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State and Social Christianity in Post-colonial Singapore

Daniel P.S. GOH

In the context of Christianity's rapid growth in post-colonial Singapore, why has Pentecostalism replaced liberal Christianity as the dominant form in the last few decades? Going beyond existing cultural explanations of Pentecostal affinity with Asian folk religions and the modernization thesis, I look at the Church as social movement, as *social* Christianity engaging, specifically in Singapore, the post-colonial developmental state. Pentecostalism became popular after the state consolidated its rule in the 1980s and suppressed nascent liberal Christian movements. This is because, compared to its fundamentalist evangelical competitor, the Pentecostal development of *Asian* contextual theologies of spiritual warfare and blessings provided young Singaporeans with practical ideologies to make sense of the spiritual telos of the post-colonial nation and engage the developmental ethos of the state. Singaporean Pentecostals are at the crossroads today, faced with a decision between the social justice emphasis of liberal Christianity and fundamentalist moral activism.

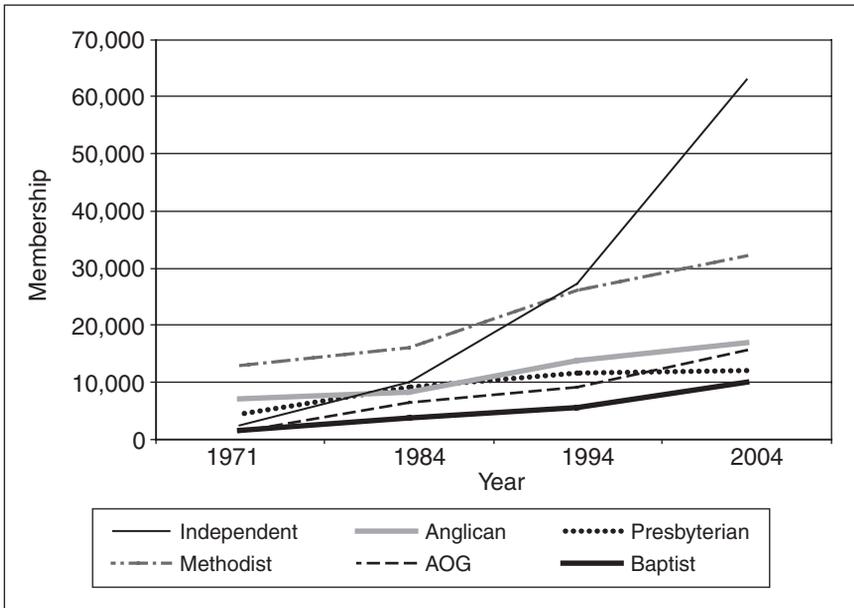
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The Trajectory of Christianity in Post-colonial Singapore

Christianity has flourished in post-colonial Singapore, especially attracting conversions from among young, urbanized and English-educated Chinese. In 2000, Protestants numbered some 245,000, comprising almost ten per cent of the total resident population according to the official census, when they represented a mere estimated two per cent in 1970 (Department of Statistics 2001, table 38). Though initially dominated by liberal Christianity, the overwhelmingly popular choice for conversion in recent decades has been to churches

that are Pentecostal *and* evangelical, derived from American influences, followed by non-Pentecostal evangelical congregations as a distant second, and lastly, the Catholic Church. The Pentecostal Assemblies of God have outgrown the evangelical Baptists and the mainstream Presbyterian Church in the 2000s (Figure 1). Mainstream denominations that have done well are those which have embraced charismatic renewal and evangelicalism, in particular the Anglicans

Figure 1
Church Membership According to Protestant Denominations



Source: Wong 1971a, p. 2; Singapore Every Home Crusade, 1987, 1995; National Council of Churches of Singapore 2005. The 2008 attendance at the weekly services of Lighthouse Evangelism, New Creation Church, City Harvest Church, and Faith Community Baptist Church — the four largest independent Pentecostal churches founded in 1978, 1984, 1986, and 1989 respectively — totaled 63,000 worshippers and is used as an estimate of the membership in independent churches in 2004. Attendance figures are self-reported and taken from <www.newcreation.org.sg> (accessed 19 November 2008), <www.fcbc.org.sg> (accessed 19 November 2008), and <www.chc.org.sg> (accessed 19 November 2008); Lighthouse Evangelism figure cited in *Sunday Times* (Singapore) 10 August 2008. Assemblies of God figure is for 2001. Baptist figure is for 2008 and taken from <www.baptistconvention.org.sg> (accessed 19 November 2008).

and Methodists since the early 1980s. Independent Pentecostal churches saw the most spectacular growth. On the other hand, the Catholic Church, which was a bastion of liberal Christianity before the “Marxist conspiracy” detentions of the late 1980s, grew only slightly from 80,000 members in 1971 to 119,000 in 2000, from outnumbering Protestants by two to one to being outnumbered by the same ratio (*ibid.*).

In broad historical strokes, liberals dominated the Christian scene in the 1960s and 1970s, but they were challenged by evangelicals and then overtaken by Pentecostals from the 1980s. How do we explain this rapid decline of liberal Christianity and dramatic rise of Pentecostalism in post-colonial Singapore? Scholars have argued that the explosive growth of Pentecostalism in capitalist East Asia involves the hybridization of American Pentecostalism, resulting in the emphatic focus on this-worldly spiritualist world views and practices which uncannily resemble the syncretic, shamanistic practices of Asian folk religions (Cox 1996, p. 221; Hwa 2008, p. 263; DeBernardi 2005; Goh 2009).

While this partly explains the ability of Pentecostalism to adapt and resonate with local cultures better than conservative evangelicalism, it does not explain the decline of liberal Christianity and the 1980s as the turning point, which was also the watershed decade for many post-colonial nation states experiencing democratization at the end of the Cold War. Others have observed similar trajectories of liberal Christian decline and Pentecostal growth in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, but suggest that Pentecostalism is already showing potential to take on the social issues championed by liberal Christianity, including the more radical views of liberation theology (Cleary and Stewart-Gambino 1997; Anderson 2004, pp. 261–78; Miller and Yamamori 2007).

Clearly then, the post-colonial trajectory of Christianity must be explained with regards to, firstly, the contextual theology that defined the social thought and teachings of Church leaders; secondly, larger social movements in global Christianity; and thirdly, with regards to the developmental state attempting to shape and control Asian

public spheres, in which religious groups have historically been influential, constituent participants. I argue that Pentecostalism has been immensely popular because it replaced liberal Christianity in providing a practical contextual framework to make sense of the *spiritual telos* of the post-colonial nation and engage the *developmental ethos* of the Singapore state. This took place *after* the Charismatic Movement began to spread to Asia in the 1970s, and the Singapore state consolidated its rule during the wave of democratization in East Asia in the 1980s that liberal Christianity contributed substantially to, most vividly in South Korea and the Philippines.

The Singapore state is an exemplary developmental state with a peculiar post-colonial affliction. Unlike other nation-building projects, the Singapore state has not turned to the cultural artifacts and imaginaries of ancient traditions (Anderson 1991) or creative transformations of ethno-religious traditions into nationalist discourses (Chatterjee 1993). For the founding state elites, Singapore is an ex-colonial port city of recent migrants with shallow historical memory and anti-colonial experience. Instead, the Singapore state has grounded the imagination of the nation in the calling of modernity to achieve progress and prosperity through rapid industrialization and participation in the capitalist world economy. As a developmental state, it has uncompromisingly disciplined and mobilized a self-regulating citizenry to fulfill modernity's calling through the ethos of economic asceticism, pragmatism, and diligence, though this was given a strong cultural gloss in the state's promotion of conservative "Asian values" in the 1980s as part of its political consolidation against democratization.

In his global survey of religion and the state from the vantage point of secularization theory, Fox (2008, pp. 214, 216) classifies the state-religion relationship in Singapore as state "hostility" to religion, the origins of which can be traced to historical events in the 1980s. In 1987, the state extra-judicially detained church workers and activists for an alleged "Marxist conspiracy" to subvert the state. Though most of the detainees were Catholic activists, warnings were issued against evangelical and Pentecostal Christians and the

liberal Christian Conference of Asia was expelled from Singapore. The Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act was enacted in 1990, giving the state wide-ranging powers to muzzle religious leaders and practitioners who stray beyond social and political boundaries established by the state.

However, Fox's characterization of the state-religion relationship as state hostility misses out on the complex discursive space in which the politics of religion and secularism are played out in the post-colonial world. Under the aegis of secularization theory, we have long adopted the separation of state and religion as our analytical starting point and theoretical problem, where we presume the secularity of the state and consign religion to the realm of private, individual beliefs, or at best, to ethno-cultural traditions with varying shades of "rationality" intruding into the political sphere. My approach takes secularization as a dynamic political discursive process and secularism as a discourse that the modern state inherited from Western colonialism. In this process, the state seeks to place the "religious" as *private reason* and the "secular" as *public principle* (Asad 2003, p. 8), as it competes against religious traditions to define and meet social goods in the public sphere (Salvatore 2007).

The specific post-coloniality of Singapore is of key significance here in shaping the relationship between Christianity and the state. I show that liberal Christian contextual theology challenged the dominant national narrative and developmental ethos held by the post-colonial state and sparked the crackdowns in the 1980s. The decline of liberal Christianity after the crackdowns was followed by the explosive growth of Pentecostalism. Contemporary development of Pentecostal contextual theology has led to the emergence of a new Christian agency that is re-engaging the national imagination and testing the state-policed separation of religion and politics.

Asianism and the Post-coloniality of Liberal Christianity

In 1948, in response to the fast-changing international socio-political milieu, the ecumenical World Council of Churches convened its first assembly in Amsterdam. As part of the worldwide ecumenical

movement; the Malayan Christian Council was formed in the same year. The Western leaders of local Protestant churches were influenced by liberal theology and saw liberal action as a necessary response to the spread of communism and other secular left-wing ideologies. While the Emergency war was being fought between British troops and Malayan Communist Party guerrillas through the 1950s, the council undertook educational and pastoral activities, opening libraries, resource centres and student hostels and, most importantly, sending mobile movie-screening vans and hundreds of Christian workers into more than half of the 600 resettled “New Village” communities to preach and provide basic social services (Sng 1980, p. 243). At the same time, the council did not neglect the theological aspects of the joint social action and set up a Faith and Order Commission to unify the scriptures, creeds, sacraments, and ministry of the constituent Protestant churches. But the ambitious effort failed and the commission was wound down in 1962.

In the 1960s, with the communist threat dissipated, the local churches faced the new problems of industrialization and nation building. After Singapore had unwillingly separated from Malaysia and become an independent nation state, local laypeople and ministers became involved in the setting up of the Singapore Industrial Mission in 1966. The mission came under the auspices of the National Council of Churches of Malaysia and Singapore and became linked to the Urban and Industrial Missions sprouting all over Asia in this period. The regional ecumenical body, the East Asia Christian Conference, in which the various national councils of churches and local churches were affiliates, coordinated the development of the missions.

The Singapore mission quickly established itself in Jurong town, the massive industrial urban project that was at the heart of the government’s development programme, and aimed to “promote the vision and the building of a viable human and mature community”, “help the community to become a participant and creative community organized for the interest of all”, and “foster new social values that would help in cultivating inter-racial community understanding and

solidarity” (Sng 1980, pp. 275–76). In 1968, the mission opened a civic centre in the ecumenical Jurong Christian Church led by the Lutheran Church. To develop the mission’s capacity and train its local workers and student volunteers from the University of Singapore and the mainstream Trinity Theological College, the East Asia Christian Conference sent Ron Fujiyoshi, a Japanese-American trained in Chicagoan grassroots activist Saul Alinsky’s “Community Organization” technique of mobilizing and empowering the poor through non-violent, organized negotiations with the powerful to win concessions (O’Grady 1990, p. 82, Barr 2008, p. 231). The civic centre flourished and the measures of its success were the jealous antagonism of state-supported union leaders and the eventual closing down of the centre and the mission in 1972 after government warnings (Sng 1980, pp. 277–78).

During the life of the mission in Jurong, Singapore’s Anglican bishop, Chiu Ban It, was vice-chairperson (1968–69) and acting chairperson (1970–73) of the East Asia Christian Conference. The World Christian Council and the International Missionary Council organized the meeting of the first conference in 1949. In the wake of the 1955 non-aligned movement meeting in Bandung, the second meeting of the conference in 1956 recommended the establishment of an Asian ecumenical body. The inaugural assembly of the conference met in Kuala Lumpur in 1959 and resolved to remain a coordinating body for networking affiliated national councils and churches rather than to become “an administrative outpost of” the World Council of Churches and International Missionary Council (Park 1982, p. 123). That it chose to do so reflected the Asian churches’ desire to remain autonomous from Western liberal ecumenism. But not separate, for the conference’s aim was to indigenize and transform liberal theology, and later liberation theology, into a socially-engaged Asian theology. In 1964, the conference met in Bangkok and declared, “Much Christian thinking, particularly in the West, has emphasized the necessity to limit state power. But in Asian countries we must stress the positive functions of government in the re-ordering of economic life and the duty of Christians and other citizens to accept the authority of the

state and a great measure of state-imposed discipline as a means to social progress” (O’Grady 1990, p. 57).

The years that followed turned out to be the turning point in the conference’s identity. Theologically, the Asian Faith and Order Conference on “Confessing Christ in Asia Today” organized in 1966 failed to define the unity of the Asian churches in the terms of Western ecumenism. The East Asia Christian Conference declared instead, “For the churches in Asia to confess the faith means that they speak out of their oneness given to them in Jesus Christ and that they speak also out of their solidarity with the world in which they live” (quoted in Anderson 1976, p. 6). The Conference had inverted the ecumenical aims of the World Council from “Christian Confessions” to “Confessing Christians”, which meant “existential involvement rather than formulation of the right kind of creedal statements” (Park 1982, p. 124). Organizationally, the conference centralized its operations to push the articulation and practice of its Asian social theology forward. A year after the shutting down of the Singapore Industrial Mission, in 1973, the conference was renamed the Christian Conference of Asia and established its head office in Singapore. In addition to the involvement of local Christians in its various committees and staffing, Lee Soo Jin served as the conference’s information officer from 1972 to 1977 and methodist bishop Yap Kim Hao officiated as its general secretary from 1973 to 1985 (O’Grady 1990, p. 33).

In the context of the larger regional shifts in Asian Christianity, the failures of the Faith and Order Commission in Singapore and the Singapore Industrial Mission reflected the reorientation of Asian social theology and the experimental adaptation of community organizing methods to Asian societies. The same Asianizing theological reorientations and experimental adaptations of organizational methods took place among evangelical and Pentecostal Christians, and the struggle between the three factions was played out in the development of competing *Asian Christianities*, each with their own social theologies. This competition implicated the state. As the churches intervened in the social field that the developmental state was attempting to

discipline and configure for rapid industrialization, the practical importance of state-church separation became a political flashpoint.

Once established in Singapore, the Christian Conference of Asia got down to business and identified three priority areas. Hunger and human rights became two focal points for the development of its programmes. The third area, theological reflection, was arguably the most important, as the conference believed that its programmes were “incomplete” if the theological understanding of them were not “clearly thought through” (O’Grady 1977, p. 54). By the end of the decade, the conference established the basis of liberal Asian theology. The theology anchored the “growing sense of ‘Asian-ness’” in the common experiences of the *spiritual* understanding of non-Christian Asian religions that “were at the same time more deep and more subjective than those held by Western Christians”, the *historical* legacies of colonialism and semi-colonialism in which the church was implicated, and the *economic* reality of poverty and bondage linked to global economic processes (pp. 7–8). The Conference published a volume titled *Asian Theological Reflections on Suffering and Hope* in 1977, edited by Yap, in which liberal Asian theology was presented as departing from Western theology, including “Latin American and Black American Liberation theologies”, and speaking “to and within the context of Asian suffering and hope” (Niles 1977a, p. 16).

There were four key distinctive elements in liberal Asian theology that engaged the national narratives of developing Third World countries. Firstly, though the theology rooted its understanding of “people” in the amorphous image of the suffering multitudes as opposed to the imagined community of the nation or the imagination of the revolutionary class (Niles, 1977b, p. 11), it introduced the Hindu-Buddhist spirituality and sensibility in seeing in each suffering person the suffering Christ bearing the cross. This was reflected in Malaysian Methodist minister Patrick Yeo’s (1977, pp. 30–35) intimate portrayal of old Lee Pak Sook, a sixty-eight-year-old man who struggles to earn his livelihood selling red-bean soup in the streets, his back permanently deformed by the two large pots he carries around balanced on a pole.

Secondly, because Christ now lived among the suffering peoples, the sacraments were not to be found in the institutional church but out there in society. Taiwanese theologian Choan-Seng Song (1977, p. 58) expressed this using a Vietnamese poem about a mother who lost her son in the war, who fills a bowl with new rice, placing chopsticks at the side and chasing the flies away while suffering in the memory of her son. Offering cooked food to the dead is a very common practice in shamanistic Asian folk religions. For Song, he saw it as “a bowl of sacramental rice” like “the bread and wine which Jesus offered to his disciples just before his death on the cross”.

Thirdly, as already evident in the examples I have offered, the theology called for the “rediscovery” and appropriation of “traditional religious cultures” in Asia because “the subverting of values and insights” of these cultures during colonialism and “later in the interests of modernization” was the cause of “many situations of suffering” (Niles 1977b, p. 8). An anthology of Asian Christian and non-Christian writings on *Suffering and Hope* published by O’Grady and Lee for this purpose for the 1977 assembly of the conference became so popular that the conference reissued a revised edition in 1978.

Fourthly, sin was theologized not as an individual attribute but as “corporate sin”, where modern corporate political, economic, and military organizations compete and turn power into “a demonic force”, causing suffering (ibid., p. 12). Citing the Old Testament on the pathos of Yahweh caught between the demands of justice and love for sinful Israel, whose suffering in exile and hope for deliverance turned the nation into a witness for Yahweh’s historical agency, Sri Lankan theologian Preman Niles wrote that sin was to be confronted by witnessing “to God’s justice in Asia” that would “invariably involve” the elect in “situations of suffering” (Niles 1977a, p. 27).

Evangelical Reaction and Pentecostal Beginnings

Though the Singaporean contribution was significant to the development of liberal Asian theology, the practice of this theology in Singaporean churches was being challenged by evangelical and

Pentecostal green shoots. Retrospectively in 1990, the conference disparaged Singaporean churches for being “caught up in internal church growth” and “such theological issues as demon worship, speaking in tongues and the second coming”, criticized the Singapore Anglican Church for turning into a fundamentalist sect, and cited a Malaysian Anglican leader who described the Singapore Church as dominated by a “heretical” and “inwardly pagan group” preferring “Christianity tailored to suit the interests of the rich” and working with Pentecostals (O’Grady 1990, pp. 29, 35).

A more disinterested reading would see this as reflecting conflict between liberals, evangelicals, and Pentecostals in the Protestant scene. Indeed, Anglican bishop Chiu embraced Pentecostalism in 1973 after he retired from the leadership of the conference and launched the charismatic renewal in the local Anglican Church. The evangelicals remained ambivalent about Pentecostalism, viewing the revival energy it produced as positive for evangelism but worried that the Pentecostals lacked “a clear biblical foundation” (Sng 1980, p. 294).

The evangelicals were, however, largely reacting to the rise of liberal Christianity. The first documented reaction was in 1955, when a conservative faction opposed the participation of the Presbyterian Church in the ecumenical movement and broke away to form the Bible-Presbyterian Church, modeled after the fundamentalist sect of the same name in the United States (*ibid.*, p. 251). In 1970, the Graduates’ Christian Fellowship organized two church strategy conferences to respond to the “serious challenge” of the “deviant liberal teachings of the Ecumenical Institute of Chicago” (Sng 1992, pp. 15–16). According to Anglican minister James Wong’s diagnosis, the church “failed to reflect an indigenous characteristic”, lacked trained local ministers, did not face up “to the long term consequences and effects” of urbanization and industrialization, could not “meet total human needs”, were silent “on social and community problems”, lacked missionary zeal, and ignored the laity (Wong 1971b, pp. 2–4). These difficulties were precisely the strengths that liberal Christianity possessed. Mirroring the prophetic posture of liberals, Wong (1973, p. 109) indicted the church for being “inarticulate on all too many

significant social issues” and that it not only failed “to expose evil, but it was silent when it might have endorsed humanizing movements in society”.

Theologically, the evangelicals also believed that they were called to move out of the institutional church, but the evangelicals did not identify Christ with the suffering multitudes. Instead, the evangelicals focused on the *formal* aspects of *oikos* (house churches) and *koinonia* (fellowship) as ordained forms of Godly organization and worship exemplified in the Acts of the Apostles. Rejecting the “traditional Western style” church “with its ‘edifice complex’”, the evangelicals believed house churches would show to non-Christians that Christianity “need not be imitations of the West” and an exclusive religion of the Westernized middle-classes, and would thereby provide a more indigenous expression of Christianity (*ibid.*, pp. 129–32). Because of the physical limitations, the evangelicals believed that house churches would develop an indigenous liturgy and catechism. The main problems expected by the evangelicals were government restrictions and “satanic disruptions” to “frustrate the Christian cause” (*ibid.*, pp. 134, 139). Rather than building ecumenical and inclusive Christian communities out of multi-religious peoples, as favoured by the liberals, the evangelicals sought to build exclusive Christian communities embedded among the peoples and bearing witness to them. Instead of peoples with sacramental rice who were already Christians without knowing it, the evangelicals saw the peoples as rice fields ripe for harvest.

Growth was however tepid in the 1970s, as can be seen in Figure 1. The evangelicals were decades behind the liberals in theological and programme development and found the planting of house churches difficult. It was reported in 1980 that the future of house churches was “one of uncertainty” because of government restrictions and “satanic disruptions” in the form of complaints from neighbours (Sng 1980, p. 273). The growth of para-church bible study groups among undergraduate students and white-collar workers took away the educated leadership needed to plant house churches, at least in the shorter term. With around a third of Christians having attended

charismatic meetings at least once and two-thirds of pastors reporting that their congregation was involved in charismatic meetings in 1979, competition from Pentecostals drew more energy away (p. 293). Evangelicalism received a major shot in the arm when American preacher, Billy Graham, traveled to Singapore for a week-long “crusade” at the 65,000-seat National Stadium that mobilized the evangelicals and converted almost 12,000 people (p. 302). But the Graham crusade also proved that the evangelicals’ house-church strategy and bible-centred theology lacked experiential appeal and that young Singaporeans favoured mega-worship events evincing collective effervescence and the heightening of spiritual experiences.

The Convergence of Liberal Catholicism and Protestantism

In the 1970s, liberal Catholics filled in the social vacuum left by the shutting down of the Singapore Industrial Mission, failure of evangelical house-church planting, and internal struggles within Protestant churches. The growth of Catholic liberalism mirrored the rise of liberal Protestantism in Singapore. Liberal Catholicism also started out as a response to the spread of communism in Asia followed by the theological development of the calling of Catholic social action in modernizing Asian societies. In the 1950s, *Aquinas*, the publication of the Catholic Students’ Society of the University of Malaya and later University of Singapore, carried articles by the Church’s Western leaders on socio-economic and political issues that attempted to carve out the principles of anti-communist and Catholic social action. At times, the arguments seemed retrograde, for example, when an author argued that vocational groups infused with “the aims and motives of ancient guilds”, rather than the trade unionism that had become rampant in Malaya, would reconcile modern industrial organization and “the spirit of Christianity” (*Aquinas* 1951, p. 48). The social doctrines and proclamations of the Church were contrasted with Marx’s and communist writings as favouring sympathy for the oppressed and the loving cooperation of the whole society as an organic body rather than class hatred and revolution (*Aquinas* 1954, p. 15; 1956, pp. 26–29).

However, through the workshops, seminars, and international exchanges of the Pax Romana Catholic university student movement, the rising crop of young local leaders began to question the received wisdom. In 1957, a student leader wrote of nationalist “mass egotism and self idolatry” as a lesser evil to communism but that the time would come soon for the “rediscovery” of the “higher law above that of tribe and nation” (*Aquinas* 1957, p. 26). The Society ran a work camp in 1957, the year the East Asia Christian Conference was founded, focused entirely on socio-political understanding and action. The students resolved to organize Catholic action groups, get in touch with workers personally to understand their problems, organize more non-religious functions to reach out to non-Catholics, and actively participate in political life in the university and society (*Aquinas* 1957, pp. 35–36).

The 1970 issue carried a report of the pan-Asian conference of the International Movement of Catholic Students in Hong Kong, where the central theme of the suffering of man in Asia, “in his dignity, his economic rights, his political freedom, his cultural values and sense of social justice”, emerged (*Aquinas* 1970, p. 38). Theological development and social criticisms followed, grounded in radical Catholic theology such as the Slant Manifesto collective of leftist Catholic intellectuals in Britain, translations of liberation theology, and the writings of radical Filipino and American Jesuits (*Aquinas* 1971, p. 14; 1973–74, p. 8; 1975, pp. 37–38; 1976, pp. 7–8). The Society also began organizing “base communities” of students praying, studying, and acting in small groups inspired by South American churches. But unready to step into the political fray, the Catholic students quietly observed as secular student activists led by Tan Wah Piow campaigned for socio-economic rights and were crushed by state repression in the early 1970s (*Aquinas* 1979, p. 46).

During this period, Catholic ministry to the workers of the new industrial workforce was accomplished through the Young Christian Workers Movement, a European Catholic movement emerging in the 1920s in response to both economic liberalism and communism. The Young Christian Workers established the Jurong Workers’ Centre

in 1971, just as the Singapore Industrial Mission ran into trouble. Paris Foreign Missions Society priest, Guillaume Arotcarena, later established the Geylang Catholic Centre in 1980 to minister to foreign workers, particularly Filipina maids. From 1979, after Young Christian Workers chaplain, Patrick Goh, took over the Catholic Students' Society chaplaincy, Catholic undergraduates began to consolidate their small group organization, theological understanding, social criticism, and activities for focused critical action and solidarity with secular student organizations that reflected what Goh called "a way of life by which we are truly present in the student milieu and in society ... service rendered lovingly and effectively with and on behalf of students and others ... with our eyes fixed on the Kingdom" (*Aquinas* 1979, p. 8).

Aquinas was transformed from an annual magazine to a vehicle for focused reflection and action on social issues and "communicating with members of the church" (*Aquinas* 1979, p. 48). The 1979 issue featured reports, analyses, and articles on children in Singapore, including an article on child labour in Singapore by the Archdiocese's Justice and Peace Commission. The 1980 issue, themed "The Tertiary Student and Society", carried articles critical of governmental economic and educational restructuring. In the years ahead, the Young Christian Workers and the Catholic Students' Society became involved in campaigns against the twelve-hour shift, retrenchment, and the eugenicist Graduate Mothers scheme to give privileges to children of university graduates to stem falling birthrates among the highly educated (see Barr 2008, pp. 238–39).

The maturing of liberal Catholicism in Singapore was part of the coming of age of liberal Christianity in Asia. The Christian Conference of Asia began to move concretely on its development programmes. In 1980, the conference published its *Guidelines for Development*, spelling out its methodology to achieve three needs: "People need release from bondage", "People need to be restored from being mere objects to their role as subjects in society", "Society itself needs to be transformed". In the section on "Asian Realities and the Christian Response", the conference called on Christians to fulfil

the “kingly function” of the church as “both a humble servant and a moral force in society”, the “prophetic function in a critical outlook around issues of justice and human rights” and the “priestly function which nurtures a new spirituality empowering people to engage in the struggle of the poor” (Perkins 1980, pp. 1, 10).

In 1984, the conference and the World Council of Churches’ Commission on the Churches’ Participation in Development organized the Asia Forum on Justice and Development in Singapore, where the explicit move into the political was made: “It was recognized that the people’s struggle for development/liberation involves political action, and therefore, that the churches must also be prepared to involve themselves in the political process in order to participate in this struggle.” This was not a call for revolution or a rejection of capitalism and the state, but a call for radical democratization so that the benefits of development would be equitably distributed (Park and Schimdt 1984, p. v).

Given the increasing convergence of their liberal theologies and social activism, informal regional and local links between liberal Catholics and Protestants grew. Representing the Christian Conference of Asia, Singapore Methodist bishop Yap attended the Catholic Church’s Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conference in 1973, and the latter reciprocated by sending a Catholic bishop to observe the Christian Conference of Asia’s General Committee session in 1975 (O’Grady 1977, p. 17). Both conferences also sponsored the founding of the Committee for Asian Women and Asian Committee for People’s Organization in the 1970s, both independently run groups that, in turn, seeded and trained community organizations across Asia. Locally, in Singapore, the conference helped fund the Geylang Catholic Centre’s assistance programme for foreign domestic workers (O’Grady 1990, p. 83).

“Marxist Conspiracy” and Pandora’s Boxes

In May 1987, the Singapore government arrested sixteen church workers and social activists, calling them “new hybrid pro-communist

types [augmenting] traditional Communist Party of Malaya tactics with new techniques and method”, for using the Catholic Church and other religious organizations in a “Marxist conspiracy” to subvert the state (*Straits Times* [ST] 30 May 1987). Arrested under the Internal Security Act, the sixteen could be detained indefinitely and extra-judicially. Vincent Cheng, a full-time Catholic worker and executive secretary of the Justice and Peace Commission, was accused of taking orders from Tan Wah Piow — the secular student activist who fled Singapore in the 1970s after government crackdowns — and leading a conspiracy of three other Church workers, six volunteers, and six other acquaintances who at one point or another were connected to liberal Christian activities. The government traced the origins of the conspiracy to the Jurong Industrial Mission, where Tan, then a University of Singapore Students Union leader, met Vincent Cheng and Tan’s future wife who were both working at the mission (*Business Times* 28 May 1987). The Young Christian Workers, the University of Singapore and Singapore Polytechnic Catholic Students’ Societies, Geylang Catholic Centre, the Justice and Peace Commission, and four liberal priests, including Patrick Goh, were also implicated.

Archbishop Gregory Yong responded cautiously and called on Catholics to pray for justice to be done, but some 2,000 Catholics thronged a hastily arranged special service for the detainees and the Justice and Peace Commission issued an open letter defending its activities as legitimate and in line with the Vatican’s social proclamations, reiterating the church’s “prophetic role” in delivering “a message, especially relevant and important in our age, about liberation” (*New Straits Times* [NST] 29 May 1987, 2 June 1987). Soon after, a meeting with Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew led Yong to concede the case of Vincent Cheng to the government (ST 3 June 1987). To the dismay of the detainees’ families and lay Catholics, Yong took action to avoid further conflict with the government by stopping the sale of the immediate issue of the *Catholic News*, suspending the four liberal priests from preaching and accepting their resignation from the implicated organizations, closing the Geylang

Catholic Centre, and tightening control over church administration (*Far Eastern Economic Review* 4 June 1987, p. 8; 11 June 1987, p. 11; *NST* 6, 7, and 8 June 1987; *ST* 7 June 1987).

The “conspiracy” was the beginning of a long political crisis and realignment in Singapore that involved further arrests, international human rights pressure, diplomatic spats with the United States, snap elections, political succession in the ruling People’s Action Party, opposition parties making inroads, the articulation of Asian values discourse, and the development of new tactics to forestall the democratization that took place in fellow newly-industrialized Asian states, South Korea and Taiwan. Looking back, it is easy to see how the “conspiracy” arrests ultimately benefited the ruling elites in their attempt to maintain political dominance in the wave of democratization taking place at the end of the Cold War. But no statesman could have been so prescient. The government leaders did not even think that the group posed a real danger of “starting a revolution” or did anything “subversive yet” (*ST* 2 June 1987, 24 August 1988). Why then did the state risk political instability by arresting Catholic activists? Why did the secular elites feel so threatened by liberal Christianity?

Barr (2008) argues that the “conspiracy” justification conceals the state’s real concern, which was that the socio-political capacity of liberal Christianity threatened the state’s monopoly on setting the public agenda for the *day-to-day* running of the country. This was true, but it was not just that liberal Christian criticism of transnational capitalism and activism with regards to local and migrant labour went to the everyday operations of the developmental state. The detained activists’ liberal Asian theological views also challenged the state’s national discourse by connecting local worker experiences to the larger confluences of working-class experiences in developing Asia. Then, the state’s imagination of the nation was grounded in a pragmatist discourse of survival in a hostile world, in which the nation’s salvation was signified by the economic modernity of the developed West, to be achieved through obedience, diligence, and frugality. Counterpoised against fear as the underpinning of the

national sentiment, liberal Asian theology offered the prospects of fraternity, dignity, and the renaissance of Asian traditions.

By the time of the arrests, liberal Christians were already spearheading political opposition to the national-developmental regimes in South Korea and the Philippines. Street protests broke out in South Korea just as the arrests in Singapore took place. International human rights pressure responding to the arrests further vindicated the ruling elites' fears that the wave of democratization was arriving in Singapore through liberal Christianity. The Federation of International Jurists, International Commission of Jurists, and Asian Human Rights Commission sent lawyers on fact-finding missions, but their interview requests with state officials were rejected (*NST* 8 July 1987). The human rights pressure escalated but the government treated protests from about 200 organizations in both the West and Asia as coming from "comrades-in-arms" of the detainees (*ST* 27 June 1987).

The International Affairs arm of the Christian Conference of Asia and the International Commission of Jurists co-organized a seminar on "The Erosion of the Rule of Law in Asia" in Bangkok in December 1987. Former Solicitor General, Francis Seow, who was representing a few of the arrested activists, spoke of the erosion of judicial independence in Singapore. A week later, the government expelled the conference, accusing it of mounting "a campaign against the recent arrests of the Marxist conspirators", involving "subsidiary bodies" in the region, including the Asian Human Rights Commission, and "its member Councils of Churches". The government also stated that it recently discovered that the conference was "responsible for starting the Jurong Industrial Mission" and financed Vincent Cheng twice when he was studying at the Trinity Theological College in Singapore and working at the Geylang Catholic Centre (*Singapore Government Press Release [SGPR]* no. 48/Dec, 30 December 1987).

That the government belatedly discovered the connection between the conference and the Singapore Industrial Mission, after nearly two decades, suggests the elites were largely unaware of the complexity and scale of Christian development in Asia until events in the Philippines and South Korea caused them to look more closely at the Singapore

church and the religious sphere at large. Thus, just two months after the arrests, the government commissioned social scientists to study religious revivalism in Singapore. The social scientists pointed out that the increase in religious zeal in Singapore was part of the worldwide religious revival and that the state had contributed to it willy-nilly by introducing religious knowledge education into the classroom in the early 1980s to shore up the moral artifice of society (Kuo, Quah, and Tong 1988). Based on the report, the government introduced the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Bill at the end of 1989.

The key reason for the bill was the elites saw that when a religion “crosses the line and goes into what they call social action”, it opens up what Lee calls “a Pandora’s box in Singapore”, because all the other religions would enter the political fray, leading to the “dismemberment” of multi-religious Singapore (*Asiaweek* 30 August 1987, p. 21). But if we read this as merely a justification for the state to intervene in religious affairs to keep the peace because multi-religiosity is a recipe for primordial wars, then we would miss the complex discursive space the state elites were toiling in. For sure, the mere justification was deployed, for example, when Senior Minister S. Rajaratnam, the party’s chief ideologue, spoke of the need to contain racial and religious “ancient tribal instincts even though these may be articulated today in pseudo-scientific language” and accused the detained church workers for dabbling in “the unholy trinity” of “racialism, religious fanaticism and communism” (*SGPR* no. 44/July 18 July 1987; no. 46/June, 26 June 1987).

However, Rajaratnam went on to debunk liberation theology as heretical nihilist beliefs of twenty-first century “Genghis Khans” seeking “to destroy capitalism knowing full well that they cannot erect in its place a Heaven on Earth”, sparking a heated exchange with Jesuit theologian Paul Tan in the Malaysian press (*SGPR* no. 46/Aug, 14 August 1987; *NST* 4 and 22 September 1987). In the similar vein of intervening in religious teachings, the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Bill told religious groups that they, “in exercising their freedom of religion”, “should acknowledge the multi-racial and multi-religious character” of Singapore society, “emphasize the moral values

common to all faiths” and not be “acting disrespectfully” towards other religions (Parliament of Singapore 1989, p. 5). Already singled out for their overzealous proselytizing activities in the bill, evangelicals were particularly uncomfortable with ecumenical teachings from the state (Sng 1993, p. 326; 1992, pp. 46–48). Why did the state enter into the realm of theology?

Sinha (2005, p. 35) has observed that the governmental solicitations of the responses of religious groups and facilitation of debates over religious harmony, multi-religiosity, and the separation of religion and politics leading up to the enactment of the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act in 1990 opened up a “Pandora’s box” of “messy disagreements” and “diversity of voices, positions, and sentiments”. This was not the only Pandora’s box the ruling elites opened up at this juncture. A few months before the arrests, the government launched the National Agenda discussions. At the height of the political crisis in mid-1988, Lee declared that Singapore had not yet become a nation despite modern trappings (*ST* 3 July 1988). Months later, Deputy Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong suggested the formalization of a national ethic to be taught “in schools, work-places, homes as our way of life” (*SGPR* no. 52/Oct, 28 October 1988). Lee Hsien Loong’s “national ideology” committee then worked for over a year to determine through discussions and consultations with all sectors of society whether the communitarian values the committee drafted constituted a common morality in pluralistic Singapore. After reservations, disagreements, and amendments, Parliament formalized the ethic as five “shared values” in January 1991, the first being “Nation before community and society above self” and the last, “Racial and religious harmony”.

It was no coincidence that the careful opening of these Pandora’s boxes *within the ambit of the state* to mobilize the peoples’ voices for two national ethical projects took place immediately after the “conspiracy” arrests and amid the political crisis they sparked. They were calculated to seize the initiative from liberal Asian theology that imagined a suffering and hoping Asia supplanting the developmental covenant of the nation. A week before the “conspiracy” arrests,

Rajaratnam spoke of a new national historiography and heritage conservation ethos at the opening of a photographic exhibition of the past at the National Museum, “What we are and what we will be must be explained in terms of what the many races of Singapore accomplished together[;] their collective sufferings and joys; their triumphs and failures; their hopes and shattered dreams the past 170 years” (*SGPR* no. 23/May, 14 May 1987). The uncanny resemblance to liberal Asian theology, except framed in the post-coloniality of national liberation from colonial humiliation and exploitation, explains the ruling elites’ vehemence towards liberation theology and antagonism towards liberal Christianity.

Pentecostal Spiritual Warfare

The evangelicals were decidedly grim in the early 1990s because of the new state-church separation and state intervention in Christian proselytizing (Sng 1993, pp. 320–26). The decline of liberal Christianity caused much ambivalence. The Anglican and Methodist Churches and the National Council of Churches withdrew their affiliations with the expelled conference in 1988, but not without divisive controversy in the Methodist Church (O’Grady 1990, p. 34).

Despite their antagonism towards liberal theology, the evangelicals were two-minded about the “conspiracy” arrests. In the midst of the raging political crisis in August 1987, the Graduates’ Christian Fellowship submitted five recommended tenets for the National Agenda, including “A Government of the people based on social justice and compassion”, an echo of liberal theology (Sng 1992, p. 52). Overall, the evangelicals were critical of the liberals because they equate the secondary callings of “social action” and “political liberation” with the primary callings of evangelism and salvation, thus politicizing the church (Sng 1989a, p. 53; 1989b, p. 65). Yet, the evangelicals saw God challenging them through the liberals and believed that the church owed liberation theology “the timely reminder to be practically oriented and involved with the ‘bread and butter’ issues of societies” and “to see the harsh realities of the world” (Lee 1989, p. 25; Sng 1989b, p. 66).

The rise of Pentecostalism taking over the place of liberal Christianity posed another problem. Already, in 1988, the Bible-Presbyterian Church, the bulwark of local evangelicalism, dissolved into individual congregations because it could not resolve a major split brewing between “neo-evangelicals”, who sought ecumenical links with other Christians and were open to Pentecostalism, and hard-line fundamentalists who believed in absolute separation (Sng 1993, pp. 336–37). Caught in two minds, the evangelicals lost the initiative to Pentecostals who, armed with their spiritual warfare theology, responded decisively to the post-coloniality of Singapore.

Kim (2008, pp. 134–38, 150) has observed that David Yong-Gi Cho’s gospel of holistic blessing in Korea can be considered a contextual Asian theology on par with *minjung* theology because it was a response to extant injustice and suffering, except holistic blessing emphasizes the collective effervescent experience of God to empower communities and exalts the faithful to seek wealth through a disciplined life of prayer, divine healing, and spiritual warfare against demonic obstacles existing in this world (see also Yong 2005). There are crucial variations on the theme of spiritual warfare among the Pentecostals. At one extreme, the theology of blessing leads Pentecostals to acquiesce in the status quo to enjoy the fruits of decades of Asian development, particularly with the rise of Asian middle-class consumption, and display the ostentatious consumption as a sign of God’s presence to revive the church. The Pentecostal is not to be satisfied with the personal knowledge that his material success shows he has God’s grace; he is called to display the success to edify and evangelize. Absorbed into the magical blessings of capital, pentecostals risk losing their keen sense of spiritual warfare. Running across the grain of Pentecostalism, New Creation’s entrepreneurial founding pastor Joseph Prince (2005, p. 28) thus interprets spiritual warfare as a defensive exercise of standing on “victory ground” with the “armour of God”, because Christ has already defeated the devil. “There are some Christians who are trying to defeat the devil,” writes Prince (p. 20), “that is a form of pride.”¹

In direct contrast, Reverend Lawrence Khong (2000a, pp. 201–2) of Faith Community Baptist Church tells Christians who “do not like

warfare imagery or terminology” that “like it or not, Scripture calls us to take stand and fight as armed warriors against the spiritual rulers of darkness”. “Loving and exalting Jesus, while we love and bless others in His name,” writes Khong (p. 202), “will defeat the devil and his schemes.” Khong’s war cry is not mere fiery rhetoric delivered for effect in the midst of Pentecostal exuberance. His Church is organized into cell groups “structured like the military”, with three to four cell groups of around ten to twenty people forming a sub-zone headed by a volunteer pastor, ten of which form a zone of 300 to 600 people pastured by a full-time pastor and five or more zones form a district congregation shepherded by a seasoned pastor (p. 34).

The congregations come together for the main service every week, to be recharged by prophetic “vision-casting” by the “apostolic leadership” (*ibid.*, pp. 39, 41). Every member is pushed and pulled into a cell group and “is called upon to give and serve sacrificially” (p. 32). Khong believes that some Christian warriors will literally “die for Jesus in this wartime”, but “God will still have the victory” whether “through martyrdom or aggressive assaults on enemy territory” (p. 211). The Church conducts “spiritual boot camp” for newcomers consisting of two weekends of spiritual warfare training involving the baptism of the Holy Spirit and training in casting out demons (p. 129). Cell groups then conduct “prayerwalking”, “physically walking the land and praying for the people” (p. 131). Khong is raising a “spiritual army that captures territory for God” (p. 202).

Khong sees the very structure and spirit of the cell church as Asian in its communality. When Khong began raising his spiritual army, a member questioned whether an American method would work in a conservative Chinese culture. Khong calls this “a lie from the evil one” and approvingly quotes a Westerner who said that “people in the East are more communal in nature” and Westerners “are too individualistic for such a system to work” (*ibid.*, p. 38). In contrast to the individualism in the theology of blessings, the thrust of Khong’s method of spiritual warfare has been communitarian. Cell groups are communal guerilla units experiencing “body life through the gifts of the Holy Spirit” that seek to infiltrate society and

“penetrate the community through ‘body evangelism’” (p. 50). Citing a story of a wife he preached to who would rather lovingly follow her husband to hell than to become a Christian, Khong writes, “as a Chinese, my culture tells me there is something very virtuous about what she said”, and after a few years he realized that conversion “is never just a personal decision” but “always occurs in the context of a community” (p. 63). Thus, it is necessary for Christians to conduct “body evangelism” involving group prayer and outreach producing “a higher level of spiritual power” (p. 121). There is nothing intrinsically Asian about this communitarianism, but Khong’s Asianism resonates with the communitarian ideology and the “Asian values” promoted by the state in the 1990s.

LoveSingapore as Post-colonial Pentecostalism

If the state usurped Asianism from liberal Christianity, then the LoveSingapore movement attempts to turn the tables by redefining the nation in the Pentecostal theology of spiritual warfare. The movement began when Khong met American preacher Peter Wagner in the first International Spirit Warfare Network in Seoul in 1993. Khong subsequently assumed formal leadership of the network in Singapore, which was already meeting regularly but informally. In 1995, Khong advanced the Vision 2001 campaign to “unite the body”, “serve the community”, “establish a prayer cell in every block by year 2000”, “launch a Seven-Wave Harvest in 2001”, and “adopt unreached people groups”. The method was targeted at the territoriality of the entire city state, to establish, secure, expand “God’s perimeter” and infiltrate and destroy “Satan’s perimeter” (*Dare to Believe [DB]* 2000, p. 12).

The initial impetus of the movement was to unite the Protestant churches torn apart by conservative evangelical hostility towards Pentecostalism and schisms by younger pastors breaking off to form independent congregations (*DB*, pp. 32, 46–47). To this end, the movement has brought together about a third of Protestants (*DB*, p. 73). Reminiscent of the decentralized networking of liberal Christian groups sharing overlapping visions and responding to local

situations and needs, the LoveSingapore leadership sought only to be “catalytic, consultative and coordinating” (*DB*, p. 25). The movement provides churches a menu of prayer and community service events leading up to the cluster of main events surrounding National Day to participate at the intensity they are comfortable in. Like the liberals, the Pentecostals were forging ecumenical unity through common theological views and social action, but now completely framed in spiritual warfare.

Unlike the liberals who targeted the transnational field of capital as a form of neocolonialism, the Pentecostals have grown rapidly because their engagement in the national field has an elective affinity to Singapore’s post-colonial condition. There are three dimensions to Pentecostal post-colonialism. Firstly, Pentecostal spiritual warfare has infused the territoriality of the nation with extraordinary meanings and purpose. In 1994, 140 pastors traveled to the “four major gateways of the nation” — the airport in the east, causeway in the north, port in the south, and the Jurong factories in the west — to claim the city for Christ. In 1995, the first National Day “prayerwalk” was organized with pastors prayerwalking the city centre and congregations conducting neighborhood prayerwalks (*DB*, pp. 76–77). Then, in 1998, the prayerwalk was expanded into a charity walkathon involving 40,000 believers converging in the downtown area on Labour Day. The number of prayerwalkers rose to 60,000 in 2000 (*DB*, pp. 42, 45). The routes were planned with all the care of “spiritual mapping”, with the first walkathon following Singapore’s original southern shoreline to achieve “healing of the land”, which presumably had been injured by land reclamation (*DB*, p. 79).

The effect has been to make Christians conscious of the nation as *place*, infusing otherwise highly urbanized space instrumentalized for capitalist competition with the significance of collective ownership and heritage. This has been a perennial concern of the state because the country has seen substantial emigration of middle-class citizens feeling little attachment to a city that was built up in a few decades on a clear-and-build urbanization plan. At the local, decentralized level of public housing townships, individual churches have drawn

strength and method from LoveSingapore to “take responsibility for the community” (*DB*, p. 56). Spiritual mapping at the national level provides for the re-imagination of the nation, but at the neighborhood level it embeds the church in local communities, causing Pentecostals to see demonic “strongholds” in a “sense of rejection and abandonment” linked to poverty and alienation, “a gulf between church and community” and “strong idolatry” (*DB*, p. 63).

Secondly, Pentecostal spiritual warfare has given historical agency to the nation beyond the striving for a developed world status. This historical agency is one that is anchored in the past. Khong (2000, p. 210) takes a stand firmly against emigration thus and tells his flock, “God forbid that you should emigrate — unless God tells you to. The heritage of this land belongs to you. Christians, more than anyone, should love Singapore. When God birthed us and caused us to live here, He had a divine purpose.” At the level of the local, spiritual mapping by neighborhood churches sensitizes Pentecostals to the heritage of the local community, from the languages spoken and ethnic cultures practiced to the history of the locality, usually comprising an ethnic village or multi-ethnic villages before its development into satellite public housing estates.

At the global level, the millenarian belief in the imminent unfolding of God’s purpose in the end-times has led Pentecostals to interpret the colonial founding of Singapore and its post-independence developmental success as part of God’s plans for Asia. Ex-Anglican bishop, Moses Tay, sees LoveSingapore as a timely act of “the good hand of the Lord upon our nation”, which began with Stamford Raffles’ founding of Singapore and its growth from “survival to success, and from success to global leadership — not just in the natural but also in the spiritual realm” (*DB*, p. 6). Inspired by Billy Graham’s “prophecy” that Singapore is the Antioch of Asia, Pentecostal spiritual mapping has placed Singapore at the centre of spreading Christianity in Asia (DeBernardi 2008).

Believing that a “spiritual beachhead” has already been established in Singapore, Khong prophesized there would be a “major harvest wave” of conversions seven symbolic years into the LoveSingapore movement

in 2001, which would then inaugurate the fanning out of the movement into the region from the Christianized nation (*DB*, p. 111). That this mass conversion did not happen — there were only 3,000 conversions — has not dampened the hope of Pentecostals in the historical agency of the nation (Tan-Chow 2007, p. 77). Combining scriptural readings, local prophesies, and historical analysis, Reverend John Tay (2007, p. 79), former dean and vicar of the Anglican St Andrew's Cathedral, writes that Singapore (derived from the Sanskrit for "lion city") would be returned from the demonic lion of Sang Nila Utama (the Malay prince who founded the pre-colonial settlement) to the Lion of the Tribe of Judah (representing Christ) in the fiftieth year of its independence in 2015.

Thirdly, many Pentecostals see the state as a component of divine purpose that has to be engaged through spiritual warfare. Tay's prophesy of the fiftieth-year Christianization of Singapore is built upon both a reading of Leviticus 25:10, "Consecrate the fiftieth year and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants", and the Prime Minister's 2007 National Day speech when he envisioned Singapore transformed in ten years into a cosmopolitan global city (*ibid.*). Another vivid example is LoveSingapore 2008's weekly Friday prayers over government buildings in the civic district. Khong seems aware that his spiritual warfare theology is ultimately threatening for the state. His strategy is to be completely transparent and yet engage the state using creative tactics avoiding confrontation. When fellow pastors were worried about testing the state's sensitivity with regards to religious harmony with LoveSingapore, Khong argued against a secretive "underground operation" that would "breed suspicion", but set down the *modus operandi* for the movement "to show Singapore how much God loves her", that participants are "God-fearing people who feel passionately for Singapore", and are unconditionally "committed to be active citizens to care for one and all". Evangelism, Khong believes, will then come naturally (*DB*, p. 13). The name "LoveSingapore" was thus adopted.

The LoveSingapore charity walkathons began as a desire to "hold a March for Jesus in the downtown area", but knowing that the

government would not permit such an event, Khong (2000, pp. 78–79) got Touch Community Services, his church’s charity arm, to organize the march as a walkathon with benefits going to charities that included Catholic and secular non-profit organizations. In 2001, as part of the mass conversion effort, LoveSingapore took out a two-million-dollar media campaign to create “God consciousness” and re-brand God from a “dictatorial rule-maker” and “distant and unapproachable killjoy schoolmaster” to “the sort of person you’d like to get to know more about” (Blair, Armstrong, and Murphy 2003, pp. 32–33). Within two weeks, the government banned the print and television advertisements. Reflecting the creative agility of the Pentecostals, the campaign was redirected to a ground effort to create, instead, an omnipresent “voice of God” in banners, posters, videowalls, T-shirts, giveaways, postcards, and cell-phone text messages “from God” (Ogilvy, n.d.).

Coda: Social Christianity at the Crossroads, Again

Because of its divergent tendencies and the radical contingency of prophetic revelations, Percy (1997, pp. 219–20) predicts that the Pentecostal movement will fall apart and develop in six separate directions: apocalyptic destruction, indulgence in experiences of the novel, communal withdrawal from society, sectarian divisions, political engagement with society moving leftwards towards social justice or rightwards towards a theocracy, and fundamentalist conservatism. Apocalyptic destruction is a difficult option for Singaporean Pentecostals as the state actively keeps tabs on cultic activities. Churches that follow the theology of blessings have already shown propensity towards social withdrawal and experiential indulgence. Sectarian divisions abound and were the very reason for the existence of thriving independent Pentecostalism in the first place. More importantly, Pentecostalism in Singapore is a movement caught today at the crossroads of becoming more aligned with conservative evangelicalism or moving closer to liberal concerns with social justice.

Of late, criticism of Pentecostal excess has not only come from anti-Pentecostal conservatives, but also from within the movement, particularly Anglican leaders emphasizing the need for fundamentalist biblical foundations (Khoo 1998; Tong 2003; Kuan 2008; see Goh 2009, p. 133). Pentecostals have joined conservative evangelicals, with Pentecostals from mainstream denominational churches often taking the lead, to oppose liberalizing moves by the state to recreate Singapore as a global city with a cosmopolitan and open culture, which they see as encouraging sinful behavior detrimental to the well-being of Singapore society. They forcefully, and successfully, argued against policy shifts in favour of employing gay civil servants in 2003 and to decriminalize sexual acts between men in 2007 (see Tan 2008), and, unsuccessfully, against the decision to build casino resorts to boost tourism in 2005.

Reminiscent of the aggressive and creative tactics of LoveSingapore, conservative Christians joined AWARE (Association of Women for Action and Research), a pioneering feminist civil society organization, and engineered a hostile takeover of its executive committee in 2009, apparently targeting the gay-inclusive sexuality education programme it ran in schools and seeking to use the formally secular organization to promote Christian family values. The conservatives were eventually ousted, but not before a public war of words and press scrutiny revealed that many of the takeover leaders were members of the same Anglican Pentecostal church led by pastor Derek Hong, also a leader in the LoveSingapore movement. Under pressure from governmental and public criticism, Hong regretted his pulpit call to church members to support the takeover to prevent the nation from crossing the “line that God has drawn for us” (quoted in *ST* 3 May 2009; see Hamilton-Hart 2009).

Criticism has also gone the other, leftward, direction. In the 2004 foreword of a recent re-issue of the 1954 biography of John Sung, the acclaimed father of the Asian evangelical revival in the 1930s, theologian and Malaysian Methodist bishop Hwa Yung (2004, p. xvi) criticizes Asian Christians for adopting Western Pentecostal teachings “that are positively harmful to the church”. Instead, Hwa calls for

the emulation of Sung's "sacrificial living", rejecting the gospel of blessings, mega church organization, and "strategic-level spiritual warfare" and returning to the Biblical fundamentals of "prayer, the centrality of the Bible, holy living, community building, servanthood and humility of the leadership, concern for the needy" (pp. xvii–xx). Theologian Tan-Chow May Ling (2007, pp. xvi, 14, 21) rejects conservative evangelicalism for its hostility towards pluralism and sees the inherent ecumenism, holistic spirituality, and transformative eschatology of Pentecostalism as filling the hollow secular economic and socio-political concerns of the state. However, Tan-Chow criticizes LoveSingapore for being seduced by Singapore's developmental state culture, thus displaying a tendency to instrumentalize God's power and love, operationalize spiritual gifts for technological manipulation, offer technocratic solutions to community problems, and treating people as means to ends rather than the ends of Christian action (pp. 79–98).

Khong may be a few steps ahead of the critics. Economist and evangelical Lee Soo Ann (2000, p. 37) has singled out Touch Community Services for being an exemplary exception to the church's lack in having "the radical social concern of the early Christians" regarding poverty and redistribution of wealth. Touch Community Services has been aiding teenage delinquents, single parents, and latchkey children. Faith Community Baptist cells have actively reached out to poor families, learning new languages to communicate with them, and holding prayer meetings at their tiny one-room apartments to express care and solidarity (Khong 2000, pp. 141, 148, 154, 157). Wrapped in Khong's spiritual warfare rhetoric is a contextual theological approach reminiscent of liberal Christianity. Khong (p. 178) practices the maxim, "don't preach the Bible. Preach lives. Preach people. But make sure everything you say comes from the Bible." In the conclusion of his spiritual warfare manifesto, Khong (p. 203) writes, "if we want to see God in action, we must go out and serve the poor and the sick and broken. In so doing we will declare war against the devil, and will see God arise and call forth His army to repossess cities and nations."

LoveSingapore 2008 marked an important shift towards social justice concerns. Week one of its forty-day prayer programme leading to the National Day mega prayer service was devoted to purification from the glut of “the great buffet” that underpins the theology of blessings. Week two focused the cleansed mind on poverty and inequality. Participants were called to ask “for a righteous anger toward greed, a holy hatred of injustice, and godly sorrow over global poverty” and to ask themselves, “how prepared am I to do something about that?” That poverty still exists amidst plenty in Singapore was highlighted. Migrant worker issues, which got the liberal Catholics arrested in 1987, were described as “the great alienation” and an article written by an activist of a local secular non-governmental organization was used for one day’s prayerful reflection. Week three reflected on the obstacles to serving the poor: the failure to see that Christ would be among the poor if he came today, lack of compassion, hypocrisy, respectability, and conformity.² Week four narrated the stories of socially involved Christians, including the Catholics Henri Nouwen and Mother Theresa. Week five taught the principles of Christian economic stewardship to tackle social problems, ending in the example of Muhammad Yunus and micro financing. The last week preached true greatness in servanthood and love for the downtrodden, culminating on National Day in a poem dreaming of an equitable, multicultural, neighbourly, and wholesome world filled with “passionate individuals” cooperating “for personal growth and social change according to the visionary agenda of Jesus of Nazareth”.

It remains to be seen whether the development of Pentecostal theology would bring about conservative or transformative social change, or any change at all. The Singapore case shows that the nature of the modern state inherited by non-Western societies, its developmentalist imbrications with capitalism, and the post-colonial hollowness of national imagination, as well as the historical decline of liberal Christianity, have a major part to play in the rise of Pentecostalism and its peculiar transfiguration in the former Third World. What is certain is that the separation between secular politics

and religious traditions is not a natural condition of modernity. The separation is merely a punctuated, meandering, changing, and well-traversed frontline in a discursive struggle fought in the terrain of the post-colonial public sphere over the defining *telos* of the nation and *ethos* of the state. It is a struggle that seems to have no end, only ceasefires.

NOTES

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1. See also Miller and Yamamori's (2007, p. 135) documentation of the 24,000-strong City Harvest Church as "the most extravagant church" they visited in their study of global Pentecostalism (also Goh 1999).
2. LoveSingapore, *40 Day 08: Beyond Words*, Singapore: LoveSingapore, 2008; quotes are from entries for 1, 6, and 8 July and 9 August.

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