~~DPostsecularity: A d~~ialogue with religious life in Asia

Lily Kong

Lee Kong Chian Chair Professor of Social Sciences

School of Social Sciences, Singapore Management University

Email: lilykong@smu.edu.sg

Junxi Qian

Assistant Professor

Department of Geography, The University of Hong Kong

Email: jxqian@hku.hk

Abstract

Introduction

Over the past decade or so, debates on the advent of a postsecular present have moved centre-stage in social and cultural theory, and made commendable achievements in analysing the increasing relevance of religion to public politics and policies. Theorisation of the postsecular makes for a hefty intellectual agenda, and a comprehensive review of this agenda is clearly beyond the scope of a single chapter, addressed, more appropriately, in a collective way by this Handbook. Nevertheless, we would like to contribute a few ideas to help delineate the broader permutations of the postsecular turn in social sciences, which serve as the intellectual context for our arguments in this chapter.

The gist of the post-secular treatise criticises the assumption of the privatisation of religion in modernity, one central component of the secularisation thesis, and argues for the persistence or resurgence of religions in public cultures and the public sphere. In Europe, encounters between different religious traditions due to massive human migrations in an era of global mobilities, and the consolidated positions of various Rightist and Fundamentalist religious movements, have meant that the relationships between the state, the public and religions need to be carefully managed and balanced, rather than pre-defined *deus ex machina* as those of privatisation and differentiation. In Habemas's (2006; 2008) formulations, liberal democracy once held that religious languages must be translated into secular languages for faith actors to converse in the public sphere; this is, however, no longer so. In a postsecular context, there is

a relationship of mutual learning between the secular and the religious; secular citizens are expected to be more self-reflexive, both cognisant of and responsive to religious utterances, while religious actors become more sensitised to secular worldviews and concerns. In this sense, the cognitive dissonances and burdens of understanding between the religious and the secular need to be dealt with by secular and religious actors in equal terms. Concurrently, Habermas has attempted to chart a middle path between secular philosophies and religions as potential resources for the normative principles of rights, justice, freedom, emancipation, etc. (Habermas *et al.*, 2010; also, Köhrsen, 2012; Ascione, 2017). Eventually, scholars' growing interest in the study of religions in public life has brought together various terms such as public religion, public theology and political theology, encompassing a rich variety of research foci, from political integration and pluralism, to politics of identity and difference, and to conflict and violence in the contemporary world (de Vries and Sullivan, 2006; Graham, 2013).

In our discipline of geography, the notion of the postsecular has nurtured a small but vibrant area of inquiry. On the one hand, the postsecular has been understood in terms of people becoming more conscious about, even proud of, the religious and spiritual dimensions of everyday life. Increasingly, people turn to theological discourses and interpretations as well as spiritual experiences to constitute everyday subjectivities and organise the meanings of lived, embodied experiences. Religions supply ordinary people with a system of vocabularies to make sense of, and negotiate, secular processes, such as changing political economic conditions, gender, national identity, mobility and migration, multicultural encounters, and so onetc. (Olson *et al.*, 2013; Oosterbaan, 2014a; 2014b; Saint-Blancat and Cancellieri, 2014; Gökarıksel and Secor, 2015; 2017).

On the other hand, in a post-secular context, the focus of religious actors and organisations is undergoing a transition from transcendence to immanence, from faith-by-dogma to faith-by-praxis, reflected in faith actors' engagements in civil services, social welfare and activism (Cloke and Beaumont, 2013). In this process, faith-based organisations bring theo-ethics to bear on professional and voluntary participation in civic affairs, which addresses the lethargy of the neoliberal state in provision of public services, and in so doing fills the gulfs in social justice (Cloke, Johnsen *et al.*, 2005; Beaumont, 2008; Beaumont and Baker, 2011; May and Cloke, 2014; Lancione, 2014; Bolton, 2015; Williams, 2015; Cloke, Sutherland *et al.*, 2016). Religious people evidence an assemblage of motivations, acts and discourses that bring together different religious communities to fight for a common ethical cause. A recent study by Middleton and Yarwood (2015) outlines a different form of this-worldly engagement, namely, Christian pastors' patrolling of the moral landscapes of drinking and night economy, which creates "liminal spaces of understanding" between secular hedonic practices and

religious ethics. In sum, this growing body of geographical scholarship has supplied a vivid portrayal of a new ecology of social life, in which secularity is increasingly enchanted by religious impulses, now diffuse in the textures of everyday life, while secularity and secularism appear to be increasingly anachronistic vocabularies in academic inquiries.

In sum, the postsecular agenda involves concerted and sophisticated efforts to reconstruct the historical narratives of modernity, and represents a sort of "strong theory" reversing secularist epistemologies and yearning for anti-secular impulses (McLennan, 2010). However, as scholars located outside Europe, observing the rapid societal changes in numerous parts of Asia, the strength of the postsecular thesis paradoxically seems to be its simultaneous weakness. First, notwithstanding its strong and assertive language, the discourses of postsecularisation are largely preoccupied with historical and contemporary specificities of Europe, and incompatible with the experiences of societies where secularity took root in different ways from modern Europe (Camilleri, 2012). In many parts of Asia, for example, secularisation was less a "naturally" occurring process than a top-down civilising and modernising mission – post-colonial political elites "learned" the discourses of secularity from the West, and orchestrated campaigns of secularisation at the local scale. In other words, secularity was very much a legacy of Western imperialism and the global triumph of Anglo-European modernity. In this sense, religions in these societies have always been "public" since the incipient stage of modernisation, always within the rubric of post-colonial state politics, discourses and policies. Postsecular discourses, as currently formulated in the mainstream Anglophone academia, tend to lose sight of state construction of secularity in non-European contexts, even though the historical emergence of secularity and laicity in Europe was largely a political project overseen by the state, as well.

Second, postsecular discourses underscore a historicity that reifies the "newness" of rapprochement between the secular and the religious, and imply a recent past in which the privatisation of religion was dominant and largely unchallenged. This framing of historicity, however, veils the fact that in many parts of the world, the privatisation of religion has never been such a desired quest or an empirical reality as in modern Europe (Kong, 2010; Köhrsen, 2012). Rather, secularity and religiosity have been produced and managed in local and specific ways, traversing the boundaries between the public and the private.

Third, postsecular discourses have been deficient in considering the ontological difference between non-Western religions and Christianity, obfuscating the fact that the religious-secular divide was not a given, but derived largely from Judeo-Christian theologies (Asad, 2003; Taylor, 2007). In contrast, the boundaries between transcendence and immanence, other-

worldly pursuits and this-worldly engagements, have been historically quite obscure, porous and fluid in many belief systems of Asia. Buddhism, for example, has long emphasised the accumulation of good karma through this-worldly service and care, and involvement of Buddhist actors in suffering alleviation, care and social welfare has been common in Chinese communities and societies for centuries.

Bearing in mind these observations, this chapter ventures to suggest an alternative framing of the postsecular. Above all, we suggest that the postsecular remains a useful concept to theorise the abiding and vibrant presence of religions in the public sphere. But for this thesis to make sense to contexts beyond Europe, two assumptions need to be rejected: (1) the epistemology of secularity and religiosity as always oppositional to each other; (2) the historicity of a linear transition from a secular past to a postsecular present. We propose that the secular and the religious are not antithetical to each other, but situated in complex relationships of *différance* – secularity restricts the expression of religiosity, but also creates new meanings and conditions for the existence of religion; vice versa, the persistence or resurgence of religion in the public sphere compels people to rethink, negotiate and maintain the reach and limit of secularity. Secularisation is not simply a *deconstructive* force, but also a *reconstructive* one.

It is in the spirit of this hermeneutic that this chapter brings religion back onto the canvas of modernity, while resisting the temptation of announcing the end of the "secular age" (Taylor, 2007). We argue that a fuller theorisation of the crossing-over between the secular and the religious, the public and the private, cannot be realised unless we attend more closely to the regional and historical contingencies of religiosity in modernity – the construction of the religious-secular divide is intrinsically negotiable and fluid. On the one hand, the postsecular does not necessarily imply the decline of secularity, rather, it captures the ongoing dynamics and competitions between the religious and the secular. Secularity and secularism are still highly relevant to state governance and governmentality across the globe. As Wilford (2010) suggests, religiosity and secularity have distinctive spatialities and scales, which may or may not overlap. Hence, the effects of religious revival do not necessarily supersede those of secularisation. On the other hand, the postsecular does not imply, in a linear-temporal sense, the transition from one configuration of modernity to another; instead, it is better suited as an epistemological manifesto for the incomplete nature of any modernising project. In this vein, scholars need to question and de-essentialise the concepts of secularisation, secularity and secularism, rather than dismantle or devalue them (McLennan, 2010). Instead of reifying the opposition between secularity and religiosity, what is better suited to a journey into multiple religiosities across different contexts is an approach that is sensitive to the ways in which secularity is variedly and contingently constituted.

Commented [JB5]: Contribution; entry?

Commented [JB6]: Derrida?

Commented [JB7]: ?

To support to our arguments, we present some empirical discussions to delineate two parallel trajectories of the entanglement of religion, secularity and modernity, both of which deviate from conventional wisdom on the postsecular in notable ways. First, we discuss the state-imposed secularisation in China since the demise of the imperial monarchy in 1911, and the recent "religious revival" in the era of Reform and Opening (1979-). We illustrate how the state construction of secularity creates undulating, not ossified, conditions for the exclusion but also inclusion of religion in the public sphere. Second, we consider the persistent visibility of religion in public politics and social life in the city-states of Singapore and Hong Kong, where religious vibrancy and state secular interventions co-constitute landscapes of modernity, and the public-private boundaries are constantly being redrawn. In this process, the state and the public advance their respective agendas and purposes; obviously, the general secularisation of society and the flourishment of public religions are very much co-existent. We are mindful, however, of the fact that there is no such thing as "Asian religious studies" (Kong, 2015), and the cultural and historical idiosyncrasies of religions as practised in Asian societies defy any generalisation. To include "Asia" in the title of this chapter simply indicates our hope that those from Asian societies other than (Mainland) China, Singapore and Hong Kong may be sympathetic to our thesis, given comparable trajectories of subjection to colonial influences and the post-colonial construction of "our modernity" (Chatterjee, 1997).

> **Commented [JB8]:** Flourishing?

> **Commented [JB9]:** Contribution; entry?

China: the making of the secular and postsecular as state projects

The secular-religious divide was historically unknown to traditional Chinese belief systems. The renowned Chinese-American sociologist CK Yang (1961), for example, characterised Chinese religiosities as "diffused religions" – cosmological-spiritual views and discourses were so inextricably interwoven with the fine-grained textures of social, economic and cultural life that this relationship of interpenetration undermined any dichotomous understanding of the secular and the religious in China. The differentiation of the religious from the secular was in fact thanks to the Chinese state's and political elites' absorption and dissemination of Western discourses and theories. The concerted effort to supress religious expressions and practices in the public sphere started in the Republican era (1911-1949), only to reach its apogee in the Cultural Revolution under the rule of Mao (1966-1976), when religions were almost entirely swept off from public cultures. China's humiliation by Western colonial powers in the late 19th and early 20th century prompted a culture of *self-critique* among Chinese intellectuals and elite. They identified traditional Chinese cultures, in which religions were syncretically embroiled, as the primary reasons for China's "backwardness" and blindness to progress. As Mayfair Yang (2011: , p. 10) has poignantly criticised, Chinese elite's embrace of key elements

of European Enlightenment resulted in "repeated waves of cultural self-laceration, religious destruction and state campaigns of secularization". Accepting European modernity as the epitome of progress and civilisation, indigenous elite in China initiated an ambitious project of social engineering by means of enforced secularisation. On the one hand, intellectuals and elite borrowed from Meiji Japan the word *shukyo* (the Japanese translation of the Western term "religion", later translated into Chinese as "*zongjiao*" 宗教). This notion was then conceptualised scientifically as a coherent system of theosophy, scriptures, rituals, clergy and religious sites (Ashiwa and Wank, 2009; M. Yang, 2008). Despite the fact that the boundaries between Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism and folk religions were highly obscure in Chinese cultures, the concept of religion had given ontological existence to institutional religions (Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Catholicism and Protestantism, excluding Confucianism and folk religions). Traditional folk religions, in particular, were devalued as irrational superstitions to be suppressed and eradicated. Indeed, superstitions became the foil against which rational and scientific knowledge of religion could take root (Duara, 1991a; 1991b). On the other hand, even institutional religions were increasingly relegated to the sphere of private faith and practice, and their significance in day-to-day social and cultural life had to be surrendered to secular reason, science, and industrial modernity (M. Yang, 2008).

On the top of this top-down secularisation campaign, the post-1949 Communist regime added an extra layer of Marxist evolutionism and atheism. Under the radicalism of Mao, the state consistently criticised religions as "opiate of the masses" and accomplices of internal feudalism and external imperialism. The state also disgraced the clergies as an "exploitative class" that parasitized the produce of workers and peasants. Eventually, the communist state launched perhaps the largest iconoclastic campaign that human history had ever seen (M. Yang, 2008; F. G. Yang, 2012). The cumulative effect of the anti-superstition movement in the Republican era and atheist purges under Maoism was "one of the most dramatic secularization processes in the modern world" (M. Yang, 2011, p. 7).

The successive episodes of state-enforced secularisation represented an extreme version of the secularisation thesis. In this sense, it is in principle justifiable to speak of a postsecular present in China, given the extraordinary revival of religious beliefs and practices in China after the Communist Party initiated the Reform and Opening in 1979. The Chinese state now recognises officially that even in a socialist country where religions cannot be used as an instrument of class exploitation, people still need a spiritual domain to negotiate disasters and misfortunes. This revised rationale is part and parcel of the state's own self-reflexivity of modernity. Notably, the relaxation of religious restriction and limited practice of religious freedom are reflective of the broader re-direction of the state's cultural policies, from the total negation of traditional

Commented [JB10]: ?
"... that was deemed parasitic on the produce of workers and peasants."

Commented [JB11]: Cultural revolution?

cultures to flexible accommodation and selective use of traditional elements as resources of cultural governance (Qian, forthcoming).

-Ironically, religions, once stigmatised and targeted for eradication, are well positioned in this new agenda, manifested in at least three ways. First, religions have been incorporated into the state's mission of constructing "spiritual civilisation" and a "harmonious society". The state emphasises religions as sources of moral values and ethics that are conducive to the maintenance of social stability. Both the spiritual guidance and philanthropic work conducted by faith actors may be co-opted by the state to enhance the governance of a rapidly diversifying and polarising society. Religion can also provide anchors of spiritualities and collective identities for people negotiating the fluidity and uncertainty of the market economy. For example, in 2016, President Xi Jinping remarked in an address to UNESCO that Buddhism and other traditional religions were important components of the Chinese civilisation, and of high "spiritual value" to the Chinese people. Second, religions give the state a new edge of *soft* political power in both domestic and international affairs. For example, the Chinese state's promotion of Mazu, a maritime guardian goddess, constitutes a symbolic force that asserts the cultural affinity between Taiwan and China as the "Motherland", and facilitates the rapprochement cross the Taiwan Strait (Chau, 2011; Zhang, 2017). In the international arena, Confucianism has been an ideological cornerstone of the alleged "peaceful rise" of China and a "harmonious" world order envisaged by the Chinese state, epitomised by the controversial project of establishing Confucius Institutes worldwide. Third, religions have been exploited as resources and assets for regional development. The selling of spiritualities and religious cultures is indeed indispensable for countless initiatives of tourism development. Not only have historical religious sites and shrines been opened to tourism for generating local revenues – religions increasingly figure visibly in flagship projects of regional development and regeneration, exemplified by the widely criticised commodification of Shaolin Monastery (少林寺) and the expansion project of Famen Temple (法門寺) in Shaanxi Province.

To conclude this section, we suggest that, if there is a Chinese postsecularity at all, it can challenge and enrich the theorisation of the postsecular in at least two ways. First, postsecular discourses in Europe tend to imply the empowerment of religions, and religious claims as quasi-independent utterances in the public sphere. In contrast, in China both secularity and postsecularity have in fact been carefully orchestrated by the state, and the increased visibility of religions in post-reform public cultures does not entail the straightforward empowerment of religions vis-à-vis secular forces. Precisely because of the centrality of the state in defining the relative importance of secularity and religiosity, the secular and the postsecular are not

mutually oppositional, but largely two sides of one coin – the cultural and ideological administration of the society by the state.

Second, the state construction of secularity and religiosity is not simply geared towards the privatisation of religions. Rather, it is a highly tortuous, uncertain agenda, moving back and forth between multiple priorities of governance, and creating ebbing and flowing spaces of visibility and invisibility for religions. Postsecularity may be as much contingent on the power of secular state as secularity. In his religious economic interpretation of religious decline and revival in China, F. G. Yang (2012) contends that religious regulation restricts the "religious market" and suppresses market mechanisms of supply of and demand for religious goods. We take a different view. Instead of equating state regulation unitarily with the *decrease* of religiosity, we introduce a new sensitivity to the *nature* and *quality* of religious regulation. Just as the Chinese state intervenes actively to *create* (rather than reduce) market mechanisms for China's economic development (Wu, 2008), the state never simply restricts the religious market, but oftentimes creates new elements and dynamics to shape, define and direct the religious market (just think of the grandiose Buddhism- and Taoism-themed mega-projects proliferating in China!). Above all, in the theorisation of the postsecular, we need to give nuanced considerations to the variegated and ambivalent positions of the modern state as a secularising force and agent.

Singapore and Hong Kong: coexistence of secularity and religiosity in the public sphere

The case of modern China represents a transition from a highly secularised past to the post-secular present. Such a linear temporality may not be uncommon worldwide, but it is not necessarily so. As Kong (2010: , p. 764) points out, in numerous contexts across the world, "the engagement of sacred and secular was not 're-emerging' but rather continuing". The postsecular discourse would be problematic, if sensibilities of "resurgence" and "revival" are universally applied. The postsecular does not have to imply religions as the backlash against the disenchantment and pathologies of modernity; rather, religions may be a spiritual force that has persisted in the public sphere over the course of modern transition, and indeed been constitutive of secular modernity. Thus, our proposition in this section is that the relationships between secularity and religiosity are multiple and context-specific, much richer than being unitarily about privatisation and differentiation. The state, the people and faith actors can harness public religions to their own benefits and interests, be they state-building, governance of diversity, participation in social welfare, promotion of specific faiths and theological ideas,

or reinforcement of civic agency. We would like to illustrate this point of view through the lens of the postcolonial societies of Singapore and Hong Kong.

A quick stroll through the streets of Singapore and Hong Kong will easily impress one with the sheer diversity and quantity of religious spaces, sites and shrines (Christianity, Buddhism, Taoism, folk religions, and more in Singapore than Hong Kong, Islam and Hinduism). In both cities, myriad scenes of vibrant religious life enrich the landscapes of cosmopolitan urban modernity. Both Singapore and Hong Kong are global hubs of commerce and finance which, thanks to tectonic economic changes since the 1960s, are now among the major world cities. Religions have traditionally figured prominently in the cultural landscapes of both cities, and been closely intertwined with the social and economic conditions of urban existence – state-led urbanisation, capitalist development, individualism, migration, social polarisation, and so on etc. Concurrently, however, due to British colonial rule and the advent of European modernity, religions (even the indigenous ones such as Buddhism, Taoism, Hinduism, etc.) are no longer diffused spiritual cosmos encompassing everyday life, but have differentiated from the state, the market, economy, science, etc. (Goh and van der Veer, 2016). In this specific configuration of modernity, it is particularly interesting to consider the relationships between the state, the public sphere and religions.

> **Commented [JB12]:** Needs rewording….

For both cities during British rule, the secularity of the state did not rule out partnerships with religions for the effective and cost-minimising management of society. For example, Christianity enjoyed patronage of the state, and was used as an instrument for culturally assimilating and co-opting indigenous elites (Kwong, 2002; Goh, 2016). Religions also played an indispensable role in the provision of social services and welfare (much earlier than the recent proliferation of faith-based care and services in the public sphere of Europe). In Hong Kong, before compulsory state education was implemented in 1971, the major providers of public education were actually religious groups. Even in 2004, the three mainline Christian churches – Catholic, Anglican and Methodist – operated 40% of all primary and secondary schools in Hong Kong, in addition to the various schools operated by Buddhist and Taoist organisations (J. Tan, 1997). In this sense, faith-based services helped the state reduce the cost of secular government, and constituted the laissez-faire economy in Hong Kong. In the context of Singapore, many of the earliest schools were established by religious groups, and they remain active in the provision of pre-tertiary education, though overtaken in proportion by state schools. These schools nevertheless remain distinctive in character and influence.

In the post-colonial contexts, religions have remained visible and vibrant in the public sphere of both Singapore and Hong Kong. But the very nature of publicness has charted very different

courses. In Singapore, the public discourses of religions are essentially constructed and propagated by the state. Neo (2016) suggests that the constitutional order of Singapore is only "quasi-secular", because the state is openly entangled with religious affairs, and explicit about its desire to regulate religions by means of public policies.

Alongside Neo, we summarise the Singapore state's approach to religions with reference to two doctrines. The first is the principle of equal treatment and harmony. The state holds in high value the 4 Ms of multiracialism, multilingualism, multiculturalism, and multireligiosity, in conjunction with a fifth M, meritocracy. In this ideology, political discourses emphasise state neutrality and equal treatment of all faiths – no privilege shall be conferred on the basis of race, language, culture, or religion (Kong, 2015; note exceptions elaborated in Kong, 1993). The mantra of equality is reinforced by prioritising racial and religious harmony. Religious groups are exhorted to identify foremost with a unified nation of Singapore, while intolerance towards other faiths is not approved by the state (C. Tan, 2008).

The second doctrine to which the state adheres is hierarchy; that is, secular reason is prioritised over religions (Neo, 2016). In so far as the state welcomes the presence of diverse religions in public cultures, religious concerns cannot override secular purposes. Even when religious teachings are valorised by the state, it is to prioritise secular goals, such as when religious adherents are exhorted to strive for economic progress and development by drawing on religious teachings (Kong, 2012). The prioritisation of secular reason and objectives has been elucidated by scholars with reference to, for example, the strong emphasis on secular multiculturalism and national identity in faith-based schools (Kong, 2005). Insights have also been drawn from the availability and locations of religious spaces and sites. In a global city where land is of extreme scarcity, religious groups face perennial challenges for the supply of spaces and buildings. State-led urbanisation and zoning, however, fall short of the expectations of religious people, for the state prefers a functionalist approach that prioritises centralised decision-making, pragmatism, efficiency and order (Kong, 1993; 2002). As a result, we occasionally witness the impromptu sacralisation of urban sites, which defies the binaries of private/ public, legal/ illegal, sacred/ profane (Sinha, 2016).

In contrast, religious organisations and faith actors in post-1997 Hong Kong are not content with being the objects of state discourses and directions, but much more active in the shaping of secular politics. On the one hand, Buddhist, Taoist and Confucian groups, which received little state patronage during colonial rule, naturally expect that their cultural affinities with China will help them gain the favour of Beijing and restore privilege in post-colonial Hong Kong. Unsurprisingly, these groups are generally in rapport with the post-Handover state in

Hong Kong, and actively promote the Chinese national identity and the revival of Chinese cultures in Hong Kong (Kwong, 2002). On the other hand, Catholic and Protestant groups have developed a strong public identity as well, but focus on the democratisation of Hong Kong and the thorny issue of religious freedom in the face of the Chinese state's anti-Christian mindset. Divergent from the thriving of Pentecostal Christianity in Singapore, which focuses on the cultivation of individual self and spiritual communities, Christianity in Hong Kong features much more strongly liberal theologies (Goh, 2016). Both Catholic and Protestant churches are vocal in the advocacy of human rights, democracy, rule of law, freedom, and a robust Hong Kong local identity (to fend off the political assimilation of Beijing) (Li *et al.*, 1998; Nedilsky, 2014). Christian concepts and theories have been re-imagined to inspire political mobilisation, giving rise to a vibrant political theology (Leung, 2009; Kung, 2010; Jung, 2016). The heavy involvement of Christian groups in the 2014 Umbrella Movement is but the latest culmination of this spirit of public engagement (Chow and Lee, 2016; Bosco, 2016).

Conclusion

We begin this concluding section by summarising our contributions to the postsecular debate. We acknowledge that they have not been developed to any degree of sophistication, given space constraints; yet, we hope that they cast some light on a global comparative perspective for the study of religion and the postsecular.

To theorise postsecularity, a comprehensive understanding of the ways in which secularity took roots in different contexts is needed. In Asia, secularity was historically complicit with the power-knowledge complex of Western colonialism and European modernity, and the fin-de-siècle encounters of many non-Western societies with secularity involved complex operations of power – the unchallenged authority of Western discourses and epistemologies, and subsequently the power of indigenous elites to institute a secular age locally. In China, the taking-root of secularism cannot be understood without critically reflecting on the symbolic and material violence exercised by the state in successive campaigns of exorcism and iconoclasm, in the name of progress and modernity. In Singapore and Hong Kong, secularity took root as a result of colonial rule, and became one of the founding political principles of the post-colonial Singapore state, albeit less so in Hong Kong. In all these contexts, however, secularising missions are never capable of absorbing religious impulses completely, and cannot march forward without being challenged or contested. The dramatic renaissance of religions in post-1979 China is a vivid testimony to this, while in Singapore and Hong Kong the state has adopted more pragmatic approaches that regulate, rather than eradicate, public religious cultures. The state sometimes even embraces religious teachings as exhortation for

secular economic growth. The interweaving of (secular) state and public religion ensures that the particular formation of the postsecular in these contexts defies easy comparison with the European experience.

The manifestations and consequences of public religions in the postsecular condition are contingent and indefinite. In both China and Singapore, the visibilities of religions in public cultures are overseen, managed and approved by the state, but postsecularity means very different things in the two societies – China is postsecular in the sense that the state has orchestrated and closely controlled the transition from overwhelming secularism to the revival of religions in public cultures, with the purpose of harnessing the benefits brought by faiths and religious cultures. In Singapore, postsecularity does not imply a comparable temporal transition, but the persistent entanglement of religious affairs and political cultures of the state. In Hong Kong, akin to Singapore, the term postsecularity makes sense in so far as it contains no connotation of having evolved from a monolithically secular age as such. But this does not mean that postsecularity is a given status quo, a *fait accompli*, rather than an ever-changing process. Indeed, the public theologies of Buddhist, Taoist and Christian groups in Hong Kong have all changed due to the Handover – for Buddhists and Taoists, their primary public roles have transitioned from social welfare to alliance with Beijing and the post-colonial local state, while for Christians, philosophies of public engagements have changed from those aligned with colonial state interests to more liberal, anti-hegemonic and resistant ones.

Above all, we do not propose to dismiss the conceptual scaffold of the postsecular even though the thesis is currently fully preoccupied with European experiences, which represent a somewhat exceptional case of secularisation rather than a global norm (Davie, 2007). Our proposition is that the prefix "post" does not imply a linear temporality, but paradigmatic changes to social scientific theories of modernity (McLennan, 2010) – secular modernity is not a totalising project but always punctuated by religiosities, and it is imperative that we do not treat the religious dimension of modernity in reductive ways. The postsecular may manifest itself as an enforced, fully-fledged secularity mutating into a postsecular present (as in the case of China), or the abiding and relative peaceful co-existence of secularity and religiosity in the public sphere (as in Singapore and Hong Kong). A key caveat, though, is that the nature of public religion is not singular, but needs to be construed and expounded in specific contexts. After all, we need to develop theorisations of multiple *postsecularities*, rather than a single postsecularity.

Further reading

<div style="text-align: right; font-size: small;">

Commented [JB13]: Largely?

Commented [JB14]: Please add a select number of articles/ books for the readership, plus 1-2 sentences explaining who relevant and important. These references should not be the reference list below

Formatted: Font: 12 pt, Bold

Formatted: Font: 12 pt, Bold

</div>

References

Asad, T. (2003). *Formations of the secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Ascione, G. (2017). Dissonant notes on the post-secular: unthinking secularization in global historical sociology. *Journal of Historical Sociology, 30*(2), 403-434.

Ashiwa, Y, & Wank, D L (Eds.). (2009). *Making religion, making the state*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Beaumont, J. (2008). Faith action on urban social issues. *Urban Studies, 45*(10), 2019-2034.

Beaumont, J, & Baker, C (Eds.). (2011). *Postsecular cities: space, theory and practice*. London: Continuum.

Bolton, C. (2015). Tracing faith-based service landscapes: the contours of messiness at the Open Door Community in Atlanta. *Urban Geography, 36*(2), 221-235.

Bosco, J. (2016). The sacred in urban political protests in Hong Kong. *International Sociology, 31*(4), 375-395.

Camilleri, J A. (2012). Postsecularist discourse in an 'age of transition'. *Review of International Studies, 38*(5), 1019-1039.

Chan, S. (2015). The Protestant community and the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong. *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies, 16*(3), 380-395.

Chatterjee, P. (1997). *Our modernity*. Rotterdam and Dakar: SEPHIS & CODESRIA.

Chau, A Y (Ed.). (2011). *Religion in contemporary China: revitalization and innovation*. London: Routledge.

Chow, C, & Lee, J. (2016). Almost democratic: Christian activism and the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong. *Exchange, 45*(3), 252-268.

Cloke, P, & Beaumont, J. (2013). Geographies of postsecular rapprochement in the city. *Progress in Human Geography, 37*(1), 27-51.

Cloke, P, Johnsen, S, & May, J. (2005). Exploring ethos? Discourses of `charity' in the provision of emergency services for homeless people. *Environment and Planning A, 37*(3), 385-402.

Cloke, P, Sutherland, C, & Williams, A. (2016). Postsecularity, political resistance, and Protest in the Occupy Movement. *Antipode, 48*(3), 497-523.

Davie, G. (2007). *The sociology of religion*. London: Sage.

de Vries, H, & Sullivan, L E (Eds.). (2006). *Political theologies: public religions in a post-secular world*. New York, NY: Fordham University Press.

Duara, P. (1991a). *Culture, power, and the state: rural North China, 1900–1942*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Duara, P. (1991b). Knowledge and power in the discourse of modernity: the campaigns against popular religion in early twentieth-century China. *The Journal of Asian Studies, 50*(1), 67-83.

McLennan, G. (2010). The postsecular turn. *Theory, Culture and Society, 27*(4), 3-20.

Goh, D. (2016). Secular space, spiritual community and the hybrid urbanisms of Christianity in Hong Kong and Singapore. *International Sociology, 31*(4), 432-449.

Goh, D, & van der Veer, P. (2016). Introduction: The sacred and the urban in Asia. *International Sociology, 31*(4), 367-374.

Gökarıksel, B, & Secor, A. (2015). The post-Islamist problematic: questions of religion and difference in everyday life. *Political Geography, 46*, 21-30.

Gökarıksel, B, & Secor, A. (2017). The post-Islamist problematic: questions of religion and difference in everyday life. *Social & Cultural Geography, 18*(5), 645-664.

Graham, E. (2013). *Between a rock and hard place: public theology in a post-secular age*. London: SCM.

Habermas, J. (2006). Religion in the public sphere. *European Journal of Philosophy, 14*(1), 1-25.

Habermas, J. (2008). Notes on post-secular society. *New Perspectives Quarterly, 25*(4), 17-29.

Habermas, J, et al. (2010). *An awareness of what is missing: faith and reason in a post-secular age*. Cambridge: Polity.

Jung, P Y. (2016). The Eucharist as transformable spirituality: reflections on protestant spirituality and a recent civil disobedience movement in Hong Kong. *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality, 16*(2A), 14-38.

Köhrsen, J. (2012). How religious is the public sphere? A critical stance on the debate about public religion and post-secularity. *Acta Sociologica, 55*(3), 273-288.

Kong, L. (1993). Negotiating conceptions of 'sacred space': a case study of religious buildings in Singapore. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers, 18*(3), 342-358.

Kong, L. (2002). In search of permanent homes: Singapore's house churches and the politics of space. *Urban Studies, 39*(9), 1573-1586.

Kong, L. (2005). Religious schools: for spirit, (f)or nation. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space, 23*, 615-631.

Kong, L. (2010). Global shifts, theoretical shifts: changing geographies of religion. *Progress in Human Geography, 34*(6), 755-776.

Kong, L. (2012) ""Managerialist" constructions of religion: the geographical and historical contingencies of religion in Singapore", International Symposium on Concepts of Religion between Asia and Europe, Museum Rietberg (Park-Villa Rieter), University of Zurich, Zurich, 1-3 November.

Kong, L. (2015). Disrupting "Asian Religious Studies": knowledge (re)production and the co-construction of religion in Singapore. *Numen: International Review for the History of Religion, 62*(1), 100-118.

Kung, L Y. (2010). The publics, church and Hong Kong: the narrative nature of public theology. *LOGOS & PNEUMA, 32*, 85-115.

Kwong, C. (2002). *The public role of religion in post-colonial Hong Kong*. New York, NY: Peter Lang.

Lancione, M. (2014). Entanglements of faith: discourses, practices of care and homeless people in an Italian City of Saints. *Urban Studies, 51*(14), 3062-3078.

Leung, B. (2009). The Hong Kong Catholic Church: a framing role in social movement. In K. E. Kuah-Pearce & G. Guiheux (Eds.), *Social movements in China and Hong Kong: the expansion of protest space* (pp. 245-258). Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.

Li, K M, Cheung, K H, & Chan, K S. (1998). The social role of Catholics in Hong Kong society. *Social Compass, 45*(4), 513-531.

May, J, & Cloke, P. (2014). Modes of attentiveness: reading for difference in geographies of homelessness. *Antipode, 46*(4), 894-920.

Middleton, J, & Yarwood, R. (2015). 'Christians, out here?' Encountering Street-Pastors in the post-secular spaces of the UK's night-time economy. *Urban Studies, 52*(3), 501-516.

Nedilsky, L V. (2014). *Converts to civil society: Christianity and political culture in contemporary Hong Kong*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press.

Neo, J L. (2016). Secular constitutionalism in Singapore: between equality and hierarchy. *Oxford Journal of Law and Religion, 5*(3), 431-456.

Olson, E, Hopkins, P, Pain, R, & Vincett, G. (2013). Retheorizing the postsecular present: embodiment, spatial transcendence, and challenges to authenticity among young Christians in Glasgow, Scotland. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers, 103*(6), 1421-1436.

Oosterbaan, M. (2014a). Public religion and urban space in Europe. *Social & Cultural Geography, 15*(6), 591-602.

Oosterbaan, M. (2014b). Religious experiences of stasis and mobility in contemporary Europe: undocumented Pentecostal Brazilians in Amsterdam and Barcelona. *Social & Cultural Geography, 15*(6), 664-682.

Qian, J X. (Forthcoming). Redeeming the Chinese modernity? Zen Buddhism, culture-led development and local governance in Xinxing County, China. *Environment and Planning A*, DOI: 10.1177/0308518X16687555.

Saint-Blancat, C, & Cancellieri, A. (2014). From invisibility to visibility? The appropriation of public space through a religious ritual: the Filipino procession of Santacruzan in Padua, Italy. *Social & Cultural Geography, 15*(6), 645-663.

Sinha, V. (2016). Marking spaces as 'sacred': infusing Singapore's urban landscape with sacrality. *International Sociology, 31*(4), 467-488.

Tan, C. (2008). Creating 'good citizens' and maintaining religious harmony in Singapore. *British Journal of Religious Education, 30*(2), 133-142.

Tan, J K. (1997). Church, state and education: Catholic education in Hong Kong during the political transition. *Comparative Education, 33*(2), 211-232.

Taylor, C. (2007). *A secular age*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

Wilford, J. (2010). Sacred archipelagos: geographies of secularization. *Progress in Human Geography, 34*(3), 328-348.

Williams, A. (2015). Postsecular geographies: theo-ethics, rapprochement and neoliberal governance in a faith-based drug programme. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers, 40*(2), 192-208.

Wu, F L. (2008). China's great transformation: neoliberalization as establishing a market society. *Geoforum, 39*(3), 1093-1096.

Yang, C K. (1961). *Religion in Chinese society*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Yang, F G. (2012). *Religion in China: survival and revival under Communist rule*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Yang, M (Ed.). (2008). *Chinese religiosities: afflictions of modernity and state formation*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Yang, M. (2011). Postcoloniality and religiosity in modern China: the disenchantments of sovereignty. *Theory, Culture and Society, 28*(2), 3-45.

Zhang, J J. (2017). Paying homage to the 'Heavenly Mother': Cultural-geopolitics of the Mazu pilgrimage and its implications on rapprochement between China and Taiwan. *Geoforum, 84*, 32-41.