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Buddhism Co. Ltd? Epistemology of religiosity, and the re-invention of a Buddhist monastery in Hong Kong

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Abstract

This article re-theorises the relationships between secularity and religiosity in modernity. While geographers have recognised that the secular and the religious are mutually constituted, this article pushes this theorisation further, arguing that the religious and the secular are in fact hybrid constructs that embrace simultaneously the sacred and profane, the transcendent and the immanent. Albeit the significant advancement in disrupting enclosed epistemologies of secular modernity, relatively less work has sought to theorise the possibility of religion as a *hybrid* operating at the secular–religious interface. Focusing on the ways in which a non-Western religion, Buddhism, performs entangled relationships between religiosity and secularity, this article argues that religious organisations and actors may refashion and re-invent themselves by appropriating rationalities, values and logics normatively defined as 'secular'. It presents a study of Po-Lin Monastery, a Buddhist monastery in Hong Kong that has adopted highly entrepreneurial, growth-oriented approaches in organisation and production of space.

Keywords

Religiosity, secularity, modernity, re-invention of religion, Buddhism, Hong Kong

Introduction

What transformations occur to religion, in both institutional and spatial terms, in the context of secular modernity? Theories of secularisation, to begin with, have underscored the decline of faith on an individual basis, the relegation of religion to the private sphere, and the differentiation of religion from other social systems, such as market, science, state, etc. (Casanova, 1994). While the first dimension has been widely questioned due to inconsistent

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statistics and survey results, the latter two have more far-reaching theoretical implications, reifying a secular–religious dichotomy in the epistemologies of modernity. Over the past decades, geographical scholarships have made substantial advancements in questioning these theoretical premises, and in so doing problematising the normative distinction between the secular and the religious. On the one hand, studies have recognised that religion is still very much on the agendas of public politics (Kong and Woods, 2016). On the other hand, a proliferating literature attends to the interpenetration between religious practices and the presumably profane domain of mundane lives (Bartolini et al., 2017; Holloway, 2003).

As geographers have come to realise, the religious and the secular are in fact mutually constituted (Ricoeur, 1995; Tse, 2014). However, while it is now widely accepted that the constitution of sacredness is embedded in social contexts (Kong, 2001), the very construct of 'religion' is not very often problematised. In some studies, religion remains a 'black box' that lacks definition (Tse, 2014); in others, the notion of religion as something diametrically opposed to the secular in terms of ideologies and values is still employed as a *default* point of entry into inquiries on sacred, spiritual and religious spatialities. In contrast, the possibility of religions as *hybrids*, operating at the secular–religious interface, is pursued only to a limited extent. This observation, though, is not borne out of oblivion to the vibrant literature on faith-based organisations (FBOs), which notes that religious ethos and doctrines are flexible and malleable vis-à-vis secular concerns, changing from the focus on transcendence to this-worldly care and public engagement (Beaumont and Cloke, 2012). This article follows this theoretical direction but aims to further this line of theorisation. It argues that in modernity, religious organisations and actors may refashion and re-invent themselves by actively engaging with and appropriating rationalities, values and logics that are normatively defined as 'secular'. To put it more boldly, this article asks whether religion itself can be 'secularised', to the extent that it selectively 'learns' (in the spirit of Habermas' (2006) rendering of this word) from secular orientations to recompose religious values, ethics and worldviews. This is not to argue for the dilution of religiosity. Rather, we contend that religion is susceptible to what Taylor (2007) has theorised as the immanent frame – religious actors reinforce the position of faith in the cultural landscapes of modernity by carefully managing and navigating the secular–religious interface.

In modernity, the belief that religion is sequestrated from other spheres of social thought and action disciplines how people understand and inhabit systems of faith. Nonetheless, as Asad (2003) and Tse (2014) argue, secular–religious boundaries are socially constructed and contingently performed, built on volatile and unstable signifiers and discourses. Straddling these boundaries, therefore, involves ongoing definition of what are accepted as legitimate and appropriate practices for religious actors (Asad, 1993).

The need to pursue this theorisation is made urgent by myriad novel, innovative religious practices that geographers of religion have overall been slow to address: New Age spiritualities, megachurches, the Charismatic and Pentecostal movements, the religious reforms in East Asia to 'modernise' traditional beliefs, among others (Bartolini et al., 2017; Covell, 2005; Maddox, 2012; Madsen, 2007). These movements emerged amidst social changes associated with high or late modernity and are characterised by theological orientations, tactics of publicity and marketing and organisational cultures that bear clear traces of the secular logics of market, economy and individualism.

To give credence to our arguments, this article presents a case study of Po-Lin Monastery, a Buddhist monastery in Hong Kong that has, over the course of the past few decades, adopted highly entrepreneurial, growth-oriented approaches in both organisation and the production of space. In 1993, after several years of fundraising and lobbying the

Chinese central government for support, the monastery completed the Tian Tan Buddha, a 34-metre-tall bronze statue of the sitting Buddha. The statue made the monastery the principal centre of Buddhism in Hong Kong and a popular destination of cultural tourism. It was also a milestone event in the transition of the monastery, from the focus on otherworldly transcendence, to active 'religious marketing' and an entrepreneurial, expansionist mentality (Einstein, 2008). This article pays specific attention to a 2002 polemic between the monastery and the Hong Kong government over the state's proposal of a cable car project and an affiliated tourism complex in Ngong Ping, Lantau Island, the rural settlement where the monastery is located. The initiative aimed to capitalise on the 'authentic' cultures of Lantau, Buddhist culture included, to boost the weakened tourism sector in Hong Kong. The cable car project (Ngong Ping 360, NP 360 hereafter) – went into service in 2006, along with the tourism complex (Ngong Ping Village), but with notable concessions made to the monastery.

The empirical research draws from three sets of data: (1) all Hong Kong-published newspaper articles (published between May 2002, when the controversy erupted, and October 2016) themed on Po-Lin Monastery, totalling 339 in Chinese and 84 in English; (2) government documents, including four versions of Ngong Ping Outline Zoning Plan (2002, 2003, 2004, 2005) referring to the construction of NP 360, a feasibility study and a Legislative Council Panel Review of the same project, and Ngong Ping Development Plan (completed by Hong Kong Planning Department in 2003; (3) 10 in-depth interviews with various stakeholders involved in tourism development of Ngong Ping, including two senior monks in Po-Lin Monastery, lay staff in the monastery, one member of the Islands District Council overseeing Ngong Ping, five local villagers and staff at Ngong Ping 360 Limited (a subsidiary of Hong Kong's MTR Corporation, and the developer and manager of NP 360).

Above all, the empirical study suggests that, while the monastery mobilised media discourses and represented the controversy as a secular–religious conflict, accusing the government of encroaching the tranquillity and sacredness of a religious establishment, beneath this rhetoric was the worry that the new development would involve resuming a plot of land currently controlled by the monastery and distracting tourists' spending, which would eventually curtail monastic income and jeopardise the monastery's own project of further construction and expansion. In this sense, instead of framing this controversy in a secular vs. religious hermeneutic, we analyse it as the collision between two competing, yet similarly entrepreneurial logics – the developmentalist logic of the state and the monastery's own vision of expanding and consolidating a 'spiritual marketplace' (Roof, 1999). However, if the dichotomies of religious–secular, sacred–profane collapse from within, it by no means signals the 'decline' of religion, as proponents of the secularisation theory might be tempted to argue. Rather, the monks legitimise their agendas on a *religious* ground – namely, to secure a foothold of Buddhism in a highly modernised and secularised Asian global city, and in a time when religious beliefs are freed of cultural/communal obligations. In the 2002 controversy, while the state project was modelled on cultural economic rationalities, based on an abstracted notion of culture as fixed resource to tap into (Raco and Gilliam, 2012), the equally proactive approach of the monastery extended beyond utilitarianism and retained an emphasis on religious meanings and identities.

Ultimately, this article hopes to contribute to the intellectual enterprise advocated by commentators such as Casanova (2006), to rethink the porous, fluid line between the religious and the secular from a global comparative perspective. While modernity and the subsequent differentiation of religion from other spheres are more or less global phenomena,

there is still the need to rethink the religious–secular divide beyond the Eurocentric roots of the secularisation paradigms. As Casanova (2008) argues,

> one should ask whether it is appropriate to subsume the multiple and very diverse historical patterns of differentiation and fusion of the various institutional spheres (that is, church and state, state and economy, economy and science) that one finds throughout the history of modern Western societies into a single, teleological process of modern functional differentiation. (103)

This article ventures to examine how the fuzziness of secular–religious boundaries manifests itself in a religious tradition historically involved in the modern transition in very different ways from European Christianity, but meanwhile embroiled in global economic transformation, expressed locally in the entrepreneurial urban governance of Hong Kong.

Modernity, secular-religious interplay and the possibilities for 'entrepreneurial religion'

As Taylor (2007) assertively claims, modern people live in a secular age, in which secular orders are independent of transcendence and spirituality. The view that in modernity, religious and secular actors base actions on very different constellations of values, norms and thoughts mirrors the ideas of early theorists, chief amongst whom was Berger (1967), and is resonant with a more general position about the functional differentiation in modern society (Dobbelaere, 2002). Bruce (2010), in a more comprehensive account, traces the sequestration of religion into a self-enclosed domain, due to rationalisation, specialisation, social differentiation, individualisation, the decline of small cultural communities, social and cultural diversity, privatisation of faith, secular state, the rise of scientific and economic consciousness, among many other factors.

However, if modernity is a historical project that aims at institutionalising various cultural, social and political principles, while not necessarily reflecting lived realities of society, it is intellectually rewarding to expose the artificiality and inconsistencies inherent in binary epistemologies underpinning the separation of the religious and the secular (Asad, 2003). Indeed, a recurring theme in the geographical scholarship on religion concerns the ways in which the boundaries between sacred and profane, religious and secular are fluidised, transgressed and problematised. Engaging with the conceptual umbrella of postsecularity, articulated by several theorists as one of the self-reflexive projects of modernity (Gorski and Altınordu, 2008; Habermas, 2006, 2008), one thread of scholarship has questioned the hypothesis of privatisation and given testimony to the revival, or indeed persistence, of religion in the public sphere. In particular, faith actors bring religiously motivated ethics and values to bear on the engagements in social welfare, care and activism (Beaumont, 2008; Beaumont and Cloke, 2012). The notion of the postsecular has also been applied to the analysis of how religion constitutes everyday subjectivities, organising and enriching the meanings of lived, embodied experiences (Gökarıksel and Secor, 2017; Olson et al., 2013).

A second thread of scholarship has given substance to the argument that the religious is not so much re-entering the secular but has always disrupted the monolithic representations of the latter, because secular modernity is always-already enchanted by religious impulses and expressions (Bartolini et al., 2017). Echoing this view, discussions of occulture, alternative spiritualities, everyday spiritualities and house churches adeptly reveal the 'excess' of religion into the 'routine', profane spaces and times (Bartolini et al., 2017; Holloway, 2003; Kong, 2002; MacKian, 2012; Mills, 2012; Woods, 2013).

However, while the narratives of the cross-over between the secular and the religious are widely accepted by geographers of religion, much more effort has been dedicated to problematising and criticising secularity than rethinking and theorising what religion and religiosity actually mean in modernity. This study hence attempts to subvert the religious–secular binary in a reverse direction and argues that while disrupting secular modernity, religiosity itself is re-constituted. Again, this rethinking starts from the recognition that the secular–religious dichotomy is integral to modernity as a hegemonic project, but not played out in seamless ways to religion as *praxis*. In fact, Asad (2003) suggests that to 'make a rigid division between the sacred and the secular is surely to impoverish both' (9). Asad goes on to argue that, when either religious or secular actors navigate social milieus, there is no single and consistent motive for a complex action; instead, 'there were several part-agents', 'because of the diverse desires, sensibilities, and self-images involved' (12) – hence, religious actors can only be analysed by looking at 'overlapping, fragmented cultures, hybrid selves, continuously dissolving and emerging social states' (15). Ultimately, it is doubtable whether immanence and transcendence are really so mutually exclusive as Taylor (2007) has claimed. Even in Europe, the bastion of the secularisation thesis, theorists such as Habermas (2006) have reminded that faith actors are exposed to the cognitive dissonances between secular and religious worldviews, and hence face the need to 'develop an epistemic stance toward the independence of secular from sacred knowledge' (14). What results is a process of *learning* that involves the reconstruction of orientations, behaviours and the universe of knowledge for faith actors, leading to 'a more reflexive form of religious consciousness' (Habermas, 2008: 28). Hence, the central problematique concerning religion in modernity is not so much the extent to which religion has declined or persisted, but 'how religious thought and practice changed in relation to modernization' (Wilford, 2010: 333), manifested by myriad innovation, adaptation, and reinterpretation in religious organisation and expression (Lambert, 1999).

This argument is developed most eloquently by the French religious theorist Danièle Hervieu-Léger (1986, 2002), who has attended closely to the 'ongoing reorganization of the nature and forms of religion into configurations which are compatible with modern living' (Davie, 2007: 61). Instead of ascertaining the extent that religion jibes with, or deviates from, the normativised religious–secular differentiation, a more refined approach delves into 'the kinds of religiosity that are nurtured by and flourish in modern societies' (Davie, 1996: 101), shaped by intertwined processes of secularisation and sacralisation. In other words, new forms of religious organisation and expression are more productively analysed as products of, rather than backlash against, modernity. Eventually, it appears that a religious institution that 'thinks and speaks from the inside of modernity' is more likely to negotiate effectively upheavals of modern society and meet the changing demands of its constituency (Davie, 1996: 106).

In particular, to unravel the mutual constitution of religion and modern market culture is a crucial step in theorising the case study in this article. Here, we single out market economy, and the cultures and values associated with it, as a key this-worldly condition constitutive of religiosity (Lambert, 1999). We do not argue that religiosity is rendered inauthentic to the extent that it is colonised by instrumental logics and rational calculation, but that religious representations are embroiled in dynamic equilibriums between parallel horizons and competing forces.

These multifaceted relationships can be summarised from three perspectives. First, religion may act as a response or even cure to conditions of capitalist modernity, for example, in the context of neoliberal overhauling of social welfare regimes and the re-enlivened engagements of FBOs (Beaumont, 2008). Note that this process is not about

transplanting existing theo-ethics to secular agendas, but involving reforms of theologies, namely, the transition from faith-by-dogma to faith-by-praxis (Cloke and Beaumont, 2012; Williams, 2015). Second, religion may even provide theological justifications for economic rationalities and behaviours. This view bears the trace of Weber's treatise on protestant ethic but finds new resonances in an era of neoliberalism, given the active role played by faith organisations in cultivating development aspirations and individualistic conceptions of merit or failure (Hackworth, 2010; Olson, 2006). The final thread of studies, mostly in the sociology of religion, attends to the ways in which religion itself adopts modalities of operation informed by proactive, entrepreneurial and market-oriented outlooks, giving rise to 'entrepreneurial religion', a phrase used by Lanz and Oosterbaan (2016) to illustrate paradigmatic changes in religious organisation. To conceptualise religion in this way underlines 'aspirations-visions of a this-worldly millennium' (Comaroff, 2009: 24), but, contrary to Comaroff's more pessimistic accounts, does not need to presuppose seamless co-option of religion by the secular economy.

All three dimensions are attuned with the tenet of our argument; that is, religiosity as *praxis* is negotiated and ongoing. But it is the third line of inquiry that we want to pursue in depth, to cast light on the new organisational culture of Po-Lin Monastery. One body of literature that narrates comparable storylines is that on the Christian megachurches. Although defined based on the size of regular attendance, what interests social scientists the most is the fact that megachurches are completely compatible with ethos of market and consumerism. Non-denominational or loosely denominational, megachurches have gained impetus in a context where liquid modernity renders all boundaries blurred (Gauthier, 2014). As Maddox (2012) observes, the activities and messages of megachurches are probably less aligned with traditional teachings than the culture of global capitalism.

Megachurches have proved extraordinarily adept in reconciling the dissonances between secular and religious logics. In addition to their theological orientations, usually described as prosperity gospels (Chong, 2015), the ways that megachurches manufacture and market religious experiences are of particular relevance to the current study. First, megachurches mobilise multiple techniques of branding and marketing (Einstein, 2008). This not only involves media exposure, public relation consultancy and reliance on the publishing industry but also the remaking of religion as mediated – 'a set of practices, objects and ideas' (Engelke, 2010: 374), with a strong material presence via spectacular buildings, stylish interior designs, capacious spaces, visual aesthetics, etc. This is epitomised foremost by rock-concert-style worship sessions that rely heavily on the technologies of pop culture, semiotics and performativity (Chong, 2015; Connell, 2005; Cruz, 2009; Goh, 2008; Yip and Ainsworth, 2015).

Second, megachurches generally adopt a reformed, modernised and growth-oriented organisation of operation, management and finance, led by charismatic personalities with strategic visions. A forward-looking outlook is exemplified by an emphasis on the constant 'development' of the church and growth of congregation (Goh, 2008; Maddox, 2012; Poon et al., 2012; Yip and Ainsworth, 2015). Finally, theologies of megachurches are largely devoid of concerns with social injustice and humanitarian purposes, but focus predominantly on personal experiences, spirituality and inner self (Chong, 2015; Cruz, 2009).

The literature on megachurches is broadly situated in religious economics (RE) and rational choice theory (RCT) in the sociology of religion. To frame our empirical case in this very large literature, we underline one argument in RE and RCT; that is, the enterprising behaviours of religious institutions and actors enliven a vibrant *market* of religious consumption (Finke and Stark, 2000; Iannaccone, 1998). 'Entrepreneurial religion' is able to make headway because of the dismantling of traditional bonds between community and

belief, paralleled by the individualisation and subjectivisation of religion (Bruce, 1996). This process allows religion to enter 'the world of options, lifestyles and preferences' (Davie, 2007: 56), a state of 'believing without belonging' (Davie, 1994), whereby individuals make choices about their religions compatible with their calculations of costs and benefits.

Despite that this body of work is often viewed as a theoretical minefield that defies easy empirical validation, we can derive explanatory value from these epistemologies, epistemologies that locate religion squarely within, not outside, secular modernity. First, in the lexicon of RE and RCT, religious experiences are akin to goods to be consumed, religious believers, now re-theorised as religious consumers, are rational actors who 'shop' for goods that maximise religious satisfaction. It is the changing demands of consumers that activate the institutional restructuring of religions (Iannaccone, 1992, 1998). Second, RE and RCT underscore that 'religious developments derive from change in the incentives and opportunities facing religious producers' (Finke and Iannaccone, 1993: 28). Hence, these theories emphasise the tactics of marketing and competition adopted by religious entrepreneurs to fashion new religiosities and experiences (Roof, 1999).

Taking stock of the theoretical perspectives discussed so far, we believe that these theoretical contours enable us to frame religion within the spaces and social struggles of a cosmopolitan city such as Hong Kong, amidst globalisation, capitalism and state developmentalism (Hancock and Srinivas, 2008; Lanz and Oosterbaan, 2016). Following the advent of Western modernity, Hong Kong has been susceptible to an immanent frame, but, akin to the US experience, has retained a vibrant edge of religiosity. However, the secular–religious divide has charted a very different course in Hong Kong both from the secularised Western Europe and the 'gloriously American' religious marketplace (Sharot, 2002). On the one hand, religion has kept an abiding presence in Hong Kong's public sphere, organising communal socialities and motivating political struggles (Kwok, 2015; Liu, 2003). Besides, traditional and folk religions in Chinese societies (China, Taiwan and Hong Kong), Buddhism included, appear to be adept in adopting the pragmatic, growth-oriented and entrepreneurial spirits of modernity, seeing no problem in the use of money as a medium, even measurement, of transcendent commitment (Chan and Long, 2011; Weller, 2001). On the other hand, however, there is no need to take approaches such as RE and RCT dogmatically, for, as Sharot (2002) reminds us, they are very much derived from the US context. When analysing the Hong Kong case, two caveats are warranted. First, in religion, value cannot always be standardised and rationally calculated. Specific returns to religious institutions – such as memberships, cultural popularity and religious commitment – cannot be measured in the same way as profits but may be integral to the proactive outlook of faith actors (Palmer, 2011). Second, RE and RCT emphasise instrumental rationality, but are reticent in value-rational orientations focusing on transcendent values (Jerolmack and Porpora, 2004). Neither can we jettison the alternative of conceptualising religion as irrational 'social contagion' (Mellor, 2000), concerning issues of identity, meaning, community, and so on. Thus, while the epistemological location of religion within modernity in RE and RCT resonates with the study, our examination of Po-Lin Monastery does not take at face value the idea of a spiritual marketplace. The question is really how religion re-invents itself to adapt to the immanent frame, within the ambits of which we orient and live our lives, both secular and religious.

Before proceeding to the case study, we insert a caveat regarding our treatment of Buddhism as religion. By characterising the negotiations between the Po-Lin Monastery and the state as evidence of intersections between the religious and the secular, this article is, in one sense, complicit in *ontologising* Buddhism as a 'religion', even though we recognise

that the secular–religious divide was historically unknown to Chinese folk belief systems, of which Buddhism has oftentimes been syncretically embroiled. Informed by the works of Gökarıksel and Secor (2010, 2017), we acknowledge that we should not lose sight of the ways that the everyday undermines enclosed definitions of religion and religiosity. Still, we believe that the conceptualisation of Buddhism as a relatively separate domain of spiritual and other-worldly pursuits is valid in the context of this study. Indeed, ever since the late 19th century, Chinese folk beliefs have been consistently exposed to the Western constructions of religiosity and secularity. In the early 20th century, Chinese political elites and intellectuals borrowed, via Meiji Japan, the Western vocabulary of religion (Chinese: *zongjiao* 宗教), which was then conceptualised scientifically as a coherent system of theosophy, scriptures, clergy and religious sites (Ashiwa and Wank, 2009; Yang, 2008). As Asad (2003) argues, the invention of 'religion' is always-already a secularising move, because it simultaneously reifies the secular domain. Meanwhile, religion is an in situ performance, whose ontological significance is brought to life by state and market forces. The Hong Kong state recognises explicitly religion as a subsystem of society and 'religion' (officially comprised of Buddhism, Catholicism, Protestantism, Taoism and Islam) is even designated as a functional constituency participating in electoral activities. Also, the need to market Buddhism as appealing to a modern and urban society encourages the clergy to see Buddhism as a cosmos of unique spiritual values and experiences.

In sum, we do not suggest that Po-Lin Monastery follows Christian denominations selling prosperity gospel. After all, Chinese Buddhism, through the notion of *karma*, was traditionally appropriated by ordinary people for pursuit of this-worldly benefits and prosperity. We are reluctant to liken this articulation of religiosity to prosperity gospel, which emerged amidst late and fluid modernities. Our point is that, despite the persisting ontological differences between Buddhism and Western religiosity, the empirical materials in this article can nevertheless be usefully expounded by theories of entrepreneurial religion and religious economics.

Enterprising Buddhism: Ethos of religious organisation, operation and marketing

> Religion, only when it changes with the epoch or even pushes forward the epoch, can act as a guide for the living beings. (*A Century of Po-Lin Monastery,* 2014: 101)

This section sketches a broad picture of the changing ways that Po-Lin Monastery has engaged with a secularised, modernised world. It not only supplies a context for the subsequent discussion of the 2002 controversy but is also in its own right illustrative of the crossing-over between the religious and the secular. Po-Lin Monastery was established in 1911 by three immigrant monks from Mainland China, beginning with no more than a shabby hut. For a good part of the monastery's history, Buddhism was overshadowed by Christianity, which was almost the *default* religious belief for elite echelons of this colonial society. The general disadvantage faced by Buddhism, and the mass conversion of educated Chinese to Christianity were the broad contexts in which a this-worldly outlook and nascent consciousness of religious competition began to emerge for monks (Interview, Monk W, September 2016). Po-Lin Monastery was also under the influence of a much wider movement of Buddhist modernisation in Republican China (This-Worldly Buddhism Movement, *Renjian Fojiao*). *Renjian Fojiao*, heralded by several reform-minded monks, advocated that religion must cater to spiritual and cultural demands of people negotiating rapid social changes (Madsen, 2007). As early as the 1930s, and under the leadership of its second

abbot, Master Fat Ho, Po-Lin began to engage in activities that had a vaguely enterprising facet, including the promotion of Buddhist music and magazines, and running of schools. In 1966, the monastery made a reform of its organisation, entrusting the management to an elected board of directors.

In the 1970s, as Buddhism was gradually reclaiming its share of the religious market, the idea of building a gigantic statue of Buddha was mooted. The staunchest support, interestingly, came from the Chinese central state, which at that time was eager to renew social and cultural ties with colonial Hong Kong and thus lent considerable financial and technical aid. The principal rationale for constructing the statue was to give Buddhist religiosity a strong material presence, and made pilgrimage a spectacular, even sublime experience. As a book compiled by the monastery suggests, the materiality of the statue is integral to the civilising function of Buddhism in the contemporary world (*A Century of Po-Lin Monastery*, 2014: 28).

Since Fat Ho, most abbots of Po-Lin Monastery have been charismatic leaders seeing Buddhism as closely entangled with textures of secular modernity. This progressive, forward-looking mentality is embraced whole-heartedly by Master Sik Chi Wai, who has been the *de facto* leader of the monastery since the 1990s and succeeded as abbot in 2005. In addition to being a principal protagonist of Tian Tan Buddha, Chi Wai is no less a media celebrity than 'holy mavericks' in the US (Lee and Sinitiere, 2009). Chi Wai presents himself as a strong voice in the public sphere. On the one hand, he does not retreat from secular politics, having served as a councillor in the Island District Council and two terms as a representative of Hong Kong to China's National People's Congress. On the other hand, he advocates vocally the expansionist vision of Po-Lin Monastery in the media, arguing that, for a religion to survive in modern society, the horizon of religious experiences must be perpetually broadened (e.g. *Ming Pao*, 6 May 2006).

We spotlight four aspects of the monastery's strategic and tactical manoeuvres that supersede the barriers between transcendence and immanence. First, the monastery carefully manipulates state–religion relations. In contrast to Christian groups in Hong Kong, aligned in general with an anti-establishment, pro-democracy position, Po-Lin Monastery and Buddhism in Hong Kong as a whole are in alliance with Beijing and the incumbent state regime. The Tian Tan Buddha, indeed, is used by the monastery to symbolise its close connection with the 'motherland' and the Chinese central state. The monastery also vocally supports the Hong Kong government. Illustrative of this political leaning is a 2013 scenario, in which Chi Wai urged activists preparing for the Occupy Central Movement to relinquish their plan (*Oriental Daily*, 12 May 2013). However, it may be misguided to conclude that Buddhist actors are simply co-opted by the state. Rather, their political stance has a strategic edge, giving them extra stake while negotiating with the state for scarce resources such as land and finance. A newspaper editorial postulated explicitly that the Hong Kong government made concessions during the 2002 polemic precisely because, encountering tension with Christian groups, they could not afford losing yet another ally in civil society (*Sing Tao Daily,* 28 October 2002).

Second, the monastery has reformed its organisation so that it acts like a business, with expertise in non-religious activities, rather than a community of monks whose horizon of actions is restricted to the religious realm. With a board of directors as the supervising body, the monastery has been registered as a limited company since 1966, albeit retaining a charity status. The advantages of structuring the monastery as a modern enterprise have been manifest in recent years, while it has substantially diversified its activities, encompassing both non-profit (religious rituals, celebrations, charity) and profit-driven (commercial religious services, production and retailing of tourist souvenirs, property investment) ones.

Overall, new organisational approaches enable clear division of responsibilities among directors sitting on the board, cleared legal barriers for hiring laypersons as employees and rationalised the management of personnel and finance. It has also occasioned unprecedented translocal mobility of monks. With the outlook of an enterprise, the monastery taps into a vast pool of qualified monks, beyond those keeping permanent residence in the monastery. A sizable number of Mainland Chinese monks have therefore migrated to work for Po-Lin Monastery, easing to some extent the shortage of local Buddhist monks. As Buddhism in the Mainland already has a noticeable this-worldly orientation and is to a notable extent commercialised (Sun, 2011), mobility of monks has further fed into the entrepreneurial culture in the monastery.

Third, Po-Lin Monastery's management of finance is now underpinned by an instrumental rationality, where the pursuit of profit is accepted by monastery leaders as a central mission. In fact, the monastery was likened by a media editorial to a business empire, with a net worth of 1.2 billion HKD (Note: Hong Kong Dollar (HKD) is approximately equivalent to US$0.13) in 2015 (East Week, 21 October 2015). On the one hand, the perpetual development, expansion and construction of the monastery call for financial resources. In response, the monastery provides a wide range of religiously coded, standard-priced services and experiences, including vegetarian meals, amulets, souvenirs, rituals, etc. To attach price tags to religiosity has aroused some confusion and anxiety among the monks, and tensions between the sacred and profane logics are apparently at play in their religious subjectivities – 'traditionally, believers donate to us at their will, and to charge unitary prices seems too utilitarian' (Interview, Monk F, October 2010). In addition, Po-Lin Monastery actively engages in real estate investment, and in 2015 alone, the monastery reaped about 27 million HKD from property speculation. On the other hand, at least in the case of Buddhism in Hong Kong, no longer does the clergy or the laity see asceticism and material simplicity as indispensable conditions of monks' spiritual fulfilment. In other words, a certain extent of 'indulgence' in the material affluence and consumer culture of the modern world is viewed as acceptable even for monks. Ironically, as a religious institution meant to provide moral guidance, Po-Lin Monastery has been caught in a series of scandals associated with finance. The most tumultuous one surfaced in 2015 and was centred on Sik Chi Ding, a disciple of Po-Lin Monastery and the head nun of Ting Wai Monastery. In addition to allegations of having successively married two monks in Po-Lin Monastery, Chi-Ding was found to be an avid purchaser of luxurious jewelleries, furniture and cosmetics, and lead a Benz-cum-iPhone lifestyle by misappropriating donations from believers.

Finally, and of particular relevance to this study, the monastery prioritises continual expansion and development, inter alia the building of spectacular material structures. After the Tian Tan Buddha project, on the top of the monastery's agenda was the construction of a grandiose structure named 'Ten Thousand Buddha Hall', which was to be home to 10,000 gold-gilded statues of Buddha and precious Buddhist relics and arts. The hall, whose construction cost 400 million HKD and took seven years, opened in 2014. Now, the monastery is already in the middle of planning a bell tower, a drum tower and a Buddhist college. The hall project will be the subject of later discussion. Suffice it to point out here that the monks read these agendas as tokens of commitment to Buddhism. In the monks' narratives, and to employ Kong and Woods' (2016) framework for making sense of these narratives, competition for a share in a religious market involves both intra-/inter-religious competition (between five officially recognised religions in Hong Kong, and between myriad independent religious organisations) and religious–secular competition (with other attractions in the Islands District, e.g. the Hong Kong Disneyland). These building

agendas are also resonant with the view that in modernity religion is more or less a personal choice that can be cultivated and directed (Hervieu-Léger, 2001) – as Monk F remarked, 'we build and we spend money, because we don't want people to lose interest in us and forget us; so, our topmost mission is still to promote Buddhist teachings' (October 2016).

The unfolding of the 2002 controversy

In 2002, the Hong Kong government announced the project of building a cable car system linking Tung Chung, a northern portal township in Lantau Island and Ngong Ping. The cable car was to be coupled with a tourism complex, consisting of hotels, hostels, shops and eateries. The rationale underlining the project was to capitalise on the Buddhist heritage, natural landscapes and authentic rurality of Lantau, to inject growth impetus to Hong Kong's tourism sector after the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis. MTR Group, the operator of the city's railway system and an active participant in property development, was selected as the developer of the project. However, even though Po-Lin Monastery and Buddhism were listed as integral elements of what the state conceived as tourist attraction of the island, the project did not attend directly to religiosity. Instead, Buddhism was approached as an exploitable economic base, a backdrop to a wide array of tourist and leisure experiences, rather than a concrete system of values, meanings and identities that might come into conflict with secular developmentalism. During the interview, staff at Ngong Ping 360 Limited also stated explicitly, 'We are not a religiously related cable car project, in our positioning... and we never really played the religious role that high' (September 2016). Now that the plan has come to fruition, the tourism complex is home to a gamut of food and beverage outlets, tourist-related product shops, and folk cultural displays, the vast majority of which do not have a discernible religious underpinning. In this sense, the Hong Kong government appeared to be replicating the problem of the controversial West Kowloon Cultural District, formulating cultural policies in purely technical and functionalist terms, but downplaying culture as actually inhabited and contested by different constituencies of people (Kong et al., 2015).

Soon after the state revealed the project, Po-Lin Monastery adopted a radical stance, criticising NP360 as a disruptive, even blasphemous project that Buddhists should respond to with an 'uprising' (e.g. *Ming Pao*, 23 October 2002). Over the course of their campaign, the monks proved adept in mobilising the public sphere, especially media. If, as Stolow (2005) argues, the myth of modern media as an instrument of secularisation is increasingly subject to doubt, the campaign launched by Po-Lin monastery offered a vivid account attesting to this argument. Nonetheless, navigating through the media discourses promulgated by the monastery, and cross-referencing them with acts and practices taking place on the ground, the need to tease out the incoherencies and discrepancies becomes apparent.

On the part of the monastery, the monks, rallied around Master Chi Wai, carefully framed the conflict as one between the religious and the secular. The monastery claimed three rationales for opposing NP360. First, while the monastery in principle accepted the necessity of the cable car system for improving tourist accessibility, it opposed the building of hotels and eateries, for they would disrupt the tranquillity and sacredness in the environs of the monastery. It claimed that tourists residing in Ngong Ping would create too much hustle-bustle, and Western tourists insensitive to Eastern religions might be indiscreet in behaviours and attires. Meanwhile, the monastery expressed worry that newly built eateries would turn a blind eye to religious taboos and sell meat dishes, contradicting the vegetarianism of Buddhists. For Master Chi Wai, it was particularly profane if 'tourists

walked in the vicinity of the monastery with chicken legs and hamburgers in their hands' (*Ming Pao*, 4 July 2002). Amidst the vocal contestation by the monastery, the Hong Kong Planning Department revised the development plan in June 2002 so that no hotel would be included.

Second, the monastery criticised top-down developmentalism for disempowering and potentially displacing vernacular economic practices of the native villagers catering to tourists. This rhetoric concerned the six local rural households that were, at the time of the controversy, the sole suppliers of food to pilgrims and visitors. While the emphasis on economic livelihoods did not fall squarely into the religious–secular divide, the monastery did suggest that practices of local people were more sensitive to Buddhist religiosity. The primary testament, the monastery claimed, was that local villagers refrained from selling meat dishes, out of respect to Buddhist doctrines. In sum, the monastery purported the impression that they had formed a grassroots alliance with villagers, based on communal orders alternative to exogenous capital and corporate interests.

Finally, the monastery's objection focused on the land before the entrance hall of the temple (where the guardian deity Skanda was worshipped), which the state planned to resume for the tourism complex. At the time of the project, the space was home to a small square, controlled by the monastery and named Di Tan (the Earthly Altar, in contrast to Tian Tan, the Heavenly Altar). The monastery argued that an open space before the Skanda hall had a ritualistic and symbolic function and was integral to any temple following the Chinese Mahayana Buddhism (*Ming Pao*, 26 August 2002). While the land was in reality unleased government land, and the monastery acknowledged it, the monks invoked an alternative concept of property rights, based on the actual use and appropriation of land (see. Blomley, 2003).

However, like any group, the ability of the monastery to harness media discourses to specific discursive formulations has its limits. Even when the conflict was evolving in 2002, some media commentaries speculated that there was more to the monastery's agenda than resisting secularist interventions. As the subsequent expansion of the monastery gradually unveiled, the media, in retrospect, viewed the 2002 event in new light – sympathetic comments ebbed to an extent, while neutral, analytical and even overtly critical tones were on the rise. Our interviews with senior monks also give credence to a more complex, entangled picture of interactions between faith actors and the state. By no means are we arguing that the rhetorics of identity, ritualistic meaning, sacredness and grassroots alliance are simply manufactured to conceal a clandestine agenda. Our point is that although these issues, focusing on transcendent values and meanings, may be firmly anchored in the monks' subjectivity, faith actors also have multiple layers of aspirations and sensibilities (Asad, 2003).

First, during the interviews, the monks suggested that the ritualistic meanings of land were actually secondary to its *exchange value*. On the one hand, as Monk W remarks, in Hong Kong, whose urbanism is defined by severe scarcity of land, high cost for land leasing and massive land speculation, 'everyone is intuitively sensitive to land and not willing to surrender even a square inch' (September 2016). On the other hand, because land within the premise of the monastery had been reserved for the Ten Thousand Buddha Hall project, the monks were keen to keep control of the land in question for potential additional project of monastery expansion.

Second, media commentaries speculated, and our interviews confirmed, that Po-Lin monastery opposed the NP360 largely out of the worry that the latter would channel away visitors' spending, attenuate the monastery's revenue and jeopardise financial viability of projects such as the grand hall. Given that the selling of vegetarian meals was

back then the primary source of income for the monastery, the opposition was underpinned by a practical economic rationality.

Finally, our interviews with local villagers suggested that socio-cultural ties between the monastery and the village have never been as strong as the monastery claimed. Of the six native households catering to visitors, we managed to interview four. Among them, all but one express suspicion towards the monastery's rhetoric of seamless local unity. At the time of the conflict, neither did local villagers uniformly oppose NP360, nor did they intentionally avoid selling meat dishes. Some media reports also implied that an alliance united around a common Buddhist legacy was probably nothing more than a myth concocted by the monastery. The monastery, in fact, was long in conflictual relationship with Brook Bernacci, a colonial lawyer and politician, and his descendants. The latter owned a plot of land in Ngong Ping and wanted to develop it into a hotel, but from time to time the plan was aborted due to persistent opposition of the monastery (*Ming Pao*, 20 December 2002).

All that said, media commentaries generally concurred that during the conflict, the monastery artfully mobilised public media to their favour – 'Sik Chi Wai... knows about the media: you are not interested in moderate expressions, you are after emotional, colourful quotes. So he did his best to please' (*South China Morning Post*, 27 October 2002). Amidst a discursive space where sympathetic voices were overwhelming, the monastery struck a final blow to the government, announcing, on 22 October 2002, that they would close the monastery and Tian Tan Buddha for a week, to register their strong concerns. To avoid a further deterioration of the situation, Michael Suen, then Secretary for Housing, Planning and Lands, took a helicopter ride to Po-Lin Monastery and had a meeting with senior monks and local district councillors. The major concession that Suen made, along with minor ones, was to modify the spatial layout of the tourism complex so that the monastery would continue to control the land before the Skanda Hall. Immediately after the meeting, the monastery released to the press that they had decided to support the NP360 project.

Ten Thousand Buddha Hall: The vortex of religious entrepreneurialism

If the state, as we suggested earlier, was reluctant to lose an ally in civil society, the monastery also avoided turning its relationship with the state into one of animosity. In fact, to stand with the state in the NP360 project helped the monastery to build the image of a committed and dependable friend willing to sacrifice some interests to advance state agendas. This, eventually, gave the monastery extra stake in bargaining with the state regarding ensuing projects of monastery expansion. In the aftermath of 2002, the monastery continued to manoeuvre state–religion relations to push forward the Ten Thousand Buddha Hall project. The state, recognising the monastery as a relatively cooperative element in society, is willing to give the latter preferential treatment in tourism development in Ngong Ping. For example, in 2010, the government spent 77 million HKD out of taxpayers' money to rebuild the Ngong Ping Square, in an attempt to improve the local built environment. The government intentionally furnished the square with Buddhist iconographies and statues of Buddhist deities, showing that the state held in high regard local Buddhist legacies. Besides, during the construction of the hall, the monastery demolished its King Yin Lei Mansion, a renowned old stone structure. This invited widespread criticism and suspicion about whether the monastery really cared about cultural legacies, as they claimed in 2002 (*South China Morning Post*, 24 September 2007). However, the government chose to remain reticent throughout the debate.

A central issue illustrating the monastery's exploitation of the state–religion rapport concerned the premium charged by the Land Department of Hong Kong in regard to the hall project. Given that Hong Kong Government is the *de jure* owner of land in the city, any change of land use is subject to the payment of a premium. Because the building of a splendidly furnished hall was already costly, the monastery made it a priority to bargain for maximal discount in land premium. During our interview, staff at Ngong Ping 360 Limited insists that, because they have built up the market of tourism in Ngong Ping, the absolute number of people spending in the monastery has increased. This view seems to be corroborated by field observations and interviews. Yet, since 2002, the monastery, in media, largely performed the role of a religious institution *victimised* by NP360. On several occasions, Master Chi Wai lamented that NP360 contributed to an increase of the monastery's expenditure (for hiring more employees to tackle increased tourists) but decrease of spending in the monastery (*Sing Tao Daily*, 13 June 2006; *Sing Tao Daily*, 11 May 2008). He even called himself a 'sinner' in the history of the monastery, for Tian Tan Buddha, which he advocated, was the root cause of state-led development in Ngong Ping (*Ming Pao*, 13 June 2007).

Positioned as a victim, the monastery claimed that a discounted premium was a totally legitimate compensation for their sacrifice to public interests. This claim proved rhetorically powerful. While the Land Department initially set the premium at close to 50 million HKD, it was reduced to 15 million in January 2006 and finally to 12 million in September. Some media reports also disclosed that the Chinese central government, via its liaison office in Hong Kong, intervened in the bargain in favour of the monastery, but whether this intervention played a decisive role has not yet been validated.

In October 2014, the Ten Thousand Buddha Hall was opened with a consecration ritual. CY Leung, Chief Executive of Hong Kong, and Zhang Xiaoming, Director of the Liaison Office of the Chinese Central Government, both attended the ritual, further obscuring the line between secular politics and religiosity. The hall vastly enlarges the horizon of religious experience in the monastery. In a sense, it presents a *prima facie* example of spirituality mediated by spectacles, iconographies and materialities (Engelke, 2010; Goh, 2008). In addition to its grandiose architectural form (a five-storey Chinese-style hall and 120 dragon-carved stone pillars), the hall has a lavishly furnished interior, with 10,000 small gilded statues of Buddha lined in a capacious hall, and five large gilded statues, each of which is placed at the centre of a storey, worth 6.88 million HKD, and donated by Buddhist believers. The hall is also home to a wide array of Buddhist relics and arts, of which the premium collectibles include a complete set of the Chinese Buddhist Canon (Chinese: *dazangjing* 大藏經), compiled and printed by the Qing imperial court, and a rich collection of Tibetan Buddhist thangka. The five storeys serve the diverse functions of assembly, lecturing, meditation and ordination. The current operation of the hall betrays the notion of religious experiences as commodities to be consumed via economic capital, for only believers who have generously donated to the monastery can access and use Storeys 2 to 5.

Conclusion

In this article, we began our argument by contesting the notion of modernity as an epoch in which the secular–religious differentiation is entrenched. While geographers of religion recognise that there is a dialectic between the secular and the religious, this article pushes this line of theorisation one step further, by arguing that both the religious and the secular are in fact hybrid constructs that are simultaneously sacred and profane, transcendent and immanent. Although there has been much progress in the geographies of religion to

demonstrate that the secular realm is not so much secularised as an ideal type would suggest, relatively less work has been dedicated to problematise and re-conceptualise religiosity. Ultimately, this article has attempted to establish the view that, if religion is by no means 'sequestrated' by the secular, it has also been *re-invented* by the latter (Davie, 2007; Hervieu-Léger, 1986). In this sense, the notion of religion as a constitutive outside of secular modernity, a system of thought and action defined foremost by its *transcendence* over secularity, must be put under critical scrutiny.

Po-Lin Monastery provides a useful case for generating insights into religious institutions relativising the conception of religiosity and engaging with the animus of modernity. We summarise some key points, which bolster our argument that the dichotomies of the secular and the religious, the sacred and the profane collapse *within* the institutional behaviours, organisational cultures and modus operandi of faith actors. First, the monastery has selectively imbibed entrepreneurial and market culture of modernity, emphasising perpetual creation of new religious experiences as extravaganza and marketable goods. Second, in the cosmopolitan urban environment of Hong Kong, where spirituality has largely been individualised, and religion no longer plays a central role in institutionalised social orders (Bruce, 2010). It appears that religious leaders in Po-Lin monastery do not have to be role models in a moral and ethical sense, but instead emphasise their role as diligent agents whose work is to 'manage' and promote religiosity. In Hong Kong media, it is not unusual to encounter parodying, even sarcastic portrayals of Master Chi Wai and other Buddhist leaders. Yet, it is also true that people depend heavily on these figures for the supply of spiritual goods. Finally, another contextual condition that warrants underlining here is that Hong Kong is a society with a firmly established tradition for religion to actively partake in secular politics. Indeed, as Councillor Yu from the Islands District Council remarks, 'religious matters always have the advantage, if not on the top' (September 2016). Hence, no wonder that media accounts commented, in either complimentary or sarcastic tones, that the monks knew the 'art' and rules of dealing with the state.

In sum, this article has ventured to extend extant theorisations about the relationship between secularity and religiosity in modernity. We do not argue for the dismantling of the categories of 'religious' and 'secular' nor do we dismiss the secularisation paradigm. Instead, we accept the categories as ideal types, from which adaptations, modifications, and hybridisations emerge. Precisely because forces of secularisation impact on religious orders, religion, over the course of negotiating these forces, has learnt from the latter and been 'secularised' in some ways through adopting immanent values and practices. As much as Tse (2014) has argued that secularism is a form of (grounded) theology in that those who call themselves 'secular' may be guided by implicit theological narratives in their practices, we promulgate the view that those who call themselves religious also employ secular ways to promote their religions and achieve the survival and growth of religious congregations and activities.

To conclude this article, we hope that the current study may encourage future work in at least two directions. First, within the context of the current case and comparable cases of entrepreneurial religions, to attend to the religious experiences of ordinary believers, beyond the examination of religious leaders, may help extend the analytical framework and further nuance an epistemology of religiosity. Second, the notion of religious actors involved in market behaviours and enterprising creates a productive tension with the recent thesis of postsecular rapprochement (Cloke and Beaumont, 2012). In this latter scholarship, activities undertaken by FBOs and actors are usually analysed as an important force restoring social justice amidst neoliberal retrenchment of state functions and welfare. The current study, however, implies that entrepreneurial religions have more complex relationships with social

justice in highly marketised societies. Po-Lin Monastery, on the one hand, is active in all sorts of charity and service provision; the expansion of the monastery also creates jobs and economic opportunities for the local community, isolated from Hong Kong proper in many ways. On the other hand, however, the monastery is heavily involved in land and property speculation, contributing – to an extent that this research is not able to estimate with confidence – to the inflation of property market and worsening of housing affordability in Hong Kong (although its expansion has not yet encroached the adjacent village). In sum, if entrepreneurial religion is an uneasy hybridity of pro- and counter-market impulses, its relations to social justice might be necessarily indeterminate, to be examined in specific contexts of uneven empirical realities.

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