized centres. They have learned to maximize the potential of contemporary Christian worship, media, social networks, and other digital technologies to propagate their religious doctrine and spirituality.

Regarding regional expansionism, Terence Chong notes how the cultural mandate of City Harvest Church in Singapore embeds the megachurch firmly in popular culture. Through the medium of pop music, the megachurch sought to expand beyond Singapore shores to make its presence felt in Malaysia, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. In

addition to the typical use of activities like preaching and worship sessions, City Harvest Church was successful in harnessing secular pop music and the carefully manufactured image of the wife of its senior pastor to advance its agenda. The case of City Harvest Church also demonstrates the limits of expansionism, in light of its failure to break into the American music market, and in how several of its leaders were later found guilty of criminal breach of trust.

The fourth observation these chapters offer is about the rise of religious nationalism among Pentecostal megachurches. By religious nationalism, I mean, on the one hand, the belief that the nation belongs to God, and, on the other, the political or civic actions undertaken by the church to shape society for God. This belief may be articulated from the pulpit in different ways, such as God's love for His people or the need to answer God's call to rise up to be a shining light to the rest of the world. Either way, patriotism and nationalism are often fused with theology, not only to lay bare the nation's divine destiny, but also to mobilize for political activism. Indeed, the postcolonial character of many Southeast Asian societies, as well as the acknowledged absence of good governance in these societies, rampant corruption, and high crime rates, draws religion and nationalism into logical conflation. Even in countries with good governance like Singapore, the allure of religious nationalism is still to be found in how some Christians desire to influence the moral character of the nation.

Jayeel Cornelio's study of Philippine's Jesus Is Lord Church makes clear that religious nationalism is ironic in that it mires the church in precisely what it attempts to contest: political patronage, political dynasties, and even allegations of corruption. Cornelio also argues that there is not one particular expression of religious nationalism that is accepted by all churches. Furthermore, the cases of Malaysia and Indonesia reveal the limits of Christian-inspired religious nationalism, given Islam's prominence in these countries. Regardless, the key point is that these forms of religious nationalism are Christian moral responses to the breakdown of secular society and its politics.

Closely related to religious nationalism is the church's deepening engagement with social and welfare services for the national community. These social engagements allow the megachurch, especially in societies where open proselytizing is frowned upon, to weave itself more intimately into the social fabric without coming across as

threatening. Jeane Yip's study of Calvary Church in Kuala Lumpur, for instance, demonstrates how the church defines its social responsibilities as religious by nature but social in essence. With this, Calvary Church engages in activities such as blood donation drives, counselling, and care centres; all open to different races and religions. How these amalgamations of the secular and the sacred will play out in the future remains uncertain.

Finally, and related to the propensity for expansion, religious nationalism, and social engagement is the forging of transnational and local alliances. These chapters have shown a propensity for building networks and links with like-minded organizations towards specific agenda. LoveSingapore, for example, is a loose coalition of evangelical churches that organizes prayer summits and intercessions on national issues and government. This coalition, currently led by Faith Community Baptist Church's Lawrence Khong, consolidates the views and discourses to present some semblance of unity and uniformity from within a diverse community. Taking a more political vein, the Philippines for Jesus Movement, an alliance of independent Pentecostal and evangelical churches, involves itself in television broadcasting and contemporary public concerns. The movement even participated in protests against China's occupation of islands territorially claimed by the Philippines.

In the effort to bring the Gospel beyond the walls of the church, megachurches are extending theological imaginations to the contradictions and fissures in local society. These theological imaginations will be crucial in framing their positions and roles in different communities. More importantly, such imaginations will continue to grow more attractive, as expressed through the lens of popular culture and mass consumption.

NOTES

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27. On the appeal to the aspiring middle class, see Cox, *Fire from Heaven*; on the appeal to the wealthy, see Steve Bruce, *Pray TV: Televangelism in America* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990).
28. Steve Bruce, *Secularisation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 188.
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30. Popular Bible verses used to support this belief include Ephesians 6:12: "For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (ESV); 2 Corinthians 10:3-5: "For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We

destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ." (ESV).

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