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Converting houses into churches: The mobility, fission, and sacred networks of evangelical house churches in Sri Lanka

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Abstract. In this paper I examine the processes and politics associated with the formation of evangelical house churches in Sri Lanka. In doing so, I show how the sacred space of the house church is constructed through the development of sacred networks, which emerge when a group of Christians assemble for prayer and worship. Sacred networks grant the house church an important degree of mobility, but they also encourage church fission. Whilst the house church enables evangelical groups to grow in hostile environments like that of Sri Lanka, it is often a superficial form of growth that is unsustainable in the long term. To conclude, I suggest that an understanding of sacred networks can help inject a sense of scalar dynamism into the study of contemporary religious movements.

Keywords: house church, conversion of space, structural mosaic, sacred networks, evangelical Christianity, Sri Lanka

Introduction

House churches are the modus operandi of many evangelical Christian groups operating in hostile religious environments around the world. Often flourishing in areas where such groups are repressed, they provide an interface that camouflages the sacred other in the form of the secular. The house church has, in this sense, proved to be instrumental in affording evangelical groups a degree of self-empowerment, autonomy, and religious leverage. In China, for example, the house-church movement has gained widespread recognition for promoting Christianity during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76) and after. Existing discourses are correspondingly Sino-centric, with an overwhelming focus on how the house church intersects with domestic Chinese politics and theology (eg, Kao, 2009; Liu, 2009; Wielander, 2009; see also Yang and Lang, 2011). Such a contextual bias has been at the expense of interrogating the similarly repressed Christian communities that operate in a variety of different religious contexts and have (often uncritically) aped the house-church model. In order to account for empirical nuances like these, a more inclusive discourse is needed: one that contributes to ongoing theorisations of the locations of evangelical Christianity and its significant worldwide growth.

In this paper I contribute to such theorisations by exploring the processes and politics involved in converting the domestic space of a house into the sacred space of a church (after Robbins, 2009; Woods, 2012a). Through such exploration I reveal the vicissitudes of house-church models of worship, and in doing so engage with recent geographical scholarship surrounding the growth of evangelical Christian groups in hostile religious environments [specifically Woods (2012a; 2013), but see also Brickell (2012), Collins-Kreiner et al, (2013)]. Most notably, the house church is an exemplar of how such groups leverage the 'structural mosaic' in order to "traverse categories, engaging all or some at the same time in

order to express agency (eg, evangelise), and to achieve an overriding objective (eg, church growth)" (Woods, 2013, page 4). In recognising the heterogeneity of structure, the value of the structural mosaic is that it sensitises discourse to the possibilities that emerge when groups engage with different categories of 'structure' at the same time. In this instance, the categories that evangelical groups engage with are those of the secular and the sacred, the house and the church. Adopting the deliberately secular veneer of the house enables the church to sidestep the often "intense contestation" that arises from outward signs of religious alterity (or threat) (Kong, 2010, page 757; Luz, 2008; Naylor and Ryan, 2003; Purcell, 1998). To this end, the house church provides an accurate reflection of how context "determines the conditions for different communities to become established on the soil of a given society", with their presence "weaving new patterns of religion in space" (Hervieu-Leger, 2002, pages 99, 104). As Henkel and Sakaja (2009, page 51) show in the context of postconflict Croatia, the Baptist Church gained strength and built presence by leveraging 'secular advantages' that enabled it to come out of the shadows and flourish. Similar methods are at play in Sri Lanka, where:

"Evangelical churches often operate in and through non-codified (often secular) spaces in order to downplay or camouflage their religious alterity, and to avoid presenting a physical target that can be attacked … [This] reveal[s] the symbolic potency of Christian presence and highlight[s] the value of the structural mosaic—and, more specifically, the appropriation and use of secular spaces for evangelical worship—in obfuscating the physical form of the evangelical church" (Woods, 2013, page 10).

The need to "obfuscate the physical form of the evangelical church" is pronounced in Sri Lanka, where evangelical Christian groups form a beleaguered minority. Not formally recognised by a state that rules in the interests of a majority Buddhist nation, evangelical churches are portrayed as the fundamentalist alternative to their mainline[1] Christian counterparts. Evangelical groups present a challenge to the bellicose Buddhist factions that resist any attempt to undermine their control over Sri Lanka's religious structure. They are subject to both formal and informal forms of repression (see Woods, 2012b) and are defined by a heavy reliance on house-church patterns of worship. At the macrolevel, the reasons for such reliance stem from the difficulty in obtaining permission to legally register, build, or expand a church. By virtue of their theological orientation, evangelical churches pursue an aggressive remit of growth that rewards patterns of worship that are more flexible and therefore less sensitive to the restrictions and costs associated with establishing a formal religious presence. To this end, the house church ensures that evangelical Christianity remains an underground movement that is amorphous, subversive, and almost impossible to contain. That said, the scalar tension between macro-scale ideology (in this case, evangelisation and church growth) and microscale praxis (house-church patterns of worship) also contributes to a politics of growth that is explored in detail below.

At the microlevel nuance is needed. Sri Lanka's house churches are by no means uniform; many have small congregations and informal organisational structures and are house-based, but not all (see Cheng, 2003, page 29). What is clear is that the development of the house church is relatively linear and can be classified according to four interrelated modalities. One, house churches are commonly used at the point of Christian inception, the aim being to grow organically and undergo a process of formalisation over time. Two, some house churches split and multiply by processes of church fission (see below). Three, once house churches have formalised into officially recognised 'churches', networks of house cells are planted and retained as a means of reaching out to, and staying plugged into (as opposed to divorced from), the catchment area covered by the parent church. Four, the most established churches have active church-planting

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[1]Mainline denominations are Catholic, Anglican, Baptist, Christian Reformed, Methodist, Presbyterian, the Church of South India, and the Salvation Army.

programmes that establish house churches around the island, thus increasing their sphere of influence and bringing the process full cycle[2]. For the purposes of this paper the focus is on the first and second modalities. These are the most volatile house churches, as they typically pursue more aggressive strategies of growth in order to sustain themselves.

The ensuing discussion explores the processes and politics associated with evangelical house-church formation in Sri Lanka. It draws on eighty-four in-depth interviews across all four modalities of house church. Interviews were conducted with the leaders of evangelical house churches, mainline (predominantly nonhouse) churches, parachurch organisations, and Christian converts throughout 2010–11. To ensure that a range of empirical contexts was considered, interviews were conducted in the capital city, Colombo, in the south of the island (Galle and Matara), the Hill Country (Kandy and Nuwara Eliya), the north (Vavuniya), and northeast (Trincomalee). In addition, approximately half a dozen house-church services were attended, ranging from ten-minute prayer meetings to full worship services lasting over two hours.

Sacred networks and the conversion of houses into churches
Over the past decade, the mapping of sacred place onto profane space has taken new and more innovative forms. Discourse has moved beyond the study of 'officially' sacred sites of religious activity, such as the church, temple, synagogue, and mosque, and has embraced 'unofficially' sacred sites of religious activity instead (after Kong, 2001; see Kong, 2010, pages 756–757 for a review). An exploration of the 'unofficially' sacred has served to expand scholarly understandings of sacred space; work on pilgrimage, for example, has moved beyond a unitary focus on sacred sites by engaging in increasingly explicit terms with the movement of pilgrims towards a sacred 'centre' (eg, Bajc et al, 2007; Coleman and Eade, 2004; Timothy and Olsen, 2006). Building on the pilgrimage literature, Della Dora (2009, page 225) has recently called for more dynamic and fluid approaches to the treatment of sacred space. Her work on the movement of sacred icons from Mount Sinai in Egypt to the Getty Center in Los Angeles seeks to "destabilize traditional notions of sacred space as a territorially fixed entity defined through a binary opposition to the profane". Arguing that the movement of sacred icons symbolises the physical movement of holy places that leads to the reconfiguration of sacred space, she shows how space is a product of global and local flows and can be transposed upon different places through the movement of material objects. I build on Della Dora's work by addressing the criticism that scholarship hitherto "treats as normal stability, meaning, and place, and treats as abnormal distance, change, and placelessness" (Sheller and Urry, 2006, page 208; see also Cresswell, 2010); and I show how sacred networks enable the conversion of houses into churches and explore the possibilities for religious concealment, movement, and growth that such conversion engenders.

House churches are built on the New Testament precept that Christians are the church of God, not the buildings that contain worship services (see, however, Inge, 2003). Such a practical application of Christian doctrine serves to remind congregations of the relative unimportance of the church building within a broader, biblical schema. Instead, the house church is grounded in the constellations of sacred networks that are formed and consolidated when Christians gather together for worship, prayer, and bible study (see Bajc et al, 2007). By locating religion within sacred networks of belief and understanding, I follow the lead of researchers who examine "the relational forms of communalization of religion 'into networks'" (Hervieu-Léger, 2002, page 103). Porter (2004, pages 167–168), for example, argues that conventions for Star Trek fans provide more of a "dialogic" centre (ie, the

[2] The difference between one and four is that one is more of a bottom-up process, whereas four is distinctly top-down; in many instances they exist in tandem.

opportunity to meet and talk with like-minded people) than they do a "geographical" one (ie, a venerated place). In a similar vein, house churches "could simply be described as locations of ritual" (Davies, 1994, page 55; see also Norman, 1990), as "the room itself [where worship occurs] has no special sanctity" (Turner, 1979, page 153). The pastor of a legalised house church in Colombo took such an understanding one step further, stating that "we are a little bit weary of ritualism, and the moment you have these gothic-type buildings the place becomes sanctified and the lives become unsanctified. So [Christians] need to come to church to meet God, and when they're out in the world, it's as though God's not there." In contrast, the sacred networks upon which house churches are built are designed to sanctify the nodes—the individual Christian believers—that form the core constituents of evangelical Christian space (see Murdoch, 2006, page 78). Whilst the effect of such sanctification can be negligible, this type of rhetoric provides justification for the lack of identifiable church buildings in Sri Lanka.

A house church can be replicated anywhere a sacred network is present, causing sacred networks to serve not only a theological imperative, but a strategic one as well. Whilst many of the pastors I interviewed lamented the difficulties they faced in obtaining land through official channels in Sri Lanka, the marginal position of Christianity reveals a more compelling rationale that brings to light the value of impermanence: "you never know, the government could take over once you have land, deeds, and so forth; you've got something that can be taken away"[3] (Evangelical Parachurch, Kandy). In hostile environments, the anti-Christian bias of the government and civil society renders fixity dangerous; a place of worship can be 'taken away', attacked, and razed, whereas sacred networks cannot.

By foregoing traditional church symbolism, house churches are essentially invisible, avoiding surveillance and reproachment. They are a "strategy for the territorial administration of the religious" (Hervieu-Leger, 2002, page 99) that enables the continuation of worship, evangelism, and growth, despite hostility. The value of sacred networks, therefore, is that they render Christianity indestructible; it cannot be subdued by force, or contained by a building or structure:

"You can meet anywhere, and that has become a reality if you take the north and east [of Sri Lanka], where due to other reasons [ie, the civil war], many churches were displaced, their structures were destroyed, but the church body continued to meet under culverts, under trees, in tents, behind barbed wire. You cannot restrict the body of Christ to meeting anywhere; you don't need a building" (Evangelical Parachurch, Colombo).

Such an agnostic treatment of the church 'building' has important and paradoxical repercussions for the church 'body', which are covered in more detail below. The fact that "you cannot restrict the body of Christ to meeting" means that the network-based church is an autonomous player in the religious arena of Sri Lanka: one that is able to operate independently of the legal and political structure (see Woods, 2012b). For these reasons, the house church is an effective agent of growth, especially when compared with more established churches. The following sections explore in more detail how the networked characteristics of the house church enable it to grow but at the same time render it susceptible to a politics of conversion and church fission. This calls into question the viability of sacred networks, and the long-term sustainability of the house-church movement.

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[3] In September 2011, Sri Lanka's Ministry of Buddha *Sasana* and Religious Affairs did, in fact, call for the closure of all 'nonofficial' (ie, unregistered) churches. Such calls are rarely heeded, and nearly impossible to enforce.

Religious mobility and spaces of subversion

The house church is a mobile church. Its networked organisation structure means it can be planted anywhere and is often embedded within densely populated residential space that enables it to affect as many people as possible. As a Colombo-based leader of one of the country's largest networks of house churches told me:

"we have a concept like take the church to where the people are and don't bring the people to the church … [House churches are] easy to grow because you are not limited; the boundaries are not limited to a building."

Whilst a church building "limits you in spreading" (Evangelical Church, Colombo), the articulated nature of the house-church movement means it can quickly and easily penetrate areas that are untouched by Christianity, whilst remaining largely invisible to the religious factions that oppose its growth. Bringing the church to the people is essentially a reversal of the centripetal logic by which many religious sites are constructed and is a key reason for growth, as identified by one mainline pastor:

"I think by building the churches and getting the idea that the church means the church, that you have to go and worship there, that has some kind of a negative thing, because we try to bring the people into a particular church building, and we don't really go to the place where the Christians are. So in that sense, I think Christianity is also getting isolated from the village, from where Christians are living. And [evangelical] churches [a]re successful in that because they have this New Testament style; they are among the people in the villages" (Mainline Church, Colombo).

The effect of being "among the people" is palpable, and is made possible by the sacred networks upon which house churches are built. Such networks grant churches an almost unlimited degree of mobility; the church can be immersed within Buddhist space, from villages to houses [and even the Buddhist temple—see Woods, (2013, pages 8–9)], and is an aggressive means of introducing Christianity to communities. As Megoran (2010) argues, close geographical proximity encourages more intimate forms of encounter, with house churches encouraging more informal, often convivial, forms of interaction that differ markedly from those experienced in 'official' sites of religious worship. Whilst the house plugs the church into residential space, the opaque boundary that demarcates inside from outside, church from house, house from community generates curiosity and acceptance. As one pastor of a Colombo-based church explained:

"When you go into an area where the non-Christians are and have a house cell meeting, you are surrounded by houses filled with non-Christians, who would see, who would hear what's happening, and then you can actually be more aggressive in entering into a non-Christian area … you are expecting them to come there. When you have a house cell, the first of the outsiders will be the kids who peep in through the door, then they would come to the doorway, then they will come and sit at the back, and then they will come and sit in front, and the same way, following them, the parents will also come and look, and that's how they come into the house" (Evangelical Church, Colombo).

Here the boundary of the house—the door—is not only open, but also a source of enchantment. Church space is not restricted to the house but flows out, finding movement and expression in sound and social interaction. Although sacred networks mean the church is not restricted to the house, the fact that they are embedded within one provides the informality needed to enable people—children first, then their parents—to enter and experience a space of Christianity. Whilst Kong's (2002, page 1581; see also Baird, 2009; Chivallon, 2001) case study of a house church in Singapore draws a clear distinction between the "external façade of secularity and an internal presentation of religiosity", as shown by rows of chairs to replicate pews and even the installation of stained glass windows, the Sri Lankan house church typically downplays internal displays of religiosity as much as it does external. The space of

the house is resolutely private, yet the church stands to gain from making it a nonprivatised, nondifferentiated space by ensuring that the boundary between inside and outside remains as porous as possible. Given that "walking into a church is like a taboo" (Evangelical Church, Galle) it is necessary to prevent the house from becoming an overtly 'Christian' space, as doing so renders it inaccessible to non-Christians and can therefore compromise the growth of the church.

The house church is a nondescript articulation of Christian space, representing what Henkel and Sakaja (2009, page 49, original emphasis) term a "*reduction of symbolism*". It exists in contradistinction to Buddhist symbolisations of space, whereby "all places are potentially 'sacred' or, at least, to be treated with some respect" (Boord, 1994, page 9). The house-church model affects the religious mobility of non-Christians in two ways, both of which highlight how "it's much easier for someone to come into the house church, to walk into a house, than to actually walk into an established church" (Evangelical Church, Galle). First, the type of respect expected when entering a house is different from that expected when entering a Buddhist temple, for example. When entering a house, visitors grant deference to the owners of the house; when they enter a temple it is the building that is revered, with people having to symbolically purify their bodies through washing, dress, and custom. Entering a house church is recognised as being "easy access … [people] can come as they are" (Evangelical Church, Colombo); there are no restrictions or even expectations regarding dress and behaviour. One story shared by an evangelical pastor makes the point well:

"One time I was preaching in a home meeting … and this particular house has the bathing [ie, a common well shared by a few families]. So I saw two ladies walking from the neighbourhood, you know, they have this cloth around their chests, you know, and a bucket, a soap, and a towel … . So they were walking and they heard me preach, so they came, put the bucket on the side and sat on the doorstep. And they were listening; they were there throughout the service. So if it [were] a church, they wouldn't have been able to come there. So it's very convenient for people and they don't see it as a threat and a disgraceful thing because they are not stepping into a Christian church; it's [just] a neighbourhood gathering for them" (Evangelical Church, Colombo).

The fact that the two ladies did not see the house church "as a threat" highlights the second way that the house church affects the religious mobility of non-Christians. The power of the house-church model is that, in the cultural context of Sri Lanka, it is not a church and is not, therefore, outwardly associated with a religion that is often construed in a negative light:

"you can invite people, [and] they are comfortable to come to a house [rather] than the church. … You can invite a friend, you can say 'we have a meeting in a home, please come'; then he will come because he's coming to your house, not to a church" (Evangelical Parachurch, Colombo).

Visiting a church building holds certain negative connotations that the presumed secularity associated with the house circumvents:

"[non-Christians] are thinking to go to [a] church, they are thinking that I am changing my religion. So even their parents, relations, friends, they [will] say that you have gone to that religion; so when you go to a house, [that] doesn't happen" (Evangelical Church, Trincomalee).

This not only highlights the close surveillance of religious behaviour in Sri Lanka, but also shows how churches are negatively associated with religious conversion, which deters non-Christians from entering them: "when I invite [someone to] the church, they are frightened. If I go, surrounding people will say 'your son is going to church', so big problems" (Evangelical Church, Galle). The network-based nature of the house church enables non-Christians to experiment with Christianity without suffering the adverse consequences and social outcasting associated with attending 'official' church services.

Given that Christian space is not readily accessible to most non-Christians, the house church provides options and a means of overcoming the religious intransigence of Sri Lankan society: "we bring it to them; they won't come to the church, that is the problem" (Evangelical Parachurch, Nuwara Eliya). A similar situation is at play in urban China, where McDonald's has become a central gathering place for worship and Bible study as "it is an accessible and acceptable public place to meet a stranger without exposing one's home or office" (Yang, 2005, page 437). Likewise, in Sri Lanka the seemingly benign space of the house church is an enabler of religious mobility for non-Christians as it involves experiencing a sacred network, and not a sacred building. The house church provides an opportunity for non-Christians to "taste for a while … the passive joys of identity loss and the more active pleasure of role playing" (Augé 1995, page 103), enabling them to experience Christianity without commitment or repercussion. Instead of competing directly with Buddhism and other religious alternatives for "presence in space" (Hervieu-Leger, 2002, page 101), the house church occupies a different spatial register that subverts normative conceptions of sacredness (Woods, 2013).

In light of this it is apparent that the house church, besides being a Christian space, is also a space of subversion. The outward appearance of the house church as a 'nonthreatening' space deflects suspicion and attracts non-Christians, but the very fact that it is so innocuous is, paradoxically, a destabilising force that threatens the prevailing religious structure. As Baird (2009, page 459) recognises in the context of the highlands of Cambodia, house churches "are spaces where highlanders can regain agency in the face of increasingly losing political and economic power". The same is true in Sri Lanka, where Christians are often denied public expressions of agency, resorting to more privatised expressions instead. In this vein, the house provides a pretext for Christian presence, to the consternation of one mainline pastor who argued

"if they go and establish themselves as a church somewhere, there can be a lot of opposition. So they pretend to be very innocent tenants and then they use [the house] for another purpose" (Mainline Church, Colombo).

Church buildings can be seen, mapped, and surveyed by all; house churches cannot. As a result, Christians are actively encouraged to realise a situation whereby "every home becomes a church in the neighbourhood" (Evangelical Church, Colombo). Indeed, when asked what the value of the house-church model is, one representative of an evangelical parachurch organisation with extensive experience planting churches throughout the island highlighted the irony of the situation well:

"It does not stand out; it is part of the community. And I think that is the main thing—it fits in. The minute a pastor who is having maybe twenty families meeting in his home, the minute he attempts to put up a larger, official, structure, there is something in the mindset of the villagers which, even though they have accepted him or even tolerated him so far in his home, would react to that. They feel that [the Buddist temple] is part of the established structure, and people don't want to change, they don't want to rock the boat. So conversely, the same thing, they don't want the church also to rock the boat and disturb the established society too much."

The house church is inherently contradictory: it "does not stand out" because it constructs Christian space within a house, not a church, and in doing so subverts cultural norms regarding religious buildings; pastors are "accepted" or "tolerated" because their church is not "official", yet when it is "official" such goodwill is seen to dissipate; and finally, "people don't want to change" and they do not want the church to "disturb the established society too much", yet the very fact that the house church operates covertly is because its aim is to disturb established society and change the prevailing religious order. The contradictions that are inherent to the house church are hidden by the fact that "the sacred" is, as Chidester and Linenthal

(1995, page 18) stipulate, an "empty signifier", yet "by virtue of its emptiness could mean anything or nothing, its emptiness is filled with meaningful content as a result of specific strategies of symbolic engagement". House churches capitalise on the fact that the sacred is an "empty signifier" by contravening the prevailing assumption that the sacred is bound to a building. Instead, they are the locus of sacred networks, "filled with meaningful content" (and associations) that enable the house church to become a space of subversion in and of itself.

House churches do not, however, exist in a vacuum. The conversion of a house into a church is imbued with politics. Being built on network principles grants house churches a degree of religious mobility that catalyses growth, yet the ease of conversion can also facilitate processes of church fission which, in turn, can compromise the long-term viability of Sri Lanka's evangelical movement.

The politics of converting houses into churches
Houses can compromise the viability of the sacred networks upon which house churches are built. Whilst sacred networks enable the house church to be embedded within non-Christian residential space, the use of the house as a place of worship is as foreign as the church itself to many Sri Lankans: "for the non-Christian, the place matters more than the people who come there, because the place itself is where they consider their god, or the power of their god, to be present" (Evangelical Parachurch, Colombo). Enabling non-Christians to experience Christianity is one thing, but getting them to accept it is another. This is in distinct contrast to the house-church movement in China, where it is argued that because house-church meetings form part of the Christian tradition—one that is superimposed upon a Marxist-informed idea of what constitutes religious space—they are purportedly accepted by their attendees (see Cheng, 2003; Yang, 2005). One convert to Christianity gave an accurate, if sardonic insight into the problems that stem from an overreliance on sacred networks as a substitute for a building:

> "the religious centre is a separate holy place; Muslims enter the mosque washing their feet and their face, right? Buddhists go with the white dress and remove their slippers … . But then the house-church pastor [comes] with a T-shirt like this, and denim, and a motorbike; so this is a church? This is a Christian religious temple? This place?" (Evangelical Church, Colombo).

Such disdainful treatment of the house church reflects the fact that, as Ingold [(2000); see also Eade and Sallnow, (1991)] argues, "the world is layered with inscriptions, symbols and, in general, significance that informs, dictates, and corrupts an individuals' perception of the environment". As much as the house church represents a new approach to worship based on network principles and a new spatial register, mainstream Sri Lankan society remains imprinted with, and guided by, the religio-cultural topography of venerated places of worship.

The network-centric house church exists in a state of tension with the building-centric practices of religious worship in Sri Lanka. Whilst pastors strive to subvert such logic through an emphasis on the relationship with God and commitment to the sacred network rather than commitment to a designated building, it is a slow and nonsensical transition for many. For one convert to Christianity, the fact that "identity comes with the building" severely compromises the ability of Christian groups to connect with non-Christians: "that's why the huge issue: the Buddhists can't understand Christianity". To the non-Christian, therefore, religious buildings are important because "people have an identity with that, that gives them a security … they want to see something visually, like we belong to this place" (Evangelical Church, Kandy). This is not the case in urban China, where the previously mentioned preference for meeting at McDonald's restaurants is, according to Yang (2005, page 425), explained by the fact that McDonald's and Christianity share a close association. Both are believed to be "progressive, liberating, modern, and universal"—values that resonate strongly amongst Western-oriented Chinese. Identity formation is predicated on the formation of sociocultural boundaries

that help to demarcate difference; something that is inherently place-based, yet socially constructed (Anttonen, 2005; Newman and Paasi, 1998; Sheldrake, 2001; Vincent and Warf, 2002). In Sri Lanka, religious buildings symbolise difference, permanence, and fixity, and are juxtaposed against the sacred network, which is intentionally nondifferentiated in order to ensure mobility across space. The conversion of space associated with the house church affects people in different ways, as "conversion engages with, informs and ultimately disrupts existing notions of meaning and identity" (Woods, 2012a, page 449). Whereas the house church enables people to experience a religious alternative in a low-risk way, it also struggles to provide a viable substitute for the permanence and symbolism of the Buddhist temple, or any other 'official' place of worship. The house church is, therefore, a self-fulfilling and problematic arbiter of Christian growth.

The house church often fails to convince non-Christians of the viability of Christianity as a religious alternative. The spatial register of the house church—that which expresses "indifference to [the] spatial environment that is postulated by the strictly voluntary bond uniting individuals in faith [ie, sacred networks]" (Hervieu-Leger, 2002, page 102)—is a source of misunderstanding that enables dualistic religious behaviours to flourish. This is a problem that pastors operating amongst the Tamil Hindu tea estate workers in the Central Province in particular bemoan. Christian house meetings are often met with confusion:

> "the main obstruction for Christianity to spread in these estates is that they don't understand, they think that [Jesus Christ] is also one of the [Hindu] gods, and [that they] can treat every god equally" (Evangelical Parachurch, Nuwara Eliya).

'Converts' would retain Hindu shrines in their homes, conduct daily *pooja*, and continue to attend Hindu events whilst simultaneously attending Christian house meetings. House churches do not draw "distinctions between spaces, mark them for specific uses, create visible and invisible boundaries, and establish cultural conventions of behaviour to deal with those boundaries" (Anttonen, 2005, page 198), leaving non-Christians confused and unguided. The ephemerality associated with the conversion of a house into a church makes it difficult for converts to break with their past religion, as it does not nurture clearly demarcated expressions of faith and encourages dualistic patterns of religiosity to evolve instead.

As cultural norms problematise the viability of Christian space, the domestic space of the house can problematise the legitimacy of the sacred networks upon which the church is built. Whilst geographers have addressed the sacred dimensions of domestic space (eg, Dwyer, 2004; Mazumdar and Mazumdar, 1999; Tong and Kong, 2000), an exploration of the domestic dimensions (specifically, politics) of sacred space is lacking (see, however, Kong, 2002). The politics of the home can, and often does, problematise the legitimacy of the sacred networks that are (re)produced during house-church meetings:

> "[if] the believers [do] not like the house owner for some reason, they [do] not come to the church; or if the house owner does not agree with some of the believers' behaviour, then they would object [to certain people coming]" (Evangelical Church, Colombo).

Similarly, the behaviours, attitudes, and actions of hosts are subject to intense scrutiny. If they contravene Christian principles, then their "lack of testimony [c]ould be a hindrance" (Evangelical Church, Colombo) to the development of the sacred network, and could compromise the validity of the house church as an impartial meeting place for Christians. The mundane operations of the house can also disrupt services and detract from the experience of religious worship:

> "there are normal, everyday happenings of the family going on whilst the service is going on; they will be eating, drinking, they might even be fighting, and the atmosphere is not so conducive to really worshipping" (Evangelical Church, Matara).

Thus whilst the building itself is impartial and can be invested with multiple meanings by different actors and agencies, humans are inherently partial, and can easily complicate the production of sacred space. Put differently, the house church conflates domestic and sacred spaces, causing the former to be scrutinised and the latter to be compromised. House churches are, therefore, based on "a structure that is susceptible to easy fragmentation" (Wilson, 1971, page 10), leading to schisms within the church, and eventually fission.

Church fission and the long-term viability of sacred networks
Fission is a problem endemic to house churches, and is symptomatic of the "schismatic, fissiparous tendencies" (Gerlach and Hine, 1968, page 26) of Pentecostal groups in general. Yet whilst fission can be a natural outcome of growth (ie, when a growing house church reaches a certain size or carrying capacity, it may split in order to remain discreet and maintain the same levels of intimacy and affective energy), it can also be a function of the politics of conversion, or a result of the capitalising behaviours of some Christian clergy and laity. In this sense, the ease and flexibility with which a house church can be established reflects in equal measure the ease with which it can be deconstructed and reconstructed in order to serve different, often self-fulfilling purposes (see Wielander, 2009; also Warf and Winsberg, 2010). It is widely recognised that "the churches are easy to split; the [non-Christian] people ask why you worship together and some people learn something there and split, and take two or three or half of the members with them; why [is] this?" (Evangelical Church, Trincomalee). A pastor of a mainline church in the northeast lamented that fact that fission has led to there being "so many churches around my church; there are so many small, small churches". These observations add empirical weight to Chidester and Linenthal's (1995, page 15) argument that sacred space is "claimed, owned, and operated by people advancing specific interests". The sacred networks upon which the house church is constructed lower—in fact, almost nullify—the entry costs to starting a church, enabling them to proliferate. Yet by enabling Christianity to grow, sacred networks also, ironically, create an intra-Christian space of subversion that empowers believers to not only compete with Buddhism, but with other churches as well. The same pastor in the northeast was candid in his assessment of growth by means of the house church: "they are not thinking about God, they want to put up their own kingdom." He went on to identify the fact that "money is the problem. What [evangelical pastors] want [is] they want to buy a land in their own name, they want to put up their own [church]." This calls into question the viability of sacred networks as the foundations, and catalysts, of evangelical Christian growth.

   Sacred networks enable the construction of a footloose, underground church movement, but they can easily be broken and reformed in response to more secular, and corrupting stimuli. Given that networks are "stabilised by the reciprocity, mutuality, preferentiality and/or interdependencies of or between the actors involved" (Pierce et al, 2011, 56), they can just as easily be destabilised by infighting, ego, and wealth production. In addition, as the preceding discussion has shown, the building cannot be dismissed. It influences sacred networks—and the ensuing spaces of Christianity—in ways that are different from, and often counterproductive for, the intended constructions. Sacred networks are an idiosyncratically Christian characteristic, and often exist in opposition to the reverence for religious buildings in Sri Lanka: "we have the concept of a holy place … it's there in their mind, you can't erase that which has been there for generations" (Evangelical Church, Galle). Seeking "the dismantling of traditional bonds between belief and belonging to a local community" (Hervieu-Leger, 2002, page 103) is frustrated by the staid, place-bound framing of religion in Sri Lanka. The success of the house-church movement in China weighed heavily on the minds of many of the pastors interviewed, yet given De Rogatis's (2003, page 9) assertion that "space [i]s a point of cultural and religious contact, exchange, and sometimes conflict",

it becomes apparent that a more nuanced application of the house-church model is needed. Speaking of Sri Lanka's house-church movement, one Colombo-based pastor correctly stated: "we can't impart, or import, the strategies from other countries", showing how the model must be applied in a culturally reflexive way if it is to serve the purpose for which it is intended (ie, to enable Christianity to flourish), and not individual gain.

Altogether, this calls into question the sustainability of the house-church model and the durability of sacred networks. In creating opportunities for growth and diffusion, longevity is a problem:

> "you have to find ways to root it, you have to find ways to make pastors accountable; often that is one of the biggest problems, when you have all these free-floating loose cannons on deck with very little accountability" (Evangelical Parachurch, Kandy).

Referring to pastors as "free-floating loose cannons" suggests that buildings play an alternative role in the construction of sacred space: whilst the sacred space of the house church is predicated upon the construction of sacred networks, pastors—and the actors responsible for the creation of sacred networks—must remain accountable to the building in which they are located. Such accountability is needed to create a sense of permanence, as recognised by the leader of one of the country's largest evangelical denominations: "people feel a sense of belonging when they can identify with a certain place; that is not absolutely essential, but it is necessary if one has some sense of progress in mind for the institution itself." The frank admission that "you can't maintain a house church for a very long time" (Evangelical Church, Kandy) formalises the delicate balance that exists between Christian growth, and Christian acceptance. Buildings generate acceptance, yet they also foment resistance, whereas networks are more experience-based, enabling Christianity to diffuse, but not necessarily settle. Buildings, in this sense, are not the physical manifestation of the sacred, but they do represent a form of spatial integrity that causes churches to "leav[e] the shadows" (Henkel and Sakaja, 2009, page 52), and are therefore imperative to the sustainability of Sri Lanka's house-church movement over time.

Conclusion

This paper presents a first step towards developing a networked understanding of sacred space. By focusing on the use of sacred networks as the foundations of Sri Lanka's house-church movement, I have shown how the role of religious buildings is abstracted in theory; yet they maintain a latent hold over Sri Lankan society in practice. Nonetheless, sacred networks provide a viable analytical tool that can further the study of religious movements. As the example of the house-church movement shows, such movements traverse scales, and it is the dialectical relationship between macroscale ideology and microscale praxis that brings the politics and potential of sacred networks to life. Whilst the paper accords with broader moves to inject a sense of spatial dynamism into the geographies of religion (and complements calls for a similar sense of temporal dynamism—see Brace et al, 2006; Pred, 1984), it brings to light the similar need to study the scalar dynamism of religious groups.

Exploring the scalar mobility of different groups will take research beyond scale as a fixed analytical category [eg, global, national, regional, local, bodily (see Kong, 2001)], and towards scale as a form of agency that enables connection, movement, subversion, and negotiation. On the one hand, scaling up the discourse will draw attention to the scalar implications of networked space for global religious movements (such as evangelical Christendom and Islamic jihad) that are founded on network principles. Given the subversive nature of sacred networks, the fault lines that emerge when territorial conquest materialises in more visible forms can be potentially explosive, as shown by the attacks perpetrated against house churches in Sri Lanka and around the world (see US Department of State, 2010). On the other hand, scaling down the discourse will see a focus on how people are absorbed into

sacred networks, and requires sensitivity to the role of the body in the "affective making of sacred space" (Holloway, 2003, page 1962; see also Holloway, 2006). Knowledge of how the body is implicated in the production and maintenance of sacred networks at various scales of analysis—from the embodied (eg, inspired worship), to the congregational (eg, collective effervescence), and the transcendental (eg, spiritual healing and exorcism)—is needed in order to connect the microscale practices of the body with more broad-based assertions of spiritual authority.

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