Acknowledgements

Many people have contributed to this research. My supervisor, Lily Kong, has provided clear academic leadership throughout the course of the PhD, and has propelled my academic development fast and far. My thesis committee – Robbie Goh and Tracey Skelton – has provided encouragement, especially during the early stages of the research. In addition, the National University of Singapore has provided an institutional covering, financial support and access to resources, without which this research would not have been possible.

During fieldwork in Sri Lanka, a number of people – Christian and Buddhist – assisted me with sampling and logistics. Although these individuals shall not be named, I am nonetheless grateful for their support. Many interviewees extended kindness to me, through the provision of food, tea, transportation or supporting documents. All of these people not only made the research process smoother, but more enjoyable as well.

Finally, thanks to my partner, Samantha, for tolerating my absences – both physical and mental – over the past three years.
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Abstract

This thesis develops a new understanding of evangelical Christian growth in the contemporary world. Existing explanations of growth are well rehearsed within the social sciences, and draw clear distinctions between the characteristics of evangelical organisations, and the structural contexts in which they operate. Notwithstanding, a number of theoretical and empirical assumptions render such explanations applicable in some countries, but not others. Drawing on qualitative data collected in Buddhist-majority Sri Lanka throughout 2010-11, I argue that closer examination of the recursive relationship between organisation (agency) and context (structure) will lead to recognition of the fact that growth is a spatially defined process, with evangelical organisations being tied to localities in complex and multifarious ways. Four empirical chapters develop this argument further. The first examines how, in structurally hostile environments, evangelical groups grow in ways that are more relational than otherwise recognised, and become adept at spreading their evangelical influence through the appropriation and use of non-religious spaces. The second focuses on the spatial variability of evangelical praxis, showing how it varies between urban and rural, and public and private spaces and, more specifically, how strategic engagement in and through space is a defining feature of youth evangelism. The third critically draws upon the findings of the first two chapters by exploring the politics of evangelical Christian growth – specifically the politics of the house church, and the allegations of “unethical” activity that foreground the politics of converting both people, and space. The fourth empirical chapter explores how Buddhist hegemony develops as a response to evangelical Christian growth, and how Buddhist insecurity in the face of Christian globalism can translate into extreme forms of religious
protectionism and violence. To conclude, I show how the findings not only contribute to the continued evolution of the geographies of religion, but also highlight the value of a more extrospective sub-discipline that engages with, challenges and develops more wide-ranging debates that exist outside our putative disciplinary boundaries.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Religion in postcolonial Asia

Evangelical Christianity is one of the fastest growing and most widely dispersed religious groups in the world today. The evangelical remit, pursued to varying degrees by all Christian groups, is a biblical mandate\(^1\), yet the processes of evangelisation that lead to growth are fraught with politics that are under-researched, and often misunderstood. This thesis fills the lacuna by exploring the politics of evangelical Christian growth. It focuses specifically on how evangelism catalyses inter-(and intra-) religious competition for resources, such as ‘people, territory, wealth, positions of power, and economic advantage… dignity, prestige, and all manner of symbolic capita’ (Lincoln 2003: 74), and how religious conflict is often a by-product of the competitive desire to ‘overcome, eliminate, or convert the other to extinction’ (Bouma 2007: 190). In doing so the thesis adopts a systemic approach to understanding Christian growth; one that positions evangelical groups not as autonomous agents, but as situated stakeholders that are both sensitive, and responsive to the structural conditions of a locality. I do this using a detailed analysis of the religious context of Sri Lanka, where I also explore how religious competition can legitimate the political aspirations of anti-Christian religious groups, and can lead to a number of paradoxical outcomes that contribute to, whilst simultaneously compromise, Christian growth.

Such a dynamic is not unique to Sri Lanka, but is particularly pronounced in postcolonial Asia, where growth often reveals an irreconcilable tension between the

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\(^1\) In particular, the Great Commission is the instruction of the resurrected Jesus Christ to his disciples, telling them to ‘go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit’ (Matthew 28: 19).
globalist ambitions of evangelical Christianity, and the localist ambitions of primordial, non-Christian religious groups. In Malaysia, for example, police recently sanctioned a mass gathering of Muslims in the capital city, Kuala Lumpur, seeking to ‘defend Islam against Christian proselytisation’ (The Straits Times 20.10.2011). The so-called ‘anti-proselytisation rally’ had been organised to bolster proposals put forth by a confederacy of Muslim organisations for a new law to punish those who try to convert Muslims. This example reflects similar anti-conversion legislation proposed (and implemented) in Bhutan, India and Sri Lanka, and contributes to an emerging trend amongst postcolonial nation-states seeking to defend their religious sovereignty against the destabilising threat of unchecked Christian proselytism. Strategies of “religious protectionism” (see Robbins 2004) typically involve the strengthening of dominant religious groups along nationalist and/or ethnic lines, as ‘the cause of “nationalism” has [often]… turned a religiously plural society into one defined by religious hegemony’ (Ammerman 2010: 164). This contributes to a dual occurrence of hegemony: the aspirations of Christian globalism and the assertions of religious nationalism, both of which have a role to play in catalysing competition and conflict.

In Sri Lanka, more specifically, recent decades have witnessed the emergence of a Buddhist political elite; one that is intolerant to difference, chauvinistic, and seeks to contain the spread and influence of evangelical groups via increasingly punitive means. In 2005 newly elected Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse remarked that ‘the religious unrest currently felt in Sri Lanka is even more serious than racial or ethnic unrest’ (cited in Matthews 2007: 456); sentiment that is amplified by the decades-long

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2 In India, anti-conversion legislation (ironically entitled the “Freedom of Religion Act”) has been implemented in the states of Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Himachal Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Gujarat. In Arunachal Pradesh and Rajasthan, similar laws have been passed, but await implementation.
civil war being fought at the time. Influenced by the colonial legacy of Christian administrations, education systems, buildings and missionaries, Buddhist groups have long sought to (re)establish their religious primacy. A growing Christian presence since the 1980s has galvanised anti-Christian rhetoric and action from the Buddhist right. Containment strategies range from informal acts of violence to more formal processes of structural resistance that serve to restrict the actions and autonomy of Christian groups. Indeed, the ontological incongruence between Buddhism and violence has only recently been labelled a ‘misconception’ (Jerryson 2010: 3), presenting a relationship that is worthy of closer interrogation (see Jerryson and Juergensmeyer 2010; in particular, Kent 2010). Given that academic studies have ‘rarely cited [Buddhism] as a political force’ (Jenkins 2007: 217), the politics of evangelical growth in a Buddhist context is an understudied problem that, for a variety of reasons, commands attention.

The moral impetus for this thesis is my belief in the freedom of religious choice. As an atheist, I feel that religious belief should be guided by individual volition, and that religious choice is something that should not be forced or denied. In the Sri Lankan context, such volition is challenged by allegations of “unethical” conversion to Christianity on the one hand, and the difficulty of converting out of Buddhism on the other. Such allegations and difficulties fuel the politics of evangelical Christian growth in Sri Lanka and are, to a large extent, a function of the idiosyncrasies of the “geo-religious” context within which they occur (see Allievo and Dassetto 1999). Throughout postcolonial Asia, centuries of Christian missionisation and conversion have led to the creation of “geo-religious” spaces that are highly sensitive to contemporary conversion, and can easily trigger residual feelings of colonial
resentment and domestic insecurity. As Agnew (2006: 185) recognises, the fact that ‘much nationalism and imperialism have found purpose and justification in religious differences and in proselytising’ affirms the reality that discourses of contemporary Christian growth are not just a matter of religious concern, but engage with other, assumedly “non-religious” issues as well. Attempts to better situate Christian growth in different religious, socio-cultural and political contexts around the world will see discourse engage with the challenges posed by the groups involved, which more often than not prefer to be in a position of religious control than a part of the compromising jigsaw of religious pluralism.

1.2 Towards a geographical understanding of religious growth

The geographies of religion have been described as a ‘burgeoning subfield’ (Wilford 2009: 328) within human geography, yet there is a continual need to realise their wide(r)-ranging potential by pushing the boundaries of how they can engage with other subfields from within, and without, the discipline. The value of studying religious growth is that it is often a symptom of underlying, and more broad-based political, economic, social and cultural processes within which geographers, and geography, are centrally implicated. Existing explanations of growth originating from the broader social sciences do not, for example, account for how Christian groups are able grow in hostile environments like that of Sri Lanka. This is partly due to a lack of clarity and nuance when defining what actually constitutes “religious growth”. In places like Sri Lanka, religious growth is reflected in many different ways, some of which are more easily quantified than others. I posit that an understanding of growth should be multivalent, and cover not just tangible/numerical indicators, such as
conversions and the planting of churches, but also more intangible markers, such as public debates surrounding Christianity, and growing awareness of Christian actions in the public conscience. The privileging of the quantifiable over the unquantifiable has caused discourse to focus on numerical increases in Christian populations rather than the discursive effects of a strengthening religious cohort. Whilst the former is undeniably important, it is self-restricting and lacks universal application.

The thesis also reflects a growing trend amongst geographers seeking to carve out their own niche in the social scientific study of religion by ‘bring[ing] forward approaches that will enable us to engage in larger, related debates that are animating other disciplines’ (Brace et al., 2006: 29). In light of this, Kong’s (2010: 763) recent call for geographers to ‘go beyond insightful analyses of the micropolitics of religious spatial expressions to contribute to an understanding of larger social and political events confronting the contemporary world, including religious conflict and religious change’ provides the impetus for the thesis, not least because the processes of Christian growth – notably evangelisation and proselytisation – drive change and conflict, and can influence perceptions of, and behaviours towards other religions at both the micro- and macro-scales. In addition, such processes are often a symptom, and function of the public resurgence of religion, with religion having become as much a matter of public expression as it is private belief (see Habermas 2006). Such resurgence reifies the latent, yet under-appreciated role of religion in matters of geographical enquiry, and underwrites the continual need to realise a more “relevant” geography of religion sub-discipline (see Pacione 1999; Henkel 2005; Brace et al. 2006; Kong 2010).
1.3 Research aims and thesis structure

By taking steps towards realising a more “relevant” geography of religion, the overarching aim of the research is to develop an understanding of evangelical Christian growth that goes beyond the confines of putative disciplinary boundaries. In doing so I integrate sociological theorisations with geographical perspectives in a mutually enriching way. To this end, the first aim is to identify and explain organisational strategies of evangelism – how Christian groups engage with and influence society and, in turn, how such strategies of engagement are influenced by the structural conditions of a locality. Ancillary to this is a detailed exploration of the spaces through which Christian growth is enacted, which results in a recurrent focus on the formation and disbandment of the Sri Lankan house church. A second aim is to develop a clearer understanding of the types, motivations and outcomes of Buddhist resistance to evangelical Christian growth. I examine not just the physical persecution of Christians by Buddhists, but explore more symbolic (e.g. spatial) forms of resistance as well. The third aim is to evaluate the relative success (and often unexpected outcomes) of Christian growth and Buddhist resistance, which in turn will contribute to a more nuanced understanding of religious growth. The rationale for, and application of these aims is expounded in the chapter summaries that follow.

Chapter 2, the literature review and conceptual framework, seeks to integrate existing approaches to theorising evangelical Christian growth with new opportunities that emerge when such approaches are critiqued through the lens of geographical understanding. More specifically, I argue that existing approaches have developed from an understanding of Christian growth in places in which it is most pronounced,
and hold little relevance when applied to a large swathe of territory that covers much of Asia (including Sri Lanka), the Middle East and Northern Africa, and is collectively referred to as the 10/40 Window (see page 29). By articulating the need for theory to begin recognising, exploring and developing the recursive relationship between structure and agency within such contexts, I argue that the structural mosaic – a heuristic device that recognises the heterogeneity of structure – can generate a clearer understanding of Christian growth in hostile environments. By recognising the heterogeneity of structure, the structural mosaic sensitises discourse to how religious agents can infiltrate (seemingly hostile) religious structures via non-religious structural influencing. I also focus on the important role of space in mediating and determining strategies of evangelical Christian growth, and explore in detail the use of the house church as both articulation of the structural mosaic in practice, and one of the most globally pervasive, yet often undetected locations of evangelical activity.

Chapter 3 outlines the empirical context and methodology, and starts with a description of Sri Lanka’s religious marketplace. The discussion is couched in religious economy parlance (first introduced in Chapter 2), and shows how the case of Sri Lanka requires new understandings of the workings of an “oligopolistic” religious marketplace. Guided by my multivalent understanding of religious growth, in the second part of the chapter I highlight the need for more qualitative understandings of religious change – something that presents a significant departure from the existing, quantitative methodologies that currently dominate. A critical ethnographic approach is outlined, and the sampling strategies and methods of data collection discussed. Finally, I introduce the research sites in order to capture the contextual determinants
of evangelism at the micro-scale, and to account for locational nuances in data collection around the country.

Chapter 4 is the first empirical chapter, and provides an overarching backdrop for the subsequent three chapters. It attempts to explain how evangelical Christian groups remain competitive and grow, despite being subjected to various forms of structural resistance in Sri Lanka. I argue that such groups compete in ways that are more relational than otherwise thought (or recognised), and in doing so they remain largely innocuous to surveillance by anti-Christian groups. Specifically, I explore how the actions of evangelical groups reflect patterns of secrecy and subterfuge that enable them to overcome boundaries and barriers to growth, and how foreign catalysts and the development of strategic extra- and intra-group networks of influence help stimulate growth. I also apply my concept of the structural mosaic, using empirical examples to show how Christian groups often conflate secular practices (termed “social ministries”, such as Montessori’s, relief provision and long-term development programmes) with their evangelical objectives in order to co-opt or influence others.

Chapter 5 explores the locations and determinants of evangelical praxis in Sri Lanka. Through a focus on two dichotomous pairings – urban-rural and public-private – Chapter 5 starts by examining some of the locational paradoxes that are an inherent part of evangelical praxis in Sri Lanka. Specifically, I explain why, in urban areas, the supply of Christianity outstrips demand, yet in rural areas the situation is reversed (demand outstrips supply). I also explain why the privatised nature of evangelical praxis provokes suspicion, even while evangelical groups are marginalised from the public domain. Following that, I focus on three spaces of youth evangelism – the
youth club, the youth camp and the university campus – that represent some of the most contested sites of evangelical activity. Finally, I explore the spatial modalities of the structural mosaic, with a particular focus on how the structural mosaic enables the obfuscation of evangelical space and, as a result, contributes to an understanding of the (often aggressive) expansion of evangelical groups in and through different spaces.

Chapter 6 is divided into three sections, each of which focuses on a different facet of the politics of evangelical Christian growth. The first section examines the place-bound politics of growth that prevents many evangelical groups from establishing a formal religious presence. I examine how spatial buffering – through the use of Bodhi (“Bo”) trees and Buddhist statues – is used to contain Christian expansion, and how the politics of permission prevents many evangelical groups from registering churches and operating more within the public domain. In the second section I examine the politics of converting space, with particular reference to the house church. More specifically, because the house church is essentially a space of subversion, I argue that it is replete with politics that encourage church fission and dualistic religious behaviours amongst congregations. In the third section I examine the politics of converting people, with particular reference to the market mentality of evangelicals, the spatial modalities (with particular regard to the public-private paradox, previously discussed in Chapter 5) of the “unethical” conversion debate, and the value of the structural mosaic in helping to contribute new perspectives to the debate. The chapter ends with an exploration of what “unethical” conversion means to the Christian groups implicated in the discourse, the aim being to expand the frame of debate beyond the parameters defined by Sri Lanka’s Buddhist right.
Chapter 7 is the final empirical chapter, and explores how evangelical Christianity contributes to the development of, and provides justification for Buddhist hegemony in Sri Lanka. I show how evangelism destabilises primordial power structures and how such destabilisation warrants the construction of a Christian “threat” by right-wing Buddhist groups. Constructing the Christian “threat” involves implicating Christian groups in broader allegations of Western imperialism that are perpetrated by churches and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), which in turn reveals the compromising effect of globalisation on the Buddhist right. The chapter ends by exploring the linkages between Buddhist protectionism and hegemony. I argue that strategies of protection are often based on a self-Orientalising assumption of vulnerability, which serves to restrict the religious mobility and freedom of the Buddhist masses, and contributes to a number of violent outcomes perpetrated against the Buddhist self, and Christian other. I conclude by highlighting the key contributions and limitations of the thesis, and the possibilities that present themselves for further research.
CHAPTER 2: THE GROWTH OF EVANGELICAL CHRISTIANITY IN
GLOBAL AND LOCAL PERSPECTIVE

2.1 Introduction

Over two decades have passed since Poloma and Pendleton’s (1989) criticism of the lack of research explaining the explosive growth of evangelical Christian groups in modernity; a phenomenon that is widely recognised as being ‘one of the most important religious developments globally of our time’ (Freston 1991: 4). Subsequent years have witnessed notable advances in identifying and explaining these developments (e.g. Martin 1990, 2002; Hefner 1993; Cox 1996; Hollenweger 1997; Jenkins 2007), yet important areas are left wanting. The fact remains that growth is not consistent throughout the world, with large territories apparently untempered by the proselytising activity of evangelical groups. Limited Christian growth throughout North Africa, the Middle East, and much of Asia highlights the blinkered nature of existing explanations, which is compounded by the fact that ‘Northerners rarely give the South anything like the attention it deserves, but when they do notice it, they tend to project onto it their own familiar realities and desires’ (Jenkins 2007: 15). Such projections have paralysed discourse, preventing critical interrogation of the caveats and differences that problematise and dilute existing theorisations. Moreover, geographical perspectives are currently lacking, despite being able to contribute much to the development of new theoretical approaches and more robust understandings of evangelical Christian growth around the world. Through an empirical focus on the restricted religious marketplace of Sri Lanka, I suggest how such new approaches and understandings can develop.
This chapter begins with an overview of existing theoretical approaches to evangelical Christian growth. I start by examining both the structural determinants of religious change, and human agency perspectives on religious conversion, focussing specifically on religious economy theorisations and the organisation as an arbiter of change. I go on to explore the variegated patterns of evangelical Christian growth around the world, before introducing the possibilities that arise from using a spatial framework to study religious growth and change, giving close consideration to existing approaches to theorising sacred space in particular. Finally, I introduce the conceptual framework, which is used to guide the four empirical chapters that follow. I first emphasise the role of the structural mosaic as an enabler of religious growth, with particular regard to the spatial modalities of the structural mosaic. I go on to discuss how the house church is a spatial modality of evangelical presence and growth that is both common throughout the world, and a cogent example of networked space.

2.2 Theorising evangelical Christian growth in modernity

Recent decades have witnessed a dramatic shift in the character and growth of Christianity. Increasingly associated with the Southern, rather than Northern Hemisphere, revivalism has seen large mainline denominations decline, smaller, more independent churches grow, and ecstatic forms of worship replace their more routinised, liturgical counterparts (Freston 2001; Jenkins 2007; Miller and Yamamori 2007). Such shifts are commonly, but not exclusively, associated with
Pentecostalism\(^3\). Identified as the third wave of Protestant cultural revolution (superseding Puritanism and Methodism), there are an estimated 500 million Pentecostals worldwide, registering a 700 percent increase since the early 1980s (Anderson et al. 2010). The rapidity of such growth and spread is ‘unprecedented in the history of religions’ (Anderson 2005a: 1), having reconfigured the religious topographies of much of Africa, Latin America, and some parts of Asia (Martin 1990; Stoll 1990; Chesnut 2003; Heuser 2009). Moreover, the relative recency of such reconfigurations underscores the fact that evangelical growth is often a function of large-scale conversion to Christianity (Freston 2001, 2009), rather than more organic demographic changes, and has accordingly been described as one of the greatest “success” stories in the current era of cultural globalisation (Robbins 2004; Anderson and Tang 2005). Attempts have been made to explain how and why growth occurs, and are often based on empirical examination of the territories in which it is most pronounced.

Below I explore existing attempts to understand religious change, with a particular focus on evangelical Christian growth. Such attempts typically reflect Durkheim’s (1938) dualistic approach to the study of institutions by expounding either the structural conditions that facilitate conversion to Christianity, or the agency of evangelical organisations and Christian converts. I explore the macro-scale, structural determinants of religious change first (with a particular focus on religious economy theorisations), followed by the micro-scale human agency approaches to understanding religious conversion (often a key driver of evangelical growth). I end

\(^3\) Throughout the thesis, the term “evangelical Christian” refers primarily to Pentecostal groups that follow a doctrine of evangelism. Other, more historically entrenched, Christian denominations – Anglican, Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian for example – are an important, but secondary concern, given that they are typically less independent, and evangelically aggressive, than their Pentecostal counterparts. See Table 1 for clarification in the Sri Lankan context.
the section by examining the evangelical organisation as an arbiter of religious change, a critique of which problematises the prevalent treatment of structure and agency in binary terms, and leads into the subsequent section that explores the variegated patterns of evangelical Christian growth around the world.

2.2.1 Structural determinants of religious change

Macro-scale approaches emphasise the structural factors that facilitate conversion to Christianity, and that are common amongst places of strong Christian growth. For more than a century, modernisation – which according to Weber (1956) equates to the rationalisation of society – has been seen as the key structural driver of conversion (see Hefner 1993; van der Veer 1996a; Jenkins, 2007). Conversion as a result of modernisation is based on two premises: that the advancement of society involves a continual reorientation towards more rational thought and action; and that a key distinction between world religions (e.g. Christianity, Buddhism, Islam) and their traditional counterparts (e.g. animism, ancestral worship) is the superior rationalisation of the former. Asad (1996: 263, original emphasis) provides a relevant metaphor to explain the process of modernisation and, in doing so, evokes the structural transition of society from traditional to world religion:

Most individuals enter modernity rather as converts enter a new religion – as a consequence of forces beyond their control. Modernity, like the convert’s religion, defines new choices; it is rarely the result of an entirely “free choice”.

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4 Although it should also be noted that processes of rationalisation also instigate conversion between world religions.
And like the convert’s religion, it annihilates old possibilities and puts others in their place.

Over time the mundane instrumentalism of traditional religion (Asad’s “old possibilities” e.g. conforming to social conventions, superstition) is replaced by world religion (the “new choices”). Replacement occurs as rationalisation involves searching for answers to the ethical, emotional and intellectual challenges of everyday life – a need that is met by world religions’ proclamation of ‘the existence of a transcendental realm vastly superior to that of everyday reality’ (Hefner, 1993: 8).

Indeed Christianity has, in many instances, proven to be relatively more successful than its counterparts in attracting new converts. Tong (2007: 4), for example, argues that Singapore’s science-oriented education system and associated “intellectualization” of the population has facilitated a growing number of conversions to Christianity. Moving away from traditional Chinese ritual practices towards the more “rational” bible teachings of Christianity reflects a shift ‘from an unthinking and passive acceptance of religion’ to a religion that is believed to be more ‘systematic, logical, and relevant’. Changes in the structure of society, perhaps unknown to converts themselves, therefore play a key role in determining religious choice.

Alternative theories point to the consequences of modernisation in initiating processes of religious conversion. As economies develop, traditional values, lifestyles, and systems of support become increasingly redundant. Large-scale urbanisation causes individuals to undergo physical dislocation, to experience anomie, and to respond by embracing new religious alternatives. Conversion has therefore been theorised as a
neo-Marxist response to social or economic deprivation (often termed “relative deprivation” – see D’Epinay, 1969; Marshall, 1991; Parker, 1996; Jenkins, 2007), social disorganisation (Talmon, 1962), psychological vulnerability (Alland 1961), or changing socio-cultural contexts (Yang, 1997; Chen, 2002; Smilde, 2007). The relative deprivation thesis, for example, suggests that processes of modernisation create situations of socio-economic deprivation and anomie that foster the growth of small, independent religious groups that are adept at meeting the felt needs of a population. This has commonly been used to explain the phenomenal growth of evangelical and charismatic forms of Christianity throughout Latin America and Africa in the latter half of the twentieth century (e.g. Martin, 1990, 2002; Chesnut, 1997, 2003). In Latin America, Protestant churches appeal to migrants and the marginalised, especially those found in the region’s sprawling megacities; whereas in Africa, Pentecostal churches are strongest where ‘neoliberal forces have eroded the capacity of liberal democratic states to provide education, health, and welfare’ (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2003: 121). Being able to provide welfare and support, such churches have managed to establish a foothold from which conversion takes place, and religious alternatives flourish.

Religious economy theorisations offer a more systemic approach to understanding the structural determinants of religious change. Central to such theorisations is the role of regulatory structures (e.g. legislation designed to restrict or enforce pluralism, local religious hierarchies, religio-cultural norms) in determining the growth and decline of religious groups. Thus whilst processes of modernisation create the conditions that facilitate conversion to Christianity (demand-side), religious economy perspectives emphasise the role of religious organisations in competing against each other to
attract converts (supply-side). Such perspectives are invaluable as they help sensitise discourses of religious change to the fact that structure can both enable, and restrict, religious growth.

2.2.2 Existing approaches to religious economy theorisation

Situated within the sociology of religion (see Warner 1993), religious economy perspectives offer another explanation for religious conversion other than the demand-side bias of the modernisation and relative deprivation theses. Religious economy perspectives emphasise the role of religious groups as indicators of religious vitality: vigorous religious groups are more competitive than their counterparts, attracting new converts and stronger commitment from existing believers. Locating such groups within inter-related systems of competition among religious groups and control by regulators, religious economy theorists argue that the (in)efficacy of supply drives religious growth or decline, which is determined by the degree to which an economy is regulated, and competition allowed to flourish (Stark 1985; Stark and Iannaccone 1993; Stark and Finke 2000; Chesnut 2003). Structural processes of regulation and deregulation play fundamental roles in determining market dynamics, as proven by the surge in religious activity in North America in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries following the deregulation of religion brought about by the First Amendment (Stark and Bainbridge 1985; Finke and Stark 1992). Existing understandings of religious economy therefore draw a clear distinction between deregulated and regulated religious marketplaces, suggesting that the former allows more room for inter-religious competition than the latter. Put differently, a religious
economy is either regulated (and monopolistic), or competitive (and pluralistic): it cannot be both.

On the one hand, in a free (i.e. deregulated) market the presence of multiple religious alternatives stimulates supply-side competition, creating a laissez-faire, competition-driven religious economy. The Allied occupation of post-war Japan exemplifies this well. Since 1945, the revocation of all laws regulating the majority Shinto religion caused *kamigami no rasshu awa* [the “rush hour of the gods”], and a concomitant surge in new Shinto, Buddhist and Christian denominations (see Finke 1997: 48-9). Moreover, Stark (1985; see also Stark and Finke 2000) asserts that greater plurality leads to greater competition for consumers, which results in religious organisations being more vigorous in recruiting and retaining believers. Competition therefore has two outcomes: greater levels of religiosity (measured as participation amongst existing believers), and more aggressive recruitment of new believers. Here it should be noted that whilst the former outcome has received adequate application and interrogation in different empirical contexts (e.g. Voas et al. 2002; Norris and Inglehart 2004; Fox and Tabory 2008; Hill and Olson 2009; Stolz 2010), the latter has not (cf. Gill 1994, 1999).

On the other hand, regulated economies lead to monopolistic marketplaces where competition is restricted as regulated religious groups face high entry and operating costs. Regulation is seen to ‘restrict competition by changing the incentives and opportunities for religious producers… and the viable options for religious consumers’ (Finke 1997: 50). Subsidy or suppression are common means of regulation, and respectively involve rewards for “in-groups” and penalties for “out-
groups”. Throughout much of Western Europe, for example, the preponderance of official state churches, supported by taxes, subsidies, and other privileges, and maintaining a cultural monopoly over the nation-state, has led to a widespread decline in individual religiosity and the limited proliferation of religious alternatives (Stark and Finke 2000; see also Woodhead 2009). As a result, regulated religions operating within a monopolistic context are put at a competitive disadvantage (due to high entry and operating costs); competition is restricted, and growth controlled. Importantly, therefore, it is argued that regulation suppresses competition, and that both religious organisations and the state stand to benefit from respectively seeking monopoly standing, or by supporting a monopoly (Stark and Bainbridge 1987).

### 2.2.3 Problematising the structural determinants of change

Structural perspectives hold a lot of deductive value in explaining large-scale movements between religions, yet they often fail to account for variance and nuance in conversion processes and outcomes. The modernist assumption that a religious economy is either regulated (and monopolistic) or competitive (and pluralistic), but not both, has received criticism for being simplistic in many contexts. Despite vaunted claims to being a “general theory” of religion (or a ‘theory of everything’ according to Bruce 1999: 40), its usefulness or even relevance is limited in the non-Western, non-Christian (and often postcolonial) world(s). Existing understandings of religious economy have been conceptualised, developed and debated in the context of the modern industrial societies of the West (specifically the United States) that use the Christian tradition as a point of academic departure (e.g. Finke and Stark 1992; Gill 1994; Warner 1997; Froese 2001). Indeed, Stark and Finke (2000: 194; cf. Yang
unabashedly ‘ignore economies consisting of nonexclusive [i.e. Buddhist, Hindu] firms’. This brings to light the geographical limitations, and exclusive effect, of religious economy theorising to date, and in doing so compromises its explanatory potential when applied to religious marketplaces like that of Sri Lanka, for example.

Beyond the West, therefore, the utility of religious economy approaches is limited by the (supposedly universal) presupposition that regulation leads to religious decline, and deregulation to religious vigour. Yang’s (2006) work on China’s religious markets have helped to keep such dichotomous thinking in check by asserting that regulation leads to religious complication, rather than demise. By problematising normative understandings of religious economy in this way, an opportunity presents itself to develop new understandings of the market dynamics of religious oligopolies. Whilst oligopolistic marketplaces present the most prevalent state-religion relationship globally, they ‘remain understudied because of the lack of conceptualization’ (Yang 2010: 201). By drawing a clear distinction between the “formal” and “informal” religious economies that emerge as a result of an oligopolistic marketplace (see Chapter 3), this thesis develops alternative strains of religious economy theorisation, whilst simultaneously assisting with Yang’s ongoing conceptualisation. In doing so it also helps to decentralise the theory away from its Western core, instead helping to better situate it within different local contexts, religious traditions, and systems of power located around the world.

In a similar vein, the relative deprivation thesis (in particular, and the modernisation thesis more generally) fails to account for why Christianity has struggled to achieve
similar rates of growth in Northern Africa, the Middle East, and much of Asia where situations of deprivation and anomie also prevail (Martin 2005). Criticism of the tautological ways in which scholars deploy the relative deprivation thesis (i.e. that conversion is proof of prior deprivation – see Robbins 2004) underscores the value of more inductive approaches to religious conversion. Postcolonial theorists in particular have made important developments in this regard. Expressing sensitivity to the complex, and often dialectical relationship between submission and resistance that arose from mass conversion to Christianity during, and after, colonial rule, they show that rather than passively accepting the consequences of modernisation, converts often pursued resistant and innovative strategies of emancipation (Viswanathan 1998; Rambo 1999). In light of this, it is evident that structural determinism must be balanced with a degree of individual voluntarism in order to explain patterns of acceptance and dissent amongst potential converts (Hefner 1993). This shows the important role played by human agency in affecting conversion processes and outcomes. Moreover, the need to account for variable rates of conversion amongst individuals of similar social, economic or cultural status further highlights the value of more micro-scale, human agency approaches.

2.2.4 Human agency and religious conversion

Human agency approaches emphasise the subtleties of individual demand that may facilitate, or compromise, the process of religious conversion. The growing influence of psychologism in the latter decades of the twentieth century has led to the recognition of an acting and conscious human agent that exercises volition in deciding to convert to a new religion (Straus 1979; Richardson 1985). Such approaches have
been theorised as a ‘sequential “funnelling” process’ (Snow and Phillips 1980: 430) that track, monitor and seek to explain the conversion trajectories of individuals from different socio-economic and psychological backgrounds, and life-stages. In doing so, there has been a tendency to focus overwhelmingly on changes over time, especially in terms of the transition from “pre-convert” to “convert” (e.g. Lofland and Stark 1965; Gerlach and Hine 1970; Beckford 1978; Lofland and Skonovd 1981; Rambo 1989, 1993). Studying this transition has engendered a psychological bias that remains central to conversion discourses to the present day⁵. Such bias is evident in the exploration of conversion “motifs” – intellectual, mystical, experimental, affectional, reviveralist or coercive (Lofland and Skonovd 1981), the effects of brainwashing (Schein et al. 1961; Singer 1979), the fulfilment of unmet emotional or cognitive need, the provision of self-expansion and fulfilment (Buxant 2009), and the relationship between changing religious belief and psychosis (Penzner et al. 2009).

Whilst the inductive value of psychology is evident, there is a tendency for such approaches to be myopic, overly descriptive and treat converts as autonomous operators that are divorced from the social fields within which they exist.

Social network approaches have proved to be relatively more enduring than a unitary focus on the individual convert (e.g. Long and Hadden 1983). Networks of religious influence at the micro-level, such as friends, family, colleagues and other social relations, have long been recognised as playing an integral role in influencing conversion patterns and behaviours. Two studies in particular are seminal in this regard. One, Lofland and Stark’s (1965: 871) study of conversion to a millennial cult in America, shows how members of the cult formed strong affective bonds with

⁵ Gillespie (1991: 13) terms this the ‘psychologizing of the religious conversion phenomenon’.
potential converts, leading to the maxim that ‘conversion [i]s coming to accept the
opinions of one’s friends’. Two, Gerlach and Hine’s (1968) examination of the
growth of Pentecostalism in Latin America shows how pre-existing social
relationships provide the “catalytic agent” needed to trigger religious conversion.
What these two studies show is that individuals seldom change religion without first
being influenced by their social relations (whether new or existing), meaning human
agents have as much of a role to play in conversion processes as the economic and
political structures within which they are embedded. Evangelical groups in particular
are adept at developing conversion networks that enable Christian teachings to be
multiplied and disseminated amongst the congregations’ friends, family and
colleagues.

That being said, attempts have also been made to reconcile the structural determinants
of change and human agency perspectives. This has involved situating the micro-level
networks of religious influence within the macro- (i.e. dominant political, economic,
and religious systems), and meso- (i.e. the intersection of the micro- and macro-
contexts, such as local governance and religious institutions) contexts (Rambo 1993;
Rambo and Farhadian 1999). For example, to explain the phenomenal growth of
Christianity in Korea, Kane and Park (2009: 366) argue that the macro- influences the
micro- by showing how ‘geopolitical networks provoke nationalist rituals that alter
the stakes of conversion at the microlevel’. In other words, Korean Christians played
an integral role in orchestrating nationalist sentiment against Japan through the use of
ritual, and in doing so increased the number and strength of social networks that lead
to conversion to Christianity. Whilst realisation of the need to situate micro-level
understandings is not as new as some may think (cf. Gerlach and Hine’s 1968
aforementioned study, which is clearly situated within, and engages with, the hegemonic Catholic context of Latin America), such awareness is a good reminder of the need to properly situate religious conversion within various scales of contextualisation.

Irrespective of the relative strength of human agency or structural determinism in driving and influencing religious change, it is the idiosyncrasies of the evangelical organisation that has enabled Christianity to grow with relentless vigour in some places, and to withstand restrictions to growth in others. In other words, the evangelical organisation has evolved so that it can exacerbate, manipulate and sometimes subvert structural determinants of change, and to create demand where it may otherwise be lacking. It is in this sense that the evangelical organisation has been viewed as an important arbiter of religious change, and the primary architect of Christian growth.

2.2.5 The evangelical organisation as an arbiter of religious change

As suggested by the demand-side bias of the religious economy theorisations outlined above, the religious organisation plays an important role in determining the ebb and flow of different religious groups. More specifically, organisational perspectives emphasise how the functional agency of evangelical groups drives their rapid growth and global spread (e.g. Stark and Bainbridge 1985; Finke and Stark 1992; Iannaccone 1994; Chesnut 2003; Robbins 2004). Returning to Gerlach and Hine’s (1968: 28) previously mentioned study of Pentecostals in North America, it is argued that the cellular, amorphous structure and operations of such organisations enable them to
adapt and grow within a wide range of social, cultural and political contexts – or “ecological niches” – making regulation and suppression difficult. Characteristically they are also highly networked, with external linkages providing the ‘core infrastructure of the Pentecostal movement’ and affording its constituent members ‘considerable world power’. Facilitating the exchange or provision of ideas, people, resources and capital that can lead to the importation and growth of churches and denominations, international evangelical networks play an important role in legitimising the globalist ambitions – or “transnational vistas” (Martin 2002: 25-7) – of evangelical organisations. Combined, these characteristics provide a significant source of organisational agency, enabling a ‘self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating’ (Lechner and Boli 2003: 390) form of religious practice that lends credence to the belief that evangelical organisations are autonomous, and effective agents of religious change.

As with the need to situate religious conversion discourses within various scales of contextualisation, over the years the development of organisation perspectives has been limited by the treatment of the organisation as the active determinant of evangelical Christian growth, and the context within which they operate as passive, or extraneous. Many studies emphasise the fact that evangelical organisations are ‘inherently flexible in different cultural and social contexts’ (Anderson 2004: 236, 2005; Kaplan 1995; Cox 1996; Robbins 2004) by showing how local forms of cultural symbolism are often adopted through processes of inculturation, whilst those that ‘inhibit their mobility, freedom and advancement’ (Martin 2002: 133; see also Keyes 1993: 273) are purposefully rejected. Indeed Peterson et al (2001: 40) liken Pentecostalism to the homogeneity of global capitalism, insofar as ‘particularity [is]
only a strategy or stepping stone toward the production of globality’. Strategies of inculturation are top-down, elite sponsored attempts to control the synthesis of religion and local culture, and retain organisational sovereignty (e.g. Meyer 1999). As a result, evangelical organisations are seen as architects of growth, and are believed to operate in similar ways around the world:

Churches in Asia, Africa, and Latin America share so many common experiences. They are passing through such similar phases of growth, and are, independently, developing such very similar social and theological worldviews. All, also, face similar issues, of race, of inculturation, and, still, of how to deal with their respective colonial heritages (Jenkins 2007: 13).

This statement clearly reflects some of the assumptions that blinker the development of more theoretically robust, empirically inclusive explanations of evangelical Christian growth. Similitude (expressed here in terms of “phases of growth”, “worldview” and “issues”) may help identify the characteristics of Jenkins’ particular vision of “Global Christendom”, yet is in equal measure reductive, anachronistic and misplaced in many contexts. As Gerlach and Hine (1968) criticise relative deprivation models for failing to account for variable rates of conversion amongst people of a similar socio-economic standing, the same logic can be applied to organisational agency approaches, which do little to account for the variable success of evangelical organisations in different contexts around the world. In order to understand such variability, research needs to recognise the fact that whilst organisations may be ‘autonomous’ (Freston 2001: 197), they are ‘not in control of their broader surroundings’ (Stump 2000: 87; e.g. McGregor 2010), and begin contextualising
expressions of organisational agency. In particular, consideration of the spatial environment has been concessionary at best, and overlooks the reality that evangelical organisations operate in and through space, and that spatial presence is structurally embedded. Such embeddedness affects organisational strategies and outcomes of evangelism, and causes rates of Christian growth to vary throughout the world.

2.3 Variegated patterns of evangelical Christian growth

Religious growth is an uncontestably geographical phenomenon, as the occupation and management of space – from bodies to territories – is ‘inseparable’ from an organisations ‘ability to impose [its] presence on a given territory’ (Hervieu-Leger 2002: 101). In Europe, for example, it has been explicitly recognised that ‘Islam is anchored in a social and symbolic milieu, a concrete geographical, geopolitical and “geo-religious” space which was not at first very favourable to it’ (Allievi and Dassetto, 1999: 244). Like Islam, Christian presence is unevenly distributed around the world, and often symptomatic of the contexts within which evangelism is expressed. Centuries of Christian missionisation and conversion have led to the creation of “geo-religious” spaces throughout the postcolonial world that are highly sensitive to contemporary conversion, and can easily trigger residual feelings of colonial resentment and domestic insecurity. Attempts to better situate conversion discourses will see them engage with the challenges posed by the groups involved, which more often than not prefer to be in a position of religious control than a part of the compromising jigsaw of religious pluralism. Evangelical organisations are not, therefore, autonomous agents, but are responsive to, and often constrained by, various contextual drivers. Whilst the Americas, some parts of Asia (i.e. the Philippines,
South Korea, and to a lesser extent Hong Kong and Singapore), and much of Africa
have experienced rapid Christian growth throughout the twentieth century, many
European countries have registered stagnation or decline. In addition there is a belt of
territory that has received recognition for resisting the encroachment of evangelical
groups, and restricting the growth of Christianity. Spanning Northern Africa, the
Middle East, and much of Asia, such territories are collectively referred to as the
“10/40 Window” (as they span the latitudes ten to forty degrees north – see Gerhardt
2008: 917-9), and challenge the geo-centricity upon which existing explanations of
 evangelical growth are based.

Within the 10/40 Window (see Figure 1, below) hegemonic Islamic, Hindu and
Buddhist structural contexts mediate and suppress the agency, autonomy and efficacy
of evangelical groups, creating situations whereby Christianity ‘find[s] it difficult to
secure a base and avoid moves to contain and isolate it’ (Martin 2005: 28).

Notwithstanding, recent years have witnessed a growing concentration of evangelical
activity within such territories, which are viewed as ‘spiritually impoverished’ (Stump
2000: 224) and ripe for salvation. Paradoxically, therefore, the 10/40 Window
provides at once the most attractive and contested grounds of evangelical activity. It
encompasses territories in which evangelical organisations want to exert agency, but
are (to varying degrees) rendered impotent by local structures of resistance and
control. Moreover, territories of the 10/40 Window are typically postcolonial, and
imbued with a tension ‘between the official end of direct colonial rule and its
presence and regeneration through hegemonizing neo-colonialism’ (Shohat 1992:
106). Being an inextricable part of the European colonial project, Christian groups are
often implicated in such neo-colonial discourses. New strategies of evangelism and
new modes of organisational structure have arisen in order to mitigate the effects of resistance and control, underscoring the need for new perspectives on evangelical Christian growth.

Figure 1: Map showing the territorial delineations of the 10/40 Window (Source: http://takelsertit.pbworks.com/Insinjilen-ed-Lislan-sdeffir-n-11-Ctember’)

By looking at Figure 1 through the lenses of existing scholarly understandings of the countries situated within, two observations can be made. First, the boundaries that demarcate the 10/40 Window should not be seen as exclusionary, but a metaphor used to describe a heterogeneous collection of territories that possess a number of structural characteristics that, whether intentionally or not, curtail the spread of Christianity. Other countries that share such characteristics may be located outside the latitudes used to denote the Window (e.g. Indonesia, Malaysia and Sri Lanka), whilst countries that may be deemed anomalies are located within (e.g. the Philippines and South Korea). It is important to recognise, therefore, that the countries within are by no means homogeneous, or necessarily distinct from some of the countries without.
Second, given the heterogeneity of the 10/40 Window, it is possible to conceptualise the evangelical terrain in terms of three distinct categories. First are countries like the Philippines and South Korea (and, to a lesser extent, Hong Kong and Singapore) where structural resistance to evangelism is minimal, and the Christian population significant. Receptive to evangelism, Martin (2002, 2005) argues that these countries are conceptually similar to those of Latin America, and are therefore anomalous to most others within the 10/40 Window. Second are countries like China and India, which have numerically significant numbers of evangelicals (ranked third and fifth in a global survey of Pentecostals, according to Anderson 2005a) yet, given their territorial size, also have clear pockets of strong resistance (see Freston 2001: 85-92, 101-105). In this sense they are amalgams of the first and third categories. Third are the remaining countries of North Africa, the Middle East, Central, South, and Southeast Asia, which form a majority of the 10/40 Window and, for the purposes of the thesis, can generally be defined by the multifarious forms of structural resistance that inhibit the autonomy and growth of minorities. Struggling to come to terms with modernity and globalisation, it is within these countries that the marginalisation of evangelical groups is most pervasive. Through an examination of the countries that fall within the third category (such as Sri Lanka), existing understandings of evangelical growth are problematised, highlighting the need for redress.

2.4 Evangelical Christian growth within a spatial framework

Having established the incompatibility between existing approaches to Christian growth and the structurally resistant empirical contexts of the 10/40 Window, of
which Sri Lanka provides a representative example, I now explore how geographers can add value to the discourse. In particular, a more nuanced understanding of the dialectical relationship between organisational agency and structural determinism is needed in order to help navigate the complex terrain of evangelical growth and resistance in the 10/40 Window. Directly addressing David Yonggi Cho’s\textsuperscript{6} maxim – “find need and meet need” – Martin (2005: 30) asks how the local structures of Japan constricted the space available for Cho’s mission, as compared to Korea. Such questioning reveals a more pervasive problem that seeks redress. That is, the hitherto peripheral consideration of how the structural determinism of the context within which an organisation operates mediates the functional agency of the organisation in producing particular outcomes. Such a relationship is grounded in the spatial context: space mediates the ongoing tension between dominant religious structures and expressions of evangelical agency, and both reflect and enable evangelical organisations to be tied to localities in complex and multifarious ways. In order to understand how evangelical organisations negotiate and overcome constraints on growth, it is therefore necessary for geographers to begin paying greater attention to the spatially embedded practices and processes of Christian evangelism in order to help move the discourse forward.

Space is a medium within, and through, which both structure and agency are expressed, meaning a spatial framework has the potential to provide recourse to existing understandings of evangelical Christian growth. The practice of religion is fundamentally spatial in nature, and is irrevocably concerned with the expression and contestation of power. Power and symbolism are invested in the codification of

\textsuperscript{6} Cho is founder of South Korea’s Yoido Full Gospel Church, which purportedly has the world’s largest Pentecostal congregation.
physical space, meaning that ‘whoever retains the resources behind material codification also has the power to produce social categories and to maintain ‘Other’ in these categories’ (Chivallon, 2001: 476). That being said, McAlister (2005: 249) argues that the active role of space needs to be restored to the study of religion by focussing attention on ‘the ways that power works through the various levels, realms and conceptions of space, in and through religious processes’. Building on the criticism that, until relatively recently, there has been a tendency for geographers to address religion with a ‘pre-Lefebvrian incarnation, concerned with areal patterns within a passive space rather than treating space as an active part of social action’ (MacDonald 2002: 63), such assertions have contributed to a theoretical turn in the geographies of religion; one in which Lefebvre’s (1991) work on the production of space features prominently. Lefebvre’s conceptual distinction between representations of space and spaces of representation provides a useful starting point for enquiry, as it reflects two distinct productions of space that represent both structure, and agency, respectively.

On the one hand marginal groups contend with representations of space; hegemonic, ideological spaces that are (re)produced by dominant structures trying to exert power and control over a given territory. Such representations reflect the structures that restrict evangelical growth within the 10/40 Window. The control dominant groups have over secular spaces and landscapes are typically widespread, and often formalised through social and political institutions, or naturalised as part of the prevailing socio-cultural habitus. Characteristics like these dictate the ongoing production of society, space, and culture, creating an ongoing form of spatial politics that marginal groups must contend with. In light of this, it appears simplistic to
assume that structural representations of space do not influence to varying degrees the strategies, operations and spaces of evangelical groups. Taken to the extreme, structural determinants may overwhelm evangelical organisations, nullifying their agency and facilitate the razing, closure or relocation of churches. In the Indian state of Gujarat, for example, Jenkins (2007) shows how evangelical churches have been unable to contend with the structural determinants of the locality, being overcome by nationalist groups and converted into Hindu places of worship.

On the other hand, minority growth is performed through space. Church planting, prayer meetings and crusade rallies occur within space, as does the location of Christianity relative to other religions. In this sense marginal groups occupy a “space of representation” – one that ‘makes imaginative and symbolic use of physical space in order to realise the possibility of resisting the power of a dominant order, regime or discourse’ (Knott 2005a: 165). Such spaces reflect the creativity of agents in overcoming structures of resistance that restrict the exercise of autonomous action. Evangelical groups work to create a space that enables them to establish a presence within a given territory, as has been done so successfully in Latin America where Pentecostalism has ‘single-handedly created religious and social space where Latin Americans from the popular classes are free not to be Catholic’ (Chesnut 2003: 39). Innovative strategies of evangelism are often employed to maximise volitional agency whilst minimising concession to a structural context that is shaped by a dominant religious group. Turning to Nigeria, Pentecostalism has long provided

A powerful metaphor for new types of practice, as well as a symbolic and material resource for the ‘elaboration of a conceptual challenge to the power
monopolies’, for the creation of ‘autonomous spaces’ of practice which defy the oppressive logic of current ‘power monopolies’… and for the articulation of strategies to create, exercise and legitimate new power relations and new opportunities for survival (Marshall 1991: 21).

In seeking new perspectives on evangelical growth it is, however, important that evangelical spaces of representation – articulated here as “autonomous spaces” – go beyond the undisputed demarcation of bounded space. As I argue above in relation to existing theorisations of evangelical Christian growth, agency does not predicate autonomy, nor does it guarantee spatial sovereignty. Instead it must be recognised that spaces of representation are embedded within, influenced by and responsive to the broader spatial representations of a given locality, as shown by Metcalf’s (1996: 12) work on the construction of Muslim space in North America and Europe which shows how Muslims ‘strain at being thus constrained’, with majority resistance playing a central role in shaping minority behaviour. Indeed, sensitivity to the production of evangelical space – and how it is, in many respects, a space of religious liminality that expresses agency and yet concedes to structure – foregrounds the need to understand existing theorisations of sacred space, and how the study of evangelical space in particular can help develop such theorisations further.

2.4.1 Theorising sacred space

Sacred space provides the conceptual bedrock from which the geographies of religion have emerged. Theorisations of sacred space have developed along two distinct axes: the “insider” or “substantial” standpoint propounded by Eliade (1959; see also Lane
1988), and the “outsider” or “situational” standpoint propounded by social
constructionists (see Smith 1978). In the first instance, Eliade’s axioms of sacred and
profane space are based on the premise that the sacred erupts in certain places, called
hierophanies. Being sites of interaction between the human and superhuman realms of
the cosmos, hierophanies provide believers with direct proof of the divine, and are
distinct from the natural, profane world. The most paradigmatic hierophanies are
termed *axis mundi* which, by providing a point of existential orientation for religious
adherents, are ‘a place that is sacred above all’ (Eliade 1991: 39). The sacred and
profane thus represent two distinct modalities of experience; each is qualitatively
different from the other, creating a clear, yet artificial conceptual distinction between
the two. Criticism of the essentialism upon which such a standpoint is based makes
way for the social constructionist paradigm, and the associated shift from an
ontological conception of sacred space to a ‘critical interrogation of the human
processes involved in making space “sacred”’ (Knott 2005a: 169). Such a shift has
cau sed the sacred and the profane to become conceptually entwined: space is not a
homogeneous articulation of the sacred, but a blend of both sacred and profane forces.

Contra to Eliade’s *axis mundi*, social constructionist thought stipulates that ‘nothing is
inherently sacred’ (Chidester and Linenthal 1995: 6). Instead, place is imbued with
meaning through various processes of sacralisation – selection, demarcation, design,
orientation, ritualisation, and so on (Hecht 1994) – which contribute to the
construction and management of a place-bound form of sacredness. Such processes
are needed to maintain a distinction between sacred and profane space, a ‘purification
involving practices of sacralization and desacralization, with various supporting
mechanisms and ongoing maintenance to keep this separation [from the secular
world] in place’ (Ivakhiv 2006: 172). Without such processes of sacralisation, place is meaningless, and the sacred becomes an empty signifier. For example, Mazumdar and Mazumdar (1993: 236) show how religious identity and attachment to sacred space are strengthened through processes of ritual and the ongoing sanctification of the Hindu house. They show how the sanctification of the house includes the purification of the outside (e.g. harmonising the house with the outside environment), sacralisation of the inside (e.g. poojas, lighting of sacred fire, anointing), and sacred learning in space (e.g. imparting norms of appropriate behaviour upon children). Studies like this show how sacred space is often a result of extrinsic constructions of sacredness, rather than the intrinsic revelations originally propounded by Eliade.

The value of social constructionist perspectives is that they bring to light the close, seemingly inextricable, relationship between space and place. Such a dynamic has been systematically expounded over the past decade, since Kong’s (2001) well-heeded call for research to go beyond the “officially” sacred (for an overview of the proliferation of work on the “unofficially” sacred sites of religious activity, see Kong 2010: 756-7). Whilst the officially sacred comprises ‘churches, temples, synagogues, mosques and such places of worship that are commonly identified as ‘religious places’’, the unofficially sacred comprises ‘other [ostensibly secular] types of place which reinforce religious identity and facilitate religious practice’ (Kong 2002: 1573). The corpus of work on the unofficially sacred draws heavily on the constructionist paradigm to show how sacred place is mapped onto profane space, resulting in the ongoing construction and metamorphosis of both. For example, Vincent and Warf’s (2002) study of eruvim in the United States and United Kingdom shows how Orthodox Jews privatise public space via the demarcation of territory. Within such
spaces, Jewish identity and practice are freely expressed (e.g. enabling people to leave their homes during the Sabbath); yet also involve a conceptual redefinition of what constitutes a “doorway” that segregates the eruv from the outside world.

Given that space reflects and (re)produces the goals and achievements of religious organisations, it should therefore be seen as a medium, a methodology and an outcome of evangelism (Knott 2005a). It also provides an analytical focus for new perspectives on religious growth. In addition, interpreting space in such a way will help temper broader criticisms surrounding the under-theorised discursive formations of religion in/and space that have become a source of contention for geographers of religion (e.g. MacDonald 2002; McAlister 2005; Brace et al. 2006; Kong 2010). Alternative theorisations of religion in/and space are needed in order to disrupt those of the “normative” West (see Kong 2001, 2010; Freston 2001; Hervieu-Leger 2002; McAlister 2005), and to enable a study of Christian growth that is at once more situated and nuanced than its predecessors. Indeed, such disruption is fitting with broader moves to “decentralise” Anglo-American modes of knowledge production (e.g. Pollard and Samers 2007; see also Sidaway 2000; Jazeel and McFarlane 2010), and to contribute to a more inclusivist sub-discipline of geography of religion.

2.5 Conceptual framework

Having reviewed some of the extant literature surrounding contemporary Christian growth, and how a spatial frame of analysis can contribute a more nuanced understanding of such growth, I now introduce the conceptual framework that will help to frame the empirical data. An overriding principle of the framework is that,
whilst geographers of religion are responsible for introducing geographical conceptions and understandings of religious phenomena to the broader social sciences, in order to do so effectively and credibly, they must also engage fully with non-geographical theorisations of religion. This is what I have done below, first through a conceptualisation and understanding of the structural mosaic as an enabler of evangelical Christian growth, followed by the spatial modalities of the structural mosaic, and culminating in the introduction of one of the most pervasive and contentious examples of the structural mosaic in practice: the house church.

2.5.1 The structural mosaic as an enabler of religious growth

Existing approaches to evangelical growth, outlined above, often focus on either the structural drivers of religious change, or the agency of evangelical organisations and Christian converts. Such foci often fail to take into adequate consideration the recursive relationship between evangelical agency and structural context. Thus, in order to reconcile the existing “unidirectional explanations” (Droogers 2001) of Christian growth, it is important that structure and agency are recognised as being co-constitutive, with both determining religious outcomes. Such a relationship is brought to life by the poststructuralist sensibilities of structuration theory. Rather than viewing structures and agents as mutually distinct, Giddens (1984: 6) instead highlights the recursive relationship between them – what he terms the “duality of structure” – which causes each to inflect, yet be simultaneously constrained by, the other. Structure shapes agency, whilst agency seeks to transform structure, a dynamic that results in the ‘reflexive monitoring and rationalization of action’ and heightened responsiveness to the changing social and physical conditions of the contexts within
which each operates. This presents an ongoing cycle that reflects and reproduces the (im)balance between minority emancipation and majority control; religious growth and/or repression. Such understanding calls into question the organisational agency approaches outlined above, whilst helping to explain why such approaches work in some structural contexts, but not others. Applying structuration theory to discourses of Christian growth provides more accurate, and inclusive, understandings; but it also needs to be developed in order to further its explanatory potential.

Specifically, embracing the duality of structure should not be at the expense of recognising inter-structural dualities. Focussing on the structuration of religious systems, it is important that structure is not reduced to a single category that collapses diverse (and sometimes conflictual) elements of society, religion and economics into a single “whole”. Instead, research must begin exploring the heterogeneity of “structure”. Indeed, Giddens’ emphasis on contextuality foregrounds his ‘vision of society as a partly structured mosaic of contexts which interact only in particular ways at particular times in particular locations’ (Thrift 1985: 611, emphasis added). Such a specific reading of contextuality is, I feel, at the expense of recognising the mosaic of structure – the “structural mosaic” – that, when unsynchronised, create spaces for agents to exploit. To recognise the structural mosaic is to recognise the heterogeneity of structure, and to recognise the heterogeneity of structure is to problematise the view that structure has an overbearing and deterministic influence upon the efficacious actions and outcomes of agents. Put differently, the structural mosaic sensitises discourse to the opportunities for engagement and subversion that present themselves when agents infiltrate and change the conditions of structure, especially those structures that may be deemed “hostile” or seek to restrict the autonomous
actions of agents. Strategies of evangelical infiltration provide a core focus of the thesis, and are typically concerned with how evangelical groups engage with, and operate within the non-religious aspects of structure.

More specifically, groups operating within the framework of the structural mosaic are able to simultaneously traverse categories of structure and structural understanding. When I talk of the structural mosaic, therefore, I refer not just to one category of engagement – the religious, the social, the cultural or the economic, for example – but to the possibilities and opportunities that emerge when groups traverse categories, engaging all or some at the same time in order to achieve an overriding objective (e.g. evangelism, church growth). It is how evangelical groups use a house to establish a church, for example, or how they distribute aid in order to create a space of engagement through which they can evangelise as well. In this vein, the structural mosaic sensitises discourse to how categories of structure may be heterogeneous, but that does not mean they are not interlinked, nor does it mean that one category cannot disguise, influence or otherwise subvert another.

As a more specific example, in many contexts, poverty (and associated symptoms, such as lack of education, nutrition, healthcare, or social justice) is a problem that is not adequately addressed or alleviated by the prevailing religious structure. Addressing the symptoms of poverty requires immediate, non-religious solutions, and provides a channel through which Christian groups can subtly express different forms of evangelical agency, and begin realising the opportunities for growth that are available when engaging with the structural mosaic by providing what has been

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7 Indeed the reverse is also true, with some religious structures imparting a form of religio-cultural intransigence that stifles measures to alleviate poverty.
termed ‘secular advantages’ (Henkel and Sakaja 2009: 51). Thus whilst the religious structure of society may restrict evangelical praxis, a focus of evangelical groups on social ministry provides a considerable source of social agency. In religious terms, evangelical Christian groups may be marginalised, but in social terms they may be embraced, even needed. The social therefore provides an entry point from which they can begin to exert religious influence via apparently benign (i.e. non-religious, or secular) engagement with society. Through exploitation of the structural mosaic, evangelical groups are able to gain a foothold from which religious agency can be expressed, and religious alternatives can flourish. Altogether, the heterogeneity of the structural mosaic enables a more discreet form of religious influencing, and creates opportunities for minority groups to engage with society in non-religious ways.

Such opportunities have started to be identified and expounded in recent work on the “postsecular” city – a burgeoning field of research within urban studies. Yet whilst Davis (2006; see also Beaumont 2008) shows how (often evangelical) faith-motivated organisations clamour to replace the retreat of secular social movements and the state, there is little critical understanding of what “faith-motivation” means, and how it intersects with proselytism, conversion and religious plurality (especially in the non-Christian world). Understanding the three-way relationship between welfare provision, the state and faith-motivated organisations (see Molendijk et al. 2010) appears to be naïvely altruistic, under-theorised and ignores the predatorial (or, at least, self-motivated) aspect of faith-motivated groups providing secular services to the underprivileged segments of society. Moreover, a focus on the urban spaces of the city should not be at the expense of the rural spaces of the village – a locational determinant that has been largely ignored by geographers of religion to date. Indeed,
the urban-rural dichotomy provides a focus for the subsequent analyses, sensitising discourse to the spatial drivers of action (and inaction) within the structural mosaic. Such drivers range from macro-scale differentiations between urban and rural, or public and private, to more micro-scale nuances, such as the use of the spaces of the house, the temple, or the Montessori as enablers of evangelical growth. Altogether, this highlights the value of, and the need to explore the spatial modalities of the structural mosaic.

2.5.2 The spatial modalities of the structural mosaic

As argued above, space plays an active role in influencing the processes and outcomes of Christian growth. Religious organisations need to be studied in relation to the spatial contexts in which they operate, as ‘underlying codes have to be inferred from surface manifestations’ and space ‘has to be considered in terms of its involvement in the construction of systems of interaction’ (Giddens 1984: 16, 368; see also Stump’s 2000; 2008 reading of contextuality). Thus whilst structural contexts and organisational agencies determine the rate of Christian growth, space mediates growth and, in doing so, reveals otherwise hidden patterns of religious activity (Giddens’ “systems of interaction”). More specifically, closer empirical examination of evangelical space is needed to show how it both reflects and reproduces the systems of interaction that arise from structuration. In line with Massey’s (2005: 9) reading of space as ‘the sphere… of coexisting heterogeneity’, exploring the spatial modalities of the structural mosaic will reveal the geographical extent of how and why evangelical groups are able to grow, in spite of resistance. Indeed, by interpreting evangelical space as a response to the structural constraints on growth will enable
discourses of religion in/and space to develop along lines that are more relational than otherwise thought.

The spatial modalities of the structural mosaic exist along two distinct axes: the appropriation of religious, and non-religious, spaces for “other” religious purposes (e.g. evangelism). As Kong (2010: 757) recognises, ‘there are many ways in which everyday spaces can be implicated in religious meaning-making, legitimating, maintaining and enhancing, but also challenging religious life, beliefs, practices and identities’. A focus on “everyday spaces”, such as the house, school or street, will sensitise discourse to the ‘spatialities of religion that lie beyond the church and the chapel’ (Brace et al. 2006: 38; Sheringham 2010), and in doing so will disrupt the hitherto prevalent focus on the realm of formal, more institutionalised religious practice. In many structurally hostile contexts, starting a pre-school or Montessori is often a precursor to planting a church as it enables non-religious engagement with society, and for Christianity to be expressed in subtle, non-religious terms. Thus a space of education is incorporated, and provides a channel through which evangelical groups can begin processes of religious influencing. It is for this reason that they have attracted a lot of suspicion from anti-Christian groups, presenting a problem that is discussed in more detail in Chapter 6. In addition, a focus on how Christian groups engage with non-Christian spaces of religion (such as the Buddhist temple – a mainstay of village life in Sri Lanka) is also necessary as such engagement is often even more conflictual, and subversive.

The house church presents one spatial modality of the structural mosaic that is pervasive throughout Sri Lanka, and the world. Sri Lanka’s house churches are
unique insofar as they reflect the often ephemeral, and highly strategic, conversion of space that enables Christian groups to penetrate new areas, and to grow whilst minimising the risk of surveillance. The process of converting the private space of the home into a public site of religious expression (although the extent to which it is “public” is debatable – see Chapters 5 and 6) is replete with politics and provides a recurrent focus throughout the thesis. Of particular interest is how the spatial production of the house diverges from existing understandings of sacred space, providing an opportunity to develop new understandings of the house church as networked space.

2.5.3 The house church as networked space

Amidst the spectrum of evangelical worship patterns, the megachurch has recently begun to pique the attention of geographers (e.g. Connell 2005; Warf and Winsberg 2010; see also Goh 2008), whilst its antipode – the house church – remains neglected. Such neglect deserves to be rectified, given the subversive logic of the house church in catalysing Christian agency in contexts where growth, even presence, is otherwise restricted. Flourishing in areas where Christianity is repressed, the house church provides a spatial interface that camouflages the sacred other in the form of the secular. As such, it has proven to be instrumental in affording more evangelical groups a degree of self-empowerment, autonomy and religious leverage. In China, for example, the house church movement has gained widespread recognition for fomenting 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 (e.g. 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, like Sri Lanka, and have (often uncritically) aped the house church model.

The value of the house church is that it is often a symbol of defiance, and is 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: 99, 104). 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: 757, e.g. Kong 2002; Naylor and Ryan 2003; Luz 2008), with such “new patterns” foregrounding new understandings of religion, space and place. Drawing on Augé’s (1995) conceptualisation of “non-place” (re-articulated as “placelessness”), the thesis explores how the house church is a mobile church that is one of the most common expressions of evangelical agency in Sri Lanka, yet also reflects a concession to a restrictive regulatory (i.e. structural) context that renders the formal regulation of church buildings difficult. In this vein the house church is both an important enabler of evangelical Christian growth, and a source of intense inter- and intra-religious contestation.

More specifically, in order to engage with existing discourses surrounding sacred space and religious growth, new ideas pertaining to the production of evangelical space are needed. I argue that the house church is a form of networked space that enables it to form and disband with ease, and thus remain innocuous to surveillance.
Whilst I take place to be a physical anchor – something real and tangible, such as a building – space has no physical footing, and is therefore anchored by its association with place. Space becomes tangible once such associations with place are readily made, and accepted by individuals and groups. Without such associations, space exists in freeform. Such an understanding is not dissimilar from that of Tuan (1977: 6, emphasis added), when he states that:

> What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value… If we think of space as that which allows movement, then place is pause; each pause in movement makes it possible for location to be transformed into place.

The logic espoused by Tuan, combined with my own conceptualisation, runs contra to existing treatments of sacred space. I argue that such treatments have conceptualised space and place as existing in a state of synchrony, suggesting that place constrains space by disabling its natural rhythm and movement. Antecedent treatments of sacred space as place-bound entities foreground its conceptualisation as an immutable, static, container of religion (numerous examples can be found in volumes edited by Scott and Simpson-Housley 1991; Carmichael et al. 1994; Holm and Bowker 1994; Chidester and Linenthal 1995; Kedar and Werblowsky 1998; and also Smith 1987). Indeed, whilst the treatment of sacred place has been multivalent and capable of being invested with both sacred and secular meaning in one site, discourse has tended to take for granted the assumption that ‘sacralization [is] highly place-dependent’ (Proctor 2006: 167) and has limited exploration of the possibilities afforded by placeless religious expression (whether existent or desired). In particular, the
possibility that sacred space ‘can be made without regard to geographical place or space’ (Hume 1998: 311; see also Lane 1988; Kong 1993, 2002), and can therefore ‘float free of any physical mooring’ (Knott 2005a: 159) has, with only a few exceptions, gone unnoticed. Going beyond the confines of place-bound analyses, it is through exploring the (apparently) placeless valences of religious worship that new understandings of sacred space can be forged.

There is therefore a need to decouple space from place in order to leverage the value gained from articulating the sacred within a framework of mobility, rather than stasis. Evidence of such a transition is emergent, and based on attempts to ‘account for the insecure, temporary and continually restructured forms of contemporary religious spatialization’ (Hervieu-Leger 2002: 104). Drawing on Sheller and Urry’s (2006: 209) new mobilities paradigm, for example, Della Dora (2009: 225) calls 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, and 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 (see also Bajc et al. 2007). It should be noted, however, that whilst the new mobilities paradigm provides leverage for new conceptualisations of sacred space, it talks primarily of movement through space – the ‘ways in which places and things move around’ (Della Dora 2009: 227, original emphasis) – and not the mobility that arises from understanding spatial production in more networked terms. Within the
context of Sri Lanka, such a framework requires new spatial metaphors: ones that go beyond existing, place-bound moulds of religious understanding, and engage with the house churches’ potential for spatial transience instead.

Through an empirical focus on Sri Lanka’s house churches, therefore, I argue that rather than being constructed in relation to place, sacred space is instead a space of flows that is constructed in relation to sacred networks. In other words, it is sacred networks that give meaning and direction to evangelical Christian space, with “space” being nothing more than a network “effect” (Murdoch 2006: 73; see also Castells 1996). In turn, place becomes “non-place” – a “non-symbolized space” (Augé 1995: 82) that performs a non-circumscribed and non-specific position in the (re)production of evangelical Christianity. As a result, house churches are granted a seemingly irrepressible, and important, degree of mobility that enables them to grow rapidly, avoid surveillance and circumvent restrictions on growth. This provides a departure from existing theorisations of sacred space that favour vertical approaches to sacralisation (i.e. either top-down, hegemonic constructions of the sacred; or ground-up, everyday interpretations of the sacred), in favour of more lateral, relation-based interpretations.

Indeed, suggesting that sacred networks are the foundations upon which the house church movement is built can contribute to an understanding of religion that is considerably more fluid and malleable than its predecessors (see Tweed 2006). By “locating” (see Knott 2005a, 2005b) religion within sacred networks, I follow the lead of researchers who examine “the relational forms of communalization of religion ‘into networks’” (Hervieu-Leger 2002: 103). In doing so, however, I seek to expand the
discourse beyond migration and the associated production of transnational religious space (e.g. Bowen 2004; Ebaugh 2004; Silvey 2005). Rather than connecting groups of territorially dispersed religious believers, I argue instead that sacred networks are constructed and performed by groups of territorially proximate believers as a substitute for more place-bound expressions of religiosity. Moreover, I argue that in the repressive Christian context of Sri Lanka, sacred networks play an integral role in the house church movement’s proliferation (in terms of the number of churches), if not its growth (in terms of the number of believers).

2.6 Summary

This chapter has reviewed the extant literature surrounding religious growth, and proposed a conceptual framework that informs the subsequent chapters and analyses. In the first section of the chapter, I introduced theories of evangelical Christian growth in modernity. In line with the dualistic treatment of structure and agency reflected by such theories, I first explored the structural determinants of religious change, focussing on the relationship between modernisation and religious conversion, the relative deprivation thesis and existing understandings of religious economy. Specifically, I explained how religious economy approaches recognise the inter-relationship between religious supply and demand, and are based on the assumption that as religious regulation increases, levels of inter-religious competition decrease. After problematising the structural determinants of change, I went on to explore the role of human agency in affecting conversion processes and outcomes, and showed how the evangelical organisation is an important arbiter of religious change. Finally, I argued that theories of evangelical Christian growth are plentiful,
but restricted by a number of assumptions and biases that render them more applicable in some contexts than they are others.

In the second section, I advanced an understanding of how geography intersects with religious growth. First, I highlighted the variegated patterns of evangelical Christian growth around the world, drawing particular attention to the general suppression of evangelical Christianity inside the 10/40 Window. Second, I argued that because space is a medium through which both structure and agency are expressed (as shown by Lefebvre’s representations of space and spaces of representation), it reflects how evangelical organisations are often tied to localities in complex and multifarious ways. Finally, I explored the development of sacred space theorisations, from Eliade’s axioms of sacred and profane space, to the social constructionist thought that currently predominates. Such understandings pave the way for the conceptual framework, which addresses the issues raised in the first and second sections.

The conceptual framework advances along three axes. First, I suggested that Giddens’ theory of structuration helps attune scholars to the recursive relationship between structure and agency, and identify the structural mosaic as being an enabler of religious growth. The structural mosaic recognises the heterogeneity of structure, which suggests that otherwise marginalised religious groups are able to grow by pursuing strategies of non-religious influencing and by exerting religious agency in more subtle ways. Second, the spatial modalities of the structural mosaic were identified as being able to sensitise discourse to strategies of influencing, such as the use of non-religious spaces for religious purposes. Finally, the house church was recognised as one of the most pervasive modalities of the structural mosaic. I argued
that the sacred space of the house church is constructed using network principles, which allow for movement, ephemerality and subversion.
CHAPTER 3: EMPIRICAL CONTEXT AND METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

Studying the growth of evangelical Christian groups in hostile environments requires data that reveal the complex relationships, interactions and outcomes that exist at the intersection of evangelical agency and structural resistance. Indeed, the need for new understandings of evangelical Christian growth (previously outlined in Chapter 2) foregrounds the need for new (or, at least, alternative) methodological approaches, and consideration of the multiple stakeholders that represent both structures and agents. Such approaches and considerations can help deter the development of universal claims in favour of more context-sensitive, and situated theorisations instead. By locating this research in Sri Lanka, and by generating qualitative data from a variety of sources, stakeholders and research sites, I aim to disrupt existing methodological approaches to the study of religious growth. Doing so means that this thesis not only contributes new theoretical perspectives, but new methodological ones as well.

As the title suggests, the chapter is divided into two main sections: empirical context and methodology. I start by introducing the empirical context within which the study is situated, focussing specifically on Sri Lanka’s oligopolistic religious marketplace, and the informal economy of evangelical Christian praxis. In the second part of the chapter I outline the critical ethnographic approach that was used to guide all stages of the research process, from conceptualisation to data collection, analysis and writing up. This is followed by consideration of the various ethical issues that were raised and
dealt with throughout the research process. Finally, sampling techniques and methods are outlined. This is followed by a detailed introduction to each of the sites wherein research was conducted. Such introductions help to provide a contextual backdrop for each of the four empirical chapters that follow.

3.2 **Sri Lanka’s contested religious marketplace**

Fieldwork was conducted in Sri Lanka, a country that is representative of repressed Christian growth in the 10/40 Window. The 1978 Constitution of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka confers Buddhism the “foremost place” with the state being duty-bound to “protect and foster the Buddha Sasana [the teaching of the Buddha]” (Article 9). Nonetheless, every person is accorded “freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including the freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his [sic] choice” (Article 10), and “the freedom, either by himself or in association with others, and either in public or in private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice or teaching” (Article 14.1.e). In reality such ideals are, however, questionable. Whilst constitutionally and numerically\(^8\) pluralistic, the country’s majority Buddhist population wields considerable power and control over domestic politics, society and culture. As Goonatilake (2006: 10) recognises, in Sri Lanka there is a ‘tradition of locally grown civic organisations in the form of Buddhist monk organisations, which had provided some associational space outside rigid government structures for over 2,000 years’. Indeed, taking Goonatilake’s

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\(^8\) Sri Lanka’s Theravada Buddhist population accounts for approximately 68% of the population according to The Association of Religion Data Archives (2011). It is the majority religion, followed by Hinduism (13%), Islam (9.5%) and Christianity (both Catholic and Protestant denominations – 8.8%). Whilst the accuracy of such statistics is questionable (see Jenkins 2007: 191; also Nanayakkara 2006), they provide an indication of the relative size of each religious group.
assertions a step further, I posit that the legal structure is often at odds with invidious assertions of Sinhala-Buddhist hegemony at the local level. This is corroborated by a range of indices from The Association of Religion Data Archives (2011) reports (2003-8) for Sri Lanka, with Government Regulation of Religion scoring 6/10, Social Regulation of Religion 9.4/10, and Religious Persecution 9/10 (where 10 is the highest rate of regulation/persecution). Civil society is often, therefore, more assertive in regulating religious groups than the government, and minority religious groups are highly persecuted. Such assertiveness can, in many respects, be viewed as an ongoing reaction to the legacy of European colonisation.

3.2.1 Christianity, Sinhalatva, and the rise of Buddhist protectionism in Sri Lanka

Starting in the 1500s, successive Portuguese, Dutch and British colonial administrations and associated missionary activity introduced Catholicism and mainline Christianity to Sri Lanka (see Table 1, below, for mainline denominations). During this time Buddhist groups were forced to contend not only with the loss of political and religious authority associated with colonialism, but also had to tolerate a Christian mission marked by ‘triumphalism… dogmatism and Orientalism’ (Matthews 2007: 258-9). By the mid-nineteenth century – the zenith of British colonial rule – processes of Buddhist revivalism had begun to take root, and a number of influential Buddhist leaders9 gained prominence for imbuing political rhetoric with exclusivist religious and ethnic sentiment (see Tambiah 1992: 5; cf. Deegalle 2004). Such sentiment reflects what Ammerman (2010: 155) terms the “narrative of loss”,

9 Notable Buddhist reformists include Anagarika Dharmapala (1864-1933) and Gangodawila Soma Thero (1948-2003), whose death marked the beginnings of the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU).
which encapsulates a ‘loss of privilege, loss of authority, perhaps loss of vitality and influence’ in the face of religious plurality and, in this case, colonialism.

Compounding the lingering effects of the “narrative of loss”, in more recent decades the secessionist war waged by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) has contributed to the development of an exclusivist political ideology called Sinhalatva.

Promoting the notion of a unitary state based on (allegedly) Buddhist values, Sinhalatva synthesises a number of “strategic essentialisms” (Briggs 1996) – Buddhism, territory, language and race – that are largely incongruous with a multi-ethnic society, religious pluralism, or political power sharing\(^\text{10}\). Within the Sinhalatva movement – of which Schalk (2007: 141) claims to have counted more than one hundred organisations in the 1980s – a number of right-wing Buddhist groups have emerged, often adopting anti-democratic and totalitarian means to defend the integrity and sovereignty of the Baudhha Rajya (“Buddhist state”). One of the more prominent organisations is the ultranationalist Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU – also known as “National Heritage Party”). Winning nine Parliamentary seats and 6% of the national vote in the 2004 elections, all of JHU’s MPs are Buddhist monks. The formation and political success of the JHU reveals the ‘loss of hope and frustration’ (Deegalle 2005a: 245) felt by some Buddhists, and gives weight to the view that ‘lay politicians have been unjust and corrupt and failed to address religious and national issues concerning Buddhists and Sinhalese’ (Deegalle 2006b: 10). Groups like the JHU seek to mobilise communities against “alien” elements that are believed to pose a threat to traditional society and culture, and have resulted in attempts to suppress the growth

\(^{10}\) In this vein Sinhalatva offers many parallels with Hindutva in India: the ‘ultranationalist ideology… which presents India as under siege from foreign invaders, and makes religion inseparable from national identity and culture’ (Jenkins 2007: 216)
and autonomy of minority groups via increasingly punitive means (see Tambiah 1986; Obeyesekere 1991; Bartholomeusz and de Silva 1998; Holt 1998; Deegalle 2006).

Within the context of mounting religious protectionism, the growth of evangelical Christian\footnote{The label “evangelical” is something of a misnomer as it can be applied to any Christian church. In Sri Lanka there is a clear-cut distinction between mainline and non-mainline churches (see Table 1 below); whilst the “evangelical” label primarily speaks to the latter category, it is not to the exclusion of the former.} groups has become a source of concern for the Buddhist right. Since the 1980s a ‘rapid and relatively large influx of new Christian denominations\footnote{Numerical data to substantiate the claim of evangelical Christian growth is lacking. At the country level, census data were collected in 1981 and 2001, although the 2001 census omitted seven out of a total twenty-five districts in the north and east of the island due to the civil war. In the district with the largest Protestant Christian population, Colombo, there has been an increase in real terms of 10,736 (or 26.4%) between 1981-2001.}’ (Perera 1999: 1) are alleged to have entered the country, compounded in more recent years by the arrival of ‘Christian missionary organizations… surreptitiously under the camouflage of new business ventures’ (Tilakaratne 2006: 222). Correctly reflecting the trend of Christian growth in recent decades, the view that such growth is a result of “influxes” and “missionary organizations” – a foreign invasion of the neo-colonising West (see Matthews 2007) – appears to underestimate the competitiveness of domestic players who have become effective at overcoming the restrictions imposed upon them. Defined by charismatic preachers and worship services, evangelical zeal and a rejection of traditional Christian symbolism, many view evangelical churches as ‘theologically quite bizarre and aggressive’ (Matthews 2007: 462). Notwithstanding, it should be noted that whilst such groups have increased in size and number since the 1980s, they have struggled to keep pace with their counterparts operating in less structurally repressive contexts.
In response to the threat posed by evangelical Christianity, the Buddhist right has made various attempts to restrict the autonomous actions of Christian groups. As a result, Christian groups have focussed on alternative strategies of evangelisation, and ‘clandestine proselytizing’ (Gerhardt 2008: 920), often by substituting (or conflating) religious goals for those of a more secular nature. Such actions have provoked outrage amongst the Buddhist right, who accuse evangelical groups of engaging in “unethical” conversion activities. One of the most publically recognised, and debated, responses to evangelism and proselytism is the desire to implement a legislative solution to the problem of “unethical” conversion to Christianity. Drafted by the JHU in 2004, the Prohibition of Forcible Conversion Bill seeks to outlaw inter-religious conversion by force, fraud, or allurement.

3.2.2 The Prohibition of Forcible Conversion Bill

A growing trend within the non-Christian world is the desire to restrict religious mobility and expressions of religious agency. The corresponding legislative solutions primarily implicate proselytising (usually Christian) groups, and potential converts. Indeed, in 2002 77 states around the world restricted proselytising activity (especially that of foreign missionaries), 29 of which prevented conversion away from the dominant religion (Fox 2009). Proposed by the JHU in July 2004 and Ministry of Buddha Sasana Affairs in June 2005, the respectively entitled ‘Prohibition of Forcible Conversion (Private Member’s Bill)’ and ‘Freedom of Religion Bill’ seek to contain the perceived threat to Buddhism posed by minority religions. The Prohibition of Forcible Conversion Bill (see Appendix 1) seeks to criminalise the conversion of Buddhists to other faiths by force, fraud or allurement, and reflects the fact that
conversion is a key driver of religious tension in Sri Lanka (Owens 2007). Whilst testament to the belligerent strategies of proselytisation practiced by some groups in recent years (notably in the aftermath of the 2004 tsunami – see Matthews 2007), it also provides a good example of how religious hegemons ‘harness the power of the State to impose sanctions on religious expression that does not fall within that institution’s definition of orthodoxy’ (Ammerman 2010: 161). If passed, anyone caught aiding or abetting such activity will be liable for imprisonment of between five and seven years and a fine of between Rs. 150,000\(^{13}\) and Rs. 500,000. Significantly, the higher sentence and fine are for those accused of converting ‘samurdhi [welfare] beneficiaries, prison, rehabilitation and detention centre inmates, physically and mentally handicapped persons, members of the armed forces, the police, students, the inmates of refugee camps and minors’ (The Sunday Times 08.02.09). Dependents (such as students, minors and inmates of refugee camps) are often a focus of evangelism, and highlight the problematic nature of evangelical strategies of outreach that specifically target “vulnerable” groups.

Sri Lanka’s Supreme Court has challenged sections of the Bill that are deemed “unconstitutional\(^{14}\)”, especially those requiring all conversions (or conversion “ceremonies”, e.g. baptisms) to be reported to the Divisional Secretariat (Matthews 2007). After being referred to a special Consultative Committee of the Ministry of Religious Affairs, the Bill was presented for a third reading in February 2009. Whilst the Chief Opposition Whip stated that ‘we are not against the principles of the Bill’ he acknowledged that ‘there should be more clarity on what constitutes a crime under

\(^{13}\) Rs. 100 is roughly equivalent to USD 1, rendering these amounts USD 1,500 and 5,000 respectively.

\(^{14}\) Although the JHU did attempt to amend the Constitution, proclaiming Buddhism as the state religion and prohibiting all conversion out of Buddhism. The Supreme Court also ruled this unconstitutional (see Owens 2007: 325).
this piece of legislation’ (cited in The Sunday Times 08.02.09). To add ballast to the Bill, in 2008 the All Ceylon Buddhist Congress (ACBC) – a lay Buddhist organisation that serves and provides for the betterment of Buddhism in society – conducted an inquiry into the conversion activities of evangelical organisations operating in Sri Lanka. Entitled the ‘Commission on Unethical Conversions’, the final report was presented to the ACBC in early 2009\(^\text{15}\). The Commission report presents evidence to support claims of unethical conversion, based on data collected from around the country (although, significantly, Christian perspectives were excluded). In doing so it contributes to a growing body of literature, rhetoric and debate that irrefutably supports the “unethical” conversion case. A counterbalance is needed: one that offers the perspectives of the Christians implicated in such a discourse, and which provides a more impartial analysis of the claims made by both sides.

If (or when) such legislation is passed in Sri Lanka, the religious freedom of both the organisation, and individual will be severely undermined. Owens (2007: 351; see also Deegalle 2004) argues that ‘the introduction of legislation to curb unethical conversion will increase, rather than eliminate, religious divisions in Sri Lanka’, and that ‘it will only result in further violations of the very rights to religious freedom it is attempting to protect in the first place’. In addition, despite being outwardly aimed at evangelical organisations, Matthews (2007) predicts mainline churches will suffer the consequences much more than their evangelical counterparts, largely because evangelical denominations operate outside of legislative frameworks (see below), meaning such proposals are imbued with problems of both a theoretical (in terms of

\(^\text{15}\) Unfortunately, during the period of fieldwork the Commission report was only available in Sinhala, and had not yet been translated into English. Nonetheless, three interviews were conducted with representatives of the ACBC, with respondents regularly citing examples from the Commission report to support their claims.
how they are conceptualised), and practical (in terms of who they stand to implicate) nature. As a result, it is necessary to explore and develop alternative approaches to understanding how evangelical organisations grow, regulate and position themselves within Sri Lanka’s religious marketplace.

3.2.3 **Oligopoly dynamics and Sri Lanka’s informal religious economy**

As discussed in Chapter 2, religious economy presents a useful theoretical approach that provides a relatively holistic understanding of religious change. It situates religious groups within broader systems of inter-religious competition and state control, but it needs to be adapted in order to explain why evangelical groups operating in places like Sri Lanka remain competitive, despite being heavily regulated. In response to the binary thinking of normative approaches to religious economy theorisation, Yang (2006, 2007, 2010) has recently proposed that four types of state-religion relations exist. In order of increasing religious regulation, these are: pluralism (all religions treated the same), oligopoly (one or more religions favoured by the state), monopoly (one official religion), and total ban (all religions outlawed). Importantly for the purposes of the thesis, Yang asserts that oligopolistic religious economies can be both regulated and competitive, thus overcoming the impasse enforced by normative understandings. Furthermore, Yang proposes a tripartite structuring of religious markets based on his understanding of religion in China: a red market of officially sanctioned religions, a black market of officially banned religions, and an ambiguous grey market that is characterised by both officially sanctioned and banned religious groups. Such theorising presents a much-needed break from existing religious economy moulds, and provides a solid conceptual frame for exploring the
competitiveness and growth of evangelical groups in Sri Lanka’s oligopolistic religious marketplace (i.e. one that privileges Buddhism, yet ensures fairness across all recognised religions).

According to Yang’s (2006) tripartite market structure, in Sri Lanka, the “red” market would comprise those religions that are officially recognised at the ministerial level: Buddhist, Hindu, and Islamic groups, the Catholic Church, and “mainline” Protestant denominations. The place of evangelical groups (commonly identified as “free” or Pentecostal churches) is not so easily defined; they are not represented by, nor are they accountable to, the Ministry of Christian Affairs, which represents the Roman Catholic and mainline Protestant denominations only (see Table 1, below). Their position within Sri Lanka’s religious economy is unclear; because they are not formally recognised at the ministerial level they are neither legal nor illegal, but politically taboo instead (i.e. they have no legal status). The recognition that comes with being either a “legal” or “illegal” religious group suggests a degree of formality in the religious economy: groups are categorised, labelled and are treated (and operate) in accordance with their legal position. Problems arise when non-legal groups, or those with no legal status, are included within religious economy theorisations, as they are not subject to the same regulatory controls as those that are legally recognised. This paves the way for new understandings of the working of an informal religious economy, one in which underground religious movements feature prominently.
<table>
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<tr>
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<th>MAINLINE DENOMINATIONS</th>
<th>EVANGELICAL DENOMINATIONS</th>
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<tr>
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<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Representative body:</td>
<td>Catholic Bishop’s Conference in Sri Lanka</td>
<td>National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka (NCEASL)*</td>
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<td></td>
<td>National Christian Council of Sri Lanka</td>
<td>Represents all evangelical organisations</td>
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<td>Represents smaller evangelical denominations</td>
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<td>Denominations/churches:</td>
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<td>Dutch Reformed Church</td>
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<td>The Salvation Army</td>
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Table 1: Sri Lanka's mainline and evangelical Christian denominations by representative body

* These are the five largest denominations represented by the NCEASL. It also represents members of the FFCSL and NCF, as well as numerous non-church and parachurch evangelical organisations.
In addition to the information presented by Table 1, the registration of churches also differs between mainline and evangelical denominations. Because religious groups are not required to register with the government in Sri Lanka, many evangelical groups are registered under the Companies Act (unlike the Catholic, Anglican and other mainline churches, for example, which have long been incorporated under acts of parliament), serving to further obfuscate their political position (see U.S. Department of State 2010). Thus whilst Yang differentiates between the red, black, and grey markets, he ultimately conceptualises them as part of the same economic system that recognises all religious groups, whether legal or illegal, or existing in the red, grey or black markets. Delineating the economy along these lines is misleading in the Sri Lankan context, as evangelical groups are unrecognised and therefore create their own informal religious economy that exists in parallel with the formal economic system of state-sanctioned religions. The relationship between the two systems is replete with tension, and is not adequately addressed by existing studies.

Yang also treats the state as the sole regulatory body. Civil society is largely controlled by the Buddhist hierarchy, and has insurmountable influence over the state and state apparatus at the local level in Sri Lanka. The regulatory affect of such ‘religious cartels’ (Grim and Finke 2010: 8) is often overlooked; undeservedly so, given their role in blurring the boundary between what constitutes “legal” and “illegal” religious activity in practice, and in law. Distinguishing between “formal” and “informal” religious economies therefore presupposes a more relativised view of regulation that goes beyond the legal power(lessness) of the state, by taking into consideration the regulatory actions of non-state actors as well. Thus by disrupting the systems of positive feedback between regulation and competition, Sri Lanka’s
informal economy challenges a core premise of more formal religious economy theorisations; in doing so it calls for new understandings of competitiveness. Evangelical vigour is not diminished or nullified by regulation, but the methods used to promote competition take on different forms that are sensitive to, and therefore reflective of, the broader workings of the religious economy. Such methods render direct, and causal, relationships between levels of regulation and levels of competition simplistic in the Sri Lankan context, and form the theoretical basis of what I term the relational model of competitiveness (see Chapter 4). Indeed, the fact that evangelical groups are notoriously discreet, difficult to control, and pose a ‘constant challenge to regulators and researchers’ (Yang 2010: 202) does not diminish the necessity of understanding how they operate and remain competitive within the informal religious economy: it adds to it.

Having explored the empirical context in which fieldwork was conducted, I now introduce the methodological approach. Specifically, I explain the value of a critical ethnographic approach when conducting cross-cultural fieldwork, and discuss in detail the ethics that I negotiated throughout the duration of the research process. Following that I describe and justify the methods used for data collection. I end the chapter by introducing each of the research sites in which data were collected.

3.3 Critical ethnography in a cross-cultural context

Ethnography is a mainstay of qualitative research. As a methodological approach it involves the collection of data in naturally occurring settings, which are used to describe and interpret the social expressions, actions, meanings and realities between
people and groups. Put differently, it is the “writing of culture” (Clifford and Marcus 1986) that leads to a greater understanding of people and places. It becomes “critical” when issues of representation, the legitimation of knowledge and the ‘exercise of power in culturally specific yet socially reproductive processes’ (Lather 2001: 479) move to the fore. Breaking from the detachment of conventional ethnography, a critical approach assumes an ‘activist collaboration with oppressed groups’ (Lather 2001: 479; see also Kobayashi’s 2002 notion of “activist” scholarship). In terms of application, such collaboration enables the production of knowledge that is co-fabricated between researchers and researched. More importantly, however, collaboration also ‘takes us beneath surface appearances, disrupts the status quo, and unsettles both neutrality and taken-for-granted assumptions by bringing to light underlying and obscure operations of power and control’ (Madison 2005: 5, original emphasis). Simultaneously hermeneutic and emancipatory, such knowledge is popularly used to invoke social consciousness, criticism or change (Carspecken 1996).

By following a critical ethnographic approach, the data collection and analysis aim to unsettle normative academic discourses surrounding religious growth, and critically explore the expressions of Buddhist hegemony and Christian agency that lead to the contested practice of evangelism in Sri Lanka. Rather than perpetuating postcolonial, Western, or academic authority, the research is explicit in its aim to ‘create spaces and discourses of progressive politics’ (Skelton 2009: 401), alternatively referred to as a “space of engagement”, wherein ‘the world speaks back’ (Massey 2004: 80). Such a space is a ‘complex structure which one transforms’ (ibid.) throughout the research process, meaning from conceptualisation to the presentation of findings, I have
continually questioned why knowledge is being produced, whom is it being produced for, and how can it best be presented in order to avoid misrepresentation (Skelton 2009). This is important given the marginal position of evangelical groups operating in Sri Lanka vis a vis the structural dominance of Buddhism, as well as the normative power of Anglo-American academic discourse when explaining religious growth. Indeed, at various levels, pursuing a critical ethnographic approach helped necessitate criticism of, and resistance to, such normative assumptions. As Lather (2001) suggests above, a critical approach facilitates identification of how power is exercised in relation to cultural specificities and processes of social reproduction, and in doing so helped me to interrogate and problematise the location and determinants of agency in terms of religious determination, academic discourse and researcher positionality.

With any form of qualitative data collection or analysis, social reality is constructed and presented from the interpretive standpoint of the researcher. Such constructions are ‘more or less affected not only by subjective understandings (previous experiences, values, assumptions, hopes, fears and expectations), but also by the social position from which the social reality is perceived’ (Barker 2003: 23; see also Massey 2004: 77). Positionality is a key consideration for the critical ethnographer. Indeed, there is an apparent tendency for cross-cultural researchers to rely on latent colonial discourses and power relations in order to gain access to research subjects, data and legitimation. Problematising the validity of cross-cultural knowledge production, Raju (2002: 173) condemns the monolithic categories to which society and culture is reduced, with the “Third World” inherently underprivileged and oppressed and “the West” the ‘primary referent in theory and praxis’ (Twyman et al. 1999: 314; Mohammad 2002). The risk of reproducing existing transcultural power
relationships poses a significant challenge to empowered cross-cultural research. Raju goes on to suggest that a degree of scepticism is required in order to avoid the ‘privileged and self-indulgent focus on the self’ (Kobayashi 2003: 348) that can stem from analytical disclosures regarding the positionality of the researcher alone; practices viewed as an ‘academic luxury that we from the “Third World” cannot afford’ (Raju 2002: 173). In light of this, Raju posits that because identities are simultaneously plural and homogeneous, none can be constituted as the “other” ‘in terms of ‘being marginal to the text of dominant discourses or researchers’ privileged gaze’ (ibid. 175). In other words, the construction of difference upon which cross-cultural research is based is increasingly redundant in a postcolonial, postmodern world of nonfixity and cultural hybridity.

Taking the argument a step further, it has been suggested that the critical becomes the postcritical once positionality moves from being a descriptive variable, to one that is actively critiqued. In such cases objectivity is eschewed in place of ‘critical interpretation that exists beyond the intentions of the author to deobjectify, dereify, or demystify that studied’ (Noblit 2004: 198). A postcritical understanding of the researchers’ position should unearth (or, at the least, contextualise) their power, privileges and biases; inviting a critique of how the self studies, interprets and represents the other. It encourages reflexivity and accountability throughout the research process. In some instances the researcher may be proven wrong, inviting an “ethics of accountability” based on a self that is ‘accessible, transparent, and vulnerable to judgment and evaluation’ (Madison 2005: 8; Thomas 1993; Whatmore

16 More specifically, she argues that research in the Third World deals with more primal, sensory issues of hunger, poverty, inequality, population growth and so on, and therefore ‘necessitate[s] alliance for collective bargaining across the board despite the involvement of actors polarized along caste, class, gender, linguistic, ethnic and regional lines’ (Raju 2002: 176).
2004). Drawing on these ideas, I now go on to explore some of the research ethics associated with conducting cross-cultural research, examining institutional ethics and the more position-dependent “ethics of accountability” in turn.

3.4 Cross-cultural research ethics

For the duration of the fieldwork I was a Visiting Scholar at the Department of Sociology, University of Colombo. This not only assured me a residence visa and re-entry permit to Sri Lanka for a twelve-month period, but my affiliation with the University of Colombo (for which a research proposal was submitted) granted me a degree of legitimacy once in-country. This legitimacy was important, as a number of interviewees initially questioned the purpose and backing of my research (especially those that were cold called, although for others it was the affiliation that was the source of questioning), and the affiliation gave me the confidence to sample and request for interviews. In addition to the University of Colombo affiliation, research only commenced once NUS Institutional Review Board (Ethics) approval had been sought and obtained. Obtaining such approval necessitated the establishment of a number of regulatory checks and balances that were designed to ensure that no direct or indirect harm would arise from respondents participating in the research.

Evangelical Christians face persecution at the ideological, organisational and individual levels in Sri Lanka. In itself this provides the research imperative to better understand how and why such persecution occurs, yet simultaneously poses a number of problems in terms of trust, the recruitment of informants and the management of information. If mishandled, the information or opinions divulged during the
interviews could have a deleterious impact upon the individuals, organisations and communities involved in this study, and informants may have felt compelled to censor their comments in order to prevent reprisals on themselves or their organisation. In order to address this concern all informants were guaranteed anonymity and, where necessary, confidentiality at each stage of the research process (Berg 2007: 79). Various layers of abstraction are used to obscure the names, identities and locations of organisations when presenting interview findings (see below). Moreover, because this research is committed to the emotional and physical wellbeing of all informants, it was made clear that withdrawal from the research process was permissible at any time, and in doing so all record of participation in the study would be destroyed immediately. All respondents were given my contact details (Sri Lanka and Singapore telephone numbers and two email addresses), meaning I was, and remain, accessible. Finally as the building of trust and rapport directly impinged the quality of data produced, there was an emphasis throughout on relationship building, including various attempts to socialise with informants before, during and after the data collection process.

Notwithstanding the importance of such ethical checks and balances, there are a number of (often unquantifiable) ethical questions that any ethnographer ‘engaging the worlds and meanings of Others’ must address (Madison 2005: 4). Below I raise and discuss some of the problems associated with such institutional ethical guidelines, and how sensitivity towards my positionality as a researcher and the ensuing “ethics of accountability” helped to circumvent some of the potential risks associated with the research.
3.4.1 Problematising institutional ethics

The ethics associated with obtaining Institutional Review Board approval serve to define and instil ethical best practices and, in doing so, reduce the risk that respondents are caused harm by participating in the research. That being said, the ethical guidelines imposed by institutions often exist in a state of tension with the 'practical application of ethical principles in real-world research situations and decision making' (Manzo and Brightbill 2007: 33). Put differently, institutions seek to establish ethical best practices, which often overlook, or even contradict, ethical problems that only surface once fieldwork commences and ethics begin to be “practiced”. This has been variously referred to as the “institutionalisation”, “bureaucratisation” or “corporatisation” of academic practice, and stems from the view that ‘researchers seem increasingly subject to a restrictive, inflexible and top-down view of what ‘ethics’ should be, via the codes of human subject panels which we are expected to adhere to’ (Cahill et al. 2007: 307, original emphasis; Elwood 2007; Manzo and Brightbill 2007). In this sense, therefore, institutional ethics are enforced from above, according to a one-size-fits-all framework.

Recognising and embracing the positionality/ies of the researcher can enable, inhibit or simply change the preconditions for what constitutes “ethical” research practice. For example, Hopkins (2007) examines how multiple positionalities and different understandings of what constitutes ethical practice has affected his research with young Muslim men. Focussing on the ‘politics of position’ (Smith 1993: 305), he shows how a consideration of the similarities and differences between the researcher and participants can lead to an understanding of the ‘multiple, interweaving and
intersecting ways in which our various positionalities and identities are revealed, negotiated and managed in research encounters’ (Hopkins 2007: 388). Despite differences in religion and ethnicity, the similarities Hopkins shared with his participants were numerous (e.g. speaking with a Scottish accent, being raised in an urban setting, and attending one of Scotland’s largest multi-racial secondary schools), and facilitated ‘alliance formation’ (Harvey 1996: 360) and the establishment of rapport. In turn such rapport eroded the cultural boundaries assumed by the positional divide that separated researcher from participant, making the negotiation of ethical issues less problematic than may otherwise be expected during cross-cultural research.

Developing the idea that positionality can have an important bearing upon research ethics, Sultana (2007) suggests that in order to undertake ethical research, greater attention must be paid to issues of reflexivity and power relations in the field. Reflexivity in particular is necessary to situate research and knowledge production in order to ensure the maintenance of ethical commitments and the serving of the ‘democratic, practical ethos of action research’ (Reason and Bradbury 2006: 7). More often than not, in order to remain reflexive, researchers must realise a commitment to research relationships based on mutual respect, rather than the strict codes defined by the institution. Sultana describes how, as an “elite”/urban Bangladeshi woman conducting research in rural villages in Bangladesh whilst representing an American university (and thus susceptible to Western institutional ethical codes), in the field she had to grapple with a range of ethical concerns on a daily basis. Whether it was the negotiation of insider/outsider status in the village, ‘othering’ by male policy makers or the socio-cultural transgressions associated with her embodied presence (e.g.
wearing trainers and having short hair), she found herself adopting multiple positionalities and having to negotiate her ethical “best” practices continually. Thus ‘positionality and subjectivity are tempered both spatially and temporally, and are unstable and not fixed… dynamics change with context, and the insider-outsider boundary gets blurred’ (Sultana 2007: 382). Below I examine in more detail three different facets of researcher reflexivity: positionality, personality and performativity.

3.4.2 Positionality, personality, performativity: a triumvirate of researcher reflexivity

Being a young white male professing no religious belief, I had to interact with, and represent the views of people that are of a different ethnicity (i.e. Sinhalese and Tamils), religion (i.e. Christians, Buddhists and Hindus) and age. Whilst any position will influence ‘what variables [a]re included or excluded in the collection or categorization of data’ (Basch et al. 1994: 15), the fact that my position could have affected access to churches and interview subjects, the building of rapport, censoring of comments, or augment the perceived cultural difference between researcher and researched (Sidaway 1992) means it warrants closer attention. As I discuss in more detail below, given the contested nature of Christianity in Sri Lanka, alongside the critical ethnographers’ aversion to “domestication” (which can compromise the validity of “critical” research – see Madison 2005: 6), I believe my reflexivity is no less problematic than that of a Christian- or Buddhist-affiliated researcher.

In the first instance, the fact that I am a white researcher from the UK granted me unfettered access to a range of stakeholders. This could be for a number of reasons,
not least the genuine willingness to assist in an “outsider’s” research project that directly implicates their country (Sri Lanka) and community (Christian/Buddhist), subservience to foreigners (referred to on pages 257-8 as the “colonial mentality”), or the perception that I could connect them with overseas evangelicals (especially, donors). In light of this, access was often granted without a formal introduction (provided by snowball sampling, for example), enabling me to exert a greater degree of control over who was contacted and how the research progressed. Indeed, as the head of one of the country’s mainline churches told me: “I have no problem that this [interview] is being recorded because you are from UK; if you are from Asia I would be a little more concerned because there is already a little religious tension in Sri Lanka… me being the head of the church, if I am misquoted in any way, the whole church will be affected” (Mainline Church, Colombo – see page 86 for legend).

Although it is not explained why he would be a “little more concerned” if I were from an Asian country, the fact that he raised such an issue without being prompted suggests that physical and cultural distance (and difference) can be an enabler of trust when studying religious issues that are of a sensitive nature. Detachment from the “religious tension in Sri Lanka” obviates the fear of being “misquoted in any way”, and reveals the hitherto under-appreciated value of difference, instead of sameness.

In the second instance, most respondents assumed I was a Christian researcher (see Barker 2003: 9-10), with the fact that I am an atheist producing mixed reactions. For some, my religious positionality made no difference, for others it rendered me less trustworthy and more likely to have an “agenda” (in one instance, an informant refused to allow the interview to be recorded on these grounds), whereas for most it provided an opportunity for proselytisation. In the last instance, this formed an
important part of the research experience by enabling me to gain an appreciation of
different proselytisation strategies (from the irritatingly Socratic, to the blindingly
directive), and, if anything, reinforced my own (non-) religious standpoint. In a lot of
cases my religious positionality was assumed. I would be referred to as “brother”, and
sometimes be asked to pray with, or for, a church or person\(^{17}\). That said, it should also
be noted that, whilst I am an atheist by choice, I have been brought up within the
Christian context of the UK. As a result, Christian values have had an indelible
impact upon my own moral outlook and, additionally, the way I interacted with my
interviewees.

In the third instance my youth, like my racial characteristics, diffused a lot of
(unnecessary) suspicion pertaining to my research objectives, and personal
motivations. Despite being 26 during the time fieldwork was conducted, many
informants asked how old I was, with most guessing that I was in my late teens/early
twenties. As a result, many informants saw me as less “threatening” than a more aged
researcher. This served to lessen (if not nullify) the power distance established by my
race, and also encouraged me to be more forthright during interviews. Finally, whilst
my gender did not appear to present much of an issue regarding researcher
positionality, this is largely due to the fact that my interview sample was
overwhelmingly male (see page 83). In itself, this reflects the male-dominated nature
of religious leadership in Sri Lanka. However, should more females have been
interviewed, gender would have undoubtedly played a more salient role in influencing
the research process and outcomes.

\(^{17}\) In such instances, I would thank the interviewees for participating in the research, and wish them
well for the future. Although not a prayer, such speeches seemed to meet the request in a satisfactory
way.
Whilst differences in positionality can problematise the legitimacy of knowledge production and representation, a critical ethnographic approach can help ‘attend to the social and political processes that struggle against and work to unsettle the architecture of domination established through imperialism’ (Jacobs 1996: 161). Central to this approach is, as suggested by the examples above, the realisation that identities, positions and power relations exist in a constant state of interplay and contestation, and go beyond primordial categories of race, ethnicity or gender. Instead, the discursive formations of a critical ethnographic perspective help ‘create a complex field of values, meanings and practices’ (ibid. 13) that have different meanings in different contexts and can ultimately be used to close the gap between knowledge producers (i.e. researchers) and “native informants” (i.e. researched) (Spivak 1999; Skelton 2002; Butz and Besio 2004). Indeed, Moser (2008) has recently brought attention to the “profound” role of personality in shaping research processes and outcomes, showing how the “meta-categories” of researcher positionality soon became less important to the research participants than the interpersonal skills, or the personality, of the researcher. It is argued that an understanding of personality complements that of positionality, with both contributing to the formation or erosion of power relations during the fieldwork process. Taking Moser’s elaboration one-step further, I argue that performativity, along with positionality and personality, completes what I understand to be a triumvirate of researcher reflexivity.

As the research progressed, I found myself enforcing or disrupting my positionality through the actions that I performed. Two instances in Colombo reveal what I mean by this. One, during a tour of the premises of a Christian NGO, I came across an overflowing toilet cistern located in one of the outdoor toilet blocks. My guide, the
leader of the organisation, was only a couple of years older than me and we had, over
the course of several meetings spanning two years, become friends. Whilst the fault
was too big to ignore, he was unable to fix it and began asking for someone to come
and help. By removing the lid of the cistern and fiddling around with the stopcock
(the extent of my plumbing skills), I soon managed to stop the water from
overflowing. Two, after an interview with the founder and assistant pastor of an
evangelical church, I requested a copy of a letter I was shown during the interview,
which documented a legal tussle the church was facing with the Urban Development
Authority (UDA) over its expansion plans. The founder’s office had a relatively new
scanner and printer, and he readily agreed to my request. After a few minutes spent
fumbling around with it, neither he nor the assistant pastor could get the machine to
work and, whilst calling for assistance, I tried to help and managed to fix the problem
immediately.

In both instances I “performed”, albeit briefly, a certain role that either challenged or
enforced my positionality. In the first instance my ability to fix a toilet – a basic,
perhaps even slightly degrading skill – seemed to destabilise the power relation
between myself and my guide by surprising him regarding my ability to perform
mundane, dirty jobs. According to Thomas (1993: 9), this performance is an example
of critical ethnography in practice, which involves taking ‘seemingly mundane events,
even repulsive ones, and reproduc[ing] them in a way that exposes broader social
processes of control, taming, power imbalance, and the symbolic mechanisms that
impose one set of preferred meanings or behaviors over others’. In the second
instance, however, I was painfully aware of the “power imbalance” that was enforced
by my performance, as my actions reflected a notion of the technologically-savvy
Westerners showing the less technologically-literate Sri Lankan how to use their own piece of equipment. My performativity served to destabilise (in the first instance) and enforce (in the second) my positionality, causing me to become more sensitised thereafter to the effect that my actions (and not just my appearance, attributes, or words) had on the reflexive positioning of the self in relation to the other.

Sensitivity towards researcher positionality, personality and performativity is in keeping with the postmodern, anti-essentialist agenda of critical ethnography. The crossing of cultural boundaries suggests that the traditional binaries of insider/outsider and sameness/difference (those derided by Raju 2002 above) give way to more dynamic spaces of “betweenness” that are predicated less on positionality per se, and more on how such a position is communicated and negotiated during the course of the research process. Such spaces of betweenness see the researcher as neither connected nor disconnected from research subjects, but instead engaged in a constant state of (re)negotiation (Nast 1994). One outcome of (re)negotiation is the creation of new, and hopefully effective, spaces of exchange around the researcher and participant, new opportunities for knowledge production (specifically for Sri Lanka to evolve from being a fertile ground of empiricism to an ‘arena for the production of theory’ – Skelton 2009: 402), and the ensuing development of grounded theories (Glaser and Strauss 1967), which are presented in the empirical chapters that follow.

3.5 Methods

The research is based on qualitative data that were collected in Sri Lanka throughout 2010-11. 106 in-depth interviews were conducted in eight locations across the island
with a variety of stakeholders, representing a variety of churches and parachurch organisations, Christian NGOs, representatives of Buddhist and Hindu organisations, and government bodies. Most interviews were with “elites” (i.e. those who play an instructive role in organisational decision-making), who were responsible for formulating and implementing strategies of evangelism, or imposing regulations or restrictions on minority groups. In addition, approximately a dozen ethnographic-style observations were made of worship and healing services, social ministries, and evangelical outreach events. Given the need to understand the complexities and subtleties of evangelical Christian growth in Sri Lanka, a qualitative methodological approach is warranted.

Existing, often sociological, studies of inter-religious relations, tension and conflict are often predicated on quantitative methodologies that are used to generate all-encompassing theorisations (see Yang 2006; Wuthnow 2011). Nuance is, as a result, relegated to the periphery of understanding, along with more qualitative explanations. Yet given, for example, Fox’s (2000: 436) assertion that ‘attacks on religious worldviews is a phenomenon that is very difficult to measure… an endeavor that is ill suited to the types of data collection and analyses performed here [i.e. quantitative regression analyses]’, qualitative understandings of religious change and conflict are needed, but lacking. More specifically, a qualitative approach presents a significant departure from normative substantiations of religious economy, which tend to be almost wholly deductive, and based on large-scale datasets derived from censuses and surveys. The methodological and theoretical exclusivity upon which existing theories are grounded have been strongly criticised for ignoring the value of qualitative understandings of religion derived from induction, narratives and ethnography (see
Ammerman 1997; Neitz and Mueser 1997; Bruce 1999). In addition, the usage of large-scale datasets in countries like Sri Lanka is inherently problematic, not least because of the unwillingness of evangelical groups to accurately report numerical measures of competitiveness (i.e. growth) to the relevant authorities, and the relative lack of resources and technical training needed to generate academically robust datasets within the developing world.

3.5.1 Sampling technique

The fieldwork followed a strong organisational path, with interviews being conducted (almost exclusively) with churches, parachurch organisations, Christian NGOs and some Buddhist and Hindu organisations and government representatives (see Table 2, below). In particular, the Buddhist perspectives included were with key proponents (and architects) of the proposed anti-conversion legislation. The deviation from new paradigm emphases on “congregational studies” (Woodhead 2009) is intentional and necessary, given the sensitivity surrounding evangelical Christian groups in Sri Lanka, and the need to understand the motivations and behaviours of those responsible for implementing organisational strategies of growth. Organisations varying in size, longevity, location, denomination and structure were all included, with no single organisational characteristic being (intentionally) privileged over others. That said, the emphasis on snowball sampling meant that organisations embedded within large, island-wide, networks were more likely to be sampled than other, more independent organisations. That is not to say that independent organisations were not included in the research; they were, albeit to a lesser extent. As a result, churches representing the country’s largest evangelical denominations, such
as the Assemblies of God and Foursquare, were more easily included. The
decentralised nature of such networks does, however, discourage homogeneity
(despite having such a denominational covering), meaning a variety of organisational
nuances were still captured.

Snowball sampling was carried out in two ways: first at the local level, and second at
the trans-local level. All sampling began in Colombo, where my initial group of
contacts was based. These contacts were initiated by email in 2009 and consolidated
and expanded during short, preliminary trips to Sri Lanka in 2009 and 2010. By the
time research commenced in August 2010, the first two weeks of interviews had
already been arranged. Thereafter, within Colombo, sampling was relatively easy, and
was a mixture of snowballing and cold calling. Given the (relatively) high density of
evangelical organisations in Colombo, and their (relatively) more overt expressions of
religious identity, cold calling was a straightforward process. Many organisations had
an online presence from which a contact telephone number could easily be obtained;
some urban evangelical churches had visible signboards outside their premises that
included contact details, whereas others were listed in telephone directories or in the
newsletters and evangelical literature of more established churches. I was, and still
am, surprised by the very high success rate when cold-calling organisations. The first
time I telephoned the Methodist church, for instance, I managed to speak to, and
arrange an interview with, the President without any problems. I attribute this largely
to my positionality as a white researcher, as discussed above. With just one exception,
nobody declined to be interviewed on the basis that they disapproved, or were not
otherwise comfortable with participating in the research.
To sample at the trans-local level, I relied heavily on my Colombo-based contacts to get started. Colombo is the primary nodal point of evangelical networks at the national (and international) scale, with provincial centres such as Galle (Southern Province), Kandy and Nuwara Eliya (Central), Vavuniya (Northern) and Trincomalee (Eastern) comprising some of the secondary nodes. The organisation of evangelical churches into networks greatly facilitated the trans-local snowballing technique.

Given that Colombo is the point at which most of these networks converge, I found that by building strong relationships with the Colombo-based leaders (or “gatekeepers”) of evangelical church networks and denominations, they would readily grant me access to their constituent churches around the island. Working down the sampling hierarchy (i.e. from the primary node of Colombo, to the secondary provincial nodes, to rural villages) also reflects a form of “theoretical sampling” (Glaser and Strauss 1967), whereby ideas were formed in the primary and secondary nodes, and then tested in the rural villages. Before arriving at a new location, I would typically be in contact with three or four local churches, and from that starting point I was able to repeat the process of local sampling. At the local level, evangelical churches are organised into pastor’s fellowships, access to which catalysed the snowballing process. Indeed, outside of Colombo, I found myself relying on a snowballing strategy, largely because of the more subdued expressions of Christian identity, and the need for a formal introduction in order to allay any suspicions regarding the research. Even with a formal introduction, outside of Colombo I found myself having to work harder to gain the trust of my informants by revealing whom else I had interviewed, both in Colombo and the locality. Notwithstanding, the number of interviews I managed to conduct over the course of nine weeks is
testament to the success of this progressive sampling technique, with every respondent (without exception) assisting with the sampling if asked to do so.

3.5.2 In-depth interviews

In line with the critical ethnographic approach outlined above, in-depth interviews were the most effective way of starting a ‘deep and abiding dialogue’ (Madison 2005: 9) with informants. Such a dialogue necessitated the construction of substantial and accurate meanings based on open and ongoing ‘question, debate, and challenge’ (ibid.). My positionality as a researcher (particularly regarding religion), previously discussed, catalysed such dialogue, especially the questioning of particular biblical (or, more generally, theological) rationale for certain actions and opinions. A variety of perspectives (including my own) were necessary, and useful, given that ‘not only will people perceive… [evangelical Christianity] from different perspectives, they will also describe and, perhaps, explain… [it] in different ways. Consciously or unconsciously, they will select from among the features presented to them’ (Barker 2003: 8, original emphasis). Incorporating a range of informants – from the leaders of evangelical churches, to Christian university students, village converts, international missionaries and Buddhist monks – enabled me to account for differing interpretations and experiences of the spatial practices of evangelical Christianity in Sri Lanka.

Overall, the interviews were strongly biased towards elites, that is, the leaders of evangelical organisations. This bias was partly intentional, and partly a function of Sri Lankan hierarchies of power. My intention for the research is to understand how
evangelical groups grow in Sri Lanka, and elites are, in my opinion, best positioned to create such an understanding, given their strategic role in organisations, their macro-level understanding and micro-level experiences, and, more pragmatically speaking, their ability to speak and understand English. This was compounded by the realisation as soon as I started the research that, even if I had wanted to speak to less senior personnel, I would have had trouble doing so. Sri Lankan hierarchies of power render the voices of senior figures more “accurate” or “important” (or not, as the case sometimes was) than their more junior counterparts, and my insistence to speak with anyone other than the leadership would likely have been met with suspicion and refusal. Whilst this was not true in all cases, in many it was. The privileging of elites was also at the expense of the layperson: the recipient of evangelical outreach. Whilst layperson perspectives are undeniably important, and definitely deserve further investigation (Chapter 8 considers in more detail how they could contribute to an understanding of evangelical growth), they fall outside the scope of the thesis. Finally, there was a very strong gender bias, with all but three of the interviews being with men (97.2%). Such a bias is reflective of religious leadership in Sri Lanka as a whole, and is not, therefore, a function of any inconsistencies in the sampling strategy.

The organisation of evangelical churches into networks, as described in the preceding section, also enabled me to scale-up or scale-down the interviews with relative ease. For example, the pastor of a typical evangelical church would be able to speak from three, sometimes four, scalar viewpoints. One, at the most micro-level would be the day-to-day actions, experiences and problems faced by the pastor’s individual church. Two, each church would usually be part of a pastor’s fellowship, consisting of a group of territorially defined evangelical pastors (e.g. those working in a given
district, or a subset of a district) that would meet regularly (usually once a month) for prayer, knowledge sharing and support. This invariably granted each pastor a more regional purview of evangelical activity, even those from the smallest, most independent, churches. Three, each church would be part of an evangelical “denomination”, or a national-scale church planting movement, usually, but not always, headquartered in Colombo\textsuperscript{18}. Such alliances also precipitated more formalised, yet irregular, meetings, training sessions and support networks that granted each pastor a more national purview of evangelical activity. Four, at the most macro-level, pastors may have international exposure, granted via overseas sponsorship, or overseas training (of which The Haggai Institute in Singapore featured prominently, as did Indian, Singaporean and South Korean theological colleges). Such exposure granted evangelical pastors an international purview, enabling them to interpret evangelical Christianity in Sri Lankan relative to that found in other countries. Such a multi-scalar approach to understanding organisational behaviour accords with Kong’s (2001) call for the analysis of religious phenomena to traverse, and transcend, scale.

Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured, open-ended approach. Whilst the use of an interview schedule (see Appendix 2) ensured a broad degree of consistency across all interviews, each would develop its own direction, appropriate to the semi-structured approach. This granted informants a degree of control over how the conversation developed, and was ultimately successful in encouraging them to “open up”. Interviews lasted, on average, one hour. Some were significantly longer, others shorter. Nearly all interviews were conducted at organisational premises, or at the

\textsuperscript{18} I also came across church planting movements that focussed specifically on a given region or province, such as the Hill Country, or the South.
homes of the informants (for the pastors of house churches, the boundary between the two is indistinguishable). The vast majority of interviews were conducted in English. For those that were conducted in Sinhala or Tamil, a translator was used. In all instances it was the prerogative of the informant to assign a translator, usually a close friend or colleague. This not only aided the building of rapport and trust, but also aided the process of cross-cultural knowledge production as it placed the respondent in a position of relative power, control and comfort vis a vis the researcher (see Twyman et al. 1999). Indeed, sensitivity surrounding evangelical activity and the often-disproportionate reactions to evangelism meant that informants would have likely been unwilling to disclose their evangelical practices to unknown, third party translators (see Hopkins 2007). I, on the other hand, was privileged insofar as my positionality meant that I was detached enough from the domestic setting to be outside of the local structures of power and influence (and corruption), yet suitably embedded within evangelical networks (through my strong contacts with the evangelical leadership at the national and local levels) to ensure my own legitimacy as a researcher.

Consent was obtained verbally, and recorded before each interview commenced. All except two interviews were recorded; for these two anomalies (who rejected the formality associated with recording, deeming it “unnecessary”), detailed notes were taken instead. Upon completion of the interview, or as soon as possible thereafter, all digital data (including voice recordings and photographs) were uploaded onto a laptop computer and backed up using an external hard drive. Whilst I initially attempted to transcribe the interview data as it was collected, I quickly realised that my time was far better spent sampling and organising my schedule of interviews and visits for the
coming days. This ensured that my in-country productivity was maximised. All interviews were fully transcribed as soon as possible upon returning to Singapore. As explained above, in order to treat the opinions and identities of the research participants with utmost confidentiality (important given the acts of persecution such individuals have experienced, and the often illicit nature of evangelical competition), the interview data is presented with a healthy degree of abstraction. All names (even pseudonyms) of individuals and organisations, and specific locational identifiers have been omitted; what remains is an acronym to signify the type of organisation the respondent represents (Evangelical Church, Evangelical Parachurch, Christian NGO, Christian Convert, Mainline Church, Buddhist Organisation, Urban Development Authority), and a locational identifier at the district level: Colombo (Western Province); Galle, Matara, Hambantota (Southern); Kandy, Nuwara Eliya (Central); Vavuniya (Northern); Trincomalee (Eastern) (see Table 2 and Figure 2, below). Quotations included in the thesis were selected based on how representative they are of broader opinion, and on clarity of expression.

Table 2 provides a top-level overview of the interview sample by location and organisation type.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Province</th>
<th>District</th>
<th>Evangelical Church</th>
<th>Evangelical Parachurch</th>
<th>Evangelical Other (e.g. NGO, convert)</th>
<th>Mainline Christian</th>
<th>Buddhist</th>
<th>Hindu</th>
<th>Government</th>
<th>Total District</th>
<th>Total Province</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Western</td>
<td>Colombo</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>5*</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>53 (50%)</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>12 (11.3%)</td>
<td>20 (18.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Matara/Hambantota</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8 (7.5%)</td>
<td>20 (18.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central</td>
<td>Kandy</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2*</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8 (7.5%)</td>
<td>20 (18.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nuwara Eliya</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>12 (11.3%)</td>
<td>20 (18.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern</td>
<td>Vavuniya</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3*</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8 (7.5%)</td>
<td>8 (7.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eastern</td>
<td>Trincomalee</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5 (4.7%)</td>
<td>5 (4.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>48</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>106 (100%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Interview sample by location (province/district) and organisation type
(Repeat interviews are not reflected in the table).

* Some of these interviews were more like focus groups, including up to five persons. For the purposes of this table, a focus group is only represented here as one interview, meaning the true number of informants included in the study is slightly suppressed. For such focus groups, the conversation was often dominated by just one person (usually the most “senior”, or the most fluent in English). Hence, I have only listed them as one interview.

† Includes the Christian (i.e. Dutch) Reformed and Methodist Churches, and the Salvation Army, all of which also fall under the “Evangelical Church” category. I have kept them separate, as they are atypical of many of the other evangelical churches, which tend to be smaller, less institutionalised and more autonomous than their mainline counterparts.
Table 2 shows that 45.3% of all interviews conducted were with representatives of evangelical churches, and 72.6% with evangelicals across all organisational categories. Such bias is intentional, given the need to understand as well as possible the strategies and outcomes of evangelism that form the backbone of this research. Moreover, the concentration of evangelical activity in Colombo accounts for its dominance in interview location (50%), followed by the Southern and Central Provinces (18.8% each). Relatively fewer interviews were conducted in the Northern (7.5%) and Eastern (4.7%) Provinces for reasons outlined below. What Table 2 does not reflect are the supplementary data sources that were used to complement the interview data. These included site visits, document verification and event attendance, collectively referred to as “observations”.

3.5.3 Observations

Observations complemented the interview data, and helped to ground the study in the lived reality of evangelical space. The necessity of observing the spatial practices and determinants of evangelical organisations is that it is ‘probably the only way in which we could ever understand the reality of religion as practised by ordinary individuals’ (Stringer 2008: 19). Observing the performative aspect of evangelism helped to build an understanding of how organisations introduced and enforced strategies of evangelism through their spatial practices. The primary form of observation (besides those of local religious landscapes and iconography) was evangelical worship services, which ranged from attending one of Colombo’s megachurches (see Figures 3 and 4, below) to numerous house church services and prayer meetings located in Nuwara Eliya’s estate lines (see Figures 7 and 8, below – also Martin 1990: 185-204).
Whilst attending “formal” church services (i.e. those held in registered church buildings) was a straightforward, and often fairly impersonal, process, attending a house church was often predicated on being invited by the pastor responsible for conducting the service. In Nuwara Eliya, where I attended nearly ten such services, this involved long, precarious, and often very uncomfortable, rides on the back of a motorbike along the rocky paths that have been carved through the region’s tea estates. Without the willingness of the pastors to chaperone me in such a way, accessing the estate lines (explained below – see Figure 7) would have been impossible. For all services, I positioned myself at the back or side of the room so that my presence would provide as little unnecessary disruption as possible. Whilst for megachurch services this was easily achieved, for house church services (which ranged from five to approximately fifty people), the disruption caused by my attendance was unavoidable (especially seeing as I was often formally introduced by the pastor in charge). Nevertheless, I remained a non-participatory observer of the proceedings – something that was made possible by the fact that all house church services were in the vernacular.

In addition to church services and prayer meetings, I also spent time at the premises of Christian NGOs, especially those that focussed on youths and children through the provision of youth clubs, feeding centres, Montessori schools (and other educational facilities) and orphanages. Each interview also provided opportunity for observation; those conducted in churches enabled me to gain a snapshot of the day-to-day operations of evangelical churches. What adorned the walls, who interrupted the meeting (and with what news), what was displayed on tables, shelves, or cabinets, and other such banal information, was noted and often discussed during interviews, and
provided an innocuous means of gaining a deeper, more applied, understanding of evangelical strategies and motivations. Going beyond these more formalised spaces of evangelical activity, consideration was also given to those of a more informal, symbolic and ad hoc nature. The public display of Christian signs, banners or messages and informal networking that arises during Christian-Buddhist/Hindu interactions was observed. To clarify what I mean by “informal networking”, when walking between estate lines with a pastor in Nuwara Eliya, we encountered a Tamil/Hindu lady who had injured her foot and was therefore unable to work. During the course of the discussion, the pastor offered to pray for her, an offer that was refused on the grounds that it made her uncomfortable. This exchange is an example of informal networking, as it brings to light the often-opportunistic nature of Christian interaction, and the unease that it can create amongst non-Christians.

Finally, I also observed latent, and overt, forms of structural and direct resistance to the spaces within which evangelism occurs. Whereas structural resistance was discerned through an interpretation of the social landscape and/or built environment (e.g. the construction of Buddhist shrines or flying of flags in front of churches – see Chapter 6), direct resistance involved more everyday experiences, such as the playing of non-Christian music or Buddhist chanting during services. Observations therefore served to expose both how evangelical organisations use space to evangelise (thus resisting the dominant Buddhist order), and how evangelism is resisted through the counter-use and counter-meaning of space. For all observations, photographs and field notes were taken and analysed. As the observational part of the research was ongoing, and very unstructured, it is difficult, and disingenuous to present it in tabular
format. Instead, I have absorbed the observational data into the discussion where necessary in order to illustrate certain ideas or arguments more clearly.

3.6 Research sites

Fieldwork was conducted in eight districts and five provinces located throughout the island: Colombo (Western Province); Galle, Matara, Hambantota (Southern); Kandy, Nuwara Eliya (Central); Vavuniya (Northern); and Trincomalee (Eastern). Whilst most of the fieldwork was conducted in Colombo (where, as previously discussed, evangelical groups are concentrated and networks of island-wide evangelical churches and outreach programmes co-ordinated), a range of structural contexts and expressions of Christian agency were captured. These included the Buddhist strongholds of the south (which was also badly affected by the 2004 Asian tsunami) and Kandy, to the impoverished tea estates of Nuwara Eliya, and post-war reconstruction in Vavuniya and Trincomalee. I am confident that these research sites capture the full gamut of evangelical agency and structural resistance experienced throughout the country. The only site I intended to visit, but was excluded from the study, was the town of Jaffna, located in the far north of the country. At the time of fieldwork, Jaffna was still relatively closed to foreigners, who required a letter of approval from the Ministry of Defence and were only allowed to fly into Jaffna from Colombo. In my evaluation of the situation, the time and cost of visiting Jaffna outweighed the benefits of including the site in the research. In addition, I was unwilling to jeopardise my work in the other sites, particularly the Central and Southern Provinces, where opportunities for sampling (especially outside of the
evangelical community) and observations were readily available, and subsequently elicited some of the richest data.

Field sites were selected based on coverage, and were decided during the Colombo stage of fieldwork. Being a country-level study of evangelical Christian growth, I actively sought field sites that covered the country’s territorial extremities, whilst also being representative of some of the different and variegated contexts in which evangelical churches operate throughout the island. Figure 2, below, highlights the eight districts in which I conducted research. Whilst the majority of research was conducted in the capital of each district, where churches are more clustered and therefore more amenable to sampling, in some areas (particularly in the Southern Province and Nuwara Eliya, where churches tend to be more spatially dispersed), I also conducted *ad hoc* interviews outside of the district capitals when necessary.
In order to gain an understanding of the characteristics and contextual nuances of the eight districts, they shall now be introduced at the provincial level.

### 3.6.1 Colombo and the Western Province

Colombo is Sri Lanka’s administrative capital, and is very much the engine of evangelical Christian growth in Sri Lanka (see Chapter 5). It has the largest number of
evangelical Christians (and, correspondingly, the largest number of evangelical churches) in the country, and is therefore the primary nodal point for the country’s evangelical community. In Colombo, the evangelical community is perceived to be strong, which is part testament to the congruity of Christianity and modernity (with Colombo being further along the path of modernity than any other Sri Lankan town or city), and part reflection of the diminished role of Buddhism in more urbane, and therefore less parochial, contexts. More affluent congregations mean churches are typically wealthier, and more financially stable and secure than their rural counterparts. The country’s largest evangelical denominations – such as the Assemblies of God and the Calvary Church – are highly visible, and have a well-established presence in Colombo. Represented by large and impressive buildings, both churches are two of the most recognisable symbols of the evangelical Christian community (see Figures 3 and 4, below). The People’s Church, for example, is Colombo’s (indeed, Sri Lanka’s) foremost evangelical church and flagship for the Assemblies of God, and can accommodate a congregation numbering in the thousands. On Sundays it operates a free bus service that ferries Colombo’s slum dwellers to and from the church, nullifying the obstacle of distance and cost of travel that prevents some Christians from attending church (a problem faced by many smaller churches). Its influence is also unsurpassed, with members of the congregation including government ministers and several high-ranking business executives. In this sense the People’s Church is a symbol of evangelical strength and embeddedness that visibly cuts across ethnic, economic, social and political divisions.
Figure 3: Inside the People’s Church, Colombo
One of the country’s two “megachurches”, the People’s Church attracts a large, and influential, following.
Figure 4: The external façade of the Calvary Church, Colombo. 
Along with the People’s Church, the Calvary Church is an evangelical Christian landmark in Sri Lanka.

A majority of time was spent in Colombo, and exactly 50% of the interview data are derived from Colombo-based informants. This was intentional, as Colombo contains not only the highest density of evangelical churches in the country, but also the
biggest range of organisations that I could approach, which explains why it is the most heterogeneous sampling site. Pragmatically speaking, it was also easiest to sample in Colombo, as informants tended to be more visible, easily contactable (either via phone or email) and readily interviewed (i.e. standards of English are higher, and travelling distances lower, making them more accessible). As previously discussed, Colombo was also the starting point for nation-wide snowball sampling, meaning the development of strong and plentiful contacts in Colombo made the process of sampling in other areas noticeably easier.

3.6.2 The Southern Province

The Southern Province, which is made up of the districts of Galle, Matara and Hambantota, is the epicentre of Christian-Buddhist tensions, and the engine of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism. It is defined by ethnic and religious homogeneity and is where fundamentalist Buddhist rhetoric is fomented, and enacted. As a result, it is a difficult place for evangelical churches to establish themselves and grow, with strategies of evangelism being longer-term and more reactive than elsewhere in the country. Churches are typically dispersed (except in the coastal towns of Galle and Matara, where research was primarily conducted), and the distances between them great. Attacks against southern-based churches are typically more frequent and violent than elsewhere. The southern coastline is a popular tourist destination, and is heavily populated with resorts, bars and hotels. Pastors labelled tourist “hotspots” – Hikkaduwa, Galle Fort and Unawatuna, for example – as being ridden with “sin” and plagued by alcohol, drugs, prostitution and homosexuality. This stands in contrast to the interior, which is populated with small towns and villages, and is believed to be a
bastion of Sinhala-Buddhist culture and values. The 2004 Asian tsunami severely affected the southern coastal region, causing widespread upheaval. Responses from the international and domestic evangelical communities were swift and decisive, and brought to the surface many of the issues that galvanise Christian-Buddhist tensions. These issues are covered in more detail in the ensuing chapters. Notably, the tsunami caused a resurgence in Buddhist religiosity in many southern coastal towns, with such resurgence being manifested in the recent (re)construction of Buddhist statues and shrines (see Figure 5, below).
Figure 5: A sign of Buddhist religiosity in Galle?
Statues like this are abundantly visible in Galle’s town centre, although Christian sceptics often question the motivations behind their construction (see Chapter 6).

My time in the Southern Province was split almost equally among churches located in the coastal towns, and those in the interior. The long distances I had to travel in order to reach churches (especially those located in the interior) meant that a whole day would typically be spent visiting just one church. Interviews were usually longer,
more informal (as they were often conducted after I had eaten lunch with my informants, during which time rapport was quickly and easily built) and often had various other informants dropping in and out to add opinions, stories or thoughts. This was in contradistinction to the two or three interviews I would conduct per day in areas where evangelical activity tended to be more concentrated (and/or accessible), such as Colombo and the Central Province. As a result, the research I conducted in the Southern Province was more participatory than elsewhere, and often elicited more multi-layered responses that incorporated aspects of religion, culture, history and personal narrative. Language, and access to translators, was a more common problem in the Southern Province than it was in Colombo and the Central Province, which served to slightly restrict the sampling process.

3.6.3 The Central Province

A cooler climate, undulating terrain and a highly stratified population define the Central Province. Research was conducted in two of the province’s three districts: Kandy and Nuwara Eliya. Kandy is the cultural heart of Buddhism, and was the last capital city of the Sri Lankan kings. Currently the administrative capital of the Central Province and UNESCO world heritage site since 1988, it is home to the ancient Temple of the Tooth Relic (causing one interviewee to describe Kandy as “the Vatican of Buddhism” – see Figure 6, below), and the annual Esala Perahera (“The Festival of the Tooth”). Like the coastal towns of the Southern Province, Kandy’s popularity as a tourist destination, not to mention its strong Buddhist heritage, has also rendered it a place of “sin” in the Christian imagination, one that presents both problems and opportunities for the city’s evangelical community. Whilst the
opportunities are self-evident and often couched in the language of salvation and moral upliftment, the problems provide more interesting insights into how pastors conveniently appropriate local discourses as justification of action. Anecdotal evidence of evangelical pastors committing adultery, drinking alcohol, appropriating church funds for personal use and falling out with other pastors (leading to church fission, which is covered in Chapter 6) are rife, and attributed to, even reflective of, the power of “sin” in Kandy.
Figure 6: Kandy – “the Vatican of Buddhism” – at dusk

In the background, on top of the hill, is the Bihiravokanda Buddha statue, which overlooks the city, and is a constant reminder of Buddhism’s “foremost place”, according to the Sri Lankan Constitution.

Whilst Kandy is the administrative capital of the Central Province, Nuwara Eliya is the epicentre of Sri Lanka’s tea producing industry. Nuwara Eliya’s town centre features a mix of Sinhala businesspeople and Tamil labourers, whereas the surrounding tea estates are homogeneously Tamil-Hindu, and are populated by tea
planters and pluckers. Brought to Sri Lanka by the British from Southern India as indentured labourers during the colonial epoch, such “Hill Country Tamils” (whose more immediate ancestral ties with India render them qualitatively different from the Tamils living in the Northern and Eastern Provinces) work on the country’s tea estates and live in close-knit, yet often isolated communities. Hinduism prevails, and is becoming increasingly belligerent in resisting Christian proselytism. This echoes the problems faced by pastors in the Southern Province, where Buddhism dominates.

Estate workers are housed in “estate lines” (see Figures 7 and 8, below); rows of squalid housing, arranged along terraces that are cramped and unhygienic, and have led to the formation of close-knit communities that are resistant to change. Without a motorcycle, it can take hours to walk from an estate line to a main road in order to catch a bus into Nuwara Eliya or any other town, making each estate line, and each estate, a highly self-sufficient, yet often introverted, community.
Figure 7: An estate line in Nuwara Eliya

Note the khovil (Hindu temple) to the left of the picture; the undulating terrain causes tight spatial clustering, meaning Christians and Hindus live, and worship, cheek by jowl.
Figure 8: Inside the estate lines

Conditions are typically cramped and squalid, with multiple family members sharing one room; communal cooking and bathing facilities are shared with neighbours.

My time in the Central Province was split equally between Kandy and Nuwara Eliya.

The tight spatial clustering of evangelical churches and activities caused by the terrain catalyses the interactions between pastors and their congregations, between churches
and between religions, and in Nuwara Eliya enabled multiple observations to be made of house church services and prayer meetings. In Kandy, a number of interviews were conducted with Buddhists who represented organisations proclaiming an anti-Christian/conversion stance, alongside the focus on evangelical organisations. In Nuwara Eliya, interviews with local evangelical representatives were complemented by insights gained from an American Christian missionary, whose outsider perspective on Christianity in Sri Lanka proved to be invaluable.

3.6.4 The Northern and Eastern Provinces

The Northern and Eastern provinces are home to the country’s largest ethnic minority group: the Tamils. Being the frontline of the three decade long civil war, they are sites of political degradation and are now populated with refugee camps, landmines and resettlement villages. Vavuniya is primarily a logistics hub, bustling with NGOs and relief workers delivering aid and other supplies throughout the Vanni region (an area in the north of Sri Lanka that encompasses the districts of Mannar, Mullaitivu and Vavuniya). There is also a strong military presence, with the Sri Lankan Air Force operating a large base along one of the main approach roads to Vavuniya town. The region is one of change and impermanence, where decades of fighting have resulted in thousands of people being dispossessed, killed or relocated. Slowly, normalcy is being restored. New resettlement villages are being built, families are regrouping, and Christian groups are seizing opportunities to evangelise and establish themselves before the region fully stabilises. Here, religion and relief operate in conjunction with each other; a dynamic that is explored in Chapter 4.
In Trincomalee, the situation is slightly different. Being a strategic port with a rich religious history, it has, over recent years, been occupied by both LTTE and government forces. Like the coastal towns of the Southern Province after the tsunami, the cessation of hostilities has resulted in more overt expressions of Hindu religiosity, in particular the (re)building of *khovils* and shrines by affluent benefactors (see Figure 9, below), and regular, large-scale Hindu processions. The town also has a significant, and clearly segregated, Muslim population. Like the Muslim quarters, evangelical churches are spatially clustered, and are also active at the district level.

![Figure 9: (Re)building Hinduism in Trincomalee](image)

*Like in Galle, the (re)construction of religion is big business in Trincomalee, with khovils and other Hindu artefacts emerging throughout the town.*

Conducting fieldwork in Vavuniya and Trincomalee proved to be the most difficult of all the field sites, and explains why these two areas account for the lowest proportion of interviews overall. In Vavuniya, mobility was a real problem: churches are spatially dispersed (and unconnected via public transport), and overwhelmingly home-based, which meant that finding them was difficult without close guidance from the pastor in charge. Refugee camps were still out of bounds to foreigners due to
international scrutiny at the time surrounding allegations of human rights abuses perpetrated during the war, in which the camps featured prominently (see Weiss 2011). In both locations, language, and access to suitable translators, was another problem. Unlike in the Southern Province, however, this did not dampen the enthusiasm of informants to be interviewed, but in some instances it did compromise the quality of data that were collected.

3.7 Summary

This chapter has outlined the empirical context and methodological approach that guided the fieldwork and data collection. The first part of the chapter focussed on Sri Lanka’s contested religious marketplace. I explained how, since the colonial epoch, the proliferation of right-wing Buddhist groups (of which the Jathika Hela Urumaya is a contemporary example) has seen a rise in religious protectionism, and the development of the exclusionist political ideology of Sinhalatva. The Prohibition of Forcible Conversion Bill, proposed in 2004, provides one of the most recent attempts at religious protectionism and, irrespective or whether it is passed or not, has severe implications for the religious freedom of all. Following that I discussed the oligopolistic nature of Sri Lanka’s religious marketplace, showing how the Constitution grants Buddhism the “foremost place” yet grants other religions freedom of expression. I argued that, because many evangelical Christian groups are not formally recognised by the state, and often operate outside of regulatory boundaries, there is an important distinction between the formal (of state-sanctioned religions) and informal (of non-recognised religions) religious economies.
The second part of the chapter focussed on methodology, methods and research sites. I explained that a critical ethnographic approach was adopted on the grounds that it unsettles taken-for-granted assumptions, and therefore encourages critical engagement with existing understandings of religious growth. Following that I explored cross-cultural research ethics, in particular highlighting the unique value of ethnic difference (as opposed to sameness) in building trust, and the hitherto unrecognised role of performativity in either disrupting or enhancing the effect of researcher positionality. In line with the aims of the research (i.e. to understand organisational strategies of evangelism), I showed how the sampling framework followed a strong organisational path, privileging the opinions of “elites” over “laypersons”, yet incorporating a range of stakeholders, both religious and secular, Christian and non-Christian. I then explained that the use of qualitative methods – in-depth interviews and observations – provides a significant and necessary departure from existing, often quantitative studies of religious growth. Finally, I introduced the various research sites around the island, all of which reflect different structural contexts that, to a greater or lesser extent, influence the activities of the evangelical groups operating therein.
CHAPTER 4: REALISING EVANGELICAL AGENCY WITHIN A STRUCTURALLY HOSTILE ENVIRONMENT

4.1 Introduction

This chapter engages with the fundamental problem facing evangelical groups operating in the 10/40 Window, that is, how agency can be expressed and competitiveness maintained in a context that is structurally hostile to Christianity. Around the world entrepreneurial religious groups have become adept at co-existing alongside monolithic encampments of religious hegemons; often subverting them for their own competitive gain (see Miller and Yamamori 2007; Grim 2009). Yet the attention paid to the competitive resilience and growth of groups operating within such contexts has been cursory, with the case of evangelical Christian growth in Sri Lanka being symptomatic of such neglect (see Stirrat 1998: 165). Thus despite Hill and Olson’s (2009: 631) assertion that ‘unfortunately, it is not very clear what religious competition is’, for the purposes of this chapter competitiveness is simply taken to be a measure of the efficacy of evangelical groups to grow numerically (in terms of conversion and the planting of churches), and to withstand the regulatory checks that are designed to control (often limit) such growth. Such checks define structurally hostile environments, and often predicate the need for more innovative strategies of evangelism.

The aim of this chapter is to explain how evangelical agency is realised in Sri Lanka. I start by introducing the motivational drivers of evangelical groups, and show how such drivers stimulate competitive action, rather than withdrawal. Focussing
specifically on the competitive actions of such groups, I go on to explain how existing understandings of religious economy fail to account for such pervasive forms of competitiveness. I suggest that a relational model of competitiveness provides a cogent explanation of evangelical Christian growth within the restrictive religious marketplace of Sri Lanka. The model is based on the observation made in Chapter 3 that, in Sri Lanka, an informal religious economy exists; one that is not formally recognised by the state, closely regulated, but is defined by persistent forms of evangelical competitiveness. I explore the patterns of secrecy and subterfuge, the role of foreign catalysts and the strategic extra- and intra-group networks of influence that enable evangelical groups to remain competitive. Finally, I show how evangelical groups use the structural mosaic as part of their strategies of Christian co-optation (i.e. for groups to engage society and gain acceptance) and influence (i.e. to express Christian agency).

4.2 Scalar determinations and dissident geopolitics

First it is necessary to examine the scalar determinations of evangelical groups. Doing so will bring to light the motivations that exacerbate the asynchronous relationship between the regulators (Buddhist) and the regulated (Christian) in Sri Lanka.

Evangelical Christian groups are defined by the resolutely geopolitical ambition to “make disciples of all nations”. In doing so they practice what Bryant and Lamb (1999: 8) term the ‘ideology of mission’ whereby religious domination (expressed in terms of “salvation”) is the ultimate goal. Ideologically they transcend the boundaries imposed by the state and enforced by indigenous religious groups by actively seeking

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19 These are the words of the resurrected Jesus Christ to his disciples; known as The Great Commission, it is a central Christian tenet and key justification for mission work and evangelism (see Chapter 1).
to baptise people into a trans-ethnic, trans-territorial faith community. Constructing a higher level of authorisation validates Christian claims to local religious markets, and challenges the regulatory controls that seek to contain their growth. West (2006: 280) has shown how, in Turkey, Islamic social and political movements do not ‘oppose the actions of any particular state’ but instead subordinate the state ‘to a functional role within a transcendental order defined by a religious faith’. Referred to as “dissident geopolitics”, the actions of evangelical groups are similarly driven by transcendental motives that, where necessary, show invariance towards the state, religious hegemons, and the territorial sovereignty claimed by each.

Dissident geopolitics is grounded in action at the micro-scale. Sri Lanka’s evangelical community relies on a transcendental order (or, as one mainline pastor put it: “they claim a monopoly of truth”) to validate their marginal position in society. Such an order informs how they compete, and remain competitive, on a day-to-day basis. One evangelical pastor in the northeast of the island resolutely stated that “we don’t think that power is in the majority; we believe power is in God” (Evangelical Church, Vavuniya). Blinkered views of power like this immediately problematise the efficacy of regulatory controls seeking to curtail the freedom of evangelical groups. Opinions surrounding the Prohibition of Forcible Conversion Bill, for example, bring to light how the law of the bible transcends that of the state. An exchange with a pastor of a mainline church in Colombo draws out the tension between secular and biblical law well:

Until lately I was very worried about this [the Bill], and, oh my goodness, what’s going to happen? But, you know, if I believe in the sovereignty of God
and if I believe in a living God who is Almighty, I mean, what is this? Big, big, big nonsense… I believe in a God that is much greater than our [humanity’s] puny efforts to stifle opposition.

If it is passed, will it affect what you do?

Yes.

Will you change?

I won’t change what I’m doing.

Even if that means being punished by the law?

Yes.

Sentiment like this was echoed across all churches and geographies. Perceived discrimination against the actions of evangelical groups, and the re-framing of domestic matters within a broader, biblical schema, reflects defiance to an unjust state, and an unjust law: “we are making a storm of a gentle breeze… the law is against the bible: I am ruled by a higher law in that sense” (Mainline Church, Colombo); “we are not worried about these phrases called “unethical conversion”: we are here to convert and we will do it – that [the Prohibition of Forcible Conversion Bill] will not deter us” (Evangelical Parachurch, Galle). Transcendental motivations encourage a more relativised interpretation of civil law; with one Buddhist interviewee accurately claiming that “they [evangelical Christians] become a law unto themselves” (Buddhist Organisation, Colombo). This, I argue, encourages (often violent) responses from anti-Christian groups, and highlights the fact that evangelical groups would rather face recriminative action than compromise their biblical rights.
Whilst responses to the Prohibition of Forcible Conversion Bill remain discursive, the razing of churches poses a more immediate, and real problem. Places of religion hold a sanctified, and highly symbolic, position in Sri Lankan culture. Physical attacks against churches hold a significance that extend beyond the building itself; they represent an ideological affront to the spatial encroachment of marginal groups at the expense of the dominant religious order. Such meaning is, however, lost on evangelical churches, whose dissidence stems from a competing construction of religious place: “for us a church cannot be burned down, or broken down by human hands because [a church is] people gathered together and not buildings; buildings don’t mean a thing” (Evangelical Parachurch, Colombo). Here, as in the example above, the dismissive reference to the regulatory power of humans (“our puny efforts to stifle opposition” and “broken down by human hands” respectively) is ridiculed when framed within the Christian transcendental order. Not only does the transcendental order legitimise acts of defiance against Buddhist antagonism, it also stimulates a drive to realise Christianity’s geopolitical vision, irrespective of the consequences.

It is this disregard to the consequences of their actions that contributes to an image of Christian defiance. Acts of defiance characterise the evangelical movement, and appear to convey a message of resilience and unwavering commitment to Christian growth. Such defiance can be extreme, and often becomes a form of self-fulfilling rhetoric: “thank God we are safe, but if they attack even, we still have to do the ministry here” (Evangelical Church, Galle); “I am ready to give my life because God has called me to th[e] ministry; I am ready to give any time, my wife also” (Evangelical Church, Nuwara Eliya). Indeed numerous, and often well publicised,
examples of physical violence perpetrated against Christians adds depth and meaning to such outward projections of defiance. By challenging the ideological hegemony of Sri Lankan Buddhist exclusivism in such a way, evangelical groups create, occupy and maintain a space of resistance, which casts doubt over Fox’s (1999: 290) assertion that ‘the main goal of the adherents of these [i.e. resistant] religions is survival and they usually do not attempt to spread their influence outside of their own geographical and social milieu’. To the contrary, an evangelical remit mandates such groups to spread their influence as far as possible. The disregard granted to their “survival” and physical safety strengthens commitment to Christianity, and increases their influence, rather than diminishing it. A strong message of persecution is communicated to the international Christian community in particular, which typically responds in a manner that is in disproportion to the original need (see the “Foreign catalysts” section below).

Having established the motivational drivers behind Christian competitiveness, it is now necessary to examine how such motivation is translated into action at the local level. To do so, using religious economy principles, I argue that a relational model of Christian competitiveness exists in Sri Lanka, as outlined below.

4.3 A relational model of Christian competitiveness

Normative understandings of competitiveness in a religious economy assume a high degree of synchronicity between the regulators (the monopoly) and the regulated (the minorities). Monopolies make it difficult for competitors to compete, so they stop competing with the same degree of voracity. Causal relationships like this are rare,
especially in the oligopolistic marketplace. Instead, I argue that a relational model of competitiveness will encourage an understanding of how groups vary the type of competitive strategies they employ in order to overcome restrictions on growth. More specifically, I suggest that as regulation increases, minority players operate in increasingly covert (or informal) ways. Such a dynamic is evident throughout Sri Lanka; areas of strong Christian opposition precipitate a shift towards secrecy, which see evangelical groups continuing to work, albeit “very quietly” (Evangelical Church, Nuwara Eliya), also referred to in one area as “the silent work” (Evangelical Parachurch, Vavuniya). Conversely, deregulation results in more overt – and therefore visible, and measurable – forms of inter-religious competition (e.g. more public displays of Christian religiosity, as shown by buildings, banners and outreach). Accordingly, rather than regulation determining the outcomes of competition, I argue that regulation determines the type of competition that minority groups employ in order to operate independently of a regulatory environment that seeks to restrict autonomous action. Put differently, the model explains how evangelical groups remain competitive, despite being embedded within punitive structures of power, regulation, and control.

Beyond religious economy theorisations, existing understandings of the competitiveness of evangelical groups tend to be descriptive, and divorced from the socio-religious structures in which they are embedded. As I argued in Chapter 2, the evangelical organisation has been treated as a key arbiter of change, with existing work pointing to the structural flexibility and decentralised nature of evangelical groups in particular (e.g. Gerlach and Hine 1968). Characteristics like these, which by now are widely accepted as catalysts of growth, do, however, take on different forms
and meanings in different religious contexts. Martin’s (2002: 154, 6) recognition that such groups are ‘freewheeling religious entrepreneurs’ that often employ ‘ingeniously pragmatic’ ways of circumnavigating regulatory frameworks and engaging with society provides a more relational perspective, but can go further to show how strategies used to remain competitive are formed in response to the structural forces that inhibit growth. Whilst I do not suggest that evangelical vigour is diminished or nullified in any way, it does take on different forms that are sensitive to, and therefore reflective of, the broader workings of the religious economy. Below I introduce three of the most salient characteristics of evangelical groups that are looking to consolidate and improve their market share under oligopolistic conditions: patterns of secrecy and subterfuge to help overcome boundaries to growth, the role of foreign catalysts, and strategic extra- and intra-group networks of influence.

4.4 Overcoming boundaries: patterns of secrecy and subterfuge

Throughout the 10/40 Window, evangelical groups are both a cause and focus of anti-Christian suspicion and animosity. As a result, evangelical groups are subject to close surveillance, a dynamic that is evident not just in Sri Lanka, but also in countries like Indonesia (McGregor 2010: 738) and Bangladesh (Ahmad 2005) as well. In light of this, a core proposition of the relational model of competitiveness is that, in a context where a minority group faces repression, they will remain competitive by acting in increasingly covert ways. Such actions can be subdivided into those defined by secrecy (i.e. being intentionally discreet) and subterfuge (i.e. being intentionally misleading). Past studies speak of religion and secrecy in terms of information (e.g. Bok 1989; Barkun 2006), whereas the focus here is on action. The differences
between secrecy and subterfuge are inconclusive, and most actions contain elements of both; hence they need to be examined in tandem. Three patterns in particular help Christian groups overcome boundaries to growth in Sri Lanka: the (in)visibility of evangelical Christian presence, the willingness to mobilise and deploy the laity and innovative strategies of spatial diffusion. More specifically, I explore how evangelical groups often eschew the expected trappings of Christian identity, such as church buildings and religious dress, in order to avoid surveillance and suspicion; how groups rely heavily on the laity to evangelise and increase their sphere of influence; and how telephone and CD ministries are examples of two particularly innovative, and effective, strategies of spatial diffusion.

4.4.1 The (in)visibility of evangelical Christian presence

Throughout Sri Lanka, the religious infrastructure of the evangelical movement – that is, the churches that act as a central gathering place for congregations – is overwhelmingly inconspicuous. Houses are commonly used to hold worship services. In a country where religious buildings are easily identified, and respected, the house church eradicates any outward signs of evangelical competitiveness, meaning: “they [Buddhists] cannot piece us together because we don’t have visible buildings, the church architecture is not there” (Evangelical Church, Colombo). At the same time as beingbiblically justified according to the New Testament bias of evangelical groups, the use of house churches also serves an eminently practical purpose by “tend[ing] to go more under the radar in the sense that they operate in that grey area” (Evangelical Church, Galle). The “grey area” of the house church is replete with tension, yet remains an uncompromising source of competitive strength, and growth, for
evangelical groups: “you can actually be more aggressive in entering into a non-Christian area when you go into a house… it’s a very low cost crusade; and you can do it every week” (Evangelical Church, Colombo). Whilst the main difference between “house” and “church” is its outward, physical appearance, some pastors use simple semantics to confuse people into misinterpreting the church: “a lot of pastors I told, don’t tell anyone we are making church, tell people we are making a worship centre… people can’t understand what is that worship centre” (Evangelical Church, Nuwara Eliya). In this instance, the fact that “people can’t understand what is that worship centre” parallels the fact that many cannot understand the concept of a house church, a problem that is explored in more detail in Chapter 6.

Such an informal approach to religious growth is clearly articulated in the church planting strategies of Christian groups. The following example shows how church planting, and growth, is intended to be as unobtrusive and misleading as possible:

We [the church] buy a house, and we station an evangelist there. And maybe [for the] first six months he doesn’t do anything, any evangelism. He just stay[s] there, pray[s], and ha[s] a relationship with the people, building up a relationship with the people. Sometimes we allow him to work somewhere, because otherwise people ask ‘what are you doing here?’ So sometimes we allow him to work somewhere, so he can say that ‘I’m working, that’s why I’m here’. So gradually he has to build up a rapport with the people. And then, at once we cannot have services in that house, we have to have services in believer’s houses (Mainline Church, Colombo).
What is evident from this example is the overriding need to disguise the Christian identity of the pastor, to the extent that he is encouraged to take up secular employment in order to arrest speculation and suspicion. Indeed, the need to disguise the pastor’s motivations for moving there (“he can say that ‘I’m working, that’s why I’m here’”) provides a clear example of the necessity for subterfuge that is an integral part of evangelical growth strategies. Also notable is the empowerment of the laity from the outset; in this case, using their houses to hold church services.

Apart from the religious infrastructure of the house church, a distinguishing feature of evangelical clergy is their nondescript appearance, which stands in contrast to their religious counterparts. As Henkel and Sakaja (2009: 52) recognise in their discussion of the growth of the Baptist Church in Croatia, a ‘strategy of invisibility’ is needed to ‘avoi[d] potential conflicts implicit in the negative stereotypes’ that may be associated with religious dress, and other attributes of religion. Besides the potential for such negative stereotyping, in Sri Lanka the problem of religious dress is more paradoxical in nature, given that religious dress, and conformity in dress, is held in high regard, irrespective of religious affiliation. The vast majority of evangelical pastors eschew the cassock, collar, or any other such identifiers as they attract attention, making their actions more visible, and more restrictive: “if you identify yourself as a clergyman, then the clergyman becomes isolated; people will treat him with respect, but they will keep a distance from him” (Evangelical Church, Colombo). Such a dynamic is more pronounced in the rural areas, especially those in the south, where one pastor explained how: “people would never sit and eat with me because I’m a pastor… You see they have this clergy, they have this religious hierarchical mentality, it comes from Buddhism… where you honour the robe more than the person” (Evangelical
Church, Galle). Power distance (or a “religious hierarchical mentality”) poses a problem for evangelists looking to build strong social bonds with people as part of the process of proselytisation. In addition, religious dress not only elevates the pastor above the people they are trying to ingratiate themselves with, but it also allows for easy surveillance from non-Christian groups. The need to avoid surveillance is especially pronounced in rural villages, which tend to be more homogeneous, traditional, and resistant to change than urban society. In order for churches to be planted and to grow in such areas, dress becomes a strategy of subterfuge that removes any visible trace of the encroachment of minority groups:

There are a lot of villages that Buddhist monk has told that they will not allow any [Christian] pastor to come into this village. So if I go with a cassock or collar, definitely the news will go very quickly to that Buddhist monk that pastor has come to the village; so it’s very difficult for me to go and serve there. So normally when I go to that village I remove the board of the church from the man, and I just go casually and have prayer meetings (Mainline Church, Colombo).

The need to “remove” the physical trappings of Christianity is in contrast to evangelical pastors, whose dissident style is dictated by the rejection of Old Testament principles of religious dress. Indeed, most evangelical pastors choose not to dress in a way that reveals their religious identity or position to society; a choice that contrasts with the high visibility of monks and other religious leaders in Sri Lanka. Adopting a more transgressive, and less defined religious identity does not stop with the clergy. Converts are discouraged from identifying themselves as
Christian – “it is unnecessary to change your label, because there are issues of community and identity” – with the evangelical leadership being keen to obfuscate their numerical position: “the vast part of the evangelical church decided that we would much rather they [Christian converts] actually put their birth religion than their new faith [for the purposes of census enumeration]” (Evangelical Church, Galle).

Fundamentally, therefore, evangelical organisations operating in Sri Lanka remain competitive because they eschew the trappings of religious identification; symbols of expected religiosity are substituted instead for an uncompromising mantra of progressive growth.

### 4.4.2 Mobilising and deploying the laity

As can be gleaned from the preceding sub-section, Christian pastors, as much as their churches, stand to benefit from downplaying outwards signs of religiosity. Instead of engaging directly with non-Christians, it is often the prerogative of the laity to use their social influence to expand the church; a process that has long been recognised and is captured by Lofland and Stark’s (1965: 871) maxim that ‘conversion [i]s coming to accept the opinions of one’s friends’, previously cited in Chapter 2.

Notwithstanding, an appreciation of the role of the laity as a tool of religious concealment, and not just persuasiveness, is currently lacking. As the leader of one of Sri Lanka’s largest evangelical churches told me: “the power of the church is the people of the church; it’s not its theological, doctrinal beliefs and finances in the bank and big buildings, it’s the power of the people and we must know how to use them” (Evangelical Church, Colombo). Using the laity in such a way is another articulation of how the role, operation and expansion of Christianity are downplayed in society.
Public cognisance of the debate surrounding unethical conversion has caused evangelical pastors to be viewed less as clergy and more as “converters” (Evangelical Church, Colombo), whereas the laity helps to allay such perceptions. Mobilising the laity to evangelise through their social networks, and within their social sphere of influence, enables Christianity to spread from the inside out. This is particularly important in places like Sri Lanka, where Christianity maintains a popular mantle of foreignness: “you will never be able to break in from the outside; that’s impossible” (Evangelical Church, Galle). One pastor explained his motivations for mobilising and deploying the laity in detail:

I will not go and tell the people about Jesus Christ, because people know that I am a pastor, a priest. So they always think this fellow is spreading the gospel; I am very quiet, I am not doing anything… But I urge people, believers, you bring your neighbour, your friend, then there is no problem. The people see that I am a very quiet person, I am not spreading the gospel. Like Catholic priests, they are always inside. But I am teaching the people, the people are doing it [evangelism], and when the people are doing it, that means less problem[s] (Evangelical Church, Galle).

As described above, the benefits of evangelising through the laity are that it detracts attention from the pastor, who will readily become circumspect if they are found “spreading the gospel”. Instead, the value of emulating Catholic clergy (and, indeed, Buddhist monks) in being “always inside” is that suspicion is averted, and conflict avoided. Another reason not stated above, however, pertains to the actual influence that an evangelical pastor has over the non-Christian community. Lacking subtlety in
how non-Christians are approached may serve to both entrench anti-Christian sentiment, and waste time and resources on developing relationships that the laity have already formed: “I don’t go from house to house to evangelise because they won’t take any notice of me so I don’t want to go. It is the believers who are under me who will bring other families, because it is their village, their friends, their relatives” (Evangelical Church, Hambantota). Being new, or different, is often construed in negative terms as a source of destabilisation that threatens the prevailing structure of society, especially in the Southern Province, where one pastor commented that “every newcomer is a suspect; you have to prove yourself over many years” (Evangelical Church, Galle). In this sense, therefore, the laity provides almost immediate access to the community, creating a multiplier effect whereby the influence and teachings of one pastor diffuses out through pre-existing relationships and channels of communication (see Figure 10, below).
When it comes to mobilising and deploying the laity, strategies of engagement have changed over time. They have become more subtle and discreet in response to mounting anti-Christian sentiment and awareness, with the need for subtlety influencing how laity is taught to evangelise within their sphere of influence. One pastor explained how:

[The] earlier strategy was you indoctrinate him [the convert] wholesale, Monday to Sunday, which results in him being cut off from his background and home. Then you bring him to a stage where you tell him ‘OK, you have to
go home and evangelise your family’, but the bridges have been burnt… So you can’t go back. So now our approach is that even, say even if I meet you, I would first be a friend to you, a genuine friend to you, not with the intention of evangelism, I will just care for you, I will just smile with you, I will talk with you, I will be there when you are having a funeral or a death in your family; I will be there at all times… It’s a very passive, it seems a very passive one [strategy], but that’s the one I believe the bible is talking about (Evangelical Church, Kandy).

As this example shows, the need to downplay difference resonates at two levels: first by using the laity as the frontline of evangelical outreach, rather than the clergy, and second by encouraging the laity not to evangelise overtly, but to manoeuvre themselves into a position of friendship whereby they can begin to “passive[ly]” influence those around them. This increases the depth of Christian embeddedness, serving to enable Christianity to spread in a manner that is innocuous, and relationship-driven. Notwithstanding, the opportunistic nature of such engagement creates problems that go beyond the difficulties faced when recruiting new believers. Empowering the laity in such a way can encourage capitalising behaviours – those that tend to serve the individual, sometimes at the expense of the group – and contributes to processes of church fission. Whereas some churches actively encourage the laity to take on the responsibility of church planting – “anybody in our church, we have said, ‘if you have an opening anywhere, you just go and start it… don’t miss the opportunity’” (Evangelical Church, Colombo) – in practice such a bottom-up, egalitarian approach to religious growth has deleterious consequences for churches,
4.4.3 Strategies of spatial diffusion

The final way in which evangelical churches overcome boundaries is by practicing strategies of spatial diffusion. Such strategies, like the mobilisation and deployment of the laity outlined above, seek to spread Christianity in ways that are less visible and more far-reaching, serving to further increase the Christian sphere of influence beyond the confines of the church, and the network of Christian believers. For non-Christians, such strategies also provide an opportunity to experience Christian teachings and healing without the stigma associated with visiting a church or pastor. Indeed, a Kandy-based member of the Buddhist right admitted the effectiveness of such strategies: “we think we are the majority and so we still have the majority feeling in us, but they are making inroads to every aspect of our lives”. Two strategies in particular were identified as being particularly ubiquitous and innovative. These are: prayer walks (ubiquitous), and the development of what I term “non-proximate” strategies of engagement – in this case telephone and CD ministries (innovative) – that enable Christians and non-Christians alike to experience Christianity in a non-proximate way.

In the first instance, prayer walks involve pastors and laity walking around a neighbourhood or village, either individually or in groups, praying for the upliftment of the church and the inhabitants of the locality. They were organised and practiced by nearly every evangelical church included in the research, and are a form of
spiritual warfare that is part leveraging of the transcendental forces that form a key motivation for evangelists, part concession to the hostile context within which churches operate. Whilst commonly used amongst established churches to facilitate expansion and/or acceptance within a community, prayer walks are also used as a tool by pastors hoping to establish a church in a new area. The use of prayer is a substitute for human communication, with Christians using their presence and movement as a means of channelling spiritual forces to help overcome the resistance to Christianity. A Colombo-based leader of a parachurch organisation outlined the process and rationale of conducting prayer walks so extensively throughout Sri Lanka:

In Sri Lanka, it’s generally a hostile environment, so you generally don’t pray out aloud when you’re walking… It’s a sign of human weakness, when you walk out into a village, you have no way of changing those people, and since we believe there are spiritual powers affecting, influencing, controlling lives, there is no way you can oppose them on your own, but then it is a sign of humility against that power… Prayer walk is in one way just an outward expression of your inward faith, or your inward desire.

The notion of expressing “a sign of human weakness” is important, and often compounded by a number of symbolic expressions of vulnerability that are conveyed by a pastor of a Colombo-based church: “some of them [doing the prayer walk] were mothers carrying their infants in their hands, and they would walk in the night, and sometimes they would walk in the rain” (Evangelical Church, Colombo). The sacrificial element to the prayer walk is one that emboldens Christian resolve and is as
much an expression of faith as it is a commitment to faith. The same pastor went on to tell me how:

The people who went on the prayer walk, they became mature and more strong [sic] in their faith and in their lives. And then in the church I could observe a sudden spurt of growth, miracle growth, people came from outside and then even the people in the church, like the choir or the youth, everyone suddenly became more committed, more active, more involved, and new ministries were begun thereafter. And also, wherever I was conducting services, I witnessed a greater sense of freedom.

As this example attests, not only do prayer walks release Christian spirituality from the confines of the church, enabling spiritual freedom and movement in places where it may otherwise be suppressed, but they also galvanise commitment to the church and its actions. Termed “miracle growth”, the act of dislocating the churches’ activities (e.g. prayer, sacrifice) from the church itself serves to induce commitment amongst existing members, and interest amongst non-members.

In the second instance, some of the most innovative strategies of spatial diffusion are those that engage non-Christians via non-proximate means. In other words, Christianity is made available to people without them having to enter a church, engage in proximate forms of interaction, or to reveal their identity in any other way. Two examples highlight the value of such strategies: telephone ministry – a centre staffed by Christians that people can anonymously call into and discuss their problems or ask for prayer – and CD ministry – the recording of evangelical services
onto CDs and distributing them amongst the congregation and laity. Regarding the telephone ministry first, the key to its success is the anonymity it grants callers. Calling the organisation enables people to meet a spiritual need without having to put themselves in a situation that could attract unwanted attention. As an administrator for the telephone ministry told me: “I don’t know who is on the other end of the telephone line… You don’t see me, I don’t see them, I only hear the voice… So people find it very much easier to pray, ask for prayers, anonymously over the phone, and for us to pray… There is no identity crisis or anything like that” (Evangelical Parachurch, Colombo). Whilst the telephone presupposes a degree of physical distance between caller and receiver – which ensures the concealment of physical identity, the avoidance of surveillance, and reduces the risk of being identified – it simultaneously overcomes distance by being a form of outreach that is not contingent upon territorial proximity. The same administrator went on to tell me how the telephone ministry is most effective amongst people “who are in different places, who are not able to come, in far away places, who are not able to come here [Colombo], to come specifically and ask for a particular thing”. By creating and overcoming distance, therefore, the telephone is an effective tool that reaches out to people whilst avoiding suspicion and surveillance.

A key difference between the telephone ministry and CD ministry is that, whilst the former is a bespoke service that is designed to meet the specific needs of callers through prayer, the latter is a more general attempt to reach out to non-Christians and non-active Christians (i.e. those who are unwilling or unable to attend church) by enabling them to experience a Christian sermon without having to attend a Christian church. The senior pastor of a church that pioneered the CD ministry in Colombo
emphasised the point that “there are people who cannot come to church freely”, instead saying how every Sunday the sermon he preaches is recorded, copied onto CDs and distributed after the following weeks’ service, meaning “people [can] listen to them in hospitals, people [can] listen to them in their homes… every time I preach it’s recorded”. This means the sermon can be kept, repeated and distributed among friends and family, and represents the diffusion of Christian doctrines outside of the church and into the private spaces of the individual. The success of this approach is that the CD provides an innocuous gateway that enables Christianity to spread into the non-Christian home, with the pastor describing how “yesterday I was invited to pray for a Muslim who is paralysed, an old lady… being Muslims they don’t disclose the fact that they’re calling a pastor to their home to pray, but God is working in ways where, you know, something little like this [a CD] is reaching even a Muslim”. Overcoming the barriers and stigma associated with Christianity, both telephone and CD ministries enable Christian groups to engage with non-Christians in ways that are iterative, unsuspecting and often, therefore, effective in building up a layer of acceptance amongst individuals and communities.

4.5 Foreign catalysts

The role of foreign players in buttressing Sri Lanka’s evangelical movement is difficult to ascertain. Whereas some evangelical churches (usually the larger ones) have policies in place that disallow the acceptance of funds from overseas, other churches explained to me in detail how they raised funds for building projects, and others asked me directly to put them in contact with potential sponsors in the UK and Singapore. Access to foreign sponsorship galvanises competition amongst churches,
and can result in the aggressive recruitment of new believers (as proof of growth) or an exaggeration of circumstance (as proof of need). Regarding the second point, communicating a message of vulnerability (whether economically, physically or politically) can translate into being in a position of strength when liaising with foreign donors. As one very experienced representative of a Colombo-based parachurch organisation put it: “they [churches] can personally raise funds from abroad, and they can even sell the country and say that there is persecution and they get money; that’s one card that they play”. “Sell[ing] the country” presents a survival strategy employed by local actors to gain sympathy and support from international audiences. Indeed, every Buddhist (and some mainline Christians) I spoke to saw clear linkages between Sri Lanka’s evangelical movement and overseas donors. Such allegations fuel, and are symptomatic of, the broader, stereotypical image of Christianity as a foreign religion, with overseas influence causing some Sri Lankan churches to be dependent on such funds, which in turn catalyses more aggressive and belligerent strategies of evangelism, and more inter- and intra-religious friction. The catalysing effect of foreign involvement is, therefore, twofold: to provide funds and other resources for local churches in order to stimulate growth and evangelical vigour, and to contribute to (and, in a sense, reify) Buddhist projections of Christianity as a foreign religion.

Whilst conducting research in Nuwara Eliya, I stayed twice in a mission house attached to a well-established evangelical church. During the second stay, my visit coincided with that of an American missionary who, for the past two years, had made annual, self-funded trips to Sri Lanka, each being two to three months in duration. His affiliation with one evangelical denomination saw him working closely with a network of five churches located throughout the Central Province and Colombo, as
well as conducting regular English and theology classes for trainee pastors. Over the course of numerous, informal conversations with him, and one in-depth interview, various insights were gained into the inter-relationships between geographically, and culturally, dislocated donors and recipients that are a defining feature of the global evangelical movement. His insights and experiences reveal the often unspoken (or denied) dynamics of international Christian networks of support, dependence and relative need. Below I explore two characteristics of foreign involvement in Sri Lanka’s evangelical community: the role of relative need in justifying foreign involvement in domestic affairs, and the ensuing tension that arises when foreign provision meets local need – creating what I term a space of parallel entitlement.

4.5.1 Relative need

Foreign sponsorship entails a projection (often distortion) of foreign needs onto domestic circumstances, serving to close the gap between donor and recipient needs and/or expectations. This often results in over-provision on the donor side, and inflated expectations on the recipient side. Whilst recipients stand to gain from access to exponentially greater levels of funding and other resources, donors are driven by more intangible objectives. When asked why the missionary feels the need to involve himself in a subset of Sri Lanka’s Christian community, he explained it was because of “the need, to me the need is unbelievable here… People say ‘why are you going back again?’ And I said ‘it’s hard to explain, it’s like something is pulling me there’. They need help so bad in my opinion” (American Missionary, Nuwara Eliya). The impression of “unbelievable” need is what drives such relativised constructions, which are further multiplied when projected onto other donors:
I show them [the missionary’s “home” congregation] the pictures and things, and the need, so they can see, I mean, I said I would like to bring a whole planeload of Americans to this country and let them see what it’s like. I think it would just be a world of awakening for all of them; I should say that about all the countries I’ve been to. Because we’re so spoilt in the US, we are. You want something, you really don’t have to think about it, you just go and buy it. But here they don’t know if they will have enough money to feed their family or pay their doctor bills or anything. Our teenagers are too spoilt; everything is given to them, handed to them.

The last sentence is a clear, if ironic, parallel between “spoilt” American teenagers and the equally dependent Sri Lankan pastors that are the beneficiaries of overseas support. In this vein the missionary talks of “awakening” the consciousness of Americans, drawing comparisons with how “spoilt” Westerners are in relation to Sri Lankans and Sri Lankan churches. Yet comparing Sri Lankan living standards and needs to those of the West is an exercise in relative need; a fallacy that serves to entrench perceptions of Christianity as both a foreign religion, and one that is financially, and materially beneficial to those that are embedded within transnational evangelical networks of support. Relative need impacts the quantum of financing for salaries or projects, and the type of project that is undertaken as well. An example recounted by the missionary proves the point well. One pastor had asked for funds to be raised in America so that his church could be relocated, and rebuilt, in its entirety. The missionary’s willingness to accede to such a request (by way of comparison, the other pastors had asked for funds for new roofs to be built) is, it seems, because of a
mismatch in expectation between the location of a church in America, and one in Sri Lanka’s upcountry:

**Why do they need to build a new church?**

Well for one thing the location, oh my stars! I wonder how many hundred steps it is up to that church? And it’s [*sic*] not nice steps; it’s all dug out into the dirt with tree roots coming through there, oh man. And how some of those elderly ladies can get up there, I do not know. Oh man… I mean just walking those steps is an experience in itself… And the tree roots, and last time it rained on Saturday night too, so coming down was worse than going up. I mean that one elderly lady; she just scared me. I thought if she slips she’s going to take everyone with her! She hung onto the grass and the weeds on the sides of… Oh man…

**But I would say that kind of situation isn’t uncommon up here…**

No, they’re used to it!

Here, the “not nice steps” (see Figure 11, below, for a similar example) that he deplores justify the need to relocate, and to rebuild the church in a more accessible location. The most illuminating insight is found in the last two lines, when the missionary acknowledges that the need to negotiate steps that are “dug out into the dirt” is “an experience in itself” for him, yet is a standard form of movement and accessibility for local residents (“they’re used to it!”). American standards of mobility and safety are not only being projected onto a non-American setting, but the missionary also strives to bridge the gap between the two countries through his
fundraising efforts and sponsorship for such projects, effectively creating a space of parallel entitlement.

Figure 11: An evangelical church in Nuwara Eliya, built using funds raised in Singapore

Note the location and the steps leading up to the church – a common sight in the upland areas of Sri Lanka.
4.5.2 The space of parallel entitlement

Relative need creates spaces of parallel entitlement: the meeting of foreign provision and local need. Access to wealth makes local pastors feel entitled to Western standards of provision, and perpetuates a cycle of dependence that entrenches the foreign mantle of the evangelical movement. Whilst every Christian I interviewed denied receiving regular payouts from overseas (although that is not to say they denied receiving needs-based funds for building projects and so on; similarly, most accused other churches of accepting such payouts), the Buddhist right argue that the evangelical movement is entirely supported by foreign donors. The experiences of the American missionary reified the Buddhist position, explaining that for the five churches under his purview:

The pastors get paid through… the US. They get the funding for their wages…

But because the people that are joining the church are much poorer, their tithes can’t sustain the church, so that’s why [America] has to finance them?

Yeah, because the pastors told me they get about three hundred dollars per month, and it comes from… the US.

Is that just their salary, or is that for the [whole] church?

That’s just their salary.

That’s a lot of money, don’t you think?

Not really, when you think of the families living here, a lot of them have, I mean [one pastor] has two kids in college. I don’t know. And his parents and her parents live with them.
That’s probably why!

No. I don’t know how they can make it, to be honest.

My challenge to the salary quantum being paid to the pastors was deliberate, given the anecdotal claims I had received from around the island of pastors’ salaries, ranging from a USD 40 per month stipend for Colombo-based pastors, to USD 30 per month being granted to pastors by a southern-based church planting movement. By comparison, in 2009 the median per capita income of an estate worker in Sri Lanka was Rs. 4,242 (approximately USD 39) per month, rising to Rs. 5,446 (approximately USD 50) for the Central Province in general (Department of Census and Statistics 2009). These salaries were corroborated during conversations with estate workers and pastors during the course of fieldwork, and highlight the gulf that exists between foreign-funded pastors on the one hand, and their domestic counterparts and the Sri Lankan layperson on the other. Put differently, the significant financial benefits pastors receive by being funded from overseas sources serves to set them apart from their domestic counterparts, whether Christian or non-Christian, clergy or laity.

Foreign sponsorship of salaries and building projects (and other ad hoc needs, such as the purchasing of motorcycles) results in the distribution of wealth and the furthering of the globalist ambitions of the evangelical movement. It became obvious during the course of the fieldwork that such sponsorship is based on a simplistic treatment of poverty alleviation and local need. Foreign sponsors create, whether knowingly or not, a local market for their affections. This shows not only ‘a capacity to control transnational impact’ (Heuser 2009: 71; cf. Anderson 2005b), but a willingness to manipulate it as well. Pastors compete against each other to prove themselves more
worthy than their peers; a dynamic that is greatly exacerbated by the fact that foreign sponsorship is often disproportionate to actual need. This encourages more aggressive strategies of proselytisation (which shows, in its crudest form, a return on investment), which and are especially pronounced amongst smaller churches that operate outside of existing frameworks of accountability. It also encourages an often-inflated portrayal of the problems facing evangelical groups: “[there is] this persecution syndrome that is going on in this country; you know, if you are persecuted, you get a lot of pity from the West” (Mainline Church, Colombo). The “persecution syndrome” exacerbates dependence on foreign funding and provokes disproportionate reactions from right-wing Buddhist factions who readily capitalise on foreign intervention as the foundations of a number of contemporary conspiracies concerning the imperialistic actions of the neo-colonising West. The space of parallel entitlement serves to both create a market of local recipients, and opens the channels through which foreign groups can begin to exert influence and control over the domestic market. As Christian groups typically compete to become more embedded within international networks of support and collaboration, over time this has served to legitimise the competitive actions of local players and the controlling actions of foreign players. To various degrees such embeddedness requires them to reflect ‘the policies and practices of distant institutions working in very different sociocultural [and socio-political] contexts’ (McGregor 2010: 735), fuelling allegations that at the ideological level they are part of a global project of postcolonial recolonisation (Goonatilake 2006). Indeed, given that there are more missionaries today than at any other time in history (Clarke 2006), and given the important role of international Christian NGOs in directing church-planting campaigns in sub-Saharan Africa (Hofer 2003), the ramifications of this hypothesis require much closer consideration.
4.6 Strategic extra- and intra-group networks of influence

The third and final characteristic of the relational model of competitiveness is one of the most unique and enduring characteristics of the evangelical movement, that is, the importance of internal and external networks of support and influence. Whilst the beneficial relationship with foreign churches and sponsors has already been addressed, this sub-section focuses more on the domestic networks of evangelical churches and organisations. Such networks have an agglomerative effect, providing individual churches with a web from which resources, contacts and ideas can be extracted, whilst enabling them to retain the autonomy needed to respond to growth opportunities as they arise. Below I examine the role of extra-group and intra-group networks of influence. By intra-group networks, I mean those within Sri Lanka’s evangelical community (whether an evangelical church, parachurch or NGO); by extra-group I mean those with other (non-evangelical) stakeholders in Sri Lanka’s religious marketplace, and the global evangelical community. Defining the global (i.e. non Sri Lanka-based) evangelical community as extra-group is in recognition of the fact that the objectives of Sri Lanka-based and non Sri Lanka-based evangelicals often differ, and outside involvement in Sri Lanka’s evangelical community may not necessarily be in the groups’ best interests.

4.6.1 Extra-group networks

Existing understandings of evangelical Christian networks tend to focus on how congregations are encouraged to evangelise within their social spheres of influence,
the aim being to bring their immediate family, friends, and colleagues into the Christian fold. Beyond conversion, however, extra-group networks are also developed in order to ‘tie the Pentecostal infrastructure to the overall structure of the established social system within which Pentecostalism exists, and help the Pentecostals to deal with the systems to their advantage’ (Gerlach and Hine 1968: 28), as previously cited. The competitive nature of oligopolistic economies makes such networks all the more salient, as they are ‘need[ed] to mobilise other resources [in order] to succeed in the marketplace’ (Yang 2010: 201). Given the marginal position of evangelical groups in Sri Lanka, extra-group networks are typically harder to form, more selective, and more opportunistic in outcome. They are also often high-risk, involving strategic collaborations based on mutual gain. If successful, such networks accelerate the consolidation of minority groups within the formal socio-religious structure.

In Colombo, for example, an evangelical church wanted to enlarge its premises. In order to do so, government permission is needed, something which is notoriously difficult to obtain via official channels. To overcome this problem, the leader of the church told me how he co-opted local Members of Parliament (MPs) with the promise of electoral votes: “we will choose some MPs, ministers, to invite to our church… [we say] we will give you our votes, because 600 votes is here; if you win, you will help us”. Identifying an opportunity to develop a relationship with political leaders based on mutual gain – “we use that weak point” – the church is able to exert influence, gain strategic support, and in doing so, overcome a significant barrier to physical expansion. Beyond the meeting of political need, gifts are another means by which evangelicals are able to develop strategic networks of support. In the south of the island, for example, the stifling dominance of Buddhism renders Christian
expansion exceptionally difficult. Nonetheless, churches have become adept at winning the approval of key political personnel through the provision of gifts:

> We are giving small, small things. With small things we can do great things. You know in the village, you have the… chief. In the village, he is the man always reporting to the GA’s [government agent; the local government representative] office. So sometimes he is against [the church], but for small thing we can get the help from him, giving a small present: a pen, calendar, a diary. With that you can turn these people (Evangelical Church, Galle).

Here, the strategic element of the network is contingent upon the ability to “turn these people”, even those that are originally against the church. In turn, this provided the church a significant degree of leeway when it comes to evangelism, physical expansion and the avoidance of other, more punitive forms of anti-Christian reactionism. Both examples show how networks act as a conduit that bridge the gap between the informal religious economy and more formalised structures of power. Risk and trust are integral to such strategic collaborations, creating an uneasy tension between formal acceptance, and the concealment of informality.

Many churches capitalise in some way on informal encounters with overseas organisations, whereas overseas organisations can also be seen to capitalise on the precarious position of Sri Lanka’s evangelical community (see example below). In order to harness support, funding, or recognition from abroad (and in response to government restrictions on visa issuance for foreign clergy), evangelical churches have become adept at going beyond formalised networks of international
collaboration, and reflect what Martin (2002: 25-7; e.g. Hüwelmeier et al. 2010) terms the ‘transnational vistas’ of evangelical groups. Utilising social media platforms to share (often biased and/or exaggerated) pictures and videos of evangelical successes, and persecution, to international audiences, they are able to turn a variety of different situations to their advantage. Media channels can provide a vivid, if easily manipulated, account of evangelical activity that is used to convey an image of Christian agency where it may not otherwise exist:

I can remember one small example, there is a reverend father… he’s a Sinhalese father, he was [based] in Mullaitivu; so some pastors came there from foreign country, local people who had settled down in [a] foreign [country], they were keeping their hands on him and praying… and they had taken [a video], they televised the thing, they went and showed it overseas and said ‘here, we went and prayed in Sri Lanka and we went and converted the reverend father into an evangelical’. The father was telling me, by doing all those things, the purpose of God [is lost]… That purpose is lost if these people do like this (Evangelical Church, Vavuniya).

The misrepresentation created by such imagery is a powerful tool that is used by evangelicals to garner support and attention from overseas. Like the pictures taken by the American missionary back to his home congregation (described above), they are an integral part of the “awakening” that he talked about, presenting an image of Sri Lankan Christian vulnerability, or, as in this case, an example of evangelical successes (i.e. conversion, or not) in the face of adversity. Moreover, the ease with which such images can be misrepresented is to the chagrin of the wider (i.e. non-
evangelical, or mainline) Christian community in Sri Lanka, and likely stimulates competition within and between groups. This has become a bitter source of contention – “the propaganda side is extremely good” (Buddhist Organisation, Colombo) – and has consequences that go beyond the day-to-day workings of the religious marketplace. Two types of extra-group network therefore aid Christian competitiveness: strategic collaborations that are used to generate specific outcomes at the micro-scale, and a more general transmission of information that is used to generate strategic outcomes at the macro-scale.

4.6.2 Intra-group networks

Strong intra-group networks result in the sharing of resources and goodwill amongst churches and theologically aligned non-church organisations. The role of intra-group networks is well established in the literature, with Gerlach and Hine (1968: 29) being amongst the first to recognise how ‘funds and other goods and services to support the activities of evangelists [and others]… flow throughout this infrastructure [of the Pentecostal movement], across organizational lines, from group to group’. Whilst the organisational function of intra-group networks requires little further elaboration, an understanding of how they contribute to more subtle forms of religious influencing is lacking. Such influencing is pronounced in hostile environments, and is practiced throughout Sri Lanka. In the tea estates of the Nuwara Eliya, for example, public infrastructure is limited, especially the provision of adequate sanitation. Streams are directly used for a variety of purposes, including bathing, irrigation, washing clothes, cooking and the dumping and disposal of sewage and human waste. Water pollution is a problem that degrades the soil and affects individual health. A Nuwara Eliya-
based pastor, aware of this problem, requested three lavatories from a Colombo-based Christian NGO. Establishing them in a large estate line (see Figure 12, below), his actions garnered favour from the local community. Strong intra-group networks like these exist at both the local, and national (of which Colombo is often a nodal point) scales, and enable churches to act with autonomy, but also to leverage the advantages of being part of a larger movement with ease. Such networks enable the evangelical movement to be self-supporting, causing agency to be transmitted and realised around the country.
Figure 12: Providing toilets (the two pale blue/green buildings in the background of the picture) for an estate line in Nuwara Eliya

*Donated by a Christian NGO in Colombo, the toilets garnered community approval and eventually enabled the pastor-in-charge to build a church adjacent to the cubicles (not in picture).*

The example presented above also reveals an important dynamic that enables evangelical groups to establish themselves in localities that may otherwise be hostile to Christianity. As mentioned, the lavatories served to ingratiate the pastor with the local community. Subsequently, he built a church adjacent to the lavatories, despite the estate line already being home to two, very well established, mainline churches. The use of non-religious agency, like that outlined above, by evangelical groups is a
defining characteristic of the evangelical movement. It enables them to attain a degree of structural acceptance before expressing religious agency. It is this dynamic that the second part of this chapter shall address, focussing specifically on how evangelical groups gain acceptance and express agency via the structural mosaic.

4.7 The structural mosaic in action

Existing understandings of Christian growth show how structural drivers emphasise secular characteristics that lead to growth (e.g. poverty, anomie), whereas evangelical agency favours the characteristics of religion (e.g. charismata) and religious groups (e.g. flexibility, networks) that lend themselves to growth or decline. The ensuing discussion seeks to reconcile these standpoints by recognising the non-religious characteristics of evangelical groups, and the role of religion in the structure of Sri Lankan society. The strong emphasis evangelical groups place on social ministry (a collective term used to describe a range of social activities, such as feeding programmes, aid distribution, healthcare clinics, child adoption schemes, Montessori’s, and so on) serves not only a theological purpose, but an indelibly practical one as well. Structural resistance causes non-religious engagement with society to become a strategic imperative for evangelical groups, who regularly exploit socio-economic deficits in order to circumnavigate prevailing patterns of religious dominance and repression. Leveraging the structural mosaic does, in this sense, enable religious values to be ‘asserted, contested, or adapted in and through the organisational structures and relationships generated out of development practice’ (Olson 2008: 393). Subtle expressions of religious agency dilute structural power, sovereignty and control via processes of “alternative discernment” (see Myers 2003;
Wallis 2005) that enable the flourishing of religious alternatives. More specifically, as Cloke (2010: 234) explains, such processes lead to the ‘rupturing of the seemingly hegemonic spaces of the current order, producing new lines of flight and new spaces of hope’. This involves evangelical groups first embedding themselves within local structures (by creating “new spaces of hope”), before shaping them to their advantage (and creating “new lines of flight”).

Below I explore two specific facets of the structural mosaic that facilitate Christian co-optation, and the ability of Christian groups to influence others. As a strategy of Christian co-optation, the structural mosaic enables otherwise marginalised evangelical groups to embed themselves within a locality, yet as a strategy of religious influencing, the structural mosaic enables more established evangelical groups to actively exert agency and grow.

4.7.1 Using the structural mosaic as a strategy of Christian co-optation

Throughout Sri Lanka, evangelical agency is not diminished or nullified by the repressive structural context within which Christian organisations operate. Instead, the structural context forces different, often less immediate, expressions of agency and less religion-centric strategies of evangelism. Religious objectives are given a secular veneer, which enables evangelical organisations to subvert the Buddhist structure. Rather than competing on religious terms, Christian groups commonly meet a non-religious need of society that brings them ‘closer to local communities and allow[s] different ways of interacting’ (McGregor 2010: 737), enabling the articulation of otherwise suppressed religious agency. In doing so, evangelists are able to co-opt
themselves into society and, over time, ingratiate them with the political (often Buddhist) hierarchy of the locality. Co-opting therefore gives way to influencing, which enables Christian groups to create a space within which they can evangelise: “you need to be able to go in, blend… after people accept you, then maybe you can start [evangelising]” (Evangelical Church, Galle). Many studies embrace the importance of Christian inculturation (recent examples include Collins 2007a; Stanley 2007), yet recognition of how social ministries enable evangelical groups to operate in a less distinctive, or religiously obtrusive, way is lacking.

Social engagement plays a salient role in downplaying religious alterity. When establishing a Christian presence in a new village or locality (termed “frontier” evangelism), pastors begin by disguising their religious motivations. They live in situ, interact with their neighbours on a social level, and start a secular job or provide a secular service that enables them to play a visible, yet non-threatening role in society. As one Colombo-based pastor responsible for a network of churches in the Southern Province put it: “we encourage our pastors increasingly to be bi-vocational and to wear a couple of hats; to be operational in society provides you with a different entry point, and a different identity”. Acceptance into the social structure foreshadows acceptance into the religious structure, with the evangelical motives of frontier pastors permeating their behaviours and actions. In the Southern Province, for example, one such pastor established a foothold in a non-Christian village by first establishing a small English and music school. Over time this “entry point” led to the realisation of his evangelical ambition; he now has an established church and large congregation, and is able to be more candid about his proselytising motivations: “still we are teaching people English, and music. Still we are continuing, but my main purpose
here is not to teach English and music. My primary focus is that people should know their God. So English and music was the means, the way to approach people” (Evangelical Church, Matara). This shows an expansion of acceptance over time; from meeting a narrowly focussed structural need (education) to the eventual formalisation of Christian presence within the village.

Besides the process of establishing a ministry in a new area, Christian groups that are looking to change a community’s perception of Christianity also do so by leveraging the structural mosaic. Non-religious engagement is necessary to generate religious acceptance. Figure 13, below, provides one of many examples of how processes and acts of “giving” or “providing” are often ‘more concerned with strengthening the social capital of the… donors [i.e. Christians]’ (Hollenbach and Ruwanpura 2011: 1299) than has currently been recognised. Provided by the international Christian NGO, Water Missions International, the tap not only provides a clean and free water source that is for the community to use, but it is also strategically located on the perimeter wall of Christian children’s home. The fact that the children’s home is located in a village in Hambantota district – a place of violently anti-Christian opinion and activity – further emphasises the value of such subtle forms of engagement. Villagers have become dependent upon the tap as a reliable water source that helps them meet their daily cooking, washing and drinking needs. Not only that, but the tap also draws villagers close to the children’s home, serving to reduce the physical distance between the Buddhist community-at-large, and the space of Christianity that the home represents. It forces Buddhists to visit a Christian space regularly, and in a positive light; it encourages them to see and hear the children playing and laughing
and, over time, has resulted in a degree of religious acceptance where hostility once prevailed.

Figure 13: A clean water source in Hambantota district
Located on the perimeter wall of a Christian children’s home, the tap is available for use by the community-at-large, and helps to reduce the physical distance between Christian and non-Christian.

Christian responses to the 2004 Asian tsunami in particular provide a clear example of how churches operating in the southern coastal areas of Sri Lanka managed to consolidate their position of religious precarity, instead transforming it into one of relative acceptance, even gratitude. In the Southern Province, the dominance of the Sinhala-Buddhist identity stifles religious alterity, and evangelical groups typically struggle to establish themselves via evangelism and church planting. The establishment of churches is dictated by the Buddhist hierarchy of a locality, as
explained by an elder of an established evangelical church: “the law doesn’t prevent you from having a church, but the structure of it [society], the local structure can stop you”. The effect of the “local structure” meant that churches struggle to find acceptance and grow with any sort of continuity. Notwithstanding, the 2004 tsunami provided an opportunity for evangelical organisations around the world to distribute aid, proselytise (a practice that was widely condemned – see Matthews 2007), and otherwise engage with Sri Lankan society during a time of immense, and immediate need. For one church located in a highly resistant village along the southern coastline, such engagement enabled it to shift from a position of vulnerability – it was frequently attacked and evicted from various premises – to one of relative acceptance and spatial fixity. As the pastor of the church told me: “they [the local structure] wouldn’t give me any place because they have been brainwashed into thinking that this is a foreign religion… people refused to rent houses to us; not the people at large, but there is a small group who is against [us]”. In the aftermath of the tsunami, however, the actions of the church and its network of collaborators made the shift possible. Regarding the distribution of aid and supplies (which, incidentally, were provided by South Korean missionaries), the leader of the church told me how:

We made it certain that they knew all these supplies [distributed to those afflicted by the tsunami] are coming from Christian people with a Christian mind. That’s it, that’s all. And very few people converted through that; but it made an impact on all of them. They view us with different eyes; they wouldn’t give us any [permanent] place, but then we saw this place and we bought it. The month we moved in then these Buddhists, they had their meetings [which are often a precursor to acts of resistance] and they talked to
those people again. The people came and told us, we are not going for those meetings. Means they view us with different eyes; their perspective changed.

In this instance, the indirect effects of social ministry (“they view us with different eyes”) overshadow the direct effects (“very few people converted”). Subtle, and less overtly proselytising approaches like this have become the norm in light of growing scrutiny surrounding the allegedly “unethical” conversion activities of evangelical groups. A Colombo-based representative of an international Christian NGO clearly explained the linkages between social ministry and evangelism: “the question has been asked, ‘why do you do this work?’ But it would be nice if people, the communities, even go beyond and say, ‘who is your God?’ So then that becomes an opportunity for us to talk about God; [we] create the opportunities where they will ask about our God”. As this, and the preceding examples show, evangelism is never far removed from the day-to-day practices of social ministry. Playing an instrumental role in the upliftment of poor and marginalised social groups, evangelically motivated organisations are able to show people an alternative way of life that can encourage them to question the religious traditions into which they were born.

The structural mosaic encourages evangelical groups to traverse categories of understanding, and in doing so creates possibilities to engage people on different levels in order to downplay the difference accorded by their Christian mantle. The relatively well co-ordinated (i.e. rapid and impactful) nature of the Christian response to the tsunami maximised the effect such support had on the local community. In Croatia, ‘the arrival of missionaries at the right moment in a region where there had been no churches helped many inhabitants of the area to bridge this [post-war] period
of existential uncertainty, and likewise helped the Baptist Church expand its influence’ (Henkel and Sakaja 2009: 50). The quick response of evangelical groups in Sri Lanka enabled a similar expansion of influence, and is a function of their highly networked, and mobile nature. A Colombo-based leader of an evangelical church explained how:

As soon as the tsunami struck, we sent out teams to areas like Galle, which were heavily littered [with] debris and there was a terrible feeling of hopelessness – so many dead bodies and so on. Now this clean up, we sent out teams, and one of the teams cleaned the premises of the [Buddhist] temple. And the monk was, he had never seen… his understanding of Christians was very different… So when they introduced themselves as being from the church, he was very shocked, because most probably this polarisation concept had been established in his mind… I personally think that we have to actively dismantle those [artificial boundaries that keep religious groups distinct] by making people realise that we are part of their community as much as them.

During the period of chaos wrought by the tsunami, the speed and scale of the Christian response served to destabilise the “polarisation” that previously existed in the minds of southerners, in particular the exclusivist claims of the Sinhala-Buddhist majority. By working with the community in ways that visibly bettered the surroundings (e.g. clearing the debris, especially that found in the temple grounds), evangelical teams were able to simultaneously engage with the community, creating situations whereby they could exert agency. As the leader of a Buddhist organisation in Galle commented, regarding the post-tsunami Christian relief effort: “they help[ed]
a lot; the first thing is they did a very good job”. That the help provided by Christian groups was received so positively foregrounds a degree of acceptance, providing a base from which evangelical groups can begin to consolidate their position (e.g. by purchasing a permanent church building, as above) and work on co-opting themselves into the religious and social structures of society.

Like the southern coastal areas of the country after the tsunami, the widespread devastation resulting from the civil war has deeply affected the north, creating innumerable channels through which religious groups can operate and reach out to society. Long-term reconstruction projects provide opportunities for evangelical groups to establish themselves. One pastor in particular received recognition for his social work, enabling him to operate within the formal confines of the prevailing religious structure: “we have an inter-religion society; in that society [there is a] Buddhist priest, and Roman Catholic father, and Hindu priest, and Muslim priest. I [am] also a member in that committee. How can I go in that committee? I am a social worker” (Evangelical Church, Vavuniya). Being accepted by religious leaders on the grounds of his social work ensures his church a degree of protection: “we have not faced a problem, but [other] Christians have faced that problem, religious problem”.

Renders (2002: 78; see also Bornstein 2005) similarly highlights the political (re)positioning of Muslim NGOs in Senegal by showing how ‘[a]ppropriating the ‘development’ discourse provides them with the opportunity to access resources and networks they would otherwise not have access to’. This suggests that such practices are pervasive; whilst the actions of such groups may be social in nature, they often belie religious intent.
4.7.2 Using the structural mosaic to influence others

Evangelical groups use the structural mosaic as a strategy of co-optation in situations where there is no prior Christian presence, or where the locality is exceptionally resistant to religious alterity, as it provides a means of disguising the evangelical motivations for engagement with the form of engagement itself (which is often non-evangelical). In other instances, however, especially those where Christian groups are more established and typically secure, the structural mosaic is used as a strategy to influence others. It is often used when evangelical groups want to achieve a specific outcome, and usually involves more audacious strategies of engagement (i.e. those more focussed on secrecy or subterfuge) with those in positions of structural power or control. In such instances, the distance between outright evangelism and non-evangelical engagement is reduced, meaning influencing is often higher risk, and yet more immediately aligned with the overarching evangelical remit. Such influencing was most evident in the former conflict zones in the north of the island.

Post-war reconstruction projects have witnessed many evangelical groups returning to the Vanni region, especially those that were exiled to Colombo or elsewhere during the war. Vavuniya is the logistics hub for the Vanni region, and is replete with distribution warehouses, the offices of NGOs, and a sense of transition and change. Refugee camps surround it, and the headquarters of the Christian NGO that I used as a base for interviews was a locus of activity, with numerous staff workers coordinating the delivery and distribution of dry rations, tents and bibles from Colombo to the Vanni region (see Figure 14, below). The manager of the centre networked vigorously with a range of personnel, from foreign representatives of international
NGOs (our interview was cut short as he was running late for a meeting with USAID), to government officials, not to mention the gamut of evangelical churches and other organisations seeking to take advantage of the opportunities for growth. For example, when the manager needed government permission to access a refugee camp in order to distribute aid to the inhabitants, he networked continuously with key military and government personnel in the area: “we have to keep the network strong and the correct way; if we do the wrong way… everything [is] going to close”. In order to establish a network “the correct way”, the NGO purposely remained silent about the work it does with evangelical churches in the area (“we cannot network with them otherwise”), thus offering extra-group personnel a blinkered view of the scale of their involvement with evangelical churches (cf. Henkel and Sakaja 2009). The breadth and vigour of such networking lends credence to the manager’s assertion that “really, we are sowing a seed everywhere”. Exploiting the opportunities presented by the structural mosaic in such a way enables the Christian NGO to plant such seeds by cultivating strong ties with key military and political stakeholders, whilst obfuscating the NGO’s overarching evangelical intent.
Figure 14: A Christian NGO in Vavuniya receiving a consignment of bibles
The bibles were to be distributed amongst churches operating in the Vanni region.

Exploiting the opportunities presented by the structural mosaic requires a conflation of goals that blurs the boundary between the religious and the secular, and between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. Building strong ties with the local political structure in order to distribute aid to the refugee camps and resettlement villages in the north, a prominent Christian NGO used such influence to ingratiate evangelical
Pastors with society. Pastors would provide an artificial fronting for the NGO during high-profile village ceremonies so that: “people can see pastor doing something for the development of the village; pastor not an evangelical person, pastor not [a] church building person, but he’s doing something for this village” (Christian NGO, Vavuniya). Such deliberate, and fallacious, attempts to disassociate pastors with evangelism enables otherwise marginalised religious leaders to disguise their evangelical mantle under the pretext of social work. Such attempts are typically widespread:

Every way… we can involve the pastors into the society; you have to do social work also. Through the social work, one day, if you like [to] go to one family, I came from, ‘oh yes pastor, welcome’, they treat very well… In the underworld we are networking them [pastors] also in the society.

The pastors?
Yes.

Bringing them up into society?
Yes. In the society, whatever we are going to implement, pastors also we are inviting.

So you provide channels through which the pastors can travel in order to bring them into society in an acceptable way.

Yes, yes… But the community, they see us [and think] oh the churches are doing something, good thing. But they don’t know [our NGO] is a Christian organisation, but they, people saw the pastors and the youths and the believers are doing a lot of things for our purpose, it’s good. They are good people, they can see it (Christian NGO, Vavuniya).
The desire to use the positive influence of the NGO to “involve the pastors into the society” is self-evident, as is an element of subterfuge, given the frank admission that the community is not aware that the NGO is a Christian organisation and that “in the underworld we are networking them also in the society”. Such misrepresentation is necessary to gain the trust of the people. Whilst an invariably effective means of realising Christian agency in a context where it may otherwise be suppressed, the ethical boundaries of such actions are disputable (see Chapters 6 and 7).

Whilst the networking of pastors is often an integral part of social influencing via the structural mosaic, in other instances, often those where social influencing gives way to religious influencing, the involvement of pastors is less critical. In such cases, the presence of pastors may complicate the message of unalloyed support that Christian groups are trying to communicate to the religious hierarchy. Organising ceremonies that are solely presided over by non-Christian religious leaders presents both a message of support, and one of control. As the Vavuniya-based leader of a Christian NGO told me:

The GS [Government Secretary] and the temple priest, like Hindu and Catholic person and the Buddhist person, they are the people in that ceremony, chief guest. They are the people distributing these things [aid and other provisions], we are never going to distribute, we arrange the programme in this village, we [are] inviting them to that ceremony, the other people in that ceremony, the chief guests and the special guests and the VIPs, we are outside. We are giving opportunity; they are the people distributing everything.
So you set the stage for them.

The platform, yes, we are giving them a platform, but we are outside. We are taking these people, we are taking opportunity, or we are giving like treating, you are a very important person for us, we think you are very important in this village, you have to counsel us, you have to guide us, you have to lead us, come and do this thing.

The obvious irony that the ceremony is a means of communicating a message that “you are very important in this village, you have to counsel us, you have to guide us, you have to lead us”, when in fact it is the actions of the organising (Christian) group that are guiding and leading those of their “guests”. The relative insouciance of the NGO in providing a public face to aid distribution (“we are never going to distribute”) belies the leverage they gain from establishing control over those that do the distributing on their behalf. Such control reflects the relative distribution of power (in terms of wealth and resources) at the micro-scale, with the NGO using its influence to indirectly strengthen the structural position of pastors and churches in the north. Collaborative arrangements between evangelical organisations mean the benefits of structural integration are passed down, creating opportunities for churches to grow.

4.8 Summary

This chapter has explored the ways in which evangelical agency is realised in a structurally hostile environment. I started by explaining how The Great Commission provides a source of transcendental motivation that catalyses Christian competitiveness, and encourages invariance towards the state, religious hegemons,
and the territorial sovereignty claimed by each. The ensuing tension is a form of dissident geopolitics that contributes to violent outcomes. In the second section, I introduced the relational model of competitiveness. Such a model is based on the observation that, in Sri Lanka, the regulatory environment does not necessarily affect the competitive outcomes of minority religious groups, but the type of competitive action instead. Specifically, I argued that increased regulation encourages evangelical groups to operate in increasingly informal ways in order to avoid surveillance. In other words, there exists an inverse relationship between structural hostility and evangelical visibility.

The third, fourth and fifth sections explored different facets of the relational model of competitiveness in more detail. First, I explored the patterns of secrecy and subterfuge that enable evangelical groups to overcome boundaries to growth. I focussed specifically on the invisibility of evangelical Christian presence (as shown by the house church, and the nondescript appearance of evangelical clergy), the mobilisation of the laity for evangelical purposes, and strategies of spatial diffusion (specifically, prayer walks and non-proximate strategies, such as telephone and CD ministries). Second, I explored how foreign catalysts contribute to growth. Drawing on the experiences of an American missionary in Nuwara Eliya, I examined the construction of relative need (i.e. where foreign needs are projected onto domestic circumstances, resulting in over-provision on the donor side and inflated expectations on the recipient side) and the ensuing spaces of parallel entitlement. Third, I explored the strategic extra- and intra-group networks of influence that generate growth. Extra-group networks are those forged with non-Christians and Christian groups based outside of Sri Lanka, and intra-group networks are those that bind the Sri Lankan evangelical
community together. Whilst such networks are often a source of strength, they can also result in competing ambitions, which serve to undermine the actors employed therein.

The sixth section outlined the structural mosaic in action. First, I explained how the structural mosaic is used as a strategy of Christian co-optation. I showed that, whilst the religious structure of Sri Lanka makes evangelism difficult, the focus of evangelical groups on social ministry provides a considerable source of social agency, and can help generate religious acceptance. In religious terms, evangelical Christian groups are often marginalised, but in social terms they are embraced, often needed, as shown by evangelical responses to the Asian tsunami and post-war reconstruction. Second, I explained that once Christian groups had been accepted by society, the structural mosaic is used to exert influence over others. Drawing on examples gained from the north of the island, I showed how Christian groups would leverage the structural mosaic in order to generate a number of evangelically-motivated outcomes, which often resulted in the strengthening of Christian presence.
CHAPTER 5: LOCATING EVANGELICAL PRAXIS IN SRI LANKA

5.1 Introduction

Whilst the previous chapter explored how evangelical agency is expressed within a structurally hostile environment, this chapter explores the spatial contingencies of evangelical praxis in Sri Lanka. I argue that strategies of evangelism are, to a large extent, determined by the locality within which evangelical groups operate, and reflect a degree of Christian reflexivity in responding to the external environment. The term “locality” is applied at various scales of analysis, from the macro to the micro. The two biggest differentiators of evangelical strategy at the macro-scale are the effect of operating in urban versus rural localities, and in public versus private locations. At the micro scale, the private domain of the house is the most common repository of evangelism in Sri Lanka, and stands in contrast to the church, temple or any other publically recognised religious building. Also at the micro-scale, some of the most specific, targeted and often contentious sites of evangelical activity are spaces of youth evangelism. More so than other population segments, youth tend to cluster in particular places, whether it is the school, the playground, the university campus or the cricket pitch. This brings to light the value of locating evangelical praxis in Sri Lanka, and provides a first, and fundamental, step towards realising space as a medium, methodology and outcome (Knott 2005a) of evangelical Christian growth.

This chapter aims to explore the locational determinants of evangelical praxis in Sri Lanka. I start by exploring how evangelical groups determine where to establish a
physical presence, and in doing so argue that locations of evangelism are often divinely sanctioned as part of the transcendental order to which most evangelical groups subscribe. I go on to examine the macro-scale spatial determinants of evangelical strategy, before moving on to the more specific, micro-scale determinants. Two dichotomous pairings provide analytical foci – urban-rural and public-private – and the paradoxes contained therein are explored in depth. I then go on to examine three spaces of youth evangelism – the youth club, the youth camp and the university campus – that provide some of the most contentious examples of evangelical praxis. Finally, the conceptual frame provided by the structural mosaic is brought back into consideration; I focus specifically on how it enables the obfuscation of evangelical space, and the enactment of typically audacious strategies of evangelical outreach.

5.2 Locational hierophanies

As discussed in Chapter 2, Eliade’s (1959) conceptualisation of a hierophany is a place-bound eruption of the sacred, as evidenced in religious sites around the world. Such an essentialist standpoint has since been subordinated to the social constructionist paradigm, which argues that sacred spaces are places that are invested with meaning by humans. Despite such subordination, I argue that the concept of a hierophany remains relevant to the evangelical imagination. Yet rather than being restrictively place-bound, evangelical hierophanies are instead location-driven. In other words, rather than being a bottom-up channelling of the sacred, locational hierophanies are top-down prophecies received by pastors, and legitimise claims to different locations, whether it is a building or a locality. Locations are invested with sacred purpose, which encourages pastors to be more resilient and location-bound,
especially during times of resistance. Playing an important role in determining locational hierophanies, prophecy is one facet of the transcendental motivations that provide pastors with direction, and the conviction to believe that their actions are ordained. For example, the pastor of a family-run church in a southern Colombo suburb recounted how the location for his church was chosen:

My mum went for a birthday party somewhere, and a foreign lady, seeing her across the room, while there is music being played and sandwiches and all that being eaten; she walks up to my mother, doesn’t know her from Adam, hasn’t seen my mother; this foreign lady walks up to my mum, introduces herself and says ‘God is speaking to me, that the place where you live, He has chosen it to become the light, and the lighthouse in that neighbourhood’… So the location wasn’t chosen by us… We didn’t build it, this church, unlike any man-driven organisation, this is very prophetic, this place is God-ordained.

Sentiment like this was echoed throughout the island, with the “God-ordained” nature of the evangelical church being described in opposition to other, “man-driven”, organisations. This also explains, in part, the autonomous nature of evangelical churches – “my organisation did not send me here, or my main church did not send me here; it was clear guidance from the Almighty God to come” (Evangelical Church, Matara) – and also alludes to why such churches are difficult to control, often operate outside the law and are outwardly driven by transcendental motivations. In addition, such “guidance” is used to explain more wayward locational choices. One church, located on a (previously undeveloped) plot of land outside the centre of Colombo has since grown to become one of the country’s foremost evangelical institutions, and is
one of the most potent examples of the power of locational prophecy within the evangelical community:

That time, if you saw [the plot of land] you won’t [sic] buy it, it was just a muddy paddy field. There was no road, proper road, to come there; there was no bridge to cross over [the river that runs in front of the church]. But I had in my mind that God was going to develop this place. You know you must have a vision for everything. If you don’t have a vision you can’t… Where there is no vision, people perish.

Taking a high-risk decision to build the church in such a disconnected location has since paid off, and to the church leaders is an important source of affirmation: “we realised we were in God’s plan, because within a short time [of the church being built] a bridge came up, connecting our road… and the narrow track suddenly became a wide, tarred road. Hospitals came up here, and we have suddenly arrived in a fairly important centre of the city, being a hospital complex”. This, and other examples, reifies the role of hierophany in guiding pastors to a particular location (“we believe God gave this place to us” – Evangelical Church, Matara), or to a particular outcome (“for this church to be here, it’s a miracle” – Evangelical Church, Colombo). Location is therefore invested with divine meaning, providing pastors with strategic direction and legitimacy.

Whilst locational hierophanies legitimise evangelical presence throughout the country, they play an especially poignant role in areas of greater resistance or hostility. Indeed, nowhere is such allegiance to a location more clearly illustrated than
a church operating in Hambantota – one of the most resistant districts of the Southern Province. Despite strong, and prolonged, resistance from the local community, the leader of the church expressed an inexhaustible mantra of immobility: “I used to get letters threatening death and asking me to go. So I used to tell the neighbours ‘today I got a letter threatening to kill me, but I am not going to leave this place, even if they kill me I am not going to leave this place’”. The refusal to move, despite vociferous opposition, forms a positive feedback loop, whereby Christian presence provokes resistance, with resistance entrenching commitment to a locality, which in turn provokes even greater resistance. Such a cycle self-perpetuates until either the church relocates, is destroyed (and sometimes rebuilt on the same plot of land), or resistance stops. In this case, resistance provided a paradoxical source of strength for the church, and it was eventually the resistance that crumbled:

I started getting money. I put the foundations [for a new structure]; as I put the foundations the whole city started coming up against it. They came in a protest march… and they took bibles and started burning the bibles and there was a riot squad from the police, the riot squad had to come and stop all this. But even after all that, the following Sunday the same crowd of people came to the church, they did not abandon the church.

Now the church is deeply embedded within the community and occupies a large, permanent structure. Being a form of transcendental motivation, locational hierophanies reify the importance of location in stimulating evangelical Christian resilience and growth. Location is invested with purpose and meaning, and is superimposed upon the spaces within which evangelism occurs.
5.3 Spaces of evangelism

Whilst locational hierophanies are a form of transcendental motivation that stimulates Christian competitiveness, such competitiveness is enacted within a space of evangelism. This section explores how and why some spaces of evangelism are more amenable to Christian growth than others, and how Christian groups adapt their strategies of evangelism to suit the prevailing socio-religious context. Two dichotomous pairings have been identified – urban-rural and public-private – and the paradoxes that are inherent to each are explored. This leads on to a more specific focus on the spaces of youth evangelism that have become some of the most contested sites of evangelical Christian growth.

5.4 The urban-rural paradox

One of the clearest ways to distinguish between differences in Christian supply and demand in Sri Lanka is by examining the urban-rural divide. Such a divide segments the country along the lines of language (English versus mother tongue), ethnicity and religion (heterogeneity versus homogeneity – see Henkel and Sakaja 2009: 49), choice (individual versus group), mobility and wealth (high versus low). As a corollary to such segmentation, it also impacts the supply of, and demand for, Christianity in multifarious, and often contradictory, ways. Below I first explain how Christianity diffuses out from the country’s urban nodes and into the surrounding, rural periphery. Such patterns of diffusion bring to light some of the differences between evangelism in urban and rural locations, which are subsequently examined
by focussing on how the supply of, and demand for Christianity is determined by the location of evangelical praxis. In particular, I explain how urban areas are characterised by strong supply and weak demand, whereas in rural areas the situation is reversed (i.e. weak supply, strong demand). This contributes to a number of paradoxical outcomes that evangelical groups must continuously negotiate.

5.4.1 Urban nodes and the spatial diffusion of evangelicals

Colombo is Sri Lanka’s primary urban centre, and a nodal point that connects local and global, urban and rural, Christian and Buddhist. The clustering of Christians within capital cities like Colombo is not unique to Sri Lanka, as Christianity has long been recognised as a religion that thrives in an urban setting, where the forces of modernity serve to simultaneously alienate society whilst empowering Christian groups (see, for example, Giggie and Winston 2002; Yang 2005). As a result, the relative deprivation thesis provides a cogent explanation as to why Christianity thrives in an urban setting, particularly amongst migrants from the rural periphery. The physical movement from a rural to an urban setting exacerbates the anomie caused by modernisation, encouraging migrants to seek recourse in religion. The fellowship associated with Christian group worship styles provides comfort, and a sense of community that may otherwise be lacking in a Buddhist temple, for instance: “they go and worship and very rarely there is a fellowship, you see. I think among Muslims they have, that’s why you find it is very difficult to break into that group. But when you go to Hindus and Buddhists, they don’t have that fellowship, that is a Christian thing” (Mainline Church, Colombo; see also Nanayakkara 2006). The emphasis on anomie does, however, provide only one aspect of the relationship between rural-
urban migration and conversion to Christianity. Another is the freedom from the socio-cultural bondage of village life, which is elucidated in more detail below. As a Colombo-based leader of a parachurch organisation explained: “in the city, what will happen… you have a person from very far, distant place, he’s here, and no-one knows that he has come to this church, and he’s very free, because his village doesn’t know anything about it, and no-one can object [to] him, he is very free in that sense”. Thus whilst anomie drives some individuals towards Christianity, it also releases them from the bondage of their previous religious affiliation.

Being centripetal nodes within national, and international, evangelical networks, cities act as disseminators of evangelicals – both pastors and laity alike – around the country. Such dissemination of influence underscores the value of cities as engines of evangelical growth:

If you take the Colombo city, all the people are from outside, from all these rural villages, you know, they all come to Colombo… cities are good places for evangelism because you can spread the gospel to every part of the country… from the centre everybody will go to their village and take the gospel there; then it is easy for you to plant churches in villages, because already you have some people there (Evangelical Parachurch, Colombo).

The movement of people to and from the urban centre facilitates the transmission of Christianity, and strengthens the networks upon which such transmission is based. Indeed, urban nodes are often part of a broader, more wide-ranging strategy of spatial diffusion and resource allocation, as recognised by one Buddhist agitator: “naturally
they [small house churches located in the periphery] belong to a network, with offices in Colombo, otherwise they can’t sustain [themselves]. So the Colombo centre is rich, and their strategy is basically to penetrate [the periphery]” (Buddhist Organisation, Colombo). The movement of people between urban and rural areas, and the opportunities for interaction and sharing that are inherent to such movement, strengthen relationships between churches and enables urban influence to permeate rural settings. As a Colombo-based leader of a network of parachurches told me: “if I am a pastor in a village… my influence is only there [in the village], but in the city, my influence, I know, may be very far”. For some, such influence can be an attraction, causing the urban to be a more desirable (and, perhaps, profitable) locus of evangelism than the rural periphery.

That being said, the movement from urban nodes to the rural peripheries is not without problems. In particular, the diffusion out from urban centres can lead to the uncritical application of evangelism in rural settings. One southern-based pastor in particular lamented how “people without understanding, they have come to the village areas with dark glasses and flashy outfits and guitars and try to speak about Jesus; they have got stoned and chased away” (Evangelical Parachurch, Galle). In this instance, the great mismatch between supply and demand highlights the dichotomy that exists between urban and rural areas, and the often-paradoxical relationship between Christian supply and demand contained therein. It is this relationship that shall now be explored in detail.
5.4.2 The supply of Christianity

In Sri Lanka, one of the greatest determinants of evangelical strategy is the distinction between the country’s urban centres (although it could be argued that there is only one urban centre – Colombo), and rural periphery. Whilst Colombo is the heart of Sri Lanka’s evangelical community, the rural periphery presents the frontline of Christian-Buddhist tensions. As Goh (2003) recognises, cities are often sites of fragmented, conflated and occasionally conflicting identities. They are the ‘natural home of difference’ (Sennett 1990: 78), being spaces of destabilisation wherein the preponderance of split loyalties makes changing religious identity a less value-loaded choice than in rural villages. The city is the locus of modernity, and is largely antithetical to the assumption of religious longevity for which more rural settlements are renowned (see Molendijk 2010). Locating evangelism in each of these two settings is, however, beset with paradox. Rural areas are typically more resistant, whilst simultaneously more receptive to Christianity, whereas urban areas are typically more open and inclusive, yet society is less willing to embrace Christianity. In religious economy parlance, rural areas are defined by restricted supply but greater demand, whereas in urban areas supply is relatively unrestricted, yet demand is lacking. As one interviewee put it:

The urban area, the people are more educated, busy, and you know, they have a lot of activities here, and sometimes they don’t have time for God. So in our experience, the villages are more receptive to the gospel than the urban

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20 The distinction between “urban centre/s” and “rural periphery” is problematic, not least because Sri Lanka’s is, by and large, still an agrarian economy. Notwithstanding, the fact that Sri Lanka’s evangelical Christian community is concentrated in Colombo underscores the fact that the capital is very much the “centre”.
people, because they have the hospital facility when they are sick... But when a villager falls sick, you know the first thing he will do is go to the village doctor and do something, and if that fails, he will become desperate. So he will become more open to the gospel... the village people are more receptive and easier to reach (Evangelical Church, Colombo).

The idea that villagers are “easier to reach” is predicated on immobility. Urban areas have more mobile populations, which is manifested both in terms of day-to-day movements, and the freedom to experiment with new religious alternatives. Rates of conversion may be higher in urban centres, yet so is attrition, as it is harder to retain converts. The value of rural immobility for evangelists is that:

In a village you’ve got the freedom of time, the freedom of meeting people at any time, that kind of thing is there... [in] Trincomalee the roads are almost bare most of the day, because people are in their homes, people are doing their small businesses and you can walk in and you can chat... it’s a more laidback place... you’ve got greater licence, a greater amount of time to work with the people, whereas in town you don’t, I mean they’ve got their work, they’ve got their after-work life, they’ve got their families (Mainline Church, Colombo).

Being more place-bound than their urban counterparts, rural people are easier to locate, and easier to engage in conversation, whether it be “in their homes” or “doing their small businesses”. Such immobility can, however, be as much of a hindrance as it is help for some pastors. To leverage the benefits of rural immobility, pastors themselves must be mobile in order to bring Christianity to the people. Travelling
between the disconnected estate lines of Nuwara Eliya, for example, means a trade-off between the quantity of possible interactions, and the (assumed) quality: “here we must commit our time; if we meet one person we must spend three hours back and forth. We can meet in Colombo in five minutes, or ten minutes; [here] sometimes entire day we must spend with one family, so that’s difficult” (Evangelical Church, Nuwara Eliya). Altogether the immobility of rural villages amounts to more privatised forms of evangelism, as opposed to more public engagement in urban areas. In rural areas the private space of the home is where the vast majority of evangelical activity takes place, whereas in urban areas it can occur in the street, on the bus or during a crusade rally held in a park or public auditorium. As Figure 15, below, shows, public proclamations of faith, and of religious communication, are more abundant in the city than they are in the provinces. The conformism of the rural setting means outward displays of alterity are restricted, making the home a sanctuary of experience that evangelical pastors can visit and influence whilst circumnavigating the structures of power and surveillance that serve to benefit from restricting change and preserving the status quo. This dynamic is addressed in more detail below.
Figure 15: Proclaiming a Christian message in an urban setting
Located along Colombo’s main commercial thoroughfare, the Galle Road, proclamations of faith like this are rare, and often outlawed, in more rural settings.

5.4.3 The demand for Christianity

In terms of supply, evangelical groups typically find it easier to reach out to rural communities, as they are easier to locate and less mobile than their urban counterparts. In terms of demand, however, the rural setting is one in which demand for Christianity is suppressed as the group takes precedence over the individual. The rural mindset was commonly described as being more prejudiced than the urban, which is more used to, and accepting of difference and nonfixity. Paradoxically therefore, whilst the need for education, healthcare, jobs and other sources of upliftment is generally greater in rural areas, and the populations more accessible, the tolerance for otherness is severely restricted, and the use of stereotype more entrenched than in urban areas. Christianity is foreign and colonial, whereas Buddhism is Sri Lankan and serves the interests of the community, which means that “the more rural ones [people] might have more hang-ups about people suddenly
coming in and saying strange things that they have never heard of before, and maybe the ability to change, and to view objectively what a person is saying could be very challenging” (Evangelical Church, Colombo). Talking about Christianity, and other facets of evangelism, are described here as “strange things” that are seen as a threat to existing ways of life due to the inability of villagers to “view objectively what a person is saying”. Rural society is polarised along the lines of religion, ethnicity and territory, as one Christian convert from the Southern Province told me: “in my village, sometimes it’s only Sinhala [people], in other areas there’s Tamils, but they’re separated”. Such polarisation reaffirms the need for evangelical groups to downplay their religious otherness so as not to be seen as a threat to society.

In addition, in rural villages people “like to maintain what they have been maintaining for centuries” (Mainline Church, Colombo), causing individual agency to often be subordinated to the interests of the group. Such subordination has important ramifications for the process of decision-making, especially regarding religious conversion. As one Colombo-based evangelical pastor explained:

You go to the village, they are Buddhists, they are living with Sinhala or Tamil, language-wise, religion-wise, they are very strict. So they’re facing problems to come out from that. I will give you an example, their life [is] based on like a community base. So I am Andrew,21 but Andrew can’t take decisions easily. Some decisions I take, that is going to affect our community, and I am also a part of the community, the village life I mean. So someone come to Christ [i.e. convert], he is going to immediately [be]

21 Not his real name.
isolate[d] from this community. Not only the family, full village, so the fear, that situation is a big problem. So he need[s] a family, he need[s] a community, you know. So [because of] that concept, [it is] quite difficult to go to the village.

In the village setting autonomous action is frowned upon, and making the decision to move away from the majority religion can estrange the individual from the group. In Sri Lanka, the dominance of the Sinhala-Buddhist identity imposes a degree of religious intransigence upon individuals (another sort of immobility – explored in more detail in Chapter 7), given that “the main obstacle for the [rural] people is how others think about you, that’s the main issue” (Evangelical Parachurch, Colombo). Whilst a problem for the individual, it also poses a strategic challenge to evangelical groups, who must negotiate their own alterity via either the structural mosaic, or by adopting practices associated with secrecy and subterfuge, previously outlined. Such practices commonly involve the private domain, and stand in opposition to the public place of religion in Sri Lankan society and culture.

5.5 The public-private paradox

Whilst differences in supply and demand beset the urban-rural paradox, it is differences in evangelical and non-evangelical conceptions of the place of religious activity that constitute the public-private paradox. Simply put, whilst Buddhist (and other religious) groups argue that religious worship and identity is a defining part of the public domain, evangelical Christian practices are overwhelmingly privatised, and often use the home for the purposes of worship and outreach. The paradox lies in the
fact that whilst the privatisation of evangelical Christianity galvanises suspicion and prevailing public discourses surrounding “unethical” conversion, evangelical groups claim that public displays of religiosity are often met with resistance, or outlawed: “very public… community-wide events and activities of outreach are becoming almost undoable” (Evangelical Church, Galle). As the Colombo-based leader of a representative body of evangelical churches told me, “it’s very, very advantageous if you have a church building, then people are… recognis[ing that] this is a church, we know this is a church… if you have in a house [then] they have a lot of suspicion; what [are] they doing here? What is this?” Thus although the use of the private domain catalyses suspicion, many evangelical groups fear the repercussions that may arise from public forms of outreach. The south is where Christianity is most vigorously denied a public presence due to the homogeneity of society and religion along Sinhala-Buddhist lines, and the strength of nationalist (and often anti-Christian) sentiment. More than anywhere else in the country, this forces groups to privatise their evangelical practices: “public rally we don’t… we can’t, we’re not allowed. From beginning they stopped – no permission. So we have to go very private, personal… it’s not meant for here [public evangelism]” (Evangelical Church, Matara).

This section explores this paradox in detail, examining it first in relation to public and private places of religion, with a particular focus on the house church, and second in relation to public and private forms of evangelical outreach. I also highlight how evangelical practice becomes more privatised as structural hostility increases – a dynamic that fuels suspicion of “unethical” evangelical practice.
5.5.1 The public place of religion in Sri Lanka

In Sri Lanka, the formal place of religion is the public domain. Formal religious groups (previously outlined in Chapter 3) are located within temples, khovils, churches and mosques. Such places are imbued with sacred meaning, and are largely respected by Sri Lankans, irrespective of religious belief: “in our mentality a place of prayer is a sacred place… a place of worship is a place of worship, and it’s respected and it has its own special rights” (Mainline Church, Colombo). Indeed, such a “mentality” serves as a point of reference for inter-religious relations, with the church being a recognised symbol of Christianity that is understood to be equal to any other such symbol: “for a Buddhist, they respect places of worship, anywhere, even a mosque; church also is like that” (Evangelical Parachurch, Colombo). Ironically it is the church building itself that is both a symbol of foreignness (and often a reminder of Sri Lanka’s colonial past – see Figure 16, below), but also a building of religious similitude that is understood by non-Christians, given that “the people’s cultural perception of a church is more in line with a temple or [any other] designated place of worship” (Evangelical Church, Colombo). There are two characteristics of religious places in particular that help to establish their position within the public domain: identity and access.
In the first instance, the ability to identify a place of religion is a key factor that differentiates the informality of evangelical groups with other religious groups that operate within Sri Lanka’s formal religious economy. The differences between mainline and evangelical churches are particularly striking in this regard. A pastor of a Colombo-based mainline church explained the importance of church symbolism: “I can’t build a Christian church like a Buddhist temple, I can’t build a Christian church..."
like a Hindu temple; each have their own building, and each has its own
significance… Christ died on a cross; I cannot say that Christ died on a lamppost… a
church must have an altar, it must have a lectern, the church must have a cover, and it
must have a cross to signify it’s a church”. Symbols of Christianity – the altar, lectern
and, most importantly, the cross – identify a church as a Christian place of worship,
and in doing so serve to position it within the public domain. Many larger, more
established, evangelical churches recognise this dynamic, and use the cross to
encourage acceptance and resonance. A southern-based evangelical pastor told me
how “we put the cross to identify [the church], otherwise they [the community] will
think this is a hall… Buddhist temple they respect, even Hindu temple they respect,
Muslim they respect. So at the same time, Christian church they respect, so we just
put the cross”. The ability to identify the church as a place of worship generates
acceptance amongst non-Christians, a dynamic that is recognised by some evangelical
groups, but not all.

A pastor of one of the country’s largest evangelical churches, for example, explained
what sort of message having a physical, public presence sent to the community,
saying how buildings “and localities, and physical property, and geographical
locations, are also part of the process of sending a message to society that we are part
of the national mosaic, and we are here, and we mean business”. The sense of
institutionality associated with having an identifiable public presence has a positive
effect on the Christian community – “the visible architectural style… is strength for
the Christians” (Mainline Church, Kandy) – and deters resistance: “they can’t easily
 crush us [the larger churches] and stamp us out” (Evangelical Church, Colombo). It is
for these reasons that churches (especially evangelical churches) often struggle to
obtain the permissions needed to register or build a “public” church, and explains why they so often resort to more private forms of worship and outreach. As the leader of a registered church in a particularly hostile village in the Southern Province explained: “a building denotes strength and stability. They have a massive fear of Christians; they look on the Christians as the enemy of the Buddhist. Now a building built by the enemy means they are going to be stable here… They thought now they have a building, they are going to stay here and literally take hold of all the others”. Thus whilst a church building is easily recognised by non-Christians, it can also threaten them, rendering the process of gaining the approvals necessary to build a church lengthy, and often problematic.

In the second instance, accessibility sends a message of openness and transparency, and reifies the position of religion as a positive force for the community. This affects both existing congregations – “they [the congregation] know that right throughout the week, they can come here, they can talk, they can pray, they can get the advice they need to get” (Mainline Church, Colombo) – and adherents of other religions. Whereas clearly identified places of religion are described as being “open” – “the Catholic church and the traditional Christian church[es are] open place[s] where I can walk in” (Buddhist Organisation, Colombo) – the house is not. Such a distinction between “open” and “closed” places of religion affects not just the ability for non-Christians to enter a church, but the neutrality of the place itself: “I [can] walk into a Christian church, right, I mean any Buddhist place or anything, I can go inside, even have an argument with a Catholic, Christian, Buddhist priest on the Buddhist philosophy. But if I go to a house, I create offense. I can’t create a debate” (Buddhist Organisation, Colombo). Notwithstanding, the vast majority of Sri Lanka’s evangelical churches are
located in houses, causing the house church to be the country’s foremost location of evangelical Christian praxis.

5.5.2 The house as church

House churches are built on the New Testament precept that Christians are the church of God, not the buildings that house worship services. Rather than the sacred space of the house church being grounded in place, it is instead grounded in the constellations of sacred networks that are formed and consolidated when Christians are gathered together for worship, prayer and bible study. In this sense, house churches ‘could simply be described as locations of ritual’ (Davies 1994: 55; see also Norman 1990), whereby ‘the room itself [where worship occurs] has no special sanctity’ (Turner 1979: 153). Given that the formation and articulation of sacred networks is based on the affective ties between believers and God, the place of the house church is nothing more than ‘a point in which [such] flows and relationships… become grounded’ (Bajc et al. 2007: 321). A house church can therefore be replicated anywhere that a sacred network is present, meaning the space of the house church is predicated upon the ‘frequentation of places rather than a place’ (Augé 1995: 85, original emphasis), effectively rendering them placeless. That said, whilst the space of the church is predicated upon the construction of sacred networks, house church services are located within the house, meaning the house church remains, at a practical level, place-bound. As a result, I term house churches place(less) as they constantly have to negotiate the politics of being conceptually placeless, yet practically place-bound.
The house church represents a practical application of Christian doctrine. It serves to remind congregations about the relative (un)importance of place within a broader, biblical schema. As the pastor of a legalised house church in Colombo told me: “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 they [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 contribute to the formulation of Christian space (see Murdoch 2006: 78). The desanctified nature of the house puts ‘the emphasis on to that nucleus of the holy people of God who themselves [a]re only sanctified insofar as they [a]re united with the Holy One of God in their midst’ (Turner 1979: 153). In theory at least, the sanctification of place is substituted with the sanctification of believers, which has important repercussions for the growth and longevity of the church.

The place(lessness) of house churches serves not only a theological imperative, but a strategic one as well. Whilst pastors lament the difficulty in obtaining land for religious purposes via official channels, the marginal position of Christianity in Sri Lankan society 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” (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. Providing no outward manifestation of the sacred, house churches are essentially invisible,
avoiding surveillance and reproachment. By foregoing traditional church symbolism, network-based churches reduce the risk of repression. They are a ‘strategy for the territorial administration of the religious’ (Hervieu-Leger 2002: 99) that enables the continuation of worship, evangelism and growth, despite hostility. The value of place(lessness), therefore, is that it renders Christianity indestructible; it cannot be subdued by force, or restricted to place:

You can meet anywhere, and that has become a reality if you take the north and east, where due to other reasons [i.e. 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 place has important, and paradoxical, repercussions for the church (which are explored in more detail below), and those groups that oppose the church. The fact that “you cannot restrict the body of Christ to meeting” means that the church is an autonomous player in the religious arena of Sri Lanka, one that operates independently of the legal and political structure.

Indeed, the autonomous nature of the house church is further enhanced by the mobility that comes with being place(less): it can be planted anywhere, and is often embedded within densely populated residential space that enables it to impact 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, or any other place-centric site of religious expression “limits you in spreading” (Evangelical Church, Colombo), the articulated nature of the house church 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. As Figure 17, below, shows, the fact that many evangelical pastors are not restricted to a single building means they have the freedom and mobility to frequent multiple places in succession. This enables them to inject a sense of Christian presence, no matter how ephemeral, into disparate locations that, in turn, become loci of Christian growth.

**Figure 17: A mobile pastor (centre, with umbrella) in Nuwara Eliya**
*Armed with just a bible and maraca, the pastor visited and conducted worship services in five different estate lines over the course of one afternoon.*

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 Colombo-based 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 are successful in that because they have this New Testament style; they are among the people in the villages.

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 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”, place-centric 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 evangelical 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.

Here the boundary of the house – the door – is not only open, but also a source of enchantment. The space of the church 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 originate from 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: 1581; see also Chivallon 2001; Baird 2009) 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 non-privatised, non-differentiated 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.
5.5.3 Evangelism in the public domain

Public forms of evangelical outreach are more prevalent in some parts of Sri Lanka than others. Two sites in particular are recognised as being more conducive to public forms of engagement: sites of degradation and urban sites. In the first instance, sites of degradation are those that have experienced some form of social, political or environmental upheaval, and in Sri Lanka are most commonly associated with areas in the north and east that are worst affected by the civil war, and to a lesser extent the coastal areas affected by the Asian tsunami in 2004. The refugee camp in particular became an important site of public evangelism during, and after, the civil war. Pastors explained how the cramped conditions, the relative immobility of the inhabitants and the sense of fear and mortality that pervaded the camp meant that the supply of Christianity become a more public event:

When the people are collected together, all those people are, the non-Christians, the other denomination people, and all the people are in one place and they’re together. Then they show, then they view how this small group of people is praying, by seeing the faith of them, how they are believing a God, that is very much helpful for the [non-Christian] people, not to convert [them], they themselves will convert… The believers, the Christians, even during that crucial time they had the belief in God, they were praying to God. But non-Christians, they were crying, they were scared and saying ‘oh, our life has gone, our god has forsaken us, we can’t do anything now’ (Evangelical Church, Vavuniya)
Of particular interest is how the public supply of Christianity served to create demand. The distinction between the ability of Christians to cope with camp life and the relative inability of non-Christians created a situation whereby “they themselves will convert”. Indeed the disruption caused by the war, whereby homes were destroyed, families were dispossessed and friends and relatives killed, encouraged people to resort to transcendental solutions to their problems. Coming to the conclusion that “our god has forsaken us” encourages people to embrace new religious alternatives, with the layout and structure of the camp making Christianity very accessible to the masses: “that place [the refugee camp] is very open… people are seeing, there are five people or ten people, they are praying, they are listening. Everybody is listening… They listen and change the mind and come to the way [of Christianity]” (Evangelical Church, Vavuniya). Whilst the camp presents a concentrated focus of evangelical activity, the repatriation of inhabitants to towns and villages after the war causes the public to become more dispersed and unyielding, and evangelism more targeted (see Figure 18, below).
In the second instance, the religious plurality and weakening of traditional power bases associated with urban sites means public forms of evangelical outreach are more likely to be permitted than in the rural periphery. Of these, the crusade rally is one of the most pervasive, yet contested, forms of outreach. As Heuser (2009: 75) shows in Ghana, ‘crusade activity lives in th[e] urban environment and seeks to manipulate it’. Manipulating the urban environment is not only a strategy of territorial conquest, but an effective means of engaging with non-Christians as well. Like in the
refugee camps, Christianity is easier to propagate when it can be seen and heard by non-Christians and, in this vein, the most successful crusade rallies are typically those held outdoors: “if you do it [a crusade] in the open air non-believers will come, and that’s our purpose of course, and doing it indoors only Christians will come… No matter how much, like even if you go and invite them personally, they [non-Christians] won’t come” (Evangelical Church, Nuwara Eliya). Holding a crusade rally outside enables evangelical groups to attract the attention of non-Christians whilst disrupting their daily routines as little as possible. No threshold has to be crossed (e.g. walking through a door) and therefore no transgression is committed. In addition, some groups rely on their extra-group networks to gain approval for such public rallies, which is not always immediately granted: “we invite a government servant who’s in a good position so those people, they don’t make problems, they don’t mind that we have this [crusade rally] here” (Evangelical Church, Trincomalee). Sensitivity to such a dynamic pervades all stages of the planning process, from advertising a crusade rally to its eventual execution. The leader of an evangelical church in the Nuwara Eliya told me his rationale for not publicising a rally that was held during the Christmas period:

In December we didn’t do any kind of advertising, we didn’t do anything at all. Because if we [did], people may not come. So we just, right in, we went there, put up a stage and did all the things, people just came in [to an open-air theatre where the crusade rally was held].

So it disrupts them as little as possible…

Because if you had given advertisements, they know it’s a Christian thing, and that’s why they won’t come in. But if you just go in and people like to listen to
songs and, of course, everyone likes music, so that’s one way that we use all the time.

In this instance it is the presentation of Christianity – particularly in terms of music and singing – that attracts non-Christians, rather than any prior advertising. The spontaneity of such events prevents attendees from having to make a conscious choice as to whether to attend or not, encouraging more impulsive responses to the immediate visual and audio disruptions to the everyday banality of the street. Such strategies of attraction are not, however, without negative consequence. Despite there being a generally positive relationship between crowd size and social influence (see Newton and Mann 1980), the moment of engagement is often fleeting and reactive, as recognised by one Colombo-based evangelist with extensive experience conducting rallies and other such outreach throughout the island:

I think such a strategy simply appeals either to the emotion, or there is the fact of peer pressure… It’s very easy to get people to respond to the gospel [during a crusade rally], and accept Jesus, but it’s very difficult to disciple them, and to keep them in the fold (Evangelical Parachurch, Colombo).

Such a frank admission of the superficiality of the crusade rally – one which “appeals either to the emotion, or… peer pressure” – is, in many respects, a reification of more sweeping criticisms pertaining to Sri Lanka’s evangelical community. A relatively shallow engagement with Christian tenets (on the part of both clergy and laity) is replaced by a preoccupation with healing, prophecy and miracles; a process of giving people a tangible experience of Christianity that is designed to elicit a specific
response (in this case, “raising their hands, or coming for prayer, or filling in response cards”). Indeed, the focus on tangibles – whether it be number of converts, quantity of aid, size of congregation or the number of churches in a network – all contribute to rhetoric surrounding the “market mentality” of Sri Lankan Christians; something much bemoaned by (mainline) Christians and Buddhists alike.

5.5.4 Evangelism in the private domain

As the earlier sub-section on the house church argues, evangelical Christianity is a largely privatised religion in Sri Lanka. As a result, evangelical worship and outreach has become a highly targeted practice, focussing specifically on engaging people within the home, where they are typically “more open” (Evangelical Church, Nuwara Eliya) and free from community surveillance. It is the single-most important site of evangelism in Sri Lanka, and is used to deflect attention from the workings and encroachment of Christianity: “my home is a little sanctuary; you come and I treat you with a cup of tea or some food and we have fellowship, I share with you. Nobody can object to that, you know, I’m not having a church service here” (Evangelical Church, Colombo). People do, however, “object to that”, largely because the boundary between house and church is so indistinct. Such indistinction lowers the barriers to entry for non-Christians. As one Colombo-based evangelical pastor explained:

Most of the people here [in the church] are Buddhists and Hindus. Usually they are not interested to come to church. We train the people to preach the gospel and distribut[e] tracts and mak[e] house meetings. Then one of our
house meetings, we are doing [at] our believer’s house. Then we invite
neighbours to come to that house meeting… The Hindus and the Buddhists,
they’re not willing to come to church, they’re a little afraid to come to church
because the Buddhist temple is close by and the Hindu temple is close by: if
they come to church, all the people will know… They [will] lose everything;
you lose their community, they lose their friends, everything.

This example clearly juxtaposes the stigma associated with visiting a church against
the relative freedom of attending a “house meeting”. Whilst this does not explain why
a Buddhist or a Hindu would choose to convert to Christianity, it does show how they
become exposed to a new religion, and provides a point from which conversion
processes can begin.

The house church is a nondescript articulation of Christian space, representing what
Henkel and Sakaja (2009: 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: 9).
The house church model impacts the religious mobility of non-Christians in two
ways, both of which highlight how “it’s much more 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 to when entering a Buddhist temple, for example. When
entering a house, deference is granted to the owners of the house, and not the place;
when entering a temple it is the place 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 [i.e. a common well shared by a few houses]. 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.

The fact that the two ladies did not see the house church “as a threat” highlights the second way that the house church impacts 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 that 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 [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 fact, therefore, that the house church is borderless enables non-Christians to experiment with Christianity without suffering the adverse consequences and social outcasting associated with attending “normal” church services.

Given that Christian space is not readily accessible to most non-Christians, the house church provides options, choice 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). 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 place. As Augé (1995: 103) explains: ‘a person entering the space of non-place is relieved of his usual determinants’; 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’, enabling them to experience Christianity without commitment, or repercussion. Instead of competing directly against Buddhism and other religious alternatives for ‘presence in space’ (Hervieu-Leger 2002: 101), the house church is
one of the most potent symbols of the effectiveness of the structural mosaic as it occupies a different spatial register that subverts normative conceptions of sacredness.

Being a private space, using the home as a strategy of evangelical outreach is also more targeted, and often more successful as well. Pastors can interact with inhabitants in a more individualised way, which means their application of Christian teachings can accurately address the needs of the individuals. The more relational nature of private evangelism is described below, and juxtaposed against the public emphasis on performance:

When we go to their house, we will know their pain… we will come to know everything, they will share with us… it is easy for us to have a chat and then finally to pray, and we can say that ‘yes, you believe Lord Jesus, then he will help you to come out of your problem’… But in open air, in public places, we cannot do that. So individually when we go and meet them… for example, if I see that he needs something, I have that, so I can give to him. So like that, so we can just build up our relationship with them: that is the difference (Evangelical Church, Trincomalee).

Here, the needs of the individual are described as “pain”, with the pastor using conversation, prayer and other forms of provision as an ameliorative force. It is the targeted nature of the home that is a cause of contention, with agitators arguing that it suppresses debate and circumvents the need for transparency. That being said, the main problem pastors face when evangelising in the private domain is that of access. Turning up unannounced (or via “door-to-door” evangelism) is often less likely to
elicit a positive response than if an introduction is first made (although the use of foreigners, or wearing a uniform, can obviate this need). In this sense, the laity plays an instrumental role in generating and managing channels of access through which pastors can evangelise. The value of the private space of engagement is that it can have a snowball effect, and is often the most effective way of reaching out to a community:

We have one strong believer there [in a mostly Buddhist village in Nuwara Eliya], he’s a Hindu convert… we started a small prayer group in his house; he has a lot of friends around so we don’t go to those houses, we ask him to invite them in… It’s easy to go through another person who lives there, who knows the community, who’s well known amongst everyone; he invites them. He’s like an agent of our church… He takes us to their houses so then they’re more welcoming… If we go in [without him] we won’t be welcome at all (Evangelical Church, Nuwara Eliya).

Three important factors therefore underscore the use of the house as a private space of engagement. The first is its effectiveness in communicating Christianity in a specific (as opposed to general) way to a captive audience, thus making it more relevant and resonant with non-Christians. The second is the ease of access granted by the house, as discussed above, which is in contrast to the social stigma and surveillance that comes with frequenting a church or another designated place of religion. The third is the important role of the laity in providing access to Christian and non-Christian homes alike. Yet whilst the private domain of the home is the preferred means of
reaching the community at large, there is a more specific subset of the community that
often comes under the intense focus of evangelicals: children and youths.

5.6 Spaces of youth evangelism

Children and youth are a particular focus of evangelical groups throughout the
country. Most, if not all, churches have designated youth groups or youth ministries,
and there is a range of international organisations catering specifically to Christian
youth in Sri Lanka. Given the dependent position of many children and youth, spaces
of youth evangelism are typically more clearly defined and contentious than those that
target adults (see Baird 2009). Contention surrounds the ethics of targeting youths
(and, indeed, any other “dependent”) for the purposes of proselytisation. The fact that
the youths targeted by Christian groups are often underprivileged exacerbates such
tensions. Agitators condemn the fact that children and youth ministries are “a very
unobtrusive intrusion into the family life of an innocent crowd” (Buddhist
Organisation, Colombo), whereas Christians maintain that “we try to make sure that
there won’t be the sense of them [youths] coming into a pressured situation where the
environment drives them to a sort of commitment” (Evangelical Parachurch,
Colombo). As this section shows, the construction of spaces of youth evangelism is
based on the logic that “to win them [i.e. to get children and youths to convert], you
have to be with them” (Evangelical Parachurch, Colombo). Spaces of youth
evangelism are not so much about forcing commitment, but about dislocating youths
from the everyday banality of their existing lives, which, in doing so, creates a space
of engagement that encourages receptiveness to Christianity. As Zhang (2006)
recognises, youths provide an entry point to the family (“they change the mind of the
“For kids, they change the mind of parents” – Buddhist Organisation, Colombo), meaning they are a significant focus of evangelical attention and resources around the world.

Figure 19: A house church service in an estate line in Nuwara Eliya

*The close quarters within which worship services are conducted make for an intense experience, one that encourages synchronous behaviours.*

Being more impressionable, receptive, and more easily manipulated than adults explains the evangelical focus on children and youths. Figure 19, above, portrays the ease with which children often unthinkingly follow the actions of their elders, and are liable to both religious and cultural conditioning. In doing so, it also shows how ‘religious identities are embedded within other cultural formations and reproduced through everyday practices’ (Harvey et al. 2007: 25). Targeting youths during their formative years is a practice that is grounded in specific places. It is also a practice that is contingent upon the effectiveness of Christian youths engaging and interacting with non-Christian youths, often through play and other social activities (cf. Hopkins
et al’s 2011 discussion of intergenerationality in the formation of youthful religiosities). A Colombo-based pastor recounted a strategy of encouraging the members of his youth ministry to go and play cricket with other youths, the value of which is that “they will, at their level, speak to them, and their own struggles they can identify” which has the cumulative effect of being able to “break down the barriers, initial barriers, because you are willing to befriend them”. The following sub-sections explore how ‘sacred and secular meanings and relations are differentially contested in the construction of space’ (Harvey et al. 2007: 25). In doing so, they stand to contribute to an understanding of how evangelical groups create a space of engagement that can lead to religious acceptance, and conversion, outside of formal religious space.

Below, I examine in detail three different spaces of youth evangelism. First I explore proximate spaces of youth evangelism (the Christian youth club), followed by detached spaces of youth evangelism (the Christian youth camp) and finally non-Christian spaces of evangelism (the university campus). Whilst the youth club and camp are clearly owned and operated by Christian groups, the university campus is not; meaning Christian groups must find more innovative ways to engage with students. This section aims to elicit an understanding of where Christian engagement with youth begins, and how space is used to fulfil the purposes of evangelical groups.

5.6.1 Proximate spaces of evangelism: the youth club

Proximate spaces of evangelism are those that are an integral part of the everyday lives of the youths that frequent them. They are often embedded within residential
areas, and provide sites of engagement that enable frequent, regular, religious and
non-religious interactions that, over time, serve to influence the values, beliefs and
understandings of youths. Youth clubs can either be embedded within churches, or
physically separated from them, and often focus on one or more of a range of
activities, whether it be sports, tuition, music, English classes or crafts. Past studies
have shown how sports and other activities that facilitate group interaction can
courage church involvement amongst youth and adolescents (e.g. Carpenter 2001),
yet close consideration of how such activities can facilitate, or provide a pretext for
conversion processes is lacking. The boundary between the sacred and the secular is,
in the context of the youth club, decidedly ambiguous, and can encourage the
(re)negotiation of religious identity (see Harvey et al. 2007). Christian principles often
underscore the ethos of such clubs, even if the activities themselves are devoid of any
overtly Christian message. Removing more overt (and therefore visible) symbols of
religion in general and Christianity in particular is a source of appeal, as conveyed by
one of the managers of a large youth club based in the centre of Colombo: “they [the
youth that frequent the club] don’t see it as a place with a lot of rules, so it’s very
different to your Sunday church, and I think that’s what makes it so appealing”.
Whilst such clubs are a space of engagement that is distinct from the normative
Christian premises of the church, they also offer experiences and activities that cannot
be found in the homes of many attendees as well. Nowhere is this more true than for
the children living in refugee camps in the north, with the youth club providing an
opportunity for them to dislocate themselves from camp life (however temporarily),
and regain a sense of normality:
If they are in the refugee camp, they feel that we are displaced children; the feelings are there. If they come out and come together with other children, after that they will be interested with their programmes and they will forget those feelings. Their mentality will develop. They will forget everything and come… They know this is what is out there [outside the refugee camp], they are not prisoners like this, then they will develop their psychological side and to develop their studies also (Evangelical Parachurch, Vavuniya).

A focus on underprivileged youths means that the club provides an experience, and a space of expression, that is distinct from the home or refugee camp. As the abovementioned manager of the youth club in Colombo told me: “many of them [the youth] come from very different homes, very difficult homes… I see this as an outlet for them to come and get away from some of the pressures at home”. By removing the rules, boundaries, expectations and pressures of the Sri Lankan home specifically, and Sri Lankan society more generally, the clubs provide space for youths to forge an identity and build relationships in a setting that encourages attendees to, above all, have fun: “sometimes they rebel at home and then come to [a youth club] because they feel there is more space for us here” (Evangelical Parachurch, Colombo). A “philosophy of fun” is the guiding principle of the Colombo club, and is reflected in the bright, multi-coloured walls, the range of activities on offer and a relatively *laissez-faire* approach to rules, boundaries and discipline. Here, the structural mosaic is evoked in the blurring of the boundary between religion and play: the space of the youth club is one of fun and distinction from the everyday pressures of Sri Lankan life, one that is, at face value, entirely “un-religious”, yet at the same time the club is grounded by Christian principles and values such as care, compassion, and often
evangelism as well. It is a taste of Christianity that is as far removed from the church – and, indeed, the temple, *khovil*, or mosque – as possible, but is operated with the intention that all youths should experience, if not accept, a new religion. Thus by taking Christianity out of the church, the aim is that:

They [youths] need to see that knowing Jesus can be fun; it’s not a matter of more rules and a duller life, but it’s about living your life to the full and you can still have fun, you can still have friends and you can still stay out of trouble… people see that you still have friends who are, whom they used to consider religious, but who are not as bad as they thought they were, and once you really get to know them they are really quite fun (Evangelical Parachurch, Colombo).

In this sense, the space of evangelism of the youth club is more about changing perceptions than it is religious instruction. It engages with youths on a different register – that of having fun, playing and socialising – that may or may not mislead those participating in such activities. As the wife of a youth club leader in the north of the island told me: “he [the husband] is a good football player, so he will go to the football grounds and reach the youths. One by one they will talk… If you give an invitation, come, we can play like them, they enjoy that; and then they will come [to the youth club]”. Here, the use of football is brazenly used as an invitation to join the youth club, and is often a precept for more religiously-motivated intentions: “a lot of what we do, like sports and all that, our desire would be that one day people come to know Jesus. But there is no compulsion in what we do; they are free to come and go. We do share the Good News [i.e. evangelise] in the clubs that we run” (Evangelical
Parachurch, Colombo). Such an admission of the sharing of “Good News” reflects the conflation of goals that is a point of contention for Buddhist protagonists.

5.6.2 Detached spaces of evangelism: the youth camp

Whilst youth clubs present proximate spaces of evangelism – those that are embedded within communities, used regularly, and focus on providing much needed social services, such as education or sport – youth camps are, in many respects, the opposite. They are detached from the day-to-day lives of camp attendees, ephemeral and infrequent, and often have a more overtly religious purpose. Most evangelical organisations run such camps, and they are clearly positioned as places of Christian learning, where Christians can become stronger in their faith, and non-Christians can learn more about Christianity. Thus, detachment catalyses commitment to Christianity: “when we really separate them [the camp participants] for a few days you will see the difference in them” (Evangelical Church, Nuwara Eliya). Whilst detachment enables more concentrated teaching and activities to take place, it also ensures that, for the duration of the camp, the attendees are dependent on the camp organisers for food, entertainment, transportation, activities and so on. Such a dependent relationship translates into the camp being a space of controlled freedom:

If they are taken out from the comfort zone, and to another area, all their attention is on us, and we have all the control… Plus, it gives them the freedom… every time they go for a youth camp… the kids, the teens love to dance, you know… That’s why they go to nightclubs on weekends: to booze and to dance. So what we show them is hey, you know, dancing is good, but
it’s who you dance for, and their mind is borrowed by that. And since it’s a dance towards God, they accept that in that area, because they’re isolated (Evangelical Church, Colombo).

The fact that the camp organisers are in control (as opposed to parents, teachers, or other religious leaders) means they are able to create a situation whereby attendees are free to explore outside of the rigid socio-cultural parameters of everyday Sri Lankan life. The absence of normative authority figures decouples attendees from the everyday setting, opening their minds to new possibilities for engagement. Indeed, the notion of dislocation and of taking youths “out from the comfort zone” is extended to personal friendships as well, with camp organisers seeking to disrupt existing friendship groups in order to make each individual as socially vulnerable as the others: “if I’m moving with the same person [when at the camp], then that’s not good, so we try to divide the friends, you know, break the friends… so that really helps them to make new friends and know other people” (Evangelical Church, Colombo). Altogether, this ensures that youths are dislocated from their existing ways of being: a relational process that catalyses new friendships, new behaviours and new possibilities for alternative religiosity (see Hopkins et al 2011).

Drawing a distinction between old and new, home and camp, there and here, is entirely intentional, with the cumulative effect of such dislocation being that it: “gives them the opportunity to define themselves, as well as explore themselves” (Evangelical Church, Colombo). The youth camp, being spatially detached and a space of detachment, puts youth in a position whereby they are encouraged to think, question and ultimately disrupt normative patterns and understandings of society,
culture and behaviour. Such disruption creates a void that is filled by Christianity: “we spread the gospel through and in the youth camps, through the youths” (Evangelical Church, Colombo). Like the youth club, the youth camp is therefore about communicating a religious message in decidedly non-religious terms, by non-religious actors (i.e. other youths), the net effect of which is to make Christianity a more attractive religious option than perhaps otherwise thought.

5.6.3 Non-Christian spaces of evangelism: the university campus

The final space of youth evangelism is one that is uniformly non-Christian: the university campus. Hopkins (2011: 158) has recently argued that ‘critical geographies of the university campus are curiously absent from research within human geography’, despite the important role-played by the university in shaping ‘the production of knowledge, students’ lifecourse trajectories and politics and power relations’. Such importance is not lost on evangelical groups, some of which (e.g. Campus Crusade for Christ and FOCUS – the Fellowship Of Christian University Students) focus specifically on evangelising in and through the campus. In Sri Lanka, whilst the university campus is an ostensibly “non-Christian” space, I was told in general terms how it holds unique value insofar as:

A university is like a mini Sri Lanka, a microcosm… it’s like a sample of what Sri Lanka is like, so all the tensions, all the trends in society, the clashes, the discriminations, all that you find in a smaller way within the university. And in a sense we can almost predict what Sri Lanka will look like in twenty years time by looking at what is happening in the university today, so it is an
important place for us to understand even Sri Lankan ministry for the future (Evangelical Parachurch, Colombo).

Each campus typically reflects the prevailing social, religious and politics dynamics, and tensions, of the locality in which it is situated. It is not surprising, therefore, that Christians, and Christianity, often face resistance on the campus. Despite such resistance, the university campus is also an important focus of Christian activity. Like the urban nodes described above, a multiplier effect is at work, given that the “campus is going to bring the leaders for tomorrow. So if we influence them [the students], then the influence is greater” (Christian Convert, Colombo). Such influence is, however, difficult to impart upon non-Christian students, and underscores the need to understand ‘the different ways in which university campuses are constructed, contested, managed and experienced in a range of exclusive, marginalising or empowering ways’ (Hopkins 2011: 158). The boundary between the campus and the outside world is clearly demarcated and often enforced, rendering it an exclusive place, and meaning “the outside world can’t do anything in the campus, because the campus, only the student can enter the campus” (Christian Convert, Colombo).

Students are key agents of evangelism within the campus, whereas adult evangelists find ways to interact with students once they leave. As one such adult evangelist explained:

When the students come out [of the campus], and they are very free, and they can go and have a cup of tea, and they will have time. They will be willing to

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22 Incidentally, beyond the lingering effects of the ethnic conflict, another key source of tension within the campus is the rural-urban divide (previously discussed), which is manifested particularly strongly in terms of language (i.e. English versus mother tongue), and the knock-on effect this has in terms of securing employment. The stereotypical Christian (i.e. one that is more “Westernised” than his or her counterparts) fuels allegations of inequality and unethical practice.
meet, you know, they like to share. And inside the campus they are frightened of who will see us, you know, kind of like when I meet some students now, others will ask who I am; why do you want to meet with us, you know? So they will be questioned, but outside, no problem (Evangelical Parachurch, Colombo).

In an ironic reversal of logic, extricating the student from the campus results in them opening their minds and being susceptible to new ideas and influences (similar to the youth camp, but in reverse). This runs contra to Nagata’s (2005: 111) understanding of school and university space in Malaysia, which, she argues, have become sites of ‘some of the most vigorous religious experimentation, competition, and membership “poaching”’. Instead, away from the surveillance of their peers, and outside the campus boundaries, Sri Lankan students become more receptive and pliable than inside the campus, akin to the effect of taking youths outside of the home, the refugee camp, or their everyday surroundings and to the youth club, or the camp.

The campus is not, however, devoid of evangelism. Because of the strong surveillance by non-Christian students, evangelical activity fills a different spatial register, taking the form of prayer walks that enable Christianity to permeate the campus in a low-key and non-suspect way. As the same adult evangelist cited above told me: “we prepare ourselves and we go around the campus, praying, asking the Lord to bring the peace to the campus; the student will experience the unity and the love, and at the same time the campus will [be] open[ed] to the God’s word and, you know, the gospel”. Thus whilst outward expressions of evangelism are rendered unsafe (and have resulted in
physical attacks on outside evangelists), prayer walks provide a spatially embedded, yet concealed means of fulfilling an evangelical agenda.

Another form of spatial embeddedness that evangelists use to reach the student populace is to engage faculty in evangelical work. Using Christian faculty members as spatially embedded agents (what Buddhist agitators call “brokers”), they are able to engage Christian and non-Christian students in ways that other students, or outsiders, may not be able to do. They are particularly useful in situations where “there are not too many Christians in university, but we have a Christian staff worker… it’s a more informal kind of approach” (Evangelical Parachurch, Colombo). The hierarchical nature of university faculty means that they circumvent many of the issues and restrictions faced by other, non-faculty evangelists on campus, and become an important source of influence that can be used to evangelise the non-Christian student body. Indeed, by bringing the structural mosaic back into consideration, it is clear that locations of evangelism are often imbued with mixed meaning, whether it is the home, the youth club or the campus. Spaces of evangelism leverage the structural mosaic by integrating different forms of engagement and influencing, which often leads to a conflation of goals. This contributes to an understanding of how evangelical space can be obfuscated, and the locations of evangelism can become more audacious.

5.7 Obfuscating evangelical space using the structural mosaic

Whilst the preceding sections have examined how evangelical groups react to different spatial environments (i.e. urban-rural), and use different spaces for different
evangelical purposes (i.e. public-private), with a specific focus on the house church and the spaces of youth evangelism, this final section examines how Buddhist spaces in particular (i.e. the temple) have been appropriated as sites of evangelical practice. The structural mosaic presupposes multiple layers of spatial ordering that obfuscate the distinction between structure and agency; it creates niches that enable new religious options to flourish (Henkel and Sakaja 2009). This contributes to the emergence of ambiguous places that integrate both religious and secular, or different religious meanings and identities in one site (see Massey 2005; Hopkins et al. 2011). The ensuing two sub-sections examine two distinct types of spatial ordering that engage with the structural mosaic: spaces of subordination and spaces of subversion. In the first instance, spaces of subordination exist when evangelical groups embed themselves within the Buddhist space of the temple, expressing deference to the prevailing religious structure. In the second instance, house churches are widespread spaces of subversion, as they are used to disguise evangelical presence. Both are typically aggressive forms of evangelical outreach, and highlight how the structural mosaic is used to help obfuscate evangelical space.

### 5.7.1 The Buddhist temple as a space of subordination

Evangelical groups practice strategies of subordination by using space to obfuscate the distinction between structure and agency. Such strategies involve deference to the Buddhist structure, manifested by Lefebvre’s (1991) representations of space. In Sri Lanka, the temple plays a centripetal role in villages throughout the country; it is the political centre of the community, and is traditionally used to meet the social, and religious needs of the village: “in every village you will have a Buddhist temple, there
is a Buddhist… structure there” (Christian NGO, Colombo). Evangelical organisations embrace this fact, regularly using temple grounds as a base for social ministry projects:

We have a [medical] clinic once a month: one in the [Buddhist] temple, the second one in the municipal council, the third in his [the pastor’s] church, so it rotates. So when we go there they know, OK, it’s a church, but it’s [also] a community service (Evangelical Church, Colombo).

The apparent trade-off between “church” and “community service” shows an expansion of the sites of community provision, from just the temple to the church as well. Such a substitution is especially contentious when it comes to children’s education, given that “in ancient Sri Lanka the education was completely on the hand of [i.e. provided by] the priest and in the temples; the temples were the schools” (Buddhist Organisation, Kandy). Christian Montessori’s are often located within both Christian churches, and Buddhist temples, and reflect the spatial possibilities afforded by non-religious engagement with society. Such engagement is the beginning of a process of religious acceptance: “in a place called Ratmalana [a southern Colombo suburb], in a Buddhist temple, we have a children’s ministry, and the monk is so happy… And we work closely with the monk… and he knows we are Christian, but he is trusting us, he knows, and works very closely with us. So we have kind of built that rapport, that trust” (Evangelical Parachurch, Colombo). Operating within the confines of the Buddhist temple reflects an encroachment of Christian influence into the traditionally sacrosanct confines of Buddhist space; a process that enables multifaceted forms of competition to exist within the same spatial register.
The motivations for locating evangelical ministries within temple grounds are, apparently, benign. It is argued that the temple is “a base for the community, it’s a place that the community recognises as reaching out to the community, and as long as you can keep both actions [social ministry and evangelism] distinct, I think it’s valid [to operate within the temple precinct]” (Evangelical Parachurch, Colombo). For evangelical groups to “keep both actions distinct” is, however, rarely possible in practice. Given the transformative potential of close geographical proximity and association, a veneer of distinction belies what religious agents have to gain from embedding themselves within Buddhist space. Whilst Megoran (2010: 383, original emphasis; see also Gerhardt 2008) shows how personal encounters can lead to an ostensibly positive reframing of self and other, in this instance the fact that Christians minister to society within Buddhist space foregrounds a politics of proximity that adds an extra layer of meaning to the ‘ways of being in certain places’. Whilst the reframing of self and other is positive, interrogation of the multivalent state of “being” suggests that space-bound encounters are perhaps more value-laden than otherwise recognised. In this instance, evangelicals use Buddhist space to circumnavigate suspicion, and speak to people and groups in ways that both enforce and yet challenge structural norms.

The traditional role of the temple in Sri Lanka as dispensary of Buddhist values and guidance, and as symbol of identity (Southwold 1983: 18), means that a focus on social ministry enables the recognition of evangelical pastors within everyday spatial registers of religious power and influence. Buddhist monks are authoritative figures that can easily mobilise the population against elements that are seen as foreign, or as
threatening the “interests” of the village. As a result, evangelical groups often express
deferece to monks, using them as channels through which aid can be distributed to
villagers. In many instances: “money [i]s distributed by the monk; it [i]s given to the
monk, and it [i]s done in the temple; because the monk is the civil authority of many
places, we respect that, and we will work under a system that recognises the authority
of the monk” (Evangelical Parachurch, Colombo). Apparent subservience to the
religious structure (“we will work under a system”) masks the fact that Christian
groups have their own system of operation that strives to influence the existing
hierarchy. As a point of comparison, in post-tsunami Aceh, Indonesia, some
Christian NGOs used donor funds to rebuild Islamic infrastructure, showing
awareness of the fact that “if you want to have an impact here you have to do it
through Islam” (cited in McGregor 2010: 741). In Sri Lanka, as in Indonesia,
evangelicals cloak religious difference in the garb of religious fixity by operating
within temple boundaries, complicating the normative assumption that ‘identities are
constructed by establishing difference, by the drawing of boundaries, by defining
what they are not: there is always an Other, and ‘othering’ is always a power relation’
(Vincent and Warf 2002: 46). The structural mosaic leads to the complication of two-
dimensional constructions of religious boundaries and difference, instead showing the
multi-dimensionality of evangelical agency. The verisimilitude of the temple grounds,
along with the place-bound actions of evangelism within the temple boundary,
contributes to an expansion of people’s spatial frame of reference along new axes,
creating new possibilities for evangelical engagement and alterity.

23 It should be noted that allegations of corruption within Sri Lanka’s monastic community are
rampant, and stem from both the academy and civil society.
The temple grounds also create opportunities for more subversive forms of evangelical engagement. The desired outcome of the strategies of spatial subordination, previously outlined, is not just to gain the acceptance of the temple or community; it is a necessary first step in the sequencing of the structural mosaic. Spatial subordination translates into spatial subversion, just as Christian co-optation translates into religious influencing over time. One pastor of a Colombo-based church told me how his regional church-planting strategy does, in the early stages, have little to do with the actual planting of churches: “if I come in [to a village] and say, ‘you know, I’m going to build a church’; they [the village] will compare and say ‘what’s going to happen to the temple?’” In lieu of a church, a strategy of spatial subordination is used to gain the acceptance of the temple first, before adopting a more formal evangelical presence: “if I come in and say ‘OK, we’re going to have a mobile clinic in the temple’, then they will say ‘OK, this is OK’”. Here the position of religious polarity (i.e. church in opposition to temple) is substituted for one of cohesion and subordination (i.e. medical clinic inside temple). The mobile clinic provides a pretext for Christian engagement; the temple grounds not only enable the obfuscation of evangelical space, but the obfuscation of evangelical intent as well. In a similar vein, using the house as a church not only deflects suspicion, but is also an effective way of attracting non-Christians. For these reasons, the house church is a clear and pervasive example of a space of subversion.

5.7.2 The house church as a space of subversion

The house church is a highly politicised space of subversion. The outward articulation of the house church as being a “non-threatening” 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: 459; see also Appadurai 1996) 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 Christianity, 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 it [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 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 place; pastors are “accepted” or “tolerated” because their church is not “official”; when it is “official” such goodwill is seen to dissipate; and finally, “people don’t want to change” and they don’t 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. It is this sense of subversion that antagonises some Buddhists, who object to the house being converted into a place of religious worship: “the house belongs to a person, don’t convert that to a church” (Buddhist Organisation, Colombo). The contradictions that are inherent to the space of subversion of the house church are hidden by the fact that “the sacred” is, as Chidester and Linenthal (1995: 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 place-bound and static. Instead, they create sacred networks, “filled with meaningful content” (and associations), that enable the house church to become a space of subversion in and of itself.

Scaling up the logic of the house church, and as a precursor to Chapter 6 (which explores, amongst other things, the politics of church registration), the structural
mosaic is also employed as a means of church assimilation, and acceptance within the public domain. The popularity of the house church model of worship is, in part, due to the fact that it enables Christian groups to gain a modicum of acceptance before expanding into a separate, officially registered, church building. More aggressive strategies of physical expansion also require the subterfuge that is a necessary condition of the structural mosaic. One pastor of an established (i.e. officially registered) evangelical church explained his vision for church growth, and his implementation strategy:

You can build a building and use it for commercial purpose[s] Monday to Saturday. [If you] have an air-conditioned building, you can hire it for seminars and stuff like that, Sunday use it for your church service, in which case you don’t have to register it as a church. You can have it as a, maybe as a community centre, right? … Kandy doesn’t have a youth centre, we are going to build a youth centre where you will have badminton, squash, weightlifting, a gym, a coffee shop… We will not register it as, in a sense, as a church. We will say it is a, it will be designated like any other community centre or hall.

In its simplest form, this strategy of spatial expansion reflects a scaling-up of the logic of the house church. Using a definitively non-religious space – in this case a “community centre” that offers activities such as “badminton, squash, weightlifting, a gym, a coffee shop” – for religious activity – enables the church to circumnavigate the religious framework imparted by the state. The range of activities planned on being offered ensures access to a broad cross-section of the population, and will enable the “church” to become an important centre of and for the community, and a base from
which Christianity can become more entrenched, and empowered. The fact that many churches struggle to gain the permissions needed to formally register a church building underscores the power of the structural mosaic in providing new, often radical possibilities for Christian acceptance and expansion in and through different spatial registers.

5.8 Summary

This chapter has explored in detail the locations of evangelical praxis in Sri Lanka. To begin, I identified the importance of locational hierophanies in binding pastors to particular locations, and encouraging resilience in the face of adversity. Following that, spaces of evangelism were explored, focusing in turn on the rural-urban paradox and the public-private paradox. Regarding the rural-urban paradox, I first identified urban nodes (in particular, Colombo) as the engines of evangelical Christian growth in Sri Lanka. Urban nodes are spaces in which conversion is most likely (due to the effects of anomie and lower levels of socio-cultural bondage), and contribute to the spatial diffusion of evangelicals. I then explored the supply of Christianity, showing how in rural areas people are typically immobile (which makes them easier to engage) and resistant, whereas in urban areas people are typically mobile (which makes them harder to engage) but more open to religious alternatives. Finally, I examined the demand for Christianity, showing in particular how, in rural areas, the group has an overbearing influence upon individual religious choice.

The following section explored the public-private paradox, focusing specifically on how formal religious groups occupy the public domain whilst, in contrast, informal
(e.g. evangelical) groups operate in and through the private domain. First, I examined the public place of religion in Sri Lanka, highlighting how identity (e.g. a cross) and access are two defining characteristics of formally recognised religious buildings. Second, I explored the network-based formations of the house church, showing how the lack of boundaries enables a form of organisational mobility and autonomy. Third, I examined public sites of evangelism, focussing specifically on the refugee camp and the crusade rally. Finally, I examined the house as a more pervasive, private site of evangelism that has proven to be an effective way of engaging people and reducing the stigma associated with religious experimentation.

Following that, I explored three spaces of youth evangelism: the youth club (as a proximate space of evangelism), the youth camp (as a detached space of evangelism) and the university campus (as a non-Christian space of evangelism). Whilst the youth club encourages regular, everyday engagement with a space of Christianity, the youth camp is detached from the everyday lives of the participants, creating a space of controlled freedom that is recognised as being conducive to religious experimentation. The university campus was identified as being typically resistant to evangelical activity, with the university perimeter providing an important boundary that dictates the openness of students to religious alternatives. Finally, I explored the obfuscation of evangelical space using the structural mosaic, focussing first on the Buddhist temple as a space of subordination, followed by the house church as a space of subversion. In the first instance I showed how Buddhist spaces are appropriated as sites of evangelical praxis, and in the second, how the house church deflects suspicion whilst simultaneously contributing to Christian growth.
CHAPTER 6: THE POLITICS OF EVANGELICAL CHRISTIAN GROWTH

6.1 Introduction

Having explored some of the spatial paradoxes that beset evangelical groups in Sri Lanka, this chapter examines the politics associated with Christian growth. The argument throughout is that the politics of evangelical Christian growth is, to a large extent, driven by different interpretations and uses of space and place by Buddhist and Christian groups respectively. Whilst Buddhist groups seek to control the use of public space by religious minorities, evangelical groups focus on avoiding public engagement and instead operate in and through the private domain of the house as much as possible. This creates a dialectic of competing religious interests and actions, and contributes to a number of religious outcomes that are often the unintended consequences of converting space, and converting people. In addition, the structural mosaic aids and abets religious conversion, and fuels (mis)conceptions of unethical practice. It is these differences and (mis)conceptions that catalyse tension and misunderstanding, and provide a platform that underpins the unethical conversion discourse. Indeed, recognising and articulating such differences is a necessary precursor to any sort of inter-religious dialogue and understanding.

This chapter is divided into three main sections, and explores the various politics associated with evangelical Christian growth. I start by examining the place-bound politics of growth, in particular the strategies of spatial buffering and the politics of permission that restrict the establishment and enlargement of a formalised (i.e. public) Christian presence. Whilst spatial buffering refers to a range of measures taken by
Buddhist groups to isolate and contain the spatial growth of place-bound Christian groups (i.e. those that have a church building, or a recognised house church), the politics of permission refers to the problems that Christian groups face when trying to formally register a church and, thus, become place-bound. The inability of many churches to become formally registered fuels the growth of the house church movement and, in this vein, the following section examines the politics of converting a house into a church. In particular, I focus on the politics of place(lessness) associated with the house church, and how such politics contributes to church fission and encourages dualistic religious behaviours (i.e. whereby Christian “converts” retain their previous religious practices and beliefs). Following that I examine the politics of converting people. I show how the market mentality of evangelicals can encourage unethical action, and explore some of the spatial modalities of the unethical conversion discourse (focussing specifically on how evangelism in and through the private domain is reconstituted by Buddhists as “unethical”). I also highlight the relationship between the structural mosaic and “unethical” practice (whether real or perceived), and show how leveraging the structural mosaic encourages pastors to engage in activities that can be interpreted as forceful, fraudulent or alluring. Finally, I end the chapter by exploring different understandings of “unethical” conversion, the aim being to add counterbalance to a debate that is currently (and unfairly) dominated by Buddhist allegations of unethical Christian practice only.

6.2 Place-bound politics of growth

This section focuses specifically on the place-bound politics of formally registered churches. It is based on the observation that being formally registered does not
exempt churches from resistance, or association with their unregistered counterparts. To this end, some formally registered evangelical churches even prefer to remove any outward markers of religiosity that may attract resistance from the community. For example, one evangelical church located in a Colombo suburb did not, until relatively recently, put up a signboard to identify itself, despite being well established within the community, and formally registered. The leader of the church explained his initial intentions to forego the signboard, and why he changed his mind:

They [the local Buddhist opposition] were saying that we were hiding it that we were a church, and so we said ‘OK, we’re not hiding, we will put up this board’, so we put it up. Our main reason was not to upset the village, I mean why do you want to upset the feelings of your neighbours? If it means putting a cross is an obstacle to them, it doesn’t help. I mean, it doesn’t increase our faith or decrease our faith if we don’t have a cross.

The lack of a signboard reflects an attempt to decouple the church from prevailing understandings of Christian place, which are associated with church architecture, crucifixes and signboards that reveal the identity of the building. In doing so, they are met with suspicion by Buddhist agitators who feel that such privatised religious practices are a form of deception that mask the subversive intentions of evangelical groups. One such agitator explained how “in our country, if it is a religious worship place it has to be displayed. It has to be a public place… If it looks outside like a house, you can’t practice religious worship inside. If you are doing that, that is wrong… They are trying to play [the] fool with the people” (Buddhist Organisation, Colombo). Yet whilst some churches choose to adopt a non-public veneer, others are
unable to establish a public presence, and have to resort to alternative (i.e. house church) models of meeting and worship instead. Below I examine in detail two examples of place-bound politics of growth. The first examines established churches, and how practices of spatial buffering, such as the appropriation and veneration of Bodhi ("Bo") trees by Buddhists, and the construction of Buddhist statues, are employed as ‘spatial strategies of purification and exclusion’ (Henkel and Sakaja 2009: 40). The second examines the politics of permission associated with gaining the legal approvals necessary to convert a house church into a registered church. Recognition of the difficulties faced by evangelical groups in obtaining the permission needed to formally register a church leads into the second part of the chapter, which explores the politics of converting a house into a church – the spatial modality within which most evangelical churches operate.

### 6.2.1 Spatial buffering as a strategy of resistance

Throughout Sri Lanka, the planting and growth of evangelical churches does not occur unabated, and Buddhist groups often employ strategies of spatial containment to restrict or control such growth. In this vein, the spatial buffering of evangelical Christian expansion is where measures are taken to isolate and contain Christianity whilst simultaneously articulating very visible, and overt expressions of Buddhist hegemony. Two examples prove the point well: one is the appropriation and veneration of Bo trees by Buddhist adherents; the other is the construction of Buddhist statues.
In the first instance, Bo trees are a distinct, and sacred, point of spatial reference for Buddhists. Tambiah (1986: 60) argues that they have become a ‘cult object’ amongst Sri Lankan Buddhists. His argument is brought to life by the conflict described by Yurman (1967: 322-3) in his ethnography of Ceylon, whereby the location of a Bo tree prevented the construction of a Hindu khovil in a village in the country’s interior. In many respects, Bo trees are a natural form of Buddhist hierophany that are appropriated by Buddhists as a symbol of the sovereignty that they claim over Sri Lanka, and can potentially cause problems for the spatial establishment of other religious groups. As one Colombo-based evangelical explained:

Bo trees are supposed to be a venerable thing, so they [Buddhists] can anytime come and sit around it and make it a place where they worship, and then it can cause problems; to quickly eliminate it is better. Normally if there is a Bo tree, a wild Bo tree even, monks setup an abode there, they claim it… [in] the south there are many places like that, so that is the reason why people [Christian pastors] are scared [of Bo trees]… In a rural area, if it is state land, they [Buddhists] will definitely claim it.

This excerpt further enforces the division between rural and urban areas: whilst Bo trees will “definitely be claimed” in rural areas, in urban areas they are commonly used as a pragmatic buffer to stop people from illegally dumping rubbish on seemingly unclaimed land. Moreover, the reference to Christian pastors being “scared” of Bo trees is grounded in the reality that “if you have a Bo tree [on church premises] it’s a problem because the next thing there is a Buddhist statue and then a temple” (Evangelical Parachurch, Colombo – see Figure 20, below). Indeed, one
church I visited in a Colombo suburb had a sapling of a Bo tree growing on the roof of an outside toilet cubicle. Whilst the pastor removed and disposed of it in front of me with good humour, in other places the maintenance of religious boundaries can be more problematic, as one leader of a parachurch organisation told me:

One church I know in Kandy, which was directly opposite the office of an [Buddhist] organisation, directly opposite, and a Bo tree was growing, a sapling was growing on top of the roof. So they had to very strategically remove it, not during the daytime, because if [they had not removed it] it would have given them a very valid reason to make this Christian church, or part of it, a focal point for Buddhist worship.

Not only does this draw attention to the sensitivity with which Bo trees must be treated in order to avoid offense (i.e. removing it “strategically” at night, rather than during the day), but it also highlights the practical necessity of defending Christian space against Buddhist encroachment. Whilst evangelical Christians commonly eschew the sacred dimensions of church space, they readily recognise the threat posed by the sacredness of Buddhist space, and go to lengths to defend the physical boundaries of Christianity. As the same representative of the parachurch organisation commented: “you fence your property, you close your doors, you distinguish your identity, so it is the need for distinguishing your identity which causes you to react to the other object” (Evangelical Parachurch, Colombo). Such a need to distinguish self from other serves, I would argue, more of a political purpose than it does a religious one. Whilst Christian space is not necessarily sacralised, it is representative of religious alterity and, as such, stands to benefit from erasing and defending itself
against any symbol that enforces the relationship between Buddhism and Sri Lankan territory.

Figure 20: A fully-grown Bo tree and adjoining Buddhist shrine, Colombo

Whilst the removal of Bo trees represents the protection of Christian space, the planting of Bo trees is also a strategy of resistance that is used to prevent the establishment of a Christian presence. A leader of one of Sri Lanka’s largest evangelical churches told me a story that illustrates the point well:

We had a pastor in the southern area who faced opposition. They [Buddhists] did everything they could to prise him out of the place where he was staying, and ultimately he moved out and stayed somewhere else. Then in the next [plot of] land, which was bare, they came and planted a Bo tree so that he
won’t be able to make this [his house] into a church. It was just a device, it wasn’t a place of worship; it’s about the perceptions.

Here, the Bo tree is used as “a device” to restrict expressions of Christian religiosity; it is a form of regulation that draws on community perceptions of the spirituality of the Bo tree. To remove the Bo tree is to remove a barrier to Christian acceptance and growth – a form of spatial resistance and counter-resistance that churches must constantly negotiate.

In the second instance, the construction of Buddhist statues and shrines reflects human attempts to counter, compromise, or otherwise contain Christian assertions of spatial sovereignty. Figure 21 (below) provides a clear example of Buddhist containment. Depicting the perimeter wall of an established evangelical church located in a residential Colombo suburb and, adjacent to it, a (relatively) new Buddhist shrine, the aggressive visual and auditory positioning of Buddhism relative to the church perimeter is revealing. As the founder of the church told me: “this Buddhist statue came about two to three years ago, whereas we have been here for the last, almost twenty years”. The shrine, I was told, is a symbol of local-scale Buddhist revivalism that seeks to counter, in a physical sense, the encroachment of Christianity, and is therefore construed as part of a broader “anti-Christian movement”. Before anybody enters the church they must first pass the Buddhist statue, and the chanting that is relayed by the opportunely positioned loudspeakers located above the shrine (with one facing the church) frequently interrupts church services and prayer meetings. In this instance, the counter-colonisation of space takes material, visual and aural forms as well. The pastor went on to add that “at least outwardly they are trying
to practice their religion, to some extent, by having all these statues all over the country”; a statement that reflects the marked differences between Christian and Buddhist conceptualisations of sacred space. Whilst Buddhists conceive space in a way that enables it to be fixed, venerated and potentially exclusionary, evangelicals adopt a more fluid approach that is detached from the places that they inhabit. Thus whilst the construction of Buddhist statues contributes to a place-bound politics of growth, such politics are compromised by different understandings of sacred space.

Figure 21: Spatial crowding in a Colombo suburb
The wall and signboard on the left are the outer limits of the premises of an evangelical church, whereas the Buddhist shrine, and the loudspeaker above it, is a more recent addition.
Statues are a form of spatial buffering that provide visible, even if sometimes meaningless, attempts to invigorate Buddhist religiosity: “now in Sri Lanka, every street having a Buddhist statue; why? This is Buddhist country!” (Evangelical Church, Nuwara Eliya). The construction of statues is especially concentrated in the southern coastal town of Galle, with one evangelical pastor pointing out to me where different statues are located, and why their numbers have grown in recent years: “even you can see if you go there and look the other side, you see another shrine, statue, you go there, statue, you look up the hill, you will see a peace pagoda, if you go this way there is a temple… before there was not that much of statues, but they [Buddhists] saw what’s going to happen. They are trying to challenge; they want to protect their authority [which] they feel that [they are] losing”. Yet whilst such statues are often a source of annoyance, the challenge they pose to Christians goes largely unnoticed. Instead, the motivations behind the construction and utility of such statues is often questioned: “we are not challenged by the statues much, because they have no influence. They have not influenced the society… But like I said, one person, he will like to gain merits by building” (Evangelical Church, Galle). Here, the value of the statue is believed to be a relatively quick and easy way for wealthy benefactors to gain individual merit, rather than a reflection of more wide-ranging Buddhist revivalism. In other words, they are believed to serve individual, rather than public need: “the thing is if they are effective, all these people need to gather around to worship; [but] they just stand there and the crows come and eat the things that they have, they are not worshipped, you know?” (Evangelical Church, Galle). This final comment reflects, in many respects, the paucity of Buddhism in responding to the perceived threat of evangelical Christian growth, with the statues being interpreted as
a meaningless distraction rather than a meaningful necessity that are needed to meet the religious demands of Buddhist society.

6.2.2 The politics of permission

Whilst spatial buffering is a strategy employed to contain the spread of place-bound Christian groups, the majority of evangelical churches are informal, and struggle to gain the permissions needed to formalise their presence and become place-bound. In many instances, a public presence is something that evangelical churches aspire towards, but is difficult to attain. In theory a public presence would appease many of the groups that are resistant to evangelical Christianity, yet in practice there are structural restrictions that prevent many churches from adopting a more public, and formalised, position in society. The official position adopted by the government is that “there are no restrictions for any religious practices in Sri Lanka; this is a free country” (Urban Development Authority, Colombo), with one representative of the Urban Development Authority (UDA) going on to state how “a religious building is taken as a public space, so when you want to have a public place you need this much access, you will need this many parking bays [and access to utilities, etc.]”. Converting a house to a church is permitted, as long as you “obtain approval from the local government authority and the Urban Development Authority” (Buddhist Organisation, Colombo). Obtaining such approvals is what drives the politics of permission.

Notwithstanding the importance of such functional prerequisites (i.e. access, parking bays, and so on), the ideal that “there are no restrictions for any religious practices in
Sri Lanka” is relative to the location and context in which it is applied, with the prevailing sentiment being that “a house is not a proper place to have a religious meeting, so if there is a conversion [i.e. from house to church], then UDA will have to take action and stop it” (Urban Development Authority, Colombo). Such sentiment imposes a degree of intransigence upon the legislative system to approve the conversion of a house to a church. As was told to me repeatedly throughout the fieldwork, “it [the ability to get planning or building permission for a church] depends on the area and the way that you move with the people and the authorities” (Mainline Church, Colombo), with one southern pastor adding that “there is a provincial council that governs each area; to get a building permit you must get their permission… they won’t give, they will keep delaying it, or they can even stop it, saying that the peace of the area is disturbed”. This reifies the importance of the strategic extra-group networks of influence, previously discussed in Chapter 4.

Civil society often dictates which religious groups are allowed a public presence, and serves to complicate the religious neutrality claimed by the government. State neutrality is an ideal used by anti-Christian groups to further restrict the activities and presence of Christianity. It is widely acknowledged amongst the Christian community that: “if people oppose [the church], even the government cannot do anything. If my surrounding says we don’t need a church here, then even if the government wants to give me the permission, they have to stop it, they will stop it” (Evangelical Church, Matara). Even the leader of a mainline church admitted that “today there is almost complete restrictions in putting up a so-called church, complete restrictions throughout the island for any church, whether mainline or not”. Discretion is deemed a necessary corollary to the “complete restrictions” Christian groups face, forcing
evangelical groups to disconnect themselves from the confines of the formal religious economy. It is this disconnection that renders regulatory constraints on growth ineffective, as it undermines the demand-side logic upon which land is allocated for religious purposes. A Buddhist explained:

If the people want a church there, they will give the land… They can’t buy the land because the people doesn’t want to… establish [a] church in their village. If I go to any village… I say I want about 2-3 perches\textsuperscript{24} to put up a worship place, they will give to me. Only thing is that I have to practice, I have to follow the rules and regulations (Buddhist Organisation, Colombo).

Simply put, whilst top-down systems of land allocation are designed to ensure that the supply of religion meets the demand, many evangelical groups use the house to supply Christianity to communities first, and then create demand to meet the supply. This practice is contentious. Until the house church is large enough to be absorbed within the official structure of society, and to reify its presence with a publicly recognised church building, it subverts the “rules and regulations established by the state to build up the worship places” (Buddhist Organisation, Colombo). It also causes an inflation of Christian supply, forcing the house church to become an underground movement. Although the house often foreshadows the church, the transition is long and frustrating for some – “[sometimes] pastor is trying to build a church without winning the acceptance of people, they are impatient… When I came here to build a church, I already had 200 people” (Evangelical Church, Matara) – and can encourage

\textsuperscript{24} 1 perch = approximately 25 square metres.
situations whereby Christian supply outstrips demand, contributing to an image of Christian insensitivity and aggression.

6.3 Converting houses into churches

As discussed in Chapter 5, evangelical Christian groups are defined by a heavy reliance on house church patterns of worship (although some mainline churches also use the house church model, especially in rural areas). The reasons for such reliance are twofold. One, as I argued in the preceding “politics of permission” sub-section, the approvals needed to legally register, build or expand a church are notoriously difficult to obtain, even for mainline churches. Compounding this is the fact that evangelical churches, by virtue of their theological orientation, pursue an aggressive remit of growth that encourages worship to be less place-contingent, and therefore less sensitive to the restrictions (and formalities) associated with establishing a religious presence. Two, house churches are a cheap, informal and flexible alternative to place-bound patterns of Christian worship. They are easy to establish and grow because, visually, they do not symbolise the encroachment of Christianity. As such, the house church ensures that evangelical Christianity remains an underground movement that is amorphous, subversive, and almost impossible to contain.

Notwithstanding, the conversion of space that the establishment of the house church is predicated upon is replete with politics, which often serve to undermine the house church as an arbiter of evangelical growth.

In the three sub-sections that follow, I explore the politics of converting space that are an inextricable part of establishing a house church. First I return to the point made in
Chapter 5, that house churches are simultaneously place-less (i.e. the construction of the “church” is predicated upon sacred networks, not sacred place), whilst remaining place-bound (i.e. they are located within a house). The dialectic of place-lessness and place-boundness compromises the stability and longevity of house churches, and renders them susceptible to processes of church fission. I go on to focus specifically in the second sub-section on the volatility of sacred networks; the third sub-section focuses on religious dualism. For many Christian converts, house church patterns of worship do not provide an adequate substitute for the religious experience provided by the temple or khovil, encouraging them not to discard, but to retain their previous religious affiliation as well.

6.3.1 The politics of place(lessness) and church fission

Place can compromise the validity of the sacred networks upon which house churches are built. Whilst the place(lessness) of the house church enables it 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. One convert to Christianity gave an accurate, if sardonic, insight into the problems that exist at the intersection of religious place and place(less)ness: “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?”. 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, place(less) approach to worship, and a new spatial register, mainstream Sri Lankan society remains imprinted with, and guided by, the religio-cultural topography of venerated places of worship.

Thus whilst the place(lessness) of evangelical Christianity makes it indestructible, networks render it fallible: place cannot be dismissed. It influences sacred networks – and the ensuing spaces of Christianity – in ways that are different, and often counter-productive, to the intended constructions. Place(lessness) is an idiosyncratically Christian ideal, one that is articulated in opposition to the reverence for religious place 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: 103) is frustrated by the staid, place-bound framing of religion in Sri Lanka. The success of the house church movement in China weighs heavily on the minds of many of the pastors interviewed, yet given De Rogatis’s (2003: 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” (Evangelical Church, Colombo), showing
how the model must be applied in a cultural reflexive way if it is to serve the purpose for which it is intended (i.e. to enable Christianity to flourish), and not for individual gain.

As a result, the place(less), network-centric model of the house church exists in a state of tension with the place-bound 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 place, it is a slow, and nonsensical transition for many. Mainline Christians can be particularly attuned to this dynamic, given that Christian patterns of worship cut across denominational divisions, and therefore provide a point of comparison. A young, Colombo-based Methodist was particularly clear in her repudiation of the performative nature of evangelical worship, which forms an integral part of the construction of sacred networks:

> Sometimes it feels a little bit, how do you say, artificial? A little bit unreal? Kind of more like a performance than a time of worship? And that’s why I think I found it [an evangelical worship service] creepy… But actually other times you really feel the presence of God, and it depends, I suppose. But for that programme I thought they were so focussed on getting people [to convert] that I felt at times there’s a tendency for it to be a performance. Because I know that people convert because of the miracles they see and all that, and then it becomes a very momentary sort of conversion… I think in the free [i.e. evangelical] church you do sometimes experience God, but then again you get
worked up to an absolute high, so when you go back [down], it’s a different kind [of experience].

The sacred networks upon which house churches in particular are built create a form of collective effervescence (see Durkheim 2001; also Heuser 2009) whereby people “get worked up to an absolute high”. Such a “high” can reify the presence of God, and thus encourage conversion, but it is also recognised as being a “very momentary sort of conversion” that relies more on emotion than it does reason. Thus, the place(less) nature of the house church does, I argue, encourage such behaviours as part of the process of breaking the mould of existing sites and styles of religious worship, and generating acceptance for the house church instead.

That being said, as cultural norms problematise the legitimacy of Christian place(lessness), the domestic space of the house can also problematise the legitimacy of the sacred networks upon which the church is built. Whilst geographers have addressed the sacred dimensions of domestic space (e.g. Mazumdar and Mazumdar 1999; Tong and Kong 2000; Dwyer 2004), an exploration of the domestic dimensions (specifically, politics) of sacred space is lacking (see, however, Kong 2002). The “non-place” of the house church is ‘only indirectly connected with [its] purposes’ (Augé 1995: 94) as a space of worship, yet it is directly connected to the space of domesticity that it represents. The politics of the home can, and often do, problematise the legitimacy of the sacred networks that are built during house church meetings. Whilst sacred networks are built upon the relationships between a collected group of believers and God, the owners of the house, or those that “host” sacred networks, often hold undue influence over the efficacy of such networks in forming a
church: “[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). Alternatively, Buddhist antagonists bemoan the fact that the house, being a private space, is one that encourages conformity, rather than debate: “house means personal beliefs of mine, it’s my kingdom, my personal beliefs. Now you can’t convert a house into a religion, common religious place” (Buddhist Organisation, Colombo).

The behaviours, attitudes and actions of hosts are also 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 can compromise the validity of the house church as an impartial meeting place for Christians. Moreover, the mundane operation of the house can 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 place 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 sanctification of church is a much more straightforward process than the sanctification of the home; the house church conflates domestic and sacred spaces, causing the former to be scrutinised, and the latter compromised. House churches are therefore based on ‘a structure that is
susceptible to easy fragmentation’ (Wilson 1971: 10), leading to schisms within the church, and eventually, fission.

Fission is a problem endemic to house churches, and is a function of both their precariousness, and the volatility of the sacred networks upon which they are built. Indeed, house church fission is symptomatic of the ‘schismatic, fissiparous tendencies’ (Gerlach and Hine 1968: 26) of Pentecostal groups in general. Yet whilst fission can be a natural outcome of growth (i.e. 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 place, or as a result of the capitalising behaviours of some Christian clergy and laity (see the “Market mentality” section below). In this sense, the ease and flexibility with which a house church can be established reflects in equal measure the ease with which they 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 this?” (Evangelical Church, Trincomalee). A pastor of a mainline church in the northeast lamented the 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: 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 (almost nullify) the entry costs to starting a church, enabling them to proliferate. Yet in creating space for Christianity to grow,
sacred networks also (ironically) create an intra-Christian space of subversion that empowers believers to not only compete against Buddhism, but against other churches as well. The same mainline pastor in the northeast was candid in his assessment of growth via 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 they [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.

6.3.2 The volatility of sacred networks

Whilst sacred networks are invariably effective arbiters of evangelical growth, they render the evangelical movement volatile, and liable to achieving short-term growth at the expense of long-term accretion. One of the key supply-side problems of the house church model is that it encourages reactiveness; sacred networks enable the construction of a footloose, underground church movement, but they can also be broken and re-formed in response to more secular, and corrupting, stimuli such as infighting, ego and wealth production. One pastor from an established evangelical church in Kandy shared a telling, and very representative, story that outlines the dangers of church fission:

When you go and split and you take twelve people and you go and start in your home, and you are having all this loud music and all that, you are asking for trouble. And you don’t have good relationships with other churches
because you have split up and gone, you are an easy target… There is one guy who comes and has a service right in front of my church, in one of those shops just across the road… I don’t know what idea he has, maybe to get a few people from my church, maybe? So things like that pose questions to Buddhists, now why should you have one in front of another? Those are things that add to persecution.

That being said, church fission is a defining characteristic of Sri Lanka’s evangelical movement. For many pastors, the lure of establishing an independent church outweighs the risks associated with being an “easy target”. The entrepreneurial nature of many evangelical pastors suggests a reframing of risk. Fission, and relatively aggressive strategies of growth (like starting a service in front of an existing church) present risks that need to be managed rather than avoided. Avoidance means lost opportunities for growth, whilst managing them (or not, as the case often is) can drive conversion whilst antagonising Christian and offering opportunity for Buddhist groups to criticise.

On the demand-side, sacred networks present an insufficient substitute for religious place in the eyes of the non-Christians to which the house church attempts to reach out to. To the non-Christian, religious place is 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). Identity formation is predicated on the formation of socio-cultural boundaries that help to demarcate difference; something that is inherently place-based, yet socially constructed (Newman and Paasi 1998; Vincent and Warf 2002; Anttonen 2005). Religious
buildings symbolise difference, permanence and fixity, and are juxtaposed against the sacred network, which is predicated on fluidity in order to ensure mobility across space. The place(lessness) of the house church impacts people in different ways; whereas it enables people to experience a religious alternative in a low-risk way, it also struggles to provide a viable substitute for the quality associated with the permanence and symbolism of the Buddhist temple, or any other “official” place of worship. 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, explaining: “that’s why the huge issue: the Buddhists can’t understand Christianity”. This suggests that the house church is a more self-fulfilling, yet problematic, arbiter of growth than has otherwise been recognised. Indeed, one of the main symptoms of the fragility of the house church model is the problem of religious dualism – a situation whereby Christian converts do not make a clean break with their previous religious affiliation, and instead retain both old and new affiliations in tandem – that is encountered by pastors throughout the country.

6.3.3 House churches and religious dualism

The “placelessness” of house churches 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 [i.e. sacred networks]’ (Hervieu-Leger 2002: 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. Echoing the sentiment articulated above, Christian house meetings are described as being met with confusion: “the main obstruction for Christianity to spread in these [tea] estates is that they don’t understand, they think that this [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 (see Figure 22, below), conduct daily *pooja*\(^\text{25}\), and continue to attend Hindu events whilst simultaneously attending Christian house meetings. The borderless church does 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: 198), leaving non-Christians confused and unguided. “Placelessness” therefore 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.

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\(^{25}\) *Pooja* is a Hindu ritual practice, which involves daily offerings being made to Hindu deities via a small shrine located within the home.
Pastors operating in the upland areas of Sri Lanka tolerate dualistic behaviours for a period of time, after which, Hindu idolatry is banned, sometimes by force. In some instances, pastors stage symbolic interventions, the aim being to force commitment to Christianity. Attending a church is a clearly demarcated place that encourages clearly demarcated displays of Christian religiosity, or, as one pastor put it: “when the place is permanent it has a positive influence on people to make a decision” (Evangelical Church, Galle). The impermanence of house churches, on the other hand, does not encourage religious exclusivism and instead leaves room for
dualistic religious behaviours to flourish. To overcome this problem, some pastors attempt to induce religious commitment through various means, most prominently the removal and destruction of “idols” (often statues and pictures of Hindu gods). Indeed, whilst Gerlach and Hine (1968) draw attention to the importance of acts of desecration (e.g. the burning of Voodoo objects) used to induce commitment amongst Haitian Pentecostals, discussion of the full ramifications of such bridge-burning acts is, unfortunately, lacking. One Nuwara Eliya-based pastor clearly described the process of claiming Christian control over a Hindu house:

[We] went to a place [i.e. house] in Pedro [estate]. They have a big wall full of idols… And both of us [the pastor and assistant pastor], we removed everything, we brought it to the church and we burnt it… Then we pray in that area, we ask the Lord to cleanse it with His blood. We pray within the home, inside the home, and that’s all. Sometimes we even use water, because people have more faith when you use something that they can see, instead of just close my eyes and pray, they will say where, we can’t see anything, but if I get a bottle of water, pray over it and just sprinkle it… In the beginning we have to tolerate them a lot, then at some point we have to say [that] now there should be a difference.

Not only is the home symbolically purified by the removal and destruction of Hindu idols, but the boundary between the Christian home and non-Christian community is also demarcated. Prayers and water are used to ritually cleanse the home in a bid to prevent the inhabitants from returning to their previous, dualistic religious behaviours. The actions required to show the “difference” between being a Hindu and being a
Christian can antagonise anti-Christian groups, who bemoan the disrespect evoked by such actions and use examples that are similar to the one cited above to justify their case against Christian aggression. These examples are, I argue, an outcome of the house church model of worship, and threaten to undermine the legitimacy of the evangelical movement by calling into question the sustainability of the house church model and the durability of sacred networks.

In creating opportunities for growth and diffusion, therefore, the longevity of the house church movement is a problem: “you have to find ways to root it [Christianity], 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). The reference to pastors as “free-floating loose cannons” suggests that place plays 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 place. 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 acceptance. Place generates acceptance, yet it also foments resistance, whereas networks are more experience-based, enabling Christianity to diffuse, but not necessarily settle. Place, in this sense, is not the physical
manifestation of the sacred, but it does represent a form of spatial integrity that causes churches to ‘leav[e] the shadows’ (Henkel and Sakaja 2009: 52), and is therefore imperative to the sustainability of Sri Lanka’s house church movement over time.

6.4 Converting people

Alongside the conversion of space, throughout the world one of the key drivers of evangelical Christian growth is the conversion of people. Religious switching is the apex of a considerably more wide-ranging discourse, with conversion representing an ‘unyielding form of conquest’ (Mills and Grafton, 2003: ix) that intersects with problems surrounding the co-existence of different religious groups in manifold ways. In Sri Lanka, conversion has become both the apex of inter-religious tensions, and, for some, a symbol of Christian aggression. The head of a Colombo-based parachurch group explained how religious conversion has become a matter of suspicion that can implicate both the converter, and the converted, within public debates surrounding unethical conversion:

Conversion has gotten so deep into people [of] all religion[s that] the moment you say I have become a Christian, no-one, absolutely no-one is going to believe that you did it solely out of your personal experience, your personal feeling. They’re all going to think no, somebody forced him; somebody put some wrong ideas into his head, somebody gave him some money, or somebody gave him this, somebody did that.
Ulterior motivations to conversion – on both the supply and demand sides – are a source of considerable suspicion, with assumptions of unethical practice being widespread. In Sri Lanka, as in many other countries throughout the 10/40 Window, a key problem facing evangelical groups is that “the real hostilit[y] is to conversion… They [Buddhist agitators] are opposed to conversion per se, and what they consider to be unethical [conversion], we [the evangelical community] would not consider to be unethical” (Evangelical Church, Galle). It is the different interpretations of ethical/unethical practice that are the focus of this section.

In what follows, I first introduce one of the key drivers of unethical practice, that is, the market mentality of evangelicals. As the earlier sub-section on church fission shows, the actions of some evangelicals can contribute to the (mis)perception that they treat religion as a business to be pursued for individual gain. The privatised nature of evangelical outreach contributes to such (mis)perceptions, and is the focus of the second sub-section, which explores the politics associated with competing understandings of public and private religious practice, and some of the strategies used by evangelists to gain access to the non-Christian home. The third sub-section examines Buddhist understandings of “unethical” conversion within the framework provided by the structural mosaic, and in doing so highlights how the structural mosaic can encourage “unethical” practice by conflating religious and secular goals. The final sub-section seeks to expand the debate by considering Christian interpretations of what constitutes “unethical” conversion.
6.4.1 The market mentality

In Sri Lanka, Buddhists and mainline Christians alike criticise evangelicals for treating religion as a business, and Christianity as a commodity that can be sold to non-Christians for a profit. Such religious economy rhetoric was repeated again and again during interviews. For example, a Kandy-based pastor argued that “this market mentality that some evangelicals have taken – that you just go and somehow try and sell your product, the numbers game – I think has brought a lot of damage to this nation”. A Colombo-based Buddhist made a similar argument: “they [evangelical pastors] are marketing executives: they have targets, they have monthly targets, they are paid monthly salaries, and they have monthly targets for conversions; we thought that selling Christianity as a commodity is an insult to Jesus Christ”. Ironically, the last sentence highlights the (not unfounded) position that the Buddhist right take responsibility to protect Christianity from its own representatives, with the Prohibition of Forcible Conversion Bill being a restorative move to that effect.

Whilst Christian groups of any denomination express a biblically mandated remit of evangelism, it is the overwhelming focus on conversion that differentiates evangelical groups from their mainline counterparts. After interviews with evangelicals I was sometimes asked to “accept” Christ or to read a prayer that would solidify (in words at least) a commitment to Christianity – practices that I found to be shallow and trite. Indeed, the process of conversion described by one Trincomalee-based mainline pastor is, in many respects, the polar opposite of the hurried strategies employed by many evangelicals:
We are not in a hurry [to convert]; we didn’t ask them [converts] to come [to church], we didn’t force them to come and join our Christianity, we didn’t ask them… They are coming for not one, they are coming for, I think, six months, one year so after that they say, ‘Father, I want to become a Christian’, and then I will baptise [them]. I won’t ask [them to be baptised], I won’t tell them ‘why don’t you take baptism?’ I won’t tell them.

The process of conversion described here – that which lasts between six months and a year – is in contrast to the impatience that I experienced with some interviewees: “I think the interest is in the new [i.e. evangelical] churches to have quick results… you want numbers [i.e. converts] immediately, you want to do things quickly, so that is where the problem starts” (Mainline Church, Colombo). This contrast brings to light the reality that some pastors “use the people for their gain instead of uniting the people for God’s gain” (Evangelical Church, Nuwara Eliya); with “their gain” being manifested in terms of converts, solidarity, more income from tithes and improved chances of garnering overseas support if church growth can be proven.

That being said, the market mentality of evangelicals is not just prevalent amongst Christian pastors, but the laity as well. By mobilising and deploying the laity, evangelical pastors are also empowering them, and removing the barriers to entry (e.g. training, dress, place, conduct) that come with being formally recognised “clergy”. House church fission, previously explained, is one example of Christian opportunism amongst the laity, as is the religious dualism that is so pronounced amongst the estate Tamils of Nuwara Eliya. Indeed, one pastor lamented the lack of seriousness, or the informality, with which many Christian converts (or not, as the
case may be) treat their new faith, explaining how “there are Christmas Christians, Hindu Christians, wedding Christians; there are Christian members of the church [but] we can see them only for Christmas service, New Years service” (Evangelical Church, Nuwara Eliya). It is this sense of opportunism amongst the laity that drives conversion via the structural mosaic (in particular), and is discussed in more detail below.

6.4.2 Negotiating public and private spaces of evangelism

As argued in Chapter 5, Christian and Buddhist conceptions of public and private spaces of evangelism exist in a state of paradox. Christians are criticised for using private, instead of public, spaces for evangelical purposes, yet it is argued that public forms of evangelism are essentially outlawed. Restricting the possibility of public engagement has been exacerbated since the Prohibition of Forcible Conversion Bill was first drafted in 2004. Indeed, as an evangelist from a mainline church told me, the Bill has had repercussions that extend beyond unethical conversion, and has served to further privatise Christianity by restricting the public tolerance for evangelical outreach. In the excerpt below, we discuss the impact of the Bill on street evangelism and the distribution of tracts – once a primary means of Christian outreach:

Why can’t you distribute tracts [on the street] anymore?
Because of this government law.

What would happen if you did? Are there laws against it?
Yes, because you cannot propagate the gospel here now.

In the public areas?
Yes, yeah. And you will be persecuted. Actually they have not passed the legislation yet, it is in the cabinet, only the vote is to be taken now.

**About the propagation of…**

Yeah, that’s right. So you are giving a tract to a Buddhist person means you are openly [proselytising], and in that tract maybe you have your address, so you are openly saying, you are openly propagating the gospel, so you cannot do that now.

**Is there a name for this piece of legislation?**

Anti-conversion bill.

**Oh, the Prohibition of Forcible Conversion Bill?**

Yes, that’s the one.

**So it includes propagation? Really?**

Yeah – have you read that Bill?

**Yes.**

It clearly says that you cannot propagate.\(^\text{26}\)

**So even though it hasn’t been passed yet, there is still this sentiment.**

Yes, because all the Buddhist people, Buddhist monks and police, all these people, they know that there is a Bill like this, so although it is not properly, 100% passed by the parliament, it is already, like, implemented.

As the excerpt above suggests, the Prohibition of Forcible Conversion Bill has evoked two (premature) responses that contribute to the ongoing tension between public and private spaces of evangelism. The first is the belief that it is a Bill that seeks to restrict

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\(^\text{26}\) The Prohibition of Forcible Conversion Bill does not say this, although the similar Freedom of Religion Bill does seek to make it an offense to accost “a person in a public place or the intrusion into the privacy of a person either at home or at the place of work” (cited in Owens 2007: 338). See Appendix 1 for a copy of the Prohibition of Forcible Conversion Bill.
all evangelical activity, not just practices of “unethical” conversion. This encourages Christian groups to further privatise their outreach, and acts as a source of legitimacy for punitive action to be taken against Christians. The second is that although the Bill has not yet been passed, “it is already, like, implemented”. This underscores the symbolic nature of the Bill, showing how it has consequences that extend beyond the reorientation of individual belief, instead effectively serving to force Christian groups to operate more and more exclusively in and through the private domain.

Evangelising through the private domain of the home can, however, often be as problematic as more public spaces of engagement. Making house visits to non-Christians is a high-risk, and polarising, strategy given that “people are suspicious… even these days they don’t open the door” (Mainline Church, Colombo). In the hostile context of the Southern Province, for example, it is recognised that “going door-to-door will not create the opportunities; they will close the door of their mind before you go there… They’ll be starting from a prejudiced viewpoint, so there is no point” (Evangelical Church, Galle). Whilst more pronounced in the Southern Province, throughout the island evangelicals run the risk that access may be denied to both the home and “the door of their mind”. In response, sub-strategies have been developed to gain access to the non-Christians. The distinctive attire of Salvation Army representatives, for example, is one means of gaining access: “if you go in a uniform then they see this person, a person whom we can trust; so then they open the door and just talk to us… they have sort of respect for clergy” (Mainline Church, Colombo). As explained in Chapter 4, however, the idea of a “uniform” is a symbol of Christianity that is rejected by the vast majority of independent evangelical pastors.
Another highly successful, and contentious, sub-strategy is the use of foreigners when making house-visits: “when people see foreigners they are more welcoming as well; that’s a good way of bringing in [Christianity]” (Evangelical Church, Nuwara Eliya).

In this vein, the American missionary in Nuwara Eliya, first introduced in Chapter 4, recounted an interesting experience:

Last time when I was there [in the estate], we would go through the village, to the different houses and pray for people. You see, there were some that I would pray for that were Hindus.

**How did it work, did you just knock on the door?**

Sure, I mean they wanted us to come [in].

**Is that just because you’re a Westerner?**

It’s possible… The willingness to let a person come in, I’m sure it helps.

This exchange brings to light two issues; the first is the use of the home as a space of evangelism, especially when the home being used belongs to a non-Christian, and the second is the use of a Westerner to gain access to such homes. Some perceive the use of foreigners as a tool to gain access to the home as a form of “allurement”, with a Colombo-based member of the Buddhist right explaining how:

They [evangelicals] might use foreigners as an allurement. When a foreigner comes to your house, as I said, because of that colonial mentality… a white skinned person [is treated with] more special regard than a brown or dark-skinned person. So Sunday early in the morning, when they knock at the door, they look through the peephole, then [if it is] another Sri Lankan, they say
‘hey, today is Sunday, early in the morning, don’t disturb us’, because that person has no prior appointment. But if you find a Westerner: ‘yes Sir, come Sir, sit Sir, what do you want Sir’ and that type of treatment.

I can attest to the utility of being a “white skinned person” in gaining access to people and places, as my racial position does, to a large extent, explain the ease and rapidity with which I could gain access to some of the country’s senior religious leaders. Notwithstanding, the use of foreigners to gain access to hitherto inaccessible locations (such as the non-Christian home) requires closer consideration by the academy, not least because of issues surrounding culture, privacy and choice. Not only that, the use of foreigners creates a fleeting space of transnationalism that engages with a putative stereotype of interaction surrounding the Western invader and the local subaltern. I have previously argued that in Sri Lanka (in rural areas especially), individual autonomy in decision-making is secondary to the broader interests of the group: an aspect of culture that suppresses conversion out of the majority religion. Yet the culture of hospitality – the opening of doors and receiving of visitors into the home – can exist in a state of tension with the interests of the group. Cultural rejection of evangelism at the level of conversion exists in parallel with a state of cultural acceptance of visitors into the home, causing the private domain to be a site of contestation in and of itself. As one Buddhist put it: “if you are a pastor, if you come to our house we [Buddhists] don’t like, but we give you food, we invite, welcome. This is our culture: when you visit our house, then we invite you [in]” (Buddhist Organisation, Kandy). Whilst such a dynamic is more prevalent in rural, rather than urban, areas, it does highlight how micro-scale cultural nuances are taken advantage of in order to help overcome macro-scale cultural barriers to growth.
The exploitation of such cultural nuances also creates an inviolable tension between strategies of evangelical engagement (many of which originate in the West and are aped by non-Western actors, of which the house church is a good example), and the local settings in which they are practiced. As one Buddhist put it:

This concept of door-to-door canvassing [originated] in the Western world, because you all have doors. If you go to our villages, our houses don’t have doors… If you go to a village they [Christians] just get into the house, and especially in an Asian culture, you don’t have the initiative of driving people away and scolding people away, out of your house. That’s against our culture, so I am against this concept of captive audience (Buddhist Organisation, Colombo).

Here, “door-to-door canvassing” is presented as an invasion of the Sri Lankan home, one that results in a “foreign” religious belief being forced upon a naïve and vulnerable local. As a point of comparison, one interviewee put forward the Buddhist approach to religious engagement: “we think if the people want to know something about Buddhism, he has to come to our temple… The Buddhist priest will never go to the unknown parties and give them Buddhism” (Buddhist Organisation, Colombo), and another adding that “if I want to learn Christianity, I know where a church is, I can go and ask the father, the priest, please teach me. But you have no right to knock at my door, intrude into my privacy and say hey, you must listen to this [Christian rhetoric]” (Buddhist Organisation, Colombo). Needless to say, the use of foreign evangelists to gain entry to the Buddhist home merely exacerbates the contrast
between Buddhism as being located within the temple – a local religion – and evangelical Christianity as being located (predominantly) in the house and, therefore, foreign. Moreover, using the private domain for religious outreach means that Christian groups avoid surveillance, creating a space of confusion wherein rumours, stereotypes and anti-Christian sentiment can develop.

### 6.4.3 Unethical conversion and the structural mosaic

The various social ministries and projects that define Sri Lanka’s evangelical community are enforced symbols of religious neoliberalism that evoke invidious responses from the Buddhist right. Traditionally, as previously explained, the temple is the repository of education, aid and welfare support in Sri Lanka. The inability of the temple to continue to meet such need (in many instances) creates a void that is readily filled by evangelically motivated groups. This dynamic is prevalent throughout the 10/40 Window, but is one not adequately accounted for by existing understandings of faith-motivated social engagement, which tend to uncritically presuppose that ‘charity can be reproduced as love and friendship, a gratuitous and creative giving of existence practised in relational service rather than with proselytizing in mind’ instead of ‘a continuing pursuit of control of, and power over the socially excluded other’ (Cloke 2010: 233, 235; see also Molendijk et al. 2010). Indeed, the acts of charity associated with social ministries are often underwritten by ‘an expectation and an implicit demand for acquiescence from the beneficiaries’ (Hollenbach and Ruwanpura 2011: 1299), with such expectations and demands contributing directly to the allegation of “unethical” activity.
In this sense, irrespective of whether or not the intentions of evangelical groups are the pursuit of control and power, popular perceptions dictate that almost any non-religious form of engagement with society is a guise for unethical conversion. This highlights the ‘inherent difficulties in differentiating between acts of charity and benevolence and acts designed to convert through force, fraud or allurement’ (Owens 2007: 350), and has caused some groups to be more reflexive in their actions: “even when we do social service now, we are very careful that we don’t do social service in an area where we want to start a church… If you do that, then they [the community] consider it unethical conversion” (Evangelical Parachurch, Colombo). That being said, many other groups operate through the structural mosaic by using social ministry as a pretext for more subversive evangelical practices, many of which fall under Buddhist definitions of “unethical” practice. Put differently, using the structural mosaic as a strategy of evangelical growth directly feeds into and, in many respects, supports the Buddhist case against “unethical” conversion as it presupposes the conflation of religious and secular goals. Below I explore this dynamic further by comparing three determinants of unethical conversion – fraud, allurement and force – with the corresponding strategies of evangelism that are pursued via the structural mosaic.

Fraud is one vertex of the triad that, according to the Buddhist right, constitutes “unethical” conversion. It also drives Christian growth via the structural mosaic, by using social ministry to disguise evangelical practices. A mainline pastor, for example, explained how “before we start a [medical] clinic we just pray with the people, say ‘this is God who provided all these things’, but we are never [asking them to become Christians]”, before going on to disclose that “there are so many
community activities through which also we evangelise, but very indirectly”. Using “community activities” to mask, and detract attention from, evangelical intent is fraudulent, especially seeing as in some instances the focus is more on conversion than it is social amelioration. In a similar vein, Figure 23, below, shows a feeding centre run by a Christian NGO in a north Colombo suburb. Catering primarily to disadvantaged children from Tamil-Hindu backgrounds, the saying of prayers before lunch is believed to be a concession to the charitable act of giving. That being said, such acts also instigate a cultural transformation of a subset of the population. The feeding centre is not only a space of provision, but also a space of experience that encourages those inhabiting it to make an association between what they are receiving (food/education) and from whom they are receiving it (“God”). The fact that the beneficiaries of such provision are children renders such practices all the more contentious.
Figure 23: Disadvantaged children queue up for a free lunch at a feeding centre in a north Colombo suburb

Run by a Christian NGO (which itself is an offshoot of an evangelical church), the structure pictured was funded, and built, by a team of Christian volunteers from the United Kingdom.

Moreover, evangelical intervention during times of crisis is often immediate, yet fraught with tension between the provision of relief and the opportunities that present themselves for proselytisation. One mainline pastor described how a group of evangelists working in a flood-stricken area “distributed meal packets to the flood victims with the gospel message inside. Naturally when a Buddhist priest or a Buddhist leader sees it, they will get very angry. I mean, here you have a disaster-ridden, helpless situation, and these people are helping them in order to proselytise” (Mainline Church, Colombo). The idea of “helping them in order to proselytise” clearly captures the possibility for fraud that is associated with strategies of evangelism enacted through the structural mosaic and, therefore, the politics contained therein.
A second vertex of the “unethical” conversion triad is allurement: an ‘offer of any temptation’ (Prohibition of Forcible Conversion of Religion 2004: 3). Allurement is the most common accusation meted against evangelical groups, and occupies a central place in anti-conversion discourse. The willingness to give is a defining characteristic of evangelical outreach, especially when it is done through the structural mosaic, such as the giving of gifts to children at Christmas time. In Nuwara Eliya, for example, a confederacy of evangelical churches held a Christmas rally in the town hall, which involved a nativity show, carols, prayers and the giving of gifts to all the children that attended, with the gift giving in particular being an overt “way to draw some of these [people from] other religions over there [to the town hall]” (Evangelical Church, Nuwara Eliya). Indeed, examples of allurement pervade nearly all strategies of evangelical engagement via the structural mosaic, and range from the giving of free medicine, to free lunches, and free English classes; all of which serve to draw people into a Christian space of engagement. The act of giving is a form of allurement that fuels inter-religious tension, as meeting the material needs of people can be a precursor to meeting their religious needs as well:

A t-shirt or a wristwatch, or money for your medicine or expenses, when he’s not getting it from the Buddhists, and a Christian priest is ready to give your medicine or your dinner everyday, I mean, what is the net result? That is conversion. You see you can theorise by saying I am not forcing you, but here, these are the goodies that I am going to give you… We are talking of the predicament that you are putting these people in (Buddhist Organisation, Colombo).
Allurement is a cost-intensive strategy of outreach that is an effective, and relatively easy, way of gaining acceptance within the structural mosaic, and driving conversion. Conversely, the inability to attract converts can minimise the desirability of allurement as a strategy of evangelism. A medical clinic setup in a tea estate in Nuwara Eliya, for example, was used as a front for church growth, and was discontinued when the desired results were not produced:

I have help from a few of my friends from Kerala [India], they pay for all the medicine and everything was given free, so lots of people came, they stand in a queue. But sad to say, we haven’t had a single conversion…

**Do you still do it?**

No, no, we don’t do it because there is no point.

Thus despite being able to draw crowds, the fact that “we haven’t had a single conversion” means the clinic was an ineffective tool for growth, and was therefore discontinued. In this instance, the agency of demand overcame the agency of supply, rendering the medical clinic an alluring, yet ineffective, form of Christian outreach.

The third and final vertex is force. Being the most belligerent form of “unethical” conversion, examples were difficult to elicit from the evangelicals that I interviewed, yet were forthcoming from the Buddhist right. One example did, however, come across as a particularly forceful process of conversion, with religious healing being withheld to non-Christians. It should be noted that this was a solitary example amongst Christian interviewees, with all others proclaiming to offer prayer and
healing irrespective of religious belief. Nonetheless, it clearly intersects with unethical conversion debates:

When a non-believer [i.e. non-Christian] comes to us asking for prayer, I just explain the situation. I’m not a man who is doing a mantra thing, I am not a person doing witchcraft: I am a servant of God. If you want healing you must accept Jesus Christ as your personal saviour, and if you believe Him you will be healed, because everything is done by faith – without believing or having faith we are unable to be healed. So first of all you accept Jesus, you believe. You might not know who is Jesus, but… you are here because you have some kind of faith, you are asking us to pray… If they say ‘no’ I say ‘no use praying for you’, because the reason I said I’m not ready to pray, when you pray… there is an evil spirit in your life [that] just goes off, but… when you don’t stand in your faith continually, the spirit that left you, it will come back to you with more strength and more power with seven more spirits. So life will be worse than what you had before, so I don’t want to put you in a bad situation, so it’s not that I don’t want to pray, I like to pray, but this is the bible truth (Evangelical Church, Nuwara Eliya).

Here, not only is healing and prayer withheld from non-Christians, but the pastor justifies his actions by claiming that praying for non-Christians will make life “worse that what you had before”. Force is presented as altruism, and conversion is presented as a necessary precursor to being healed. Whilst not ubiquitous, this example does highlight how the structural mosaic enables pastors to meet need in a variety of different ways, one of the most forceful of which is by presenting relief as being
contingent upon religious switching. Given the central position of superstition and spirits in Sri Lankan society and culture, such strategies reflect an unethical manipulation of people’s emotion and reason, and the superficial nature of “unethical” conversion activity. Exploring such superficiality in more detail reveals the need to situate “unethical” conversion debates within a more transgressive understanding of religion in general, and Christianity in particular. Doing so will relativise the existing (rather linear) complaints meted against Christian groups (i.e. that unethical conversion is a result of fraud, force or allurement), and bring into focus new registers of unethical praxis.

6.5 Debating “unethical” conversion

As the preceding sections have shown, conversion is the apex of inter-religious tensions, and transcends individual religious switching. In addition, understandings of what constitutes “unethical” conversion are largely determined by religious worldview, and interpretation of religious doctrine. This fits into broader discourses regarding the language of conversion, in particular how it has often failed to adopt perspectives that are broad or inclusive enough to cover the full gamut of conversion processes and outcomes. Such restrictiveness lends credence to Rambo’s (1989) view that conversion should be treated as a descriptive, rather than normative enterprise. It should be observed, understood, interpreted and explained as it is practiced in various local contexts and not, as some may argue, relative to an all-encompassing canon. To varying degrees, this is apparent in all fields of study that rely on, whilst call into question, the:
Transferability of culturally loaded concepts and keywords, usually from Western sources, to other traditions… The most powerfully evocative terms have some meaning for almost everyone but on closer inspection, turn out to mean substantially different things to different people, varying by context and audience… Meaning thus unfolds through action and debate and hence should not be expected to be completely consistent, to conform to an easy “definition” or set of prescriptions, either within or across cultures (Nagata, 2001: 492-3).

Given the range of stakeholders involved, and the politics embedded within, “unethical” conversion discourses exacerbate this dynamic further. As an instructor at one of the country’s theological colleges pointed out: “as far as most of us are concerned it [“unethical” conversion] is a contradiction in terms, because no Christian can convert anybody as far as we’re concerned; that’s a work of God and somebody’s heart, and we offer that [conversion] as an option, something to think about, a worldview change, but that’s nothing that can be forced upon [someone]”. He went on to add that “if people are involved in conversion for the sake of the material benefits [i.e. allurement] that they get, we would simply call that a false conversion: it’s not an unethical conversion, it’s not even a conversion”. Extending this line of thought further, it is apparent that the Prohibition of Forcible Conversion Bill is based on a different ontological understanding of what constitutes “unethical” conversion to those it seeks to penalise. Buddhists argue that individuals can be bought, bullied or deceived into converting, whereas Christians argue that conversion itself is not a matter of human interference, but is instead an outcome of an individuals’ relationship with God. Thus, “unethical” conversion is a misnomer that has been designed to
further the political agenda of the Buddhist right. One evangelist from the Southern Province went on to explain how:

No government, no religious leader can rob an individual of his decision [to convert], that is entirely your private matter. So there’s nothing called “unethical” conversion, it is you. But if you try to suppress it, that is unethical. If you, by your religious authority, by saying that we will not [allow] you to buy goods from this shop, that is what happens in Sri Lanka if you become a Christian, the shops close on you, the three wheeler guy will not take you to town, probably the policeman will not entertain your complaint, and probably you will be deprived of so many legal things which a normal villager would enjoy because you became a Christian. Now that is really unethical… but nobody talks of that… How do you treat me? How does the government treat me? Why don’t they give us land to build a church? Why do they say in the Constitution there is freedom of expression of religion, and they are telling [the] UN we are a very free country, we don’t suppress our citizens, they can practice: that is the religious garb to the world. Underneath there’s another jungle law, which deprives the person who gets converted.

According to this interpretation, therefore, the “unethical” conversion discourse is reversed, and instead used to implicate the government and the structure of society in its treatment of Christians and Christian converts. Beyond these two polarising views of conversion (i.e. that presented by the Bill, and that presented by Christians who argue “there’s nothing called “unethical” conversion”), however, there is a middle ground. This middle ground is occupied by pastors who are driven by the market...
mentality outlined above, and who concern themselves not with the “worldview change” described above, but instead with the pursuit of numbers of converts, whatever the cost. It is this subset of the evangelical population that fits with the definition of “unethical” conversion proposed by the Buddhist right, but in doing so implicates the whole of the Christian community and undermines the Christian position in the debate. Minimising the impact of this unrepresentative subset of Christianity is, in my view, not going to be resolved by addressing the symptoms of what is a far more wide-ranging, and deep-rooted, problem that afflicts inter-religious relations in Sri Lanka. Most notably this includes Sri Lanka’s relationship with the West in particular (especially given the historical – or colonial – contingencies that have such a strong bearing upon contemporary religious discourse), and its ongoing struggle to exert local religious sovereignty in a context of mounting Christian globalism.

Finally, public discourses surrounding “unethical” conversion have so far focussed on the individual, but have ignored the conversion of space. As this, and the preceding chapters, have shown, the conversion of space – such as houses into churches – is an issue of equal contestation that deserves recognition and its own separate dialogue. Christians commit a structural transgression by using private spaces for ostensibly public purposes, yet implicating them on such terms again fails to take into consideration differences in worldview. As one leader of a network of house churches in the south told me:

I know the government [is] trying to say that the house church is illegal, it has to be registered, and I don’t think that’s fair. I think a proper lobby, a proper
documentation is difficult because you have to recognise one’s religious beliefs to outlaw or to approve something based on their beliefs, so what they’re [saying] is we need to register all religious places of worship… But I think meeting in a home to worship God, to study the bible, to pray and all, there’s absolutely nothing wrong with it, and you can… because then, when the Buddhists hold their plate ceremonies27, they should register the house. When [Hindu’s] do their pooja’s, they should register the house, because that means every religious act should be registered, and that’s impossible. So it’s actually, what is a church? That’s the question.

To understand “what is a church” would be a first step towards understanding the theological divisions that represent the fault lines that exist between Christian and Buddhist factions. The Christian spatial register treats the house church as a legitimate place of worship, similar to the house as a site for “plate ceremonies” and “pooja’s” in the Buddhist and Hindu traditions respectively. Yet what exactly the conceptual differences between regular, collectivised Christian meetings in the house, and irregular, or individualised Buddhist and Hindu ceremonies in the house needs to be expounded in order to be reconciled. Doing so will not only enable greater inter-religious understanding to develop, but will also engender a scholarly appreciation of different religious uses of the same place, and how the interpretation of use forms part of a broader political ideology of acceptance and difference.

27 Plate ceremonies form a part of Buddhist weddings and funerals.
6.6 Summary

This chapter identified and discussed the salient issues that politicise the growth of evangelical Christian groups in Sri Lanka. First, I explored some of the place-bound politics of growth. I argued that the claiming of Bo trees and construction of statues by Buddhists are forms of spatial buffering that affect formally registered churches, and that informal churches looking to “formalise” their presence through government registration are subjected to a politics of permission. Following that I explored some of the politics associated with converting houses into churches. I began by looking at the politics of place(lessness) associated with the house church, highlighting how “placelessness” encourages religious experimentation, but it struggles to generate lasting commitment to Christianity. “Placelessness” also encourages processes of church fission, which is symptomatic of the capitalising behaviours of many evangelical pastors. Then I examined the volatility of sacred networks, showing how “placelessness” is an evangelical ideal that is, practically speaking, unsustainable in the long-term. Finally I showed how house churches struggle to gain credibility amongst existing place-bound religious institutions, with many “converts” pursuing dualistic religious practices instead.

The next section engaged specifically with the politics of converting people. First, I explored the market mentality of evangelicals (and, sometimes, the laity), showing how processes of conversion can be corrupted by the capitalising behaviours of pastors. Following that I examined how evangelicals must constantly negotiate competing tensions surrounding the use of public and private spaces for evangelical purposes. Specifically, I showed how anti-Christian sentiment forces evangelical
groups to further privatise their strategies of outreach, and how the privatisation of evangelical praxis often galvanises Buddhist suspicion of “unethical” activity. The final sub-section sought to integrate prevailing understandings of “unethical” conversion with the opportunities for evangelism afforded by the structural mosaic. In doing so, I argued that leveraging the structural mosaic encourages “unethical” behaviours. The final section sought to disrupt the prevailing understandings of “unethical” conversion in Sri Lanka (which are dictated by the Buddhist right), by articulating Christian understandings of religious freedom and choice.
CHAPTER 7: BUDDHIST HEGEMONY IN A GLOBAL SCHEMA

7.1 Introduction

Whilst the preceding three chapters have explored the various processes, patterns and politics of evangelical Christian growth, this final empirical chapter focuses on Buddhist responses to such growth. Understandings of the impact evangelical Christianity has on indigenous, often anti-Christian groups, is generally lacking (see, however, Bautista and Lim 2009). Such an oversight is unwarranted, given that responses to Christian growth are typically reactionary, violent, and often based on various essentialisms that implicate both groups in discourses that go beyond religious praxis (see Fox 2004). Given Christianity’s associations with the Western colonial project, alongside the globalist ambitions of contemporary evangelical groups, the inter-relations between local growth and global contingencies are necessarily complex and worthy of attention. In the case of Sri Lanka, the fact that Christian groups pose a threat (both real and imagined) to Buddhist sovereignty, and challenge primordial assumptions of identity, allegiance and togetherness, causes them to trigger disproportionate reactions from local religious hierarchies. Indeed, the fact that Christianity is still equated with the arrival of modernity exists in a state of tension with the search for, and articulation of primordial identities that remain constant through space and time (Harvey 1989; also Blackburn 2010). Such tension is pronounced in Sri Lanka, where being Sinhala-Buddhist means being bound to a lineage that has constantly sought to defend its sovereignty in the face of foreign invaders, from ancient history to the present day. The Buddhist right enforce such
bonds, using them as justification for strategies of religious protectionism and the often-violent rebuttal of Christian groups.

In contrast to the preceding three empirical chapters, this final chapter resides at a predominantly macro scale of analysis, and explores Buddhist responses to evangelical Christian growth. Divided into three sections, in the first section I explore a fundamental antagonism that has contributed to the development of a hegemonic Buddhist, anti-Christian discourse in Sri Lanka; that is, the destabilisation of primordial Buddhist power structures that is an invariable outcome of Christian growth. In the second section I examine how Buddhist groups construe Christian growth in terms of being a “threat” to Sri Lanka, focussing specifically on the construction of Christianity as a foreign religion (and a pernicious symptom of Western imperialism), the strong (and negative) associations with international NGOs (non-governmental organisations), and the ensuing impact on Buddhist insecurity. In the third section I examine the strategies of Buddhist protectionism that have arisen as a result of such a threat. I expound the self-Orientalising nature of Buddhist hegemony, focussing specifically on how Buddhist protectionism serves to not only control the actions of Christian groups, but the religious mobility of the Buddhist masses as well. Finally, I show how violence (both symbolic and physical) is an outcome of both self-Orientalism and Buddhist hegemony, and argue that both Buddhist hegemony and Christian competitiveness galvanise violent outcomes.
7.2 The destabilisation of primordial power structures

Evangelical Christian growth challenges the “foremost place” of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, as granted by the Constitution. The divinely sanctioned remit for growth, previously outlined in Chapter 4, encourages aggressive, and often secretive, strategies of religious practice. The ensuing attrition of Buddhism on account of Christianity serves to destabilise primordial power structures, which are religiously guided and culturally entrenched. Derived from ancient Buddhist hierarchies (see Tambiah 1976; Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988), such power structures find strength in the village setting in particular, where society is typically more homogeneous, communalised and untainted by the “corrupting” influences of globalisation. As one Colombo-based pastor reflected:

There is this cultural bondage, culture is very strong [in the village]. Buddhist culture, they have this thing called the village, the temple and the school, those three… They have this concept, so they think that [when] these three are interdependent, and when they are strong, then the village is moral[ly] uplift[ed] and all that… So there [i]s a kind of binding of people and he [the monk] [i]s consulted for everything, and that is quite strong in the village, and they see the Christians coming in and disrupting that unity.

The fact that “moral uplift[ment]” is contingent upon the strength and pervasiveness of Buddhist power structures reveals the threat posed by evangelical groups. By “disrupting that unity” and weakening the Buddhist structure, the evangelising and proselytising activities of Christian groups, whether intentionally or not, subvert the
control and influence of Buddhism. In addition, the monk is the judicial authority of most localities: “in Sri Lanka, the most power is in the Buddhist monk; the Buddhist monk say anything, the people will listen” (Evangelical Church, Galle). The monk is often instrumental in dictating village opinion and attitudes, particularly regarding religious matters. This has important consequences for churches when facing monk-led opposition: “you can have police, you can have President, you can have anybody, but the village priest [i.e. monk] has the say, the final say, you know, what they say is the final decision made” (Evangelical Church, Colombo). The agency of Christian groups is not only an affront to the authority of the monk, but also threatens the cultural foundations upon which most of Sri Lankan society is based. Whilst such authority is pronounced in the rural, village setting, it reduces considerably as localities become more urbanised:

In the village, the village monk has become the chief person there… whenever the Buddhist monk get to know that the Christian activities are happening then they organise all kinds of rallies and all kinds of opposition activities. But in the urban area, it is not the Buddhist monk who is the main person of this urban area; they have no kind of authority in the urban area (Mainline Church, Colombo).

The diluted authority of the monk in the urban setting provides one explanation for the relative clustering and success of churches in urban areas, especially Colombo, where modernising forces have already weakened such power structures. This also explains why rural areas are typically higher risk, and relatively more impenetrable, spaces of evangelism than their urban counterparts. In rural areas especially,
expressions of evangelical agency threaten the prevailing dominance of Buddhist thought and lifestyle, leading to a rigid demarcation and defence of the boundaries that separate religious groups. Indeed, in rural areas the actions of evangelical groups are most likely to ‘pose a challenge to the religious monopoly, domination, and/or ideals of the majority group, thereby provoking discrimination as a response’ (Fox 2000: 427). Such actions challenge the hitherto sacrosanct legitimacy of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, destabilise primordial power structures, and contribute to a “crisis of legitimacy” that resonates throughout much of the Third World (see Sahliyeh 1990; Juergensmeyer 1993; Haynes 1994). As one southern-based pastor reasoned: “when you speak about the Good News [i.e. evangelise], people who... keep a certain segment of the people under their authority and rule [i.e. monks], they lose their grip”. This accords with Fox’s (2000) assertion that religious legitimacy (articulated in the form of primordial power structures) is used to sanction religious discrimination against minority (in this case, evangelical) groups.

The destabilisation of primordial power structures by Christian groups contributes to an erosion of Buddhist sovereignty. As a response to such erosion, Christian growth is typically reconstituted as being part of a more wide-ranging “threat” to Sri Lanka; a realignment that, in turn, serves to legitimise expressions of Buddhist hegemony.

7.3 Constructing the Christian “threat”

In Sri Lanka, Christian growth is depicted as being a “threat” to the stability and longevity of Buddhism. The appropriation of postcolonial discourses that construe Christianity as a religion at the ‘frontiers of [Western] hegemony’ (Nederveen
Pieterse 1992: 13; Wallace 2006) serves an important, if paradoxical purpose in the development and justification of Buddhist hegemony. In this sense, the construction of the Christian “threat” both reflects (and deflects) a number of insecurities that arise when Buddhist hegemony is situated in a global schema. It reflects the fear of the weakening of the Buddhist power base as a result of Christian growth, whilst simultaneously focussing attention on Christian aggression instead of the shortcomings of Sri Lankan Buddhism. In particular, the Buddhist right draws evidence and strength from associating Christian groups with the (neo-) colonial West, and the strong associations between Christian groups and international NGOs. In the sub-sections that follow, these two characteristics are explored, followed by consideration of how Christian globalism exacerbates Buddhist insecurity, thus contributing to the formation and justification of Buddhist hegemony in Sri Lanka.

7.3.1 Christianity as a symptom of the (neo-) colonial “West”

Christian discourses in Sri Lanka are heavily tainted by the country’s colonial past, and often struggle to shed the mantle of foreignness that is popularly associated with the religion. The fact that ‘the past is not past, but alive and kicking… the enemy is prefabricated and available on order’ (Hellmann-Rajanayagam 1990: 120) presents an enduring problem for Sri Lankan Christians. Colonial antecedence, despite its anachronism, continues to be a powerful “enemy” against which Buddhist groups are able to mobilise society. The unethical conversion discourse, for example, is presented as a contemporary extension of a problem that has afflicted Sri Lanka for centuries: “we have a 500-year history of forceful, forcible, unethical forms of conversion” (Buddhist Organisation, Colombo). Such reactionism has morphed into
more contemporary understandings of Christianity and the West, and is fitting with King’s (1999a: 187) warning about the need to remain sceptical of the presupposition that ‘the period of domination of ‘the rest’ by the West has now come to an end and that scholars who have taken the post-Saidian ‘postcolonial turn’ can now claim to be free from complicity with regimes of domination’.

For the Buddhist right in particular, the growth of Christianity is symptomatic of a neo-colonising “West”. Christian growth triggers “a certain paranoia about Western imperialism and grand Protestant evangelical Christian schemes to destroy Sri Lanka and Buddhism” (Evangelical Church, Galle). Whilst this may appear a little embellished coming from an evangelist, it does reflect the prevailing Buddhist logic that “the only way to get this country today is by religion” (Buddhist Organisation, Kandy). As a result, the Buddhist right has reframed Christianity in broader terms that go beyond religious difference: “we found that there [i]s a hidden invasion in the country, a cultural invasion” (Buddhist Organisation, Colombo). Expounding the term “cultural invasion” reveals the supposed linkages between Christianity and Western exploitation, and the insidious outcomes of such a relationship:

We label this as a cultural invasion, because not only [do] they [evangelicals] change the religion, they change the entire mindset. After Western people left, people began thinking about the country, having self-pride, self-confidence, so when Third World become independent, that is a big problem for the Western exploitation and the postcolonial exploitation process… So they’re making a hidden army of the Western forces inside the Third World, through this conversion. That’s why Western countries have funded these churches. That’s
 Construing Christians and Christianity as the “hidden army of the cultural invasion” – one that enlists people via conversion – encapsulates the full scale of the perceived threat posed by evangelical Christianity, as well as the crisis of insecurity that undermines the transition from colonial, to postcolonial nation-state. Converting to Christianity problematises such a transition by providing a contemporary reminder of the colonial past. Moreover, according to such logic, religion is the conduit through which Western governments continue to exert power and control over Sri Lanka’s domestic affairs at both the macro scale – “what the Christian, Western governments are doing in this country is to create chaos in this country… the only agenda they have is to Christianise the rest of Asia” (Buddhist Organisation, Colombo) – and the micro: “even the police have been bought over, they have been silenced by the church” (Buddhist Organisation, Colombo). Altogether, this has contributed to an understanding that “there was a postcolonial ruling by the West; they were not in Sri Lanka physically… [but] they had the capacity to rule us… until 200528, our Sri Lanka was a Western colony” (Buddhist Organisation, Colombo). Western colony or not, the associations made between Christianity and contemporary forms of colonisation are clear, and often exacerbated by the actions of evangelical groups. For example, leveraging the structural mosaic encourages evangelical churches to align themselves with NGOs and other development organisations and, in turn, for faith-

28 2005 was the year incumbent President Mahinda Rajapaksa was elected to office. Such a specific understanding of change is, perhaps, due to the fact that this interviewee is a senior civil servant in the Rajapakse administration.
based NGOs to be implicated in the unethical conversion discourse. Such alignment contributes to broader suspicions surrounding the activities and objectives of NGOs operating in Sri Lanka.

7.3.2 Connecting Christianity and the NGO conspiracy

In 1990, an unpublished government report identified a significant rise in the number of NGOs in Sri Lanka, increased funding of NGOs and strong links between NGOs and foreign donors. Subsequently, from 1991-3 an NGO Commission explored in detail the activities of NGOs, allegations of the misuse of NGO funds and the (potentially deleterious) effects of NGOs on issues of national interest, such as religion. Since the Commission, NGOs, whether faith-based or secular, have been subjected to intense, often unfair scrutiny and suspicion in Sri Lanka. Like churches, they form an integral part of discourses purporting ongoing Western imperialism in Sri Lanka, with Goonatilake (2006: 9; see also Gunasekara 2012) in particular arguing that ‘as the Cold War ended, there was a conscious policy change in the Western countries and through them in international agencies to sponsor non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in the developing world’. Such a change has captured the attention of Buddhists and (some) Christians, and is based on the presupposition that NGOs represent an informal extension of Western power over the postcolonial world: “if you take the US and some other countries in the West, they have Western interests. So when they can’t find it through the direct government level, they will use these kinds of channels. They will use NGOs, they will use this type of missionaries, and things like that” (Evangelical Parachurch, Colombo). NGOs and missionaries provide contemporary manifestations of past grievances, serving to reify the prevailing
suspicion that “Western interests” are fundamentally at odds with Sri Lankan interests.

Figure 24: The United Nations headquarters in Colombo under siege
In July 2010 Sri Lanka’s Housing Minister, Wimal Weerawansa, led protests against the UN investigation of war crimes perpetrated during the civil war. The protests involved Weerawansa participating in a much-publicised hunger strike, a seven-hour siege of the UN compound, and the burning of an effigy of Ban Ki-Moon (see The Telegraph 06.07.10). Surrounding Weerawansa throughout his protest was a group of Buddhist monks.
Suspicion has been revived in recent years by allegations of unethical practice amongst the NGO community. Receiving widespread condemnation for allegedly perpetrating an ‘externally financed and NGO-fomented spate of forced and induced religious conversions [to Christianity]’ (Wanigaratne 1997: 225), such sentiment has been most pronounced in the immediate aftermath of the 2004 Asian tsunami, and since the end of the civil war in 2009. Allegations like these crystallise the linkages between NGOs and Christianity, which are perceived as being detrimental to Sri Lankan Buddhism: “most NGOs in Sri Lanka, most Western NGOs are Christian NGOs… whilst they portray themselves as independent, impartial, [with the] human rights label that they put, but in fact they are there to protect the Christian religion” (Buddhist Organisation, Colombo). The articulation of religious bias is compounded by a perceived lack of transparency and accountability. In this sense, the NGO conspiracy is based on the (apparent) inter-relationship between NGOs, Western donors and Christianity, and the anti-Buddhist agenda that such an inter-relationship foments:

They [NGOs] are relying on Western funding, so they have to satisfy their master, so their agenda is there… I mean, the Western world is not funding these NGOs to do nothing, they have an agenda, I mean, they had an agenda centuries ago, they have an agenda today. America has an agenda, Britain has an agenda, I mean, they [NGOs] are not coming here for the love of Sri Lankans.

**Why do you say that?**

Well, they suppressed the Buddhists for centuries; they destroyed our temples, they destroyed our culture (Buddhist Organisation, Colombo).
The “agenda” of NGOs is articulated as an extension of Western power, which in turn is interpreted in a resolutely anti-Buddhist light. NGOs, whether secular or faith-based, are all implicated in the broader discourse of Christian “threat”. The belief that “the Western world is not funding these NGOs to do nothing” highlights how perceptions of the past influence those of the present, with the “agenda” of the West remaining constant over time and rooted in the belief that “they are not coming here for the love of Sri Lankans”. In other words, past grievances are projected onto present-day ambitions, providing a source of suspicion that encapsulates not just religion, but development and international relations as well (see Olson 2008). Such suspicion plays an important part in constructing the Christian threat, but it also highlights Buddhist insecurity in the face of global forces.

7.3.3 Buddhist insecurity in global perspective

The constructions, depictions and associations discussed in the preceding sub-sections highlight the insecurity of Buddhist groups in Sri Lanka. Fear that Buddhist sovereignty is being compromised by the dictates of global forces has contributed to the construction of Buddhist nationalism and Christian globalism in oppositional terms. Whilst the former seeks to enforce the religious, ethnic and territorial boundaries that define the “nation”, the latter seeks to overcome such boundaries by baptising believers into a trans-ethnic, trans-territorial faith community. The competing ambitions of the two groups strengthen each in relation to the other, which increases the propensity for dogmatism and conflict. As Olzak (2011) shows, globalising forces often have a catalysing effect upon both nationalist sentiment and
conflict. On the one hand, nationalist movements around the world are often articulated in terms of a defensive response to the forces of globalisation, and a reaction against the increasingly globalist world system (see Spohn 2003; Rudnyckyj 2010). On the other hand, arbiters of globalisation threaten nationalist individuals and groups, rendering them ‘ontologically insecure and existentially uncertain’ (Kinnvall 2004: 741). Indeed, the insecurity of Sri Lanka’s Buddhist community is one characterised as “a majority group with a minority mindset” (Evangelical Parachurch, Colombo), a dynamic that runs contra to existing understandings of the inter-relationship between religion, discrimination and violence.

I emphasise here the irony that a minority, marginalised religious group is constructed as being discriminatory; the Buddhist right projects a (not unfounded) view of Christian belligerence, in that “the more they [Christians] can attack the Buddhists, they’re happy” (Buddhist Organisation, Colombo). Perceived discrimination acts as a ‘warrant’ (Little 1991: xxi) that sanctions (often violent) retributive action to be taken against evangelical groups. A discourse is created and sustained whereby ‘difference is perceived in oppositional rather than pluralistic terms, and differences between cultures become fetishized at the same time as internal heterogeneities within each culture are effaced’ (King 1999a: 188). One interviewee (a Buddhist convert to Christianity, who now pastors an indigenous evangelical church in Colombo and also works for an international religious NGO) outlined the ensuing tension between oppositional (rather than pluralistic) forms of difference with perceptiveness:

They [Buddhists] hate Christians because of the global village, globalisation. The Buddhism is nationalism, but the Christian is supporting globalisation.
We are one family, you and me; if you’re a Christian, I’m a brother, you are a brother to me. In any part of the world, the Christians are a brotherhood, they are supporting the global village, Christianity. The globalism is very against the nationalism. Nationalism looks at this global village concept as a threat. The Christian is more connected to the global: one God, one family, one kind. You can see the problem, Christianity is promoting the globalism. Can you understand why the Buddhist people hate the Christian people? Not just because of the religious thing, but because of the religious principle, the concept of God, no, no, this is against nationalism… We are proud to be Sri Lankan, we love motherland, everything is there, we submit to government, but the problem is that to the Buddhist, the Christian is the enemy. They want to promote a Buddhist Sinhala country.

The interviewee constructs an accurate distinction between the globalist ambitions of Christianity, which transcend national boundaries and putative cultural, ethnic, and linguistic barriers (“one God, one family, one kind”), and the nationalist ambitions of Sri Lankan Buddhism, whereby “they want to promote a Buddhist Sinhala country”. Importantly, globalism and nationalism are also recognised as existing in a state of insurmountable tension with each other: “the problem is that to the Buddhist, the Christian is the enemy” (and, indeed, vice versa). Indeed, the globality of Christian groups as a discursive construct is self-evident in their ideology of salvation, and positions them in painful contrast to the domestic, steadfast practices of Sri Lankan Buddhism. International linkages provide funds, ideas and support, and fuel allegations of local dispossession. Fundamentally, Christianity enables converts to
reap the benefits of the global market of supply and demand, much to the chagrin of ‘those who have been left behind’ (Kinnvall 2004: 742).

In light of this, it is apparent that the NGO conspiracy is partly a response to the failure of Sri Lanka’s postcolonial project of independence, development and modernisation, and partly recognition of the need to attribute blame for such shortcomings. As Juergensmeyer (1996: 1) recognises in his original conceptualisation of religious nationalism, ‘politicized religious movements are the responses of those who feel desperate and desolate in the current geo-political crisis’. Whilst Juergensmeyer does not define what he means by the “current geo-political crisis”, his recognition of the desperation and desolation of religious nationalists is instructive. Being outside influences that represent the West in general and Christianity in particular, churches and NGOs provide suitable foci for such grievances. Altogether, in the context of Sri Lanka, the “geo-political crisis” of which Juergensmeyer speaks is the meeting of Christian globalism and Buddhist nationalism, the nexus of which exposes the failures of Buddhism to modernise in a way that is relevant and viable (which, to a large extent, reflects the failure of state-led development throughout the postcolonial world – e.g. Collins 2007b; Rudnyckyj 2010), and the precarious role of Christianity in injecting modernising influences into a context that is resistant to such interference. As a result, the paradoxical construction of Christianity as being a “threat” to Sri Lanka (and Sri Lankans) legitimises the discursive positioning of the Buddhist right as the “protectors” of the nation, and perpetuates their hegemonic power.
The carefully constructed Christian “threat” justifies the need for Buddhist protectionism. The Prohibition of Forcible Conversion Bill, for example, provides one indication of the typically inflated, and often disproportionate responses to the original “threat”. Not only that, but discourses surrounding the Bill also reveal the assumed vulnerability of the Buddhist masses, their inability to counter the threat themselves, and the ensuing need for Buddhist guardianship. The following sub-sections develop three understandings that arise from the relationship between Buddhist protectionism and hegemony. The first explores the self-Orientalising frame that Buddhist elites use to control the Buddhist masses and subvert them to their authority. The second engages with some of the ideas raised in Chapter 5, by exploring the cultural intransigence that arises from the self-Orientalising frame, and focussing specifically on how discourses of ethnicity and language impact religious mobility. The final sub-section examines the violent outcomes of Buddhist hegemony: the symbolic violence of self-Orientalism, and the physical violence that is a by-product of the relational model of competitiveness.

7.4.1 The discursive formations of self-Orientalism

Contemporary discourses surrounding the Buddhist self are, I argue, self-Orientalising in nature. They paint and glorify a picture of Buddhist culture that is immobile and restrictive, which serves ‘not only to distort the complexity of the subject matter but also remain in complicity with particular ideological agendas’ (King 1999a: 94). In this sense, Kinvall (2006: 4) correctly recognises that ‘any collective identity that can
provide… security is a potential pole of attraction’ with ‘paramount figures… seeking to rally people around simple, rather than complex, causes’. In addition to Kinnvall’s recognition of the “collective identity” in providing a “potential pole of attraction”, I take her argument a step further and suggest that, in the Sri Lankan case, such an identity is an amalgamation of historical glorification, the desire to reverse a position of perceived servitude, and often paradoxical systems, and interpretations of power. Through self-Orientalising dialogues, the Buddhist right (Kinnvall’s “paramount figures”) are positioning Sri Lankans, and those “at threat”, within a structure of marginality which serves to enforce the prevailing asymmetry between self and other, Buddhist and Christian, local and global (see Kinnvall 2004: 745-9). Such dialogues often serve a self-fulfilling purpose (King’s “particular ideological agendas”), and form the cornerstone of Sinhala-Buddhist identity mobilisation in Sri Lanka.

Defining the national self in opposition to the colonial other is a common practice that gained traction during the latter stages of the colonial epoch. As Kinnvall (2004: 756; see also Said 1978) explains, with the shift to a postcolonial world system and concomitant rise of nationalist discourses, the national psyche is:

Frequently loaded with affective images of what existed before the “rape of the nation” by the colonial masters. Such narratives are often deeply rooted in religious discourse, relating the present search for the nation to a glorified past prior to colonialization. Religious and cultural rituals and ritualistic observances of anniversaries can serve to sustain the trauma and feed into the continued demonization of the other while sacralizing the self.
Here, the synchronous relationship between the “glorified past” and the “present search for the nation” is highlighted as being one that further enforces the notion of the “sacralized” Buddhist self and the “demonized” Christian other. Yet there is another dimension to such discourses, one that projects the image of a “glorified past” onto the corruption of the present in unflattering, and often self-critical, ways.

Speaking of unethical conversion, for example, a Kandy-based Buddhist monk told me how “our country’s [i.e. Sri Lankan] people are very innocent, Hindu and Buddhist [are] easy to convert”, whilst a Colombo-based Buddhist was more critical in his admission that “our poor common masses… they have no knowledge [of religion]”. Another representative of one of Sri Lanka’s Buddhist organisations readily criticised the lack of religious understanding amongst everyday Buddhists, which renders them susceptible to unethical activity:

All the people are not intelligent about religion. There are poorish people, there are uneducated people, grassroots level, village level, community-based old women, young women: they don’t know anything about philosophy. So somebody can go and convert him… Likewise there are so many [Christian] groups, they’re trying to identify the innocent, young, those uneducated group and they give it [a “bribe” or inducement].

Perhaps unwittingly, both sides of the unethical conversion debate are presented here: a gender-biased articulation of the religious ignorance and openness of the Buddhist masses (demand-side), coupled with the predatorial nature of evangelical groups (supply-side). In this instance, the debasement of the Buddhist self as “uneducated”, “not intelligent about religion” and “poorish” reflects a ‘culturally imposed
stupefaction of the people’ (Lele 1993: 59), and is in contradistinction to the debasement of the other that forms the prevailing wisdom regarding identity formation.

In this sense, self-Orientalism is a discursive strategy that aims to legitimate the protectionist strategies of the Buddhist right, whilst restricting the possibilities for autonomous choice and, ultimately, religious freedom. The architects of a self-Orientalising discourse are those that stand to gain from positioning Buddhism as weak and vulnerable within a global schema. It is a ‘rationalizing strategy to cover [the] deep rooted fears and anxieties of the Singhalese Buddhist majority’ (Korf 2006: 284): portraying the self as weak and vulnerable circumvents the need to interrogate the failings of Buddhism and the attraction of Christianity. Conveniently, it is the self-fulfilling relationship between ‘premodern ethnic ties and modern nationalism’ (Smith 1996: 447) that provides the impetus for self-Orientalising discourses, especially when such discourses are constructed in relation to other, more globalising, forces.

Whilst the Orientalising of the self presupposes an attempt at ‘retriev[ing], privileg[ing], and sanction[ing]’ (Marty and Appleby 1991: 816) past cultures, such a reading is idealised and, like more normative Orientalist discourses, can be far removed from the realities and ambitions of those it attempts to describe. Self-Orientalism is an integral aspect of Buddhist hegemony in Sri Lanka (and likely elsewhere), and is part capitulation to normative Oriental discourse; part response to the cultural challenges posed by globalisation in general (and Christian globalism in particular); and part justification for virulent strategies of Buddhist protectionism.
For example, one of Sri Lanka’s foremost Buddhist Reformists during the colonial period, Anagarika Dharmapala (1907: 286), describes the ideal from which contemporary reactionaries take inspiration: ‘free from foreign influences, untainted by alien customs, with the word of Buddha as their guiding light, the Sinhalese people lived a joyously cheerful life’. One excerpt from a Kandy-based Buddhist clearly echoes such a self-reinforcing cultural trope, albeit within a more contemporary frame of reference. In doing so, he highlights the restrictiveness of the self-Orientalising discourse, and the privileged vantage point from which those who claim to represent them actually view the Buddhist masses:

75-85% of the people in this country are farmers, and they’re not wealthy farmers like you find in Europe, they live at the peasant level. But they lead a good quality of life… they eat well, they dress well, they have clean homes and their lives are mostly farming. Now, once [they] get converted, I don’t think they like paddy farming because the [Christian] culture is such that paddy farming doesn’t go with the status, of that status [that comes with being a Christian], because you are supposed to be better educated. You are in better clothes, you are speaking broken English, you meet different types of people. Now when you go on Sunday to their [Christian] prayer centres, you find the English, white-skinned, Europeans are coming, because these people, they pat on the shoulders and say ‘hello my son’, and they [Sri Lankans] love a pat from a white-skinned man, that is the problem being under colonial rule, you see… And such a person who walks into that group finds that to get back into the mud and plough behind the buffaloes is something little.
The virtues of rural village life – eating well, dressing well and having clean homes – are presented here as failing to measure up to the standards of dress, education, language and social relations that are a corollary to Christian conversion. By presenting the Buddhist self in terms of a ‘cultural stereotype which [is then] used to subordinate, classify and dominate’ (King 1999b: 159), the architects of Buddhist protectionism are discursively stifling the progress and development of the masses and portraying such socio-economic intransigence as a force for the good of Sri Lanka. In abstract form, Christianity represents the ‘constant change and innovation of the modern world’, which is in contrast to Buddhist ‘attempt[s] to structure at least some parts of social life within it as unchanging and invariant’ (Hobsbawm 1983: 2). It is of little surprise, therefore, that as the benefits of modernisation become increasingly clustered and shared amongst a Colombo-based elite and their thinly spread networks of rural politicians, poverty is reproduced (especially in the Southern Province), and economic aspirations restricted (especially amongst the youth) (see Hettige 1998; Perera 2000; Uyangoda 2000). Indeed, the metropolitan elite that is plugged into, and maintains control over a large and disenfranchised rural population, forms the very basis of religious nationalism (Juergensmeyer 1993, 1996). As a result, not only are self-Orientalising discourses likely more prevalent than has currently been recognised, but they also have the effect of immobilising the Buddhist masses.

7.4.2 Cultural intransigence and religious (im)mobility

Self-Orientalism enforces a degree of cultural intransigence on the Buddhist masses, which in turn limits the potential for individual religious mobility. Religious mobility is the ability to convert out of an existing religion, and into a new one, and is
predicated on the volitional agency of the individual. Religious immobility, on the other hand, occurs when such volitional agency is suppressed or restricted. Sri Lanka’s Buddhist right fear religious mobility, as conversion out of Buddhism serves to weaken their power base, and undermine the coherence of the national identity from which they gain strength. As a result, besides being an attempt to curtail Christian proselytism, the Prohibition of Forcible Conversion Bill is also a strategy of protectionism that aims to restrict and control the religious mobility of the Buddhist masses:

We don’t want anybody to be a Christian or to go to any other religion; we prevent it…

So the role of [the Prohibition of Forcible Conversion Bill] is to stop Buddhists from converting to Christianity?

Definitely yes, firmly (Buddhist Organisation, Colombo).

Such sentiment reveals the often unspoken intentions behind the Bill. An interviewee from a different, albeit ideologically aligned organisation added a degree of justification by explaining the exalted role of Buddhism in Sri Lanka: “it’s not a mere religion for us, it’s our heritage, it’s our history, so we have an emotional link with Buddhism”. Indeed, Obeyesekere (2006: 151; see also Obeyesekere 1991) strongly refutes the conflation, rather than differentiation, of Buddhist doctrinal tradition and Buddhist history, as the latter is invented and subject to ongoing invention and corruption. He contends that the conflation of “Buddhist history” and Sinhala identity is erroneous (what he terms an ‘essentialized and primordialized axiomatic identity’) and a primary source of inter- and intra-group tension. Not only that, but such
conflation also creates an inviolable tension between the religious rights of the nation, and the religious freedom of the individual.

Whilst the Prohibition of Forcible Conversion Bill is widely viewed as presenting a legislative infringement upon the rights of the individual (Owens 2007), such an infringement is often obfuscated by the demobilising effect of culture on religious choice. As discussed in Chapter 5, culture is an important arbiter of religious immobility; it obfuscates the ethics of religious freedom, and forms the structural underpinnings of Buddhist hegemony in Sri Lanka. The triumvirate of cultural belonging collapses elements of religion (Buddhism), ethnicity (Sinhalese) and language (Sinhala) into a single grouping that determines behaviours, attitudes and choices. This has precipitated a cultural transformation of the universalist Buddhist tradition in Sri Lanka, as it has done with Hinduism in India and Islam in Pakistan (see van der Veer 1996b, 2001). Thus whilst religion ‘is seen as optional rather than inherent’, in the Sri Lankan context it is conflated with ethnicity to the extent that ‘both these attributes are desirable for all people at all times’ (Rogers 1994: 15). The cultural context greatly restricts the possibilities for individual religious mobility, as religion is tied to ethnicity, and ethnicity cannot be changed:

The government, I mean the [Buddhist] kings also, they fostered this idea… that if you are Sinhala you are part of the culture, and Buddhism is part of this culture. So people, there are a lot of customs that go with Buddhism… You are within a certain frame where the religion and the race are very, very close… [As a result] people feel that if you are a Sinhalese you have got to be a Buddhist, it goes with the culture, the customs of the land, so they feel that if
you are giving up your religion [i.e. convert] it’s a slur… If you’re Sinhala you have got to be a Buddhist, there’s a strong feeling that the saviours of Buddhism are in this country. So the Buddhists, so the people are not very religious, it’s part of their culture, they feel it’s part of being a Sinhalese. So anyone leaving the temple and coming to the church is an insult to the Sinhala people, the Sinhala race (Evangelical Church, Galle).

Ethnicity is an immutable anchor of identity that, in Sri Lanka, is inextricably associated with religion, thus restricting the possibilities for religious experimentation and change. Such a “frame” of understanding is most pronounced in the Southern Province, where assumptions of ethnic belonging render Buddhism the de facto religious “choice”: “when it comes to down South, it’s totally Sinhalese, so it’s a bit hard for me to say ‘I’m a Christian’” (Evangelical Church, Colombo). That being said, whilst ethnicity is immutable and religion inviolable, language provides a facet of cultural belonging that can be changed, presenting a channel through which religious (and, indeed, socio-economic) mobility can begin.

Since the Sinhala Only Act of 1956, which established Sinhala as the official language of Sri Lanka, language has played an integral role in Sri Lankan identity politics (Tambiah 1986). The strategies of evangelism employed by many Christian groups galvanise such politics. English-language instruction, whether via Montessori’s or adult education classes, is a common means by which evangelical Christian groups reach out to non-Christians, to the consternation of the Buddhist right:
We have our own traditions and historical values, and our historical values should not be diluted. Should not be diluted, the main thing, definitely, we are not allowing anybody to do that… we should not allow people, our babies, to study English (Buddhist Organisation, Colombo)

As this excerpt suggests, in Sri Lanka, Buddhist nationalism is not just about the ‘fulfilment of identity’ (Anderson 1992: 205), but the imposition and policing of it as well. Disallowing “our babies to study English” reveals an attempt at safeguarding the Sinhala language, and more deep-rooted suspicions surrounding the effects of Christian-sponsored language instruction on individual mobility. Such suspicion is warranted, given that English-language instruction is often little more than a pretext for evangelism; it helps to erode cultural barriers to conversion, and provides a captive audience to whom Christian groups can propagate their beliefs. In this sense, the paradox of which Juergensmeyer (2002) speaks (whereby Islamic nationalists are accountable to both nationalist identities and the transnational umma29) is recast in a different light, as religion (which Christians see as universal) and cultural belonging (which is place-specific) are divorced from each other, rather than mutually constitutive: “religion, or belief, supersedes culture; culture can be wrong, bible can never be wrong… if you look at the bible, God liberates you [from culture]” (Evangelical Church, Kandy). The need to “liberate” Sri Lankans (specifically the Sinhalese) from the cultural frame within which they are bound is a guiding principle of Christian evangelisation, as doing so will remove (or, at least, reduce) a significant barrier to religious mobility:

29 The umma is the Islamic nation. It is a collective term that encompasses territorially dispersed Muslims around the world.
[Christians] ask all the poor people to send their youngest, youngsters, babies to [their] Montessori… then they will learn, teach them English. Then the poor girl, they go and say ‘mummy goodnight’ when they are going to bed… then that poor mummy thinks ‘nice, my girl can speak English, I have to send her [to the Christian Montessori]’, she encourage: we oppose that (Buddhist Organisation, Colombo).

Opposing the sending of children to Christian Montessori’s reflects a willingness to not only restrict the linguistic (and by extension, religious) mobility of the individual, but their socio-economic advancement as well (given that English language proficiency is typically equated with better employment prospects). The fear is that “as a child, they don’t know Buddhism, their parents, they don’t know, they only want English” (Buddhist Organisation, Kandy). Putting religion before perceived individual betterment (“they only want English”) brings to light the deleterious effects of Buddhist hegemony, not just on those they oppose (i.e. Christians), but those they claim to represent as well. The ensuing structure of marginality enforced by the Buddhist right appears to promote national fortitude at the expense of individual advancement. Such promotion is, as Tambiah (1986: 92) argues, symptomatic of the fact that hegemonic impulses have rendered the Sinhala-Buddhist identity as ‘militant, populist, fetishized’, and as bastardising the traditions upon which it is based. Taken to the extreme, such an identity can sanction violence against those that are alien or other, whilst perpetrating subtler forms of symbolic violence against the Buddhist self.
7.4.3 The violent outcomes of Buddhist hegemony

Whilst 2009 marked the end of the decades-long civil war in Sri Lanka, Buddhist hegemony continues to orchestrate violent outcomes against the Christian other, and the Buddhist self as well. Understanding the motivations for such violence is especially important given that the transition to ‘a more equitable ‘post-war Sri Lanka’ depends not just on territorial securitization of the island’s geography, but also on forging dissident and dynamic space for debate and dialog around the composition of the contemporary Sri Lankan national’ (Jazeel and Ruwanpura 2009: 385). Currently, the persistence of Buddhist hegemony stunts the “forging” of “dissident and dynamic space for debate and dialog” in favour of a more uncompromising “composition of the contemporary Sri Lankan national” instead. Such uncompromising compositions serve to strengthen the grip of Buddhist hegemony, yet undermine the possibilities for individual emancipation and religious pluralism. To this end, the ensuing discussion explores two inter-related modalities of violence that are outcomes of Buddhist hegemony in Sri Lanka: the symbolic violence of self-Orientalism, and the physical violence associated with the relational model of competitiveness.

In the first instance, self-Orientalism is a form of symbolic violence that seeks to restrict the mobility, advancement and autonomy of the Buddhist masses. Such restrictions are deemed necessary given the construction of Christian “threat”, and the necessity of hegemonic “protection”. The discourse of threat and protection becomes more pronounced when interpreted in a global schema. Indeed, whilst the prevailing assumption is that globalisation can cause the individual to feel ‘bereft and alone in a
world in which she or he lacks the psychological support and the sense of security
provided by more traditional settings’ (Giddens 1991: 33), anomie also catalyses
religious mobility and change. Thus whilst self-Orientalising devices like the
Prohibition of Forcible Conversion Bill reflect the “psychological support and
security” of tradition, the ensuing religious immobility enforces a position of
marginality that does little more than strengthen the bondage between masses and
elites. Evangelical Christianity, on the other hand, is simultaneously a product of
global forces, and often better suited to alleviate their negative consequences. Rather
than the self-Orientalising emphasis on stalling, even reversing the effects of
modernisation (see Pathak 1998), Christian groups embrace and fulfil the needs
associated with modernisation (e.g. education, wealth, individual realisation, group
solidarity) instead of condemning their effect (see Heuser 2009).

The meeting of modern need exposes the structural inequality and immobility
associated with self-Orientalism, serving to enforce the differences between the
Buddhist self and Christian other. Evangelical groups provide the networks and
possibilities that are needed to begin the process of upward socio-economic mobility,
which adds ballast to Haynes’ (1994: 31; see also Juergensmeyer 1990; Fox 2000:
437; Spohn 2003) argument that ‘the arrival and consolidation of contemporary
religious militancy is rooted in the failed promise of modernity’. The promises of
Christianity offer a stark and immediate reminder of such failures, and, as a result, are
reframed by the Buddhist right in terms of “unethical” conversion and religious
imperialism. Paradoxically, therefore, whilst Buddhist elites lament the neo-
colonising tendencies of evangelical Christian groups, it is this same group that are
colonising and exploiting the imagination of the rural masses as Orientalism is, fundamentally, an imperialistic endeavour (Said 1978).

Such colonisation and exploitation not only reflects the symbolic violence being perpetrated against the Buddhist self, but also entrenches the need for physical violence as a form of protection against the constructed Christian “threat”. As Springer (2011: 91) notes in the context of economic neoliberalisation: ‘because of the performative nature of Orientalism, an exasperated populace may follow their ‘scripted’ roles and resort to violent means in their attempts to cope with the festering poverty and mounting inequality wrought by their stat[e]’. Such “scripted” responses are evident in the willingness to preserve Buddhist heritage in Sri Lanka: “I am a Buddhist, I know something of Buddhism, but I know it is my heritage… We have to fight, we have to preserve, we have to safeguard” (Buddhist Organisation, Colombo). Constructing a monolithic, out of touch populace that is disconnected and alienated from the processes of modernisation encourages violent recourse to external “threat”. Such tendencies are fuelled by the self-Orientalising discourse, which at once provides a reason to defend Buddhism, and a reason to convert out of it.
The securitisation of religion in Sri Lanka has become increasingly belligerent, although acts of violence are often informal, rather than state-sanctioned.

In the second instance, it is evident that relational forms of competition (previously explained in Chapter 4) beget relational forms of regulation; regulating the informal economy is the prerogative of civil society, not the state. Such a dynamic is brought to life by Korf’s (2006: 280; after Derrida 2005) understanding of roguishness, which ‘is about the question who holds discursive power over law and justice: those who hold power define the law and decide who stands outside the law’. The primordial power structures that control Sri Lankan society hold “discursive power over law and justice”, meaning the holders of power – the temple and Buddhist hierarchy – are able to condemn the actions of Christian groups; the metaphorical “rogues” that are constructed as being a threat to public order. As Korf argues, the “rogue other” is needed to both legitimise an extra-legal state of exception (i.e. to legitimise violence perpetrated against rogues), and to consolidate existing, often hegemonic, structures.
of power and control. Compounding this is the fact that persecution can serve to ‘embolden the actions of social, political, and religious groups that learn how to work within the system’ (Grim and Finke 2007: 637). The fact that Christian groups operate in relational ways in order to remain competitive can not only exacerbate the violence meted against them, but can “embolden” their evangelical resolve as well.

As a result, the competitive actions of evangelical groups simultaneously erode the numerical dominance of Buddhism, whilst contributing to the realisation of an increasingly punitive form of Buddhist hegemony. Correspondingly, there is an expansion of regulation, from formal (i.e. top-down, state-led, legal) patterns of control, to more informal (i.e. bottom-up, violent, reactive) patterns of persecution (see U.S. Department of State 2010 for a report on religious freedom – or lack thereof – in Sri Lanka). For example, the competitive value of the house church has to be tempered in relation to the more informal types of resistance perpetrated against it. Somewhat ironically, it is because of the intransigence of the legislative system to deal with house churches that has led to more bottom-up forms of persecution. A representative of a Buddhist organisation told me that the “sheds and all that of the evangelicals” are believed to “invite natural attacks”; people “get organised and threaten them [the house churches], attack them, or set fire to these places” because it is believed to be the most effective way of suppressing their growth. Such sentiment was echoed by a Colombo-based leader of one of the country’s largest evangelical denominations, who commented that “all the small churches, they are crushed, persecuted”. More importantly, such antagonism is legitimised on the grounds that “they [Buddhists] found they can’t rely on the established system, because the established system is with the powerful side, not with the weaker side” (Buddhist
Organisation, Colombo). Whilst the reversal of positions is a clear articulation of Buddhist insecurity, how such insecurity manifests itself is a cause of growing concern in the post-war epoch as Buddhist reactionaries stake ever-greater claims to people and territory, and play an ever-greater role in the regulation of religious minorities.

That said, whereas Grim and Finke (2010) argue that the restriction of religious freedom by the state results in violent forms of persecution, it is also apparent that the competitive actions of minority groups accentuate the persecution meted against them. In this sense regulation, competition and conflict should not be seen in unitary terms as the actions of one group against another, but as outcomes of dynamic processes of interaction. The competitive desire of both majority and minority players perpetuates Christian resilience and Buddhist persecution, causing each to strengthen in relation to the other (see Bouma 2007; also Gramsci 1973). Indeed, the strengthening of the Christian “threat” plays an important role in hiding elements of roguishness within the self (Korf 2006: 286), meaning processes of evangelism and proselytism (the “threat) serves to legitimise the acts of violence that are perpetrated against them. In light of this, it is evident that resolving the competitive deadlock between Christian and Buddhist groups is not just a matter of religious concern, but one that requires consideration of a number of historical and developmental contingencies as well.
7.5 Summary

This chapter has situated the growth of evangelical Christianity in Sri Lanka within broader discourses of Buddhist nationalism and hegemony at the domestic level, and Western imperialism at the international level. In the first section, I focussed on the destabilisation of primordial powers structures that are a common outcome of evangelical Christian growth. I explained that the effects of such destabilisation are especially pronounced in the village setting, where moral upliftment is equated with the strength and pervasiveness of Buddhism. The fact that monks are conceived as the judicial authority of the village means that they often hold undue influence over village opinions and behaviours, and can easily mobilise the village in response to a perceived Christian “threat”.

In the second section, I examined the construction of the Christian “threat”. In particular, I explained how postcolonial discourse plays an important role in the development and justification of Buddhist hegemony. Christianity is commonly constructed as a symptom of the (neo-) colonising West, with the colonial antecedence of Christianity providing an important conceptual bridge that is used by the Buddhist right to mobilise society against Christian groups. I also explained how NGOs are depicted as an informal extension of Western power over the postcolonial world, serving to undermine the sovereignty and interests of Sri Lankan Buddhism, and causing insecurity amongst the Buddhist right.

In the third and final section, I critically explored three interconnected outcomes of the relationship between Buddhist protectionism and hegemony. First, I examined the
development of a self-Orientalising discourse that casts the Buddhist masses as vulnerable, and therefore in need of protection. The assumption of vulnerability positions the Buddhist masses within a structure of marginality that subverts them to the authority of elites whilst providing justification for Buddhist hegemony. Second, I argued that self-Orientalism causes cultural intransigence, which in turn restricts the possibilities for religious mobility and freedom. Third, I examined the violent outcomes of Buddhist hegemony, focussing specifically on the symbolic violence of self-Orientalism, and the physical violence perpetrated against Christian groups. Importantly, I argued that the violent rebuttal of Christianity is often the outcome of a dynamic process of interaction, with both groups competing aggressively for the affections of the Buddhist layperson.
CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSIONS

In this thesis I have considered various theoretical standpoints, empirical insights and interdisciplinary analyses, the aim being to develop a new understanding of evangelical Christian growth. Such an understanding is most applicable to environments that are generally hostile to Christian expansionism, such as Sri Lanka. By exploring the expressions, patterns and politics of evangelical agency in Sri Lanka, I have shown that there exists a recursive relationship between Buddhist power and Christian resilience, with both strengthening in relation to each other. This relationship causes inter-religious antagonisms to become more pronounced and entrenched. Most importantly, the role of space in effecting strategies of evangelical growth and resistance is a recurrent theme, and draws attention to the importance and value of geography in helping to understand and explain patterns of religious change. This concluding chapter summarises the arguments and findings of each preceding chapter, and identifies the key contributions and limitations of the thesis; directions for future research are indicated throughout.

8.1 Chapter summaries

The thesis has been divided into eight chapters, the first of which framed the research problem and introduced the research aims. I explained that the growth of evangelical Christianity has been restricted in much of postcolonial Asia, where the prevalence of religious nationalisms contributes to broad-based anti-Christian sentiment. Such sentiment prevails in Sri Lanka, a “geo-religious” space that shares a number of similarities with other countries in Asia and beyond. Following that, I argued that not
only are geographical perspectives on religious growth needed, but engagement with discourses of religious growth beyond geography will contribute to a wide(r)-ranging geography of religion. Three overarching research aims – to explore strategies of Christian growth, Buddhist resistance, and to evaluate the relative success of each – were also introduced.

Chapter 2 reviewed the extant literature surrounding religious growth, and introduced the conceptual framework. I started by drawing a distinction between the structural determinants of religious change (e.g. modernisation, relative deprivation, the regulatory environment of religious economy theory), and human agency approaches to religious conversion. In particular, I explained the important and unique role of the evangelical organisation as an arbiter of religious change. Following that, I showed how a swathe of territory known as the 10/40 Window has proven to be generally resistant to evangelical praxis, and highlights the geographical limitations of existing understandings (which focus on territories in which growth is pronounced). As a result of such limitations, I explained the value of interpreting Christian growth in a spatial framework. Finally, the three axes of my conceptual framework were explained. Drawing on Giddens’ theory of structuration, I identified the structural mosaic as an enabler of religious growth, the spatial modalities of the structural mosaic, and one of the most pervasive spatial formations of the structural mosaic – the house church. More specifically, I suggested that leveraging the structural mosaic enables otherwise marginalised religious groups to exert religious agency in more subtle ways – by using non-religious spaces for religious purposes, for example. A focus on the house church reveals how evangelical space can be produced in networked (as opposed to place-bound) terms: this enables churches to form, disband
and move with ease; to occupy a variety of non-religious spaces and localities; and to catalyse Christian growth in a number of (hitherto under-appreciated) ways.

Chapter 3 outlined the empirical context and methodology. To begin, I discussed the rise of religious protectionism in Sri Lanka since the colonial epoch, specifically the emergence of the Buddhist right and, most recently, the Jathika Hela Urumaya’s proposed Prohibition of Forcible Conversion Bill. I also articulated the distinction between Sri Lanka’s formal and informal religious economies, explaining how evangelical Christian groups fit into the latter category as they are not formerly recognised by the state and often operate outside of more formal regulatory frameworks. The second part of the chapter provided an overview of the critical ethnographic approach that was employed, and a discussion of cross-cultural research ethics. Deviating from existing, quantitative-based understandings of religious growth, I argued that the qualitative methods employed – in-depth interviews and observations – could elicit new perspectives. Finally, the research sites were introduced and locational nuances explained.

Chapter 4 was the first empirical chapter, and explored how Christian groups realise their evangelical agency within the structurally hostile environment of Sri Lanka. I started by explaining the transcendental motivations of evangelical groups – inspired by The Great Commission – and the dissident geopolitics that result. I then introduced the relational model of Christian competitiveness, which shows how regulation determines the type of competition (not the outcome), with increased regulation resulting in more informal strategies of evangelical engagement. Expounding this further, I explained how evangelical groups overcome boundaries to growth by
working in ways that are secretive and encourage subterfuge (shown by the invisibility of Christian presence, the mobilisation of the laity, and strategies of spatial diffusion), the (sometimes deleterious) role of foreign catalysts in generating growth, and the strategic extra- and intra-group networks of influence that are a source of strength for evangelical groups. Finally, I identified two ways in which leveraging the structural mosaic can contribute to Christian growth. One, the focus of evangelical groups on social ministries is a source of social agency that can lead to religious acceptance: a process of Christian co-optation (e.g. evangelical responses to the 2004 tsunami). Two, once such acceptance has been attained, social ministries are often used to generate more evangelically motivated outcomes: a process of Christian influencing (e.g. the involvement of Christian NGOs in post-war reconstruction projects in the north).

Chapter 5 explored different locations of evangelical praxis in Sri Lanka. I started by introducing the concept of locational hierophanies, showing how divine prophecies encourage Christians to commit to a particular location. Following that I explored spaces of evangelism, focussing on the rural-urban, and public-private paradoxes in turn. In the first instance, I highlighted the importance of urban nodes as engines of evangelical growth, before explicating the differences between rural and urban supply of, and demand for Christianity. Whereas in rural areas people are typically easier to engage yet harder to convert, in urban areas they are harder to engage but easier to convert. In the second instance, I explained how the public domain is often the preserve of formal (i.e. recognised) religious groups, whereas the private domain is the preserve of informal (e.g. evangelical) groups. Following that, I explored three spaces of youth evangelism: the proximate space of the youth club, the detached
space of the youth camp, and the non-Christian space of the university campus.

Finally, I showed how evangelical space is often obfuscated using the structural mosaic. First, I highlighted the tendency for Christian groups to establish social ministries in Buddhist temples, the aim being to create a space of subordination that enables the encroachment of Christian influence into the confines of Buddhist space. Second, I argued that the house church is a space of subversion, as the appropriation of the ostensibly secular space of the house serves to deflect anti-Christian suspicion, whilst simultaneously contributing to Christian growth.

Chapter 6 explored the politics of evangelical Christian growth. I started by exploring the place-bound politics of growth, focusing specifically on how formal churches (i.e. those that are registered and have a fixed presence) are subjected to strategies of spatial buffering, whilst informal churches (i.e. those that are unregistered and have no fixed presence) are subjected to a politics of gaining the permission needed to establish a formal presence. Following that I examined the politics of converting houses into churches. I showed how the politics of placelessness contributes to church fission and encourages house church attendees to adopt dualistic religious behaviours that encompass both “old” and “new” religious practices and beliefs. A section on the politics of converting people followed, in which I focussed on how the market mentality of evangelical pastors (and laity) foregrounds the strong emphasis on converting people; how discourses surrounding the Prohibition of Forcible Conversion Bill have caused evangelical groups to privilege private over public spaces of evangelical outreach (a situation that, ironically, further antagonises the Buddhist right); and how leveraging the structural mosaic can easily (if unwittingly) encourage pastors to act in a manner that can be (mis)interpreted as “unethical”.
Finally, I presented Christian understandings of “unethical” conversion, the aim being to reframe the discourse within a Christian worldview. In doing so, I highlighted some of the contradictions that are embedded within the accusation of “unethical” activity, such as the curtailment of religious freedom that is an invariable outcome of the Prohibition of Forcible Conversion Bill.

Chapter 7 was the final empirical chapter, and explored how evangelical Christian growth has contributed to the development of, and justification for Buddhist hegemony in Sri Lanka. I started by showing how strategies of Christian evangelism weaken primordial structures of Buddhist power and control by encouraging society to question the traditions they have been born into (and often unthinkingly accept). Such encouragement causes a rupture in society, and threatens the traditional authority of the Buddhist hierarchy. Following that, I explained how and why right-wing Buddhist groups construct the Christian “threat” as being foreign, colonial, aggressive and incompatible with Sri Lankan Buddhism. I also explained that such exaggerations reveal the insecurity of the Buddhist right, and help to legitimise the need for protective measures that are disproportionate to the actual “threat”. Such measures reveal a self-Orientalising construction of the Buddhist masses as vulnerable, with the assumption of vulnerability serving to restrict individual religious mobility and freedom. Finally, I argued that the violence perpetrated against Christian groups in Sri Lanka is an outcome of the competitive actions of both Christian and Buddhist groups, and should not be viewed in unilateral terms.
8.2 Key contributions and relevance for future research

Existing theories of Christian growth tend to focus on either the structural drivers of religious change, or the agency of evangelical organisations. In this thesis, I have overcome such theoretical dualism by arguing that structure and agency are co-constitutive in influencing the strategies and outcomes of evangelism. Such co-constitution is most important (and most pronounced) in contexts like Sri Lanka, where Christian groups face structural opposition to growth. By applying Giddens’ (1984) structuration theory to the religious sphere, I have shown how the recursive relationship between structure and agency reveals how the actions of agents are often guided by the conditions of structure. Such a relationship foregrounds the relational model of competitiveness, and has been further developed along the lines of the structural mosaic. The structural mosaic provides an analytical framework that recognises the heterogeneity of structure, which in turn sensitises discourse to the possibilities for agents to engage with society in a variety of (often non-religious) ways. Leveraging the structural mosaic through the use of social ministries enables otherwise marginalised Christian groups to establish a presence in seemingly hostile localities, to reframe Christianity in a more positive light, and to grow, despite resistance. The structural mosaic does, however, also encourage meanings, intentions and boundaries to become confused, and causes “unethical” behaviours to flourish.

The tension that arises from expressing evangelical agency in and through different categories of structural understanding, and the ethical ambiguity surrounding such expressions, is often enhanced by the spatial practices of evangelical groups. The structural mosaic presupposes multiple layers of spatial ordering that obfuscate the
distinction between structure and agency. In doing so, it creates niches that enable marginalised religious groups to establish a foothold in a locality and flourish. As a result, spaces of evangelism are necessarily complex and multi-layered in order to overcome the stifling prohibitiveness of a hostile structural context. Outward symbols of Christianity are often eschewed in order to downplay signs of alterity. To this end, sensitivity to the spatial practices of evangelical groups reveals the agentic role of space in disguising difference and suppressing the true extent of evangelical presence, as shown by the establishment of social ministries within temple boundaries, and the widespread networks of house churches that exist throughout Sri Lanka. Indeed, the structural mosaic contributes to the emergence of ambiguous spaces that integrate both religious and secular, or different religious identities and meanings in one site. The most successful evangelical groups are defined by multifaceted productions of space, and the production of new spatial metaphors. As a result, the production of evangelical space is often defined by conflated meanings, flexible uses, and an overarching commitment to Christian growth.

Building upon this, the thesis advances three more specific contributions. The first pertains to the spatial approach to evangelical Christian growth. Such an approach provides recourse to the inability of existing models to explain Christian growth in hostile environments around the world. The second is my conceptualisation of network-based sacred space. Such a conceptualisation provides a significant departure from existing, place-bound moulds, and presents a new theoretical direction in which the geographies of religion can advance. The third is more holistic in nature, and identifies the fact that this thesis contributes to a more extrospective geography of religion. It not only tackles an issue that has animated the broader social sciences for a
long time (religious growth), but also engages with, and advances ostensibly sociological theories (e.g. structuration theory) through geographical reasoning. I elaborate on each contribution below, as well as its relevance for future research agendas.

8.2.1 *A spatial understanding of evangelical Christian growth*

More than anything else, this thesis has furthered a spatial understanding of evangelical Christian growth. Integrating understandings of structuration theory and space, and applying the resultant formation – the spatial modalities of the structural mosaic – to the religious sphere has advanced a new approach to evangelical Christian growth. Indeed, the example of evangelical groups using social ministries to establish themselves on temple grounds provides potent indication of the ‘spatial possibilities [of marginal groups] that vie for ascendancy’ (Knott 2005b: 165). It is these possibilities that serve to disrupt normative conceptions of religious structure and tradition, with space playing an integral role in the ‘ever-shifting social geometry of power and signification in which the material and ideological are co-constitutive’ (Jazeel and Brun 2009: 4). How evangelical groups are able to shift the “social geometry of power and signification” in their favour is through the manipulation of people’s frame of socio-spatial reference, which is achieved by collapsing different expressions of agency into one workable, albeit contentious, form. The structural mosaic involves a conflation of religious and secular goals that problematise the regulation and surveillance of minority groups. It complicates attempts to resolve inter-religious tension at the administrative level, and can inform contemporary (and alternative) strategies of religious regulation and control.
Recognising the spatial variability of evangelical Christian praxis renders the utility of legislative solutions to the problem of “unethical” conversion questionable. It appears that the current unethical conversion discourse (i.e. that which focuses on acts of force, fraud, or allurement, as defined by the Prohibition of Forcible Conversion Bill) is merely addressing the symptoms of Christian growth. In many respects it neglects the drivers of “unethical” activity, that is, the strategies of growth that are enacted by leveraging the structural mosaic. Whilst the Prohibition of Forcible Conversion Bill is designed to restrict unabated expressions of Christian agency, it does nothing to address the structurally nuanced patterns of evangelism that foreground Christian “recalcitrance” in Sri Lanka. The implications of this for the various stakeholders involved in the structural mosaic (i.e. religious organisations, NGOs, policymakers) present a challenge that future research on religious growth, regulation, and decline, would do well to address.

8.2.2 Network-based sacred space

The second contribution is a corollary of the first: the construction of network-based – as opposed to place-based – sacred spaces that enable Christian growth. Decoupling religious space from place opens discourse to new possibilities and understandings of the sacred, which are built on the possibilities that arise from movement, impermanence and change. As the case of the Sri Lankan house church movement attests, fidelity to place is substituted (or not) by fidelity to the sacred networks that are self-generated by a group of religious observers – an ideal that, although problematic, has the potential to radically alter existing understandings of the
production and contestation of sacred space. In particular, sacred networks provide a viable analytical tool that can further the study of religious movements (and not just place-bound institutions). Such movements traverse scales, and it is the dialectical relationship between macro-scale ideology and micro-scale praxis that brings the politics and potential of sacred networks to life. Thus whilst the thesis 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 Pred 1984; Brace et al. 2006), there is a 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 (e.g. global, national, regional, local, bodily – see Kong 2001), and towards a treatment of 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 global Christendom and Islamic jihad) that are founded on network principles. As Augé (1995) recognises, non-place is particularly embraced by those whose aim is to retain or conquer territory, resulting in paradoxically placeless assertions of territoriality. Given the subversive nature of religious placelessness, the fault lines that emerge when territorial conquest materialises in more visible forms can, potentially, be explosive, as evinced by the attacks perpetrated against house church in Sri Lanka and around the world. 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: 1962, see also 2006). How the body is implicated in the production
and maintenance of sacred networks at various scales of analysis, from the embodied (e.g. inspired worship), to the congregational (e.g. collective effervescence), and the transcendental (e.g. spiritual healing and exorcism) is needed in order to connect the micro-scale practices of the body with more broad-based assertions of spiritual authority.

8.2.3 Towards a more extrospective geography of religion

Whilst the preceding two contributions are specific in nature, they are both implicated in the third, more general contribution. From the topic of study, to the interdisciplinary nature of the theoretical framework and analysis, this thesis has made headway in the advancement of a more extrospective geography of religion. Such a shift towards extrospection is nascent, but overdue. As Kong (2010: 770) recognises in her most recent review of the field: ‘geographical insights have not yet significantly influenced religious scholarship in other disciplines’. In light of this, the findings of the thesis have not only contributed to, but also furthered critical debates being rehearsed in the broader social sciences. Notably, my application of structuration theory to the religious sphere, and consideration of the spatial modalities of the structural mosaic (the outcomes of such application), highlights the value to be gained from blending sociological and geographical theorising. In addition, whilst my use of religious economy theorisations has remained purely sociological in scope, the insights to be gained from exploring the spaces of the religious economy will provide another step to further consolidating the role of geography in the social scientific study of religion.
To that end, whilst the past two decades have seen the geographies of religion forging an identity and gaining a sense of legitimacy within the wider geographical enterprise, it is now time to start exploring outside of our disciplinary boundaries in a more sustained and systematic manner. The current trend towards introspection is perceptible, and self-restricting; the geographies of religion should be viewed not in exclusory terms, but as a transgressive lens that can be focused upon any field of social scientific inquiry, geographical or otherwise. Not only that, but geographical contributions are needed, given that ‘the social scientific study of religion is a legitimate endeavor, but even today an endeavor that struggles relative to other disciplines’ (Cornwall 2011: ii; see also Paulson 2011; Cornwall 2012). Scaling-up our contributions, and proving the wide(r)-ranging theoretical and empirical value of geography, will not only consolidate the viability of geographical approaches to religion, but will contribute to the ongoing legitimation of the social scientific study of religion as well.

8.3 Autocritique and final comments

The outcomes of a research project of this scale and duration are a result of the choices presented and decisions made throughout the research process. Some choices and decisions have – for better or worse – invariably affected the research outcomes. Two limitations, both pertaining to the types of people and organisation included in the research, have altered the scope of the thesis. The first limitation is general: the privileging of “elites” (often clergy) at the expense of the layperson. Whilst such privileging enabled an insight into the organisational strategies of evangelism that drive growth, greater consideration of layperson perspectives would garner a closer
appreciation of the efficacy of such strategies, especially in terms of the fraught process of translating evangelical intentions into (desired) outcomes. The structural mosaic provides multiple (often non-religious) possibilities for engaging the layperson, but it also complicates the process of conversion and, as recognised throughout the empirical analysis, is subject to exploitation by both Christians and non-Christians alike. Layperson narratives of evangelical engagement would reveal more specific insights into the politics of the structural mosaic, how converts negotiate the prohibitions accorded by the cultural context, and how national belonging affects religious alterity.

The second limitation is more specific, and pertains to the relatively restricted types of organisations and religions included in the research. In terms of organisation, I only conducted a minimal number of interviews with explicitly transnational Christian organisations (and their international representatives). Indeed, a key limitation of this thesis has been the assessment of the transnational drivers of evangelical growth, especially with regards to the physical, cultural and economic disconnects between donor communities in the West (and other developed countries, notably Singapore and South Korea), and recipients in countries like Sri Lanka. How such a disconnect frames and distorts sponsorship and fundraising schemes presents a necessary field of future research, not least because of the broader implications of foreign involvement in domestic affairs, as discussed in Chapter 7. In terms of religion, only two interviews were conducted with representatives of Hindu organisations; no Muslim groups or individuals were interviewed. That is not to say that Hindu and Muslim actors are not important. On the contrary, the strong influence of Hindu nationalism in neighbouring India and the draw and influence of the transnational umma suggest
that, as the arrival of the post-war epoch signals a period of consolidation and change in Sri Lanka, factors like these will play an increasingly important role in the structure and workings of the religious marketplace. In the face of such developments, continued exploration of how evangelical Christian groups jostle not just with Buddhists, but Hindus and Muslims as well, will provide further theoretical nuance and empirical richness to the findings currently presented.
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THE GAZETTE OF THE DEMOCRATIC
SOCIALIST REPUBLIC OF
SRI LANKA

Part II of May 28, 2004

SUPPLEMENT

(Issued on 31.05.2004)

PROHIBITION OF FORCIBLE CONVERSION OF
RELIGION

(Private Member’s Bill)

A

BILL

to provide for prohibition of conversion from one religion to another by use
of force or allurement or by fraudulent means and for matters incidental
therewith or incidental thereto

To be presented in Parliament by Ven. Dr. Omalpe Sobhiitha Thero, M. P.
Prohibition of Forcible Conversion of Religion

AN ACT TO PROVIDE FOR PROHIBITIONS OF CONVERSION FROM ONE RELIGION TO ANOTHER BY USE OF FORCE OR ALLUREMENT OR BY FRAUDULENT MEANS AND FOR MATTERS INCIDENTAL THEREWITH OR INCIDENTAL THERETO.

WHEREAS, Buddhism being the foremost religion professed and practiced by the majority of people of Sri Lanka, due to the introduction by great Tathagatha, the Sambuddha in the 8th Month after he had attained Buddhahood on his visit to Mahiyangana in Sri Lanka and due to the complete realisation after the arrival of Arahath Mahinda Thero in the 3rd Century B.E

AND WHEREAS, the State has a duty to protect and foster the Buddha Sasana while assuring to all religions the rights granted by Article 10 and 14(1) (e) of the Constitution of the Republic of Sri Lanka :

AND WHEREAS, the Buddhist and non Buddhist are now under serious threat of forcible conversions and proselyzing by coercion or by allurement or by fraudulent means :

AND WHEREAS, the Mahasanga and other religious leaders realising the need to protect and promote religious harmony among all religions, historically enjoyed by the people of Sri Lanka :

BE it enacted by the Parliament of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka as follows :—

1. This Act may be cited as the Prohibition of Forcible Conversion of Religion Act, No. of 2004

2. No person shall convert or attempt to convert, either directly or otherwise, any person from one religion to another by the use of force or by allurement or by any fraudulent means nor shall any person aid or abet any such conversion.

3. (a) Whoever adopts a religion from one religion to another shall within such period as may be prescribed by the Minister, send an intimation to that effect to the Divisional Secretary of the area in which such adoption took place.

2 – H 20502 — 375 (05/2004)
(b) Whoever converts any person from one religion to another either by performing any ceremony by himself for such conversion as a facilitator or by taking part directly or indirectly in such ceremony shall within such period as may be prescribed by the Minister, send in an intimation to that effect to the Divisional Secretary of the area in which such adoption took place.

4. (a) Notwithstanding contrary to any provision in the Code of Criminal Procedure Act, whoever contravenes the provisions of section 2 above shall, without prejudice to any civil liability, shall be guilty of any offence and on conviction before a magistrate be liable to be punished with imprisonment for a term which may not exceeding five years and also be liable to a fine not exceeding Rupees one hundred and fifty thousand:

Provided that whoever contravenes the provisions of section 2 above in respect of a minor, a woman or a person referred to in schedule 1 hereof, shall on conviction before a Magistrate be punished with imprisonment for a term not exceeding seven years and also be liable to a fine not exceeding rupees five hundred thousand.

(b) Whoever fails, without sufficient cause, to comply with the provisions of section 3 (a) and (b) above shall on conviction before a Magistrate be punished with imprisonment for a term not exceeding five years or with a fine, not exceeding rupees one hundred and fifty thousand;

5. Proceedings before a Magistrate may be instituted in one of the following ways:—

(a) by the Divisional Secretary of the area or an officer authorised by him for the purpose;

(b) by the Police in terms of Section 136 of the Code of Criminal Procedure Act, No. 15 of 1979, upon a complaint made to the Police by a person aggrieved.
Prohibition of Forcible Conversion of Religion

by the offence or in the case of a Minor, by his or her father or mother or a lawful Guardian or any other interested person who has reasons to believe that the provisions of the act has been violated, acting in the public interest;

(e) by a person aggrieved by the offence;

(d) by an Attorney-at-Law;

(e) by any person authorised by the Minister.

6. The Minister for the time being in charge of Justice may make rules and regulations for the enforcing and carrying out the provisions of this act and all such rules and regulations so made shall be published in the Government Gazette and shall be placed before the Parliament for approval.

7. In the event of any inconsistency between the Sinhala and Tamil texts of this Act, the Sinhala text shall prevail.

8. In this Act, unless the context otherwise requires —

(a) “allurement” means offer of any temptation in the form of —

(i) any gift or gratification whether in cash or kind;

(ii) grant of any material benefit, whether monetary or otherwise;

(iii) grant of employment or grant of promotion in employment.

(b) “convert” means to make one person to renounce one religion and adopt another religion;
Prohibition of Forcible Conversion of Religion

(c) “force” shall include a show of force including a threat or harm or injury of any kind or threat of religious displeasure or condemnation of any religion or religious faith;

(d) “fraudulent” means includes misinterpretation or any other fraudulent contrivance;

(e) “minor” means a person under eighteen years of age.

SCHEDULE 1

1. Those persons classified as samurdy beneficiaries
2. Prison inmates
3. Inmates of rehabilitation centres
4. Inmates of detention centres
5. Physically or mentally disabled
6. Employees of an organisation
7. Members of the armed forces or police
8. Students
9. Inmates of hospitals and or places of healing
10. Inmates of refugee camps
11. Any other category as may be prescribed by the minister by regulations.
APPENDIX 2: Interview Schedule

Interview schedule for “elite” Christian research subjects (i.e. leaders of Christian church and parachurch organisations)

1 Warm-up/background information
   - Religious and family background
   - Background and role(s) working with the organisation
     - Length of service
     - Job scope within the organisation

2 Organisational characteristics
   - Characteristics
     - Number of pastors/staff
     - Contextual characteristics (e.g. ethnic/religious composition of community; notable changes in community over time)
     - For churches: size and composition of congregation (changes over time?); key activities, etc.
     - For parachurch organisations: nature of work; measures of “success” (e.g. number of churches planted), etc.
   - Origins and growth
     - Inception (i.e. how did the church come about)
     - Spatial development (e.g. building upgrades/expansion)
     - Where organisation is located (site/situation – include both permanent and temporary locations)
     - Growth milestones over time
   - Transnational linkages
     - Number and nature of linkages
     - Type and degree of dependency (if any)
     - Effect on organisational operations, strategies and outcomes

3 Strategies and spaces of evangelism
   - Key factors affecting the development and implementation of strategies of evangelism
     - What strategies are commonly used?
     - Efficacy of different strategies; why are some strategies used and not others?
     - Explore tension (if any) between strategies of evangelism and context (i.e. demand, other religious agencies, etc.)
   - Spaces of evangelism
     - Characteristics of spaces commonly used
- Efficacy of different spaces; why are some used and not others?
- Explore how space is used to reflect and reproduce evangelical Christianity

- Intersections of strategy and space
  - To what extent are strategies of evangelism place-specific?
  - How is space used to implement different strategies, and how is evangelical strategy influenced by space (if at all)?

4. Resistance to evangelism

- Key sources and forms of resistance
  - Where does resistance come from (i.e. which religious/ethnic/social groups) and who do they target (i.e. physical buildings, symbols, or persons)?
  - Probe spatial dimensions of resistance
  - Explore the effect of resistance on strategies and outcomes of resistance

- Reciprocal/mitigating responses from evangelicals
  - How do evangelicals (i.e. organisations, clergy and laity) respond to resistance?
  - Explore the idea that the relationship between evangelical strategy and context is reciprocal, and in a constant state of (re)negotiation
  - Explore how the use of space is a means/outcome of resistance/counter-resistance

5. Evangelism in Sri Lanka

- Key challenges facing evangelical organisations in Sri Lanka/locality
- Implications of the Prohibition of Forcible Conversion Bill, if passed
- Other regulatory constraints that affect the practice or outcomes of evangelism
- Understanding of the position of non-evangelical groups and possible options for tolerance in the future