

Religious Studies and Transcultural Studies: Revealing a Cosmos Not Known Before?

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Introduction

The notion of the “transcultural,” together with all its possible derivatives, has without doubt become one of the buzzwords of the humanities and social sciences in recent years. In this paper, we set out to explore the relationship between an emerging transcultural paradigm and the academic study of religion by discussing what a transcultural perspective, as we understand it, can bring to the table for those of us studying religions.¹ In doing so, we seek to promote awareness of and critical engagement with such a perspective among our colleagues within and beyond the study of religion, addressing both proponents of the discussion as well as outsiders. In our own research, the notion of the transcultural and its theoretical implications have enabled us to articulate aspects of our research material that we had not seen or had no satisfactory concepts to describe. In this paper, we thus want to share the fruitfulness of a transcultural research perspective. Yet, as we have discovered and appropriated the notion of the transcultural for ourselves and our own research, it has also opened our eyes to what Daniel G. König and Katja Rakow have called the “transcultural component” of our own academic discipline.² Not only might the academic study of religion itself be described as the product of various “trans-cultural” encounters, but the methodological and theoretical concerns informing our understanding of a transcultural research perspective can also be found in one form or another in already well-established discussions and approaches within and beyond our own discipline. It is this two-fold discovery—the fruitfulness of a transcultural perspective for our own research and the “transcultural component” in our own and related disciplines—that we seek to share with our reader on the following pages.

1 Our subtitle, “Revealing a Cosmos Not Known Before,” is borrowed from Madeleine Herren, Martin Rüesch, and Christiane Sibille, *Transcultural History: Theories, Methods, Sources* (Berlin: Springer, 2012), vii.

2 Daniel G. König and Katja Rakow, “The Transcultural Approach within a Disciplinary Framework: An Introduction,” *Transcultural Studies* 2 (2016): 89–100.

Religious studies: A heterogeneous discipline

Like many academic disciplines, religious studies evolved in nineteenth century Europe and America after centuries of colonial expansion and the concomitant encounter with a “non-Western Other.”³ Since its formation, the academic study of religion has been marked by a multiplicity of approaches and research agendas.⁴ It thus seems necessary to first position ourselves within the field of religious studies as such.

We understand religious studies not as a theological endeavour, but as a field of critical inquiry. For us, this means adopting a perspective of “methodological agnosticism.”⁵ Such a perspective does not ask whether the religious actors we engage with are right or wrong about the religious truth claims they make, but acknowledges that such truth claims serve as important reference points in the social practices and imaginative horizons of the religious actors involved; it also acknowledges that these truth claims, and the religious realities that stem from them, engender actual experiences and become a social reality, with consequences not only for the actors who share a belief in them, but also for those who remain undecided or actively deny them (one example is the repercussions of conservative Christian realities for LGBT or reproductive rights). These social realities are the stuff of our research. Consequently, this perspective takes as its starting point the self-representations of our research interlocutors without critically deconstructing them as “false consciousness” or uncritically affirming them. Rather, we critically ask how the religious realities we encounter became what they are for those who live through them (or those who deny them), how people become invested in them, and what “work” such truth claims accomplish in the everyday life of social actors.

For us, studying religions also means adopting what Richard King has termed “constructivist and/or historicist understandings”⁶ of “culture” in general and “religion” in particular, bearing in mind that whatever theories and methods

3 Luther H. Martin and Donald Wiebe, “Religious Studies as a Scientific Discipline: The Persistence of a Delusion,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 80, no. 3 (2012): 588–591; Richard King, “The Copernican Turn in the Study of Religion,” *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 25, no. 2 (2013): 145–153.

4 John R. Hinnells, ed., *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2005); Robert A. Orsi, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies*, Cambridge Companions to Religion (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

5 For a discussion of the notion of “methodological agnosticism” in religious studies see Russell T. McCutcheon, *The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion: A Reader* (London: Continuum, 2005), 213–285.

6 King, “The Copernican Turn,” 138.

we chose will shape the object we study and the knowledge we produce about it.⁷ Accordingly, our approach to the study of religion asks “how discourses of religion construct the very object that they seek to explain.”⁸ In so doing, it acknowledges the historical contingency of the very category of religion itself, which cannot be separated from the history and formation of the discipline of religious studies.⁹ “The appearance of ‘religion’ as a natural object,” as Peter Harrison writes, “coincided with the development of *Religionswissenschaft* which both defined its object and explicated it.”¹⁰

From religion to religions

The invention of the concept of world religions is rooted in nineteenth-century scholarly debates, which were shaped by contemporary theories of language and race.¹¹ Although the emerging discourse of world religions seemingly acknowledged religious diversity, it played a formative role in shaping a new European hegemonic identity that disguised its universalist attitude in the language of pluralism.¹² The term “world religions” was reserved for transregional religious formations that were seen as expressions of human religious experience, and was modelled after and measured against the prototype of the category religion, i.e. Christianity.¹³

7 Craig Martin, *A Critical Introduction to the Study of Religion* (Sheffield: Equinox Publishing, 2012); Michael Bergunder, “What Is Religion? The Unexplained Subject Matter of Religious Studies,” *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 26, no. 3 (2014): 246–286. We are aware that the concepts of “culture” and “religion” are highly contested in academic discourse. However, both terms persist as social reality within the life worlds we study and the academic discourse in which we participate. We thus continue to use both terms, remaining mindful of their history. To point to this history, we have been using quotation marks, but for the sake of smooth readability, in the following we will forgo the use of such highlighting measures.

8 King, “The Copernican Turn,” 145.

9 Peter Harrison, *“Religion” and the Religions in the English Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 14; Russell T. McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Bergunder, “What Is Religion?” 273.

10 Harrison, *“Religion” and the Religions*, 14.

11 Jonathan Z. Smith, “Religion, Religions, Religious,” in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor and Donald S. Lopez (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 278; Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and “The Mystic East”* (London: Routledge, 1999); Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions; or, How European Universalism was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

12 Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions*.

13 Timothy Fitzgerald, “Hinduism and the ‘World Religion’ Fallacy,” *Religion* 20, no. 2 (1990): 101–118; Smith, “Religion, Religions, Religious”; King, *Orientalism and Religion*.

Just like the study of religions as a nascent discipline, the pluralising concept of world religions was born out of pre-colonial and colonial encounters through which Western thinkers began to re-imagine the world as a patchwork of different Western and non-Western cultures.¹⁴ Post-colonial criticism has since deconstructed these theories and concepts as colonial fantasies rooted in Orientalist discourses of “othering” and their inherent assumptions about cultural ideals and norms, as well as the asymmetrical power relations inherent in European imperialism.¹⁵

As a result of these developments, the academic study of religions itself came under increasing scrutiny. Queer and feminist criticism, for example, has brought to light biases that arise from the fact that “until recently, women of other cultures have been studied mainly by male scholars whose methods reflect their own cultural biases.”¹⁶ Such a concern addresses the still prevalent biases in global scholarship in general, where the voices heard and the publications read for the most part still originate from academic centres in Anglophone and European countries. Moreover, such a critique raises awareness of the situatedness of knowledge production in general.¹⁷

Despite the criticism, however, the concept of world religions can be regarded as a crucial step towards an internal pluralisation of the concept of religion itself. In recent decades, scholars have backed away from conceptualizing religions as singular traditions with one distinct body of ideas, practices, and artefacts, and started to emphasize the internal plurality and heterogeneity of religious traditions. Instead of Christianity in the singular, implying a homogenous tradition, scholars of religions have begun to speak of *Christianities*, to make visible the plurality of different Christian traditions hidden beneath the surface of a unifying signifier.¹⁸

14 Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, “Culture, Power, Place: Ethnography at the End of an Era,” in *Culture, Power, Place: Explorations in Critical Anthropology*, ed. Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 1–2. Andreas Reckwitz, “Die Kontingenzperspektive der ‘Kultur’: Kulturbegriffe, Kulturtheorien und das kulturwissenschaftliche Forschungsprogramm,” in *Unschärfe Grenzen: Perspektiven der Kulturosoziologie*. (Bielefeld: transcript, 2008), 19–23.

15 Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978); King, *Orientalism and Religion*; Morny Joy, “Beyond a God’s Eyeview: Alternative Perspectives in the Study of Religion,” *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 12, no. 1 (2000): 110–140.

16 Joy, “Beyond a God’s Eyeview,” 118.

17 Joy, “Beyond a God’s Eyeview,” 131; Thomas A. Tweed, “On Moving Across: Translocative Religion and the Interpreter’s Position,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 70, no. 2 (2002): 255–260.

18 Jonathan Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity*, Jordan Lectures in Comparative Religion 14 (Chicago: University of

Religious history came to be understood as a history of entanglement, exchange, and translation between different religious and cultural traditions, or as re-inventions across time and space.¹⁹ Such transformations, syncretisms, or hybrid traditions, once considered exceptions or aberrations of “the one true teaching,” now came to be understood as the historical norm, a typical pattern of the dynamics of religious history in general. In fact, the very idea of one unified and hegemonic tradition is considered to be the outcome of discursive struggles over a religious master narrative, as demonstrated by Bernard Faure. In the process of such struggles, varied and contested histories become unified through the omission of historical contingencies, disputed forms, and competing developments in canonization processes and religious histories.²⁰ What is regarded as a specific religious tradition is thus the product of an active and often deliberate social construction, which calls for a thorough historicisation of such traditions.²¹

At the same time, such awareness highlights the transcultural history of the very concept of religion itself, which evolved in the wake of colonialism from encounters between Christian missionaries, colonial traders, and Western scholars and their respective local interlocutors, trading partners, informants, and colonial subjects. Through these encounters and the subsequent mutual re-reading, appropriation, and translation of circulating ideas, practices, and artefacts, the modern understanding of the category religion emerged.²² In this

Chicago Press, 1990); Smith, “Religion, Religions, Religious”; Peter C. Phan, “Introduction: Asian Christianity/Christianities,” in *Christianities in Asia*, ed. Peter C. Phan (Malden, MA: Wiley, 2011), 1–6; James S. Bielo, “Urban Christianities: Place-Making in Late Modernity,” *Religion* 43, no. 3 (2013): 1–11.

19 Fritz Stolz, “Austauschprozesse zwischen religiösen Gemeinschaften und Symbolsystemen,” in *Im Schmelztiegel der Religionen: Konturen des modernen Synkretismus*, ed. Volker Drehsen and Walter Sparr (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1996), 15–36; Michael Stausberg, “The Invention of a Canon: The Case of Zoroastrianism,” in *Canonization and Decanonization*, ed. Arie van der Kooij and K. van der Toorn, *Studies in the History of Religions* 82 (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 257–277; Klaus Hock, “Religion als transkulturelles Phänomen: Implikationen eines kulturwissenschaftlichen Paradigmas in der Religionsforschung,” *Berliner Theologische Zeitschrift* 19, no. 1 (2002): 64–82; Katja Rakow, *Transformationen des tibetischen Buddhismus im 20. Jahrhundert: Chögyam Trungpa und die Entwicklung von Shambhala Training*, *Critical Studies in Religion/Religionswissenschaft* 6 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014).

20 Bernard Faure, *The Rhetoric of Immediacy: A Cultural Critique of Chan/Zen Buddhism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 12–21.

21 Gregory P. Grieve and Richard Weiss, “Illuminating the Half-Life of Tradition: Legitimation, Agency, and Counter-Hegemonies,” in *Historicizing “Tradition” in the Study of Religion*, ed. Steven Engler and Gregory P. Grieve (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2005), 1–8.

22 Today, there exists a variety of understandings of what religion is, but many of these are shaped by the historical processes of the nineteenth century; see Nongbri, *Before Religion*, 15–24. The notion of the religious and the secular as separate spheres is a dominant trope in the modern understanding

global process of shaping the modern notion of religion, the co-productive role of the “colonized other” was usually neglected. At the same time, these voices have never been only passive recipients, but active agents, and at times have spoken back, challenging established categories of religion or narratives of knowledge production.²³ A transcultural perspective tries to shed light on this polyvocality and the discursive struggles in the histories of religious traditions, as well as the history of the academic study of religions. As such, a transcultural approach opens up spaces for scholars from different disciplinary backgrounds and parts of the world to engage in dialogue, and make the multiplicity of voices count.²⁴ Otherwise, the “transcultural” becomes yet another “European conceptual categor[y]” imposed on a non-Western other “in the name of transcultural dialogue,” rightly criticized by Daniel P. S. Goh as “thinly veiled eurocentrism.”²⁵

Transculturality and the transcultural

The “transcultural” as a notion goes back to Fernando Ortiz’ work on sugar and tobacco cultures in post-colonial Cuba, first published in 1940.²⁶ Ortiz sought to establish the term transculturation as an alternative to the idea of acculturation, which was commonly regarded as a process in which cultures are transformed by other, supposedly “superior” cultures, as Rudolf Wagner writes.²⁷ In contrast to this concept of acculturation, Ortiz understood processes of cultural adaptation as a two-way transformation and conceptualized

of the category of religion. On the relation between religion and science and the conceptualization of specific religious traditions as part of a larger religious history, see Michael Bergunder, “‘Religion’ and ‘Science’ within a Global Religious History,” *Aries: Journal for the Study of Western Esotericism* 16, no. 1 (2016): 86–141. On the pairing of the religious and its “Siamese twin ‘secularism,’” see Talal Asad, “Reading a Modern Classic: W. C. Smith’s *The Meaning and End of Religion*,” *History of Religions* 40, no.3 (2001): 221.

23 Bergunder, “‘Religion’ and ‘Science,’” 110–117.

24 In doing so, a transcultural perspective shares the concerns of many postcolonial approaches. For religious studies, see for example Morný Joy, “Postcolonial Reflections: Challenges for Religious Studies,” *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 13, no. 2 (2001): 177–195.

25 Daniel P. S. Goh, review of *Religion, Tradition and the Popular: Transcultural Views from Asia and Europe*, ed. Judith Schlehe and Evamaria Sandkühler, *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 30, no. 1 (2015): 174–175.

26 Fernando Ortiz, *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar*, 2nd ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1947; Durham: Duke University Press, 1995). Originally published as *Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y el azúcar* (Havana: Jesús Montero, 1940).

27 Rudolf Wagner, “Process and Construction. Transculturality” (unpublished manuscript, December 31, 2010), PDF file.

transculturation accordingly.²⁸ Since then, the term has been used with slightly different implications. In *Transcultural History: Theories, Methods, Sources*, the authors raise the question of “whether the introduction of a new transcultural way of addressing questions to the past [and present, we would like to add] might reveal a cosmos not known before.”²⁹

To answer this question, it is important to first distinguish between two different understandings of the term “transculturality.” On the one hand, it can be understood as an inevitable condition of culture as hybrid “all the way down.”³⁰ The signifier “transcultural” thus acts as either status attribute or process description.³¹ On the other hand, transculturality might also be understood as a foundational research perspective.³² Here, we use transculturality in the latter sense, as a research perspective that rests on the assumption of cultures as something always in the making.³³ As such, transculturality contests the notion of cultures as bounded, homogeneous entities based on the assumption that cultural difference and identity is never given but always the socially constructed product of relational (although potentially asymmetrical) processes, such as encounters, exchange, and translation.

There also is a political dimension in adopting the transcultural approach as a research perspective: Although the concept of culture has by now been thoroughly criticized in academic discourse, it is a persistent social reality and produces tangible effects in the life of social actors.³⁴ Didier Fassin has shown this for the similar concept of race.³⁵ Just like the concept of culture, the concept

28 Ibid.

29 Herren, Rüesch, and Sibille, *Transcultural History*, vii.

30 Renato Rosaldo, foreword to *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity*, by Nestor Garcia Canclini, ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), xv.

31 See Wolfgang Welsch, “Transculturality: The Puzzling Form of Cultures Today,” in *Spaces of Culture: City, Nation, World*, ed. Mike Featherstone and Scott Lash (London: Sage Publications, 1999), 194–213.

32 “Understanding Transculturalism—Monica Juneja and Christian Kravagna in Conversation,” in *Transcultural Modernisms*, Model House Research Group, Publication Series of the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna 12 (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2013), 25.

33 Richard Gabriel Fox, *Lions of the Punjab: Culture in the Making* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 196–206.

34 Gupta and Ferguson, “Culture, Power, Place,” 1–5; Martin Fuchs, “The Universality of Culture: Reflection, Interaction and the Logic of Identity,” *Thesis Eleven* 60, no. 1 (February 1, 2000): 11–22.

35 Didier Fassin, “Racialization: How to Do Races with Bodies,” in *A Companion to the Anthropology of the Body and Embodiment*, ed. Frances E. Mascia-Lees (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 419–434.

of race is highly contested in academic discourse, while at the same time persisting as a troubling social reality. “[C]an we,” Fassin asks, “completely abandon the language of race, when people are stigmatized or even killed on this basis all over the globe?”³⁶ One way of incorporating the critique of the concept without abandoning the term altogether—and thus also losing the chance to intervene in the social reality this term creates and perpetuates—is to take a processual approach. Accordingly, Fassin focusses on the “processes through which races are embodied and bodies are racialised.”³⁷ We think of the prefix *trans-* in the term trans-culturality as embodying exactly this kind of critical potential to focus on the processuality of culture and to rethink the ways in which social reality (including cultural differences, boundaries, and identities) is constructed.³⁸

However, the histories, discourses, and practices we encounter in our research are not always best described within the broad framework of trans-culturality. Instead, we argue for varied terminologies that allow for different scales and relational horizons in spatial, temporal, and cultural terms. Depending on the subject matter and according to epistemological interests and research frames, it might be more fruitful to apply the critical potential of the prefix *trans-* to other notions, such as the national, regional, local, or temporal.³⁹ As Thomas A. Tweed has suggested in his “translocative analysis,” we might need to expand or contract our temporal span, historical frame, or geographical scope accordingly and move across varying scales.⁴⁰

Awareness of the need for varying terminologies and scales also draws attention to research and academic projects conducted under other methodological labels that nevertheless share the theoretical concerns of a transcultural perspective. In fact, a variety of scholars have developed and applied similar concepts and approaches in studying religious phenomena past and present, often while

36 Ibid., 421.

37 Ibid.

38 “Understanding Transculturalism,” 25.

39 Tweed, “On Moving Across”; Thomas A. Tweed, “Theory and Method in the Study of Buddhism: Toward ‘Translocative’ Analysis,” *Journal of Global Buddhism* 12 (2011): 17–32; Manuel A. Vásquez, “The Global Portability of Pneumatic Christianity: Comparing African and Latin American Pentecostals,” *African Studies* 68, no. 2 (2009): 273–286; Cristina Rocha, “Transnational Pentecostal Connections: An Australian Megachurch and a Brazilian Church in Australia,” *PentecoStudies: An Interdisciplinary Journal for Research on the Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements* 12, no. 1 (2013): 62–82.

40 Thomas A. Tweed, “American Occultism and Japanese Buddhism: Albert J. Edmunds, DT Suzuki, and Translocative History,” *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 32, no. 2 (2005): 249–281; Tweed, “Theory and Method.”

working at the margins of established research fields, such as studying the history of African or Asian Christianities, which are usually not part of the field of traditional church history. Here, scholars were often confronted with problems posed by a particular Eurocentric perspective that placed European and North American Christianities at the centre of their respective academic maps; at the same time they were often met with a certain disregard for or simple omission of seemingly peripheral and heterodox forms of non-Western Christianities.⁴¹ As a response, scholars of religions have increasingly called for new and different “maps” that take into account the global history, entanglements, and polycentricity of Christianities as well as religions in general.⁴² Klaus Koschorke and the Munich School of World Christianity have developed an approach that includes the polycentric structures and transcontinental links in the history of World Christianity from its earliest beginnings. Their approach highlights multidirectional processes of exchange and two-way transformations.⁴³ Klaus Hock emphasises the processuality and mutual entanglement of cultures and religions and the ways in which religions themselves are “constituted transculturally.”⁴⁴ He further highlights the fruitfulness of such a transcultural approach for the analysis of cultural contacts as well as processes of exchange and transformation within and between cultures and religions, especially, but not exclusively, within the context of globalization, migration, and diaspora.⁴⁵

41 Philip Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity: The Thousand-Year Golden Age of the Church in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia—And How It Died* (New York: HarperOne, 2009); Ciprian Burlacioiu and Adrian Hermann, “Einleitung: Veränderte Landkarten und polyzentrische Strukturen der Christentumsgeschichte; Zum akademischen Wirken Klaus Koschorkes und dem Programm der Festschrift,” in *Veränderte Landkarten: Auf dem Weg zu einer polyzentrischen Geschichte des Weltchristentums; Festschrift für Klaus Koschorke zum 65. Geburtstag* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2013), XVI.

42 Jenkins, *The Lost History*, 36–39; Klaus Koschorke, “Changing Maps of the History of Global Christianity,” in *Europäisches und Globales Christentum: Herausforderungen und Transformationen im 20. Jahrhundert/European and Global Christianity: Challenges and Transformations in the 20th Century*, ed. Katharina Kunter and Jens Holger Schjørring (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011), 273–293; Karénina Kollmar-Paulenz, “Lamas und Schamanen: Mongolische Wissensordnungen vom frühen 17. bis zum 21. Jahrhundert; Ein Beitrag zur Debatte um aussereuropäische Religionsbegriffe,” in *Religion in Asien? Studien zur Anwendbarkeit des Religionsbegriffs*, ed. Peter Schalk, *Historia Religionum* 32 (Uppsala: University of Uppsala, 2013), 185–187; Bergunder, “‘Religion’ and ‘Science.’”

43 For an introduction to the substantial work of the Munich School of Christianity see the recent special issue of *The Journal of World Christianity* 6, no. 1 (2016).

44 Klaus Hock, “Religion als transkulturelles Phänomen: Implikationen eines kulturwissenschaftlichen Paradigmas für die Religionsforschung,” *Berliner Theologische Zeitschrift* 19, no. 1 (2002): 64–82.

45 Klaus Hock, “Kulturkontakt und interreligiöse Transkulturation: Religionswissenschaftliche und missionswissenschaftliche Perspektiven,” *Berliner Theologische Zeitschrift* 24, no. 1 (2007): 5–28; Klaus Hock, “Religion on the Move: Transcultural Perspectives; Discourses on Diaspora Religion

The transcultural approach in religious studies: Two examples

The extent to which a transcultural approach “might reveal a cosmos not known before,” as Madeleine Herren, Martin Rüesch, and Christiane Sibille have suggested, shall now be explored in two examples from the field of Pentecostal Christianity.⁴⁶

By now, it has become commonplace to refer to contemporary Pentecostal Christianity as a global network comprising a rhizomatic ensemble of actors, organizations, institutions, discourses, practices, materialities, and sensibilities.⁴⁷ Joel Robbins’ apt description of Pentecostal and charismatic Christians as “a far-flung network of people held together by their publications and other media productions, conferences, revival meetings, and constant travel”⁴⁸ echoes Simon Coleman’s analysis of the globalization of charismatic Christianity, whose structure he describes in terms of a “globally dispersed,” “huge and increasingly transnational network of Christians, comprising congregations, networks, fellowships, mega-churches and [...] so-called para-churches.”⁴⁹ He adds that within this network, “there exists an internal market involving the production and consumption of particular goods as well as the promotion of highly mobile preachers who circulate between numerous, widely distributed workshops and conferences.”⁵⁰

Most scholars agree that Pentecostalism is currently the most rapidly growing form of Christianities worldwide. The term Pentecostalism, as we have seen, acts as an umbrella term for a conglomerate of more or less closely associated Christian movements, some of which date back from as late as the turn of the twentieth century.⁵¹ Since then, Pentecostalism has grown into a major branch of

Between Category Formation and the Quest for Religious Identity,” in *Christianity in Africa and the African Diaspora: The Appropriation of a Scattered Heritage*, ed. Afe Adogame, Roswith I. H. Gerloff, and Klaus Hock, Continuum Religious Studies (London: Continuum, 2008), 235–247.

46 Herren, Rüesch, and Sibille, *Transcultural History*.

47 We use the term network in a metaphorical sense as established in the field of Pentecostal Studies by authors such as Joel Robbins and Simon Coleman. See Joel Robbins, “The Globalization of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 33 (2004): 117–143; Simon Coleman, *The Globalisation of Charismatic Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

48 Robbins, “The Globalization of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity,” 122.

49 Coleman, *The Globalisation of Charismatic Christianity*, 13; 22–23.

50 *Ibid.*, 13.

51 Joel Robbins, “The Globalization of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity,” 117–143; Allan H. Anderson, “The Origins of Pentecostalism and Its Global Spread in the Early Twentieth Century,” *Transformation: An International Journal of Holistic Mission Studies* 22, no. 3 (2005): 175–185; Michael Bergunder, “Pfingstbewegung, Globalisierung und Migration,” in *Migration und*

contemporary global Christianities, with centres mainly in the Global South, i.e. Asia, Africa, and Latin America.⁵² Some scholars thus speak of a general shift in the landscape of global Christianities, as the major centres of gravity migrate from the Global North, i.e. Europe and North America, to the Global South.⁵³

Then and today, “global flows” of Pentecostal discourses and practices crisscross the globe and are re-territorialized, appropriated, and “customized” in different local contexts.⁵⁴ These ideas and practices are “speaking in tongues, intuitive and experiential Spirit-centred devotion, oral liturgy, firm biblical orientation, narrative theology and testimonies, strong lay participation, [and] healing.”⁵⁵ However, it is important to note that a seemingly typical Pentecostal set of discourses and practices is never essential to Pentecostalism as such. Such sets of practices and ideas are negotiated as “typically Pentecostal” only “within the network” of Pentecostalism itself, and thus are subject to change and transformation as well as local and power-dependent differences, as Michael Bergunder has argued.⁵⁶ What holds the discursive Pentecostal network together is thus not a range of common characteristics, but the process of negotiation itself, which links the different groups through inclusion and exclusion alike.

Pentecostalism has also been described as “building a supra-local space” and a “trans-local time.”⁵⁷ But in order to demonstrate what a transcultural

Identität: Pfingstlich-charismatische Migrationsgemeinden in Deutschland, ed. Michael Bergunder and Jörg Haustein, Beihefte der Zeitschrift für Mission 8 (Frankfurt am Main: Lembeck, 2006): 155–169; Michael Wilkinson, “The ‘Many Tongues’ of Global Pentecostalism,” in *Global Pentecostal Movements: Migration, Mission, and Public Religion*, ed. Michael Wilkinson, International Studies in Religion and Society 14 (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 3–14.

52 Allan Anderson, Michael Bergunder, Andre F. Droogers, and Cornelis van der Laan, eds., introduction to *Studying Global Pentecostalism: Theories and Methods* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 1; Allan H. Anderson, *To the Ends of the Earth: Pentecostalism and the Transformation of World Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

53 Afe Adogame, “Reconfiguring the Global Religious Economy: The Role of African Pentecostalism,” in *Spirit and Power*, ed. Donald E. Miller, Kimon H. Sargeant, and Richard Flory (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 185; Alister E. McGrath, *The Future of Christianity*, Blackwell Manifestos (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002); Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

54 Jonathan Xavier Inda and Renato Rosaldo, eds., “Tracking Global Flows,” in *The Anthropology of Globalization: A Reader*, 2nd ed., Blackwell Readers in Anthropology 1 (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002), 16.

55 Michael Bergunder, “The Cultural Turn,” in Anderson et al., *Studying Global Pentecostalism*, 55.

56 Ibid.

57 Vásquez, “The Global Portability,” 280.

approach might reveal, we need to scale down this envisioned supra-local space and trans-local time inhabited by Pentecostalism. First we will look at the discourse, which locates the historical origins of Pentecostalism in North America, and secondly, we will analyse voices that contest the centrality of North America in the current Pentecostal genealogies and imaginations of the world. Before we proceed, however, a cautionary note on the role and scope of the following examples seems to be in order. We do not claim to cover any of the following examples in full detail and some readers might rightly miss one or another aspect as important dimensions of the material presented. We also do not consider the sketches of our case studies to be conclusive regarding the fruitfulness of a transcultural perspective. Rather, we have chosen these examples because we think they show how a transcultural perspective might reveal previously hidden aspects or dimensions. Paul Gifford once wrote, on the very same topic, “I am fully aware that my examples (sometimes from several years apart) are not ‘conclusive’ in any hard sense, but I’ve selected them, because I think they are revealing of a reality.”⁵⁸ The same can be said about our own choice of examples and their coverage here. The depth of the following description flows from this objective.

The birth of Pentecostalism: An American event or a transcultural moment?

The most popular origin narrative of Pentecostalism, expounded in early historiographic research and still repeated in contemporary studies, connects global Pentecostalism with a revival at Asuza Street in Los Angeles beginning in 1906.⁵⁹ Accordingly, Pentecostalism came to be considered a particular “American brand” of Christianity that was exported to the rest of the world and has subsequently become a global movement.⁶⁰ This account of the history of global Pentecostalism has met with considerable criticism.⁶¹ As discussed

58 Paul Gifford, *Christianity, Development and Modernity in Africa* (London: Hurst & Company, 2015), 7.

59 Michael Bergunder, “Constructing Indian Pentecostalism: On Issues of Methodology and Representation,” in *Asian and Pentecostal: The Charismatic Face of Christianity in Asia*, ed. Allan H. Anderson and Edmond Tang (London: Regnum Books, 2005), 179–180.

60 Paul Gifford, *The Religious Right in Southern Africa* (Harare: Baobab Books, 1988); Steve Brouwer, Paul Gifford, and Susan D. Rose, *Exporting the American Gospel: Global Christian Fundamentalism* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 2–7; Stephen Hunt, “‘Winning Ways’: Globalisation and the Impact of the Health and Wealth Gospel,” *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 15, no. 3 (October 2000): 331.

61 David Martin, *Tongues of Fire: The Explosion of Pentecostalism in Latin America* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 2–3; Paul Freston, “Charismatic Evangelicals in Latin America: Mission and Politics on the Frontiers of Protestant Growth,” in *Charismatic Christianity: Sociological*

by Allan H. Anderson, such accounts of the history of Pentecostalism

often reflected a bias interpreting history from a predominantly white American perspective, neglecting (if not completely ignoring) the vital and often more significant work of Asian, African, African American, Caribbean and Latino Pentecostal pioneers. Some of these western histories add the biases of denomination and race [...].⁶²

Early attempts to nuance the narrative of the American origin of Pentecostalism sought to include black history, i.e. the influence of black culture on Pentecostal ideas and practices in the United States.⁶³ Later attempts aimed to rewrite Pentecostal history as a “polycentric, transnational religion”⁶⁴ or “non-centred global network,”⁶⁵ while Afe Adogame and Shobana Shankar called for a general “decentering” of the North Atlantic that has until now served as a reference frame for writing hegemonic religious history: “In the post-imperial era, we must draw a different map,” a map that takes seriously the “complexity of religious activism in the context of globalization.”⁶⁶ According to Adogame and Shankar, this means allowing “formerly colonized and marginalized peoples to become religious agents not just in the centres of power but throughout the world” and acknowledging the fact that “new religious movements possess their own chronology and ontology, not linked necessarily to the timescale and discourses of empire and postcolonialism.”⁶⁷

We believe that a transcultural perspective allows us not only to re-examine the history of early Pentecostalism, but to decentre the very birth of Pentecostalism, the “American event” at Azusa Street itself. By doing so, we

Perspectives, ed. Stephen Hunt, Malcolm B. Hamilton, and Tony Walter (London: Macmillan, 1997), 184–204; Allan Anderson, “Varieties, Taxonomies, and Definitions,” in Anderson et al., *Studying Global Pentecostalism*, 19–20.

62 Anderson, “The Origins of Pentecostalism,” 176.

63 Walter J. Hollenweger, *Pentecostalism: Origins and Developments Worldwide* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997).

64 Anderson, *To the Ends of the Earth*, 1; Anderson, “The Origins of Pentecostalism,” 184.

65 J.D.Y. Peel, “Postsocialism, Postcolonialism, Pentecostalism,” in *Conversion after Socialism: Disruptions, Modernisms and Technologies of Faith in the Former Soviet Union*, ed. Mathijs Pelkmans, 183–200 (New York: Berghahn Books, 2009), 193.

66 Afe Adogame and Shobana Shankar, eds., *Religion on the Move! New Dynamics of Religious Expansion in a Globalizing World*, *International Studies in Religion and Society* 15 (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 1–2.

67 *Ibid.*, 1.

follow a line of investigation introduced by Michael Wilkinson, who argues that “even the Azusa meetings are not simply a product of the USA.”⁶⁸ Instead, he highlights the global flows of the slave trade and African religiosities as the “glocal origin” of the Azusa event.⁶⁹

Here we seek to further illuminate this “glocal origin” by returning to the Azusa event and addressing the past—and research about that past—in a transcultural way, re-reading existing research through a new lens:

[T]ransculturality is by no means limited to as yet undiscovered source material. It starts with a different form of reading, which is aware of inclusion and exclusion processes and thus reflects on what is not mentioned and why. [...] The essential condition necessary for shaping new questions is therefore to read existing literature carefully, since new paradigms cannot develop out of an intellectual void.”⁷⁰

In so doing, we seek to take the departure from the “out of America”-thesis one step further and suggest that the revival at Asuza Street was not only “not an American event,” but an inherently transcultural and translocal moment.

In April 1906, in a run-down former African Methodist Episcopal building in Azusa Street, Los Angeles, African American preacher William Seymour (1870–1922) initiated what would become daily twelve-hour prayer meetings. The institution lasted for three and a half years. At these meetings, attendees claimed to experience the baptism in the Holy Spirit, which bestowed supernatural gifts upon them, such as the ability to speak in actually existing foreign tongues not known to the person (“xenoglossia”).⁷¹

The Azusa event, however, was not confined to its local context. The event was part of an already existing global missionary network. The long nineteenth century is usually considered the heyday of European colonialism, enabled and accompanied by revolutions in communication and transport technologies that made the rise of global trade networks possible. In the wake of these developments, European evangelicals too set out to bring the Christian faith to Africa, Asia, and the rest of the world, thus creating their own global

68 Michael Wilkinson, “Religion and Global Flows,” in *Religion, Globalization, and Culture*, ed. Peter Beyer and Lori Beaman (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 386.

69 *Ibid.*, 385–387.

70 Herren, Rüesch, and Sibille, *Transcultural History*, 94.

71 Anderson, “The Origins of Pentecostalism.”

missionary networks.⁷² The first World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh in 1910 testifies to the global outreach as well as the Euro-American bias of this missionary movement: 509 of the participants were British, 491 North American, 169 from continental Europe, 27 from the white colonies in South Africa and Australia, and only 19 came from the “non-Western” world.⁷³

By the second half of the century, this missionary movement had gained new momentum through the widespread reception of premillennial discourses. Such discourses stressed the need to proclaim the Gospel to all people and all nations, so as to enable them to convert to Christianity before the imminent Second Coming of Christ. Many also awaited a great end-time revival, the so-called Latter Rain, and eagerly looked around for signs that such a revival might finally manifest itself.⁷⁴

In this atmosphere, the news of the supernatural happenings at Azusa Street fell on fertile grounds. The “xenoglossia” claimed by its participants seemed like a heaven-sent alternative to the time-consuming process of teaching missionaries the local languages of their mission fields.⁷⁵ At the same time, the participants of the Azusa Street revival claimed to represent the fulfillment of hopes harboured by the global missionary movement. They saw themselves as the beginning of the long-awaited end time revival, which they intended to bring “to the ends of the earth.”⁷⁶ As a result, “Azusa Street went global from

72 Dana Lee Robert, *Christian Mission: How Christianity Became a World Religion*, Blackwell Brief Histories of Religion Series (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 48–52. Early missionary societies engaged in such worldwide missionary endeavors have been, for example, the Methodist Missionary Society (founded in 1786), the Baptist Missionary Society (founded in 1792), the London Missionary Society (founded in 1795), the Church Missionary Society (founded 1799), the Basler Mission (founded in 1815), or the China Inland Mission (founded in 1865). For an introduction see Klaus Koschorke, “Christliche Missionen und religiöse Globalisierung im 19. Jahrhundert,” in *WBG Welt-Geschichte: Eine globale Geschichte von den Anfängen bis ins 21. Jahrhundert*, ed. Walter Demel and Hans-Ulrich Thamer, vol. 5, *Entstehung der Moderne 1700 bis 1914* (Darmstadt: WBG, 2010), 195–208.

73 Brian Stanley, *The World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910*, Studies in the History of Christian Missions (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2009), 12.

74 Bergunder, “Constructing Indian Pentecostalism,” 182.

75 Anderson, *To the Ends of the Earth*, 48.

76 As Michael Bergunder points out, not everyone bought into the vision of the Azusa Street revival as the fulfillment of such missionary hopes right from the start. He quotes Frederik Henke, a contemporary of the Azusa Street revival, who saw the events in Azusa Street as a “small part” of a more encompassing end-time revival already taking place. Bergunder suggests that some of the efforts in spreading the news about the Azusa Street revival were thus also motivated by establishing Azusa Street as the very center its participants claimed it to be. Bergunder, “Constructing Indian Pentecostalism,” 183.

the very start,” as participants channelled their ideas and practices through correspondence and magazines, personal contacts and missionary journeys, into the global missionary network.⁷⁷

At the same time, people from all over the world began pouring into Azusa Street, intrigued by accounts of the supernatural happenings popularised by word-of-mouth and Seymour’s journal *The Apostolic Faith*—which quickly reached international circulation.⁷⁸ These visitors, however, were more than just spectators. Many claimed to have been profoundly impacted by what they experienced and left to establish missions and new Pentecostal centres in their own countries of origin, or wherever their missionary zeal called them to go.⁷⁹

Based on this transcultural way of re-reading the Azusa event, and following Adogame and Shankar’s call to “decenter” the North Atlantic as a reference frame for the narration of religious histories, we thus suggest that the revival at Azusa Street was less an “American event” than an inherently transcultural and translocal moment. We argue that from its very beginning, the Azusa revival was embedded in and facilitated by various translocal and transnational circuits of exchange, which had been established during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century by various evangelical missionary organizations. These networks channelled people, ideas, and practices through the hub of Azusa Street, making it a temporary node in the already-existing networks of evangelical and missionary exchange. The circulating ideas, practices, and people transformed the Azusa event and were simultaneously transformed by the local forces at play. Feeling profoundly changed, people left Azusa, taking these ideas and practices with them, and re-injected them into global circuits of exchange, setting them in motion “to the ends of the earth.”⁸⁰

Although the early examples discussed above seek to complicate the origin story and decentre the history of a global Pentecostal movement, most of these approaches still regard the Azusa event itself as something inherently American. The transcultural approach, however, allows us to highlight the complexity of the Azusa event itself: Azusa became a hub for translocative Christian networks and circuits of exchange, which extended beyond the

77 Ibid.

78 The first edition of the *The Apostolic Faith* was published in 1906 with a circulation of 5,000 copies. Only half a year later, this number had increased to 40,000 copies. Pentecostal magazines in vernacular languages were printed in Norway, Germany, China, Japan, Palestine, and Brazil. The publication of these magazines was accompanied by flows of letters and correspondences to and from Azusa Street. Bergunder, “Constructing Indian Pentecostalism,” 148.

79 Anderson, “The Origins of Pentecostalism,” 179.

80 Anderson, *To the Ends of the Earth*.

national framework. In this case, adopting a transcultural approach means paying attention to specific exchange processes through which ideas, practices, artefacts, and actors emerge or become available in specific local contexts at a certain moment in time. Further, it means taking a close look at the transformations that these ideas, practices, artefacts, and actors experienced in Azusa. Finally, such an approach will ask how the transformed discourses, practices, objects, and people are then re-inserted into conduits of exchange through which they become available in new contexts, to be again adopted, rejected, appropriated, or translated, thus constituting an expanding and dynamic translocative Pentecostal network.⁸¹

Charismatic Christianity in Singapore: decentering the West and reimagining the missionary world map

The narrative of the American Gospel's export to the "rest" of the world extends not only to religious ideas and practices, but also to forms of Christian community organisation, such as megachurches and small groups (e.g. Bible study, home fellowship, or prayer groups). Megachurches are commonly understood as churches with a weekly attendance of at least 2,000.⁸² Some of the largest megachurches in Singapore reach an attendance of 30,000 per week.⁸³ The largest megachurch today is Yonggi Cho's Yoido Full Gospel church in South Korea, with a reported membership of 480,000, whereas Lakewood Church, the biggest church in the U.S., currently attracts approximately 40,000 weekly attendees. Complementing the weekly Sunday worship services, most of the megachurches offer religious activities conducted in much smaller settings, usually small groups of a dozen or two. These activities can include Bible study, prayer, or physical and recreational activities, and allow for closer contact among members and attendees than the large worship services.

Despite their varying scales, both—the megachurch and the small group as well as their theologies and practices—are often understood as modelled after

81 "Understanding Transculturalism," 25.

82 Scott Thumma and Dave Travis, *Beyond Megachurch Myths: What We Can Learn From America's Largest Churches* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007), xviii.

83 Robbie B. H. Goh, "Hillsong and 'Megachurch' Practice: Semiotics, Spatial Logic and the Embodiment of Contemporary Evangelical Protestantism," *Material Religion: The Journal of Objects, Art and Belief* 4, no. 3 (2008): 186–187; Daniel P. S. Goh and Terence Chong, "Asian Pentecostalism: Revivals, Mega-churches, and Social Engagement," in *Routledge Handbook on Religions in Asia*, ed. Bryan S. Turner and Oscar Salemink (London: Routledge, 2015), 407–412; Terence Chong and Yew-Foong Hui, *Different Under God: A Survey of Church-Going Protestants in Singapore* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2013); Terence Chong, "Megachurches in Singapore: The Faith of an Emergent Middle Class," *Pacific Affairs* 88, no. 2 (2015): 215–235.

American examples or expounding “American-style”⁸⁴ religious doctrines and worship forms:

While the leaders of the new Christian faith come from various nations, the message is predominantly American. When believers enter a church in Africa, Asia, or Latin America, they participate in a form of worship that can be found in Memphis or Portland or New York City. Perhaps it will be Pentecostal, or Southern Baptist, or a ubiquitous charismatic product marketed by Bible schools in places such as Tulsa and Pasadena.⁸⁵

While Steve Brouwer et al. acknowledge that leading voices of the “new Christian faith”—referring to the global upsurge in evangelical and charismatic Christianity—are to be found in different parts of the world, they characterize the religious content of their practices and beliefs as “predominantly American” and see its worldwide dissemination as an indicator that this “quintessentially American faith” is “in the process of becoming an international religious culture generated by enthusiastic, broad-based movements in dozens of countries.”⁸⁶

In a similar way, Stephen Hunt reaffirms the North American roots of the so-called Prosperity Gospel (a set of beliefs and practices relating to the promises of God for his believers), which is prominent among contemporary charismatic Christians, pointing to the fact that it has made its “way across the Atlantic from ‘God’s backyard’ in the USA to Europe and beyond.”⁸⁷ Now being spread worldwide, these new evangelical forms, beliefs, and practices “have come to the fore and increased the global significance of American-style religion.”⁸⁸

Although Brouwer et al., as well as Hunt, acknowledge local adaptations and transformations of Pentecostal ideas, practices, and organisational forms, the direction of the transfer is clearly described in unidirectional terms as a movement from the West to the “rest.” But this narrative is challenged by Pentecostal Christians in various ways. Taking a closer look at small group practices in Singaporean megachurches and how religious actors narrate the history of their own organisations, it becomes obvious that there are various models of small group practice, whose advocates do not necessarily feel

84 Hunt, “‘Winning Ways,’” 331.

85 Brouwer, Gifford, and Rose, *Exporting the American Gospel*, 2.

86 *Ibid.*, 6.

87 Hunt, “‘Winning Ways,’” 331.

88 *Ibid.*

indebted to American models. Instead, they credit the Home Cell Group-system developed by the South Korean pastor Yonggi Cho, or the G12 Cell Group-system introduced by the Colombian pastor César Castellanos, as their inspiration. In so doing, they resist the hegemonic narrative that accredits a Christian small group movement solely or primarily to American Christianity.

Authors and exponents of small group models—whether they locate themselves in the North American, South Korean, or Latin American lineage—all name the Bible as their ultimate reference point and thereby re-claim small groups as the original and thus “authentic” form of Christian community formation. This should call attention to questions of hegemony, debates over the “optimal ‘cellular structure’”⁸⁹ of small groups, and struggles over power and authority within translocative Christian networks. Singaporean Christians not only contest the narrative of the exclusive American inheritance of the small group model, they reverse the perspective, claiming that the small group with a focus on communality is a typically Asian model that is now being exported to and becoming an inspiration for churches in Europe.⁹⁰

This kind of re-imagining the missionary world map, by positioning oneself not at the receiving end of missionary flows, but at the centre of missionary activities that are spreading out from Singapore (or Asia in more general terms) to the rest of the world, is also found in the global dissemination of the “Gospel Revolution” by the Singaporean pastor Joseph Prince.

The son of a Sikh priest and a Chinese mother, Joseph Prince was born in Singapore in 1963 and spent his primary school years in Malaysia before returning to Singapore, where he converted to Christianity at the age of twelve. He started preaching at nineteen and founded New Creation Church together with friends in 1983/84. In the 1980s, he changed his birth name to Joseph Prince.⁹¹ The congregation grew rapidly in the 1990s. With approximately 30,000 weekly worship attendees, New Creation Church currently constitutes

89 Joshua Adam Comaroff, “Vulgarity and Enchantment: Religious Movements and the Space of the State” (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2009), 476. ProQuest (3410362).

90 McGrath, *The Future of Christianity*, 64–68; David Harvey, “Cell Church: Its Situation in British Evangelical Culture,” *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 18, no. 1 (January 2003): 95–109.

91 Tan Dawn Wei, “Church Pastors Like No Other,” *The Straits Times*, October 5, 2008, 8; Jeff Chu, “Rising Stars: Joseph Prince and the New Creation Church,” *OZY.com*, <http://www.ozy.com/rising-stars/joseph-prince-and-the-new-creation-church/3515> [Accessed on 7. November 2013]; Chong, “Mega-churches in Singapore,” 220.

the largest independent church in the small Southeast-Asian city-state.⁹² The growth of neo-Pentecostal megachurches in Singapore coincided with the economic growth in Singapore during the 1980s and 1990s and the subsequent emergence of a consumerist middle class.⁹³ Megachurches are especially attractive to “young professionals making the socio-economic transition from working to middle class within an achievement-oriented culture in Singapore that is encouraged by these churches,” as Terence Chong argues.⁹⁴ According to a quantitative study conducted among Protestant Christians in Singapore, the demographic attracted to megachurches is usually “[a]ttuned to market logic, centred on personal improvement and consumerist adornment as markers of individuality, and much less focused on socio-political issues or injustice.”⁹⁵ One of the crucial factors that makes megachurches attractive for this emerging middle class is the sense of individual agency conveyed by the “achievement-oriented culture” and “‘can do’ spirit” of these churches.⁹⁶ All these elements are present in the church culture of New Creation Church and the Grace theology preached by Joseph Prince. In addition, these elements resonate within the larger transnational network of contemporary Pentecostal Christianity.

Joseph Prince has achieved influence beyond Singapore via his English book publications (printed by American Christian publishers such as Charisma House and FaithWords), his televangelist program with the title *Destined to Reign*, which is recorded during his sermons at New Creation Church and internationally broadcast via the Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN), and his various speaking engagements across the globe. His televangelist program was originally produced and packaged for the North American evangelical/Pentecostal TV market, although today the program is broadcast by cable and satellite networks in Europe, Africa, Asia, Australia, and Israel as well. Prince entered the North American TV market in 2007 with the financial means to establish a TV ministry with high production value, which is crucial for gaining an influential market share in the already crowded US televangelist field.⁹⁷ A study from the Hartford Institute for Religion Research has shown

92 For a database with attendance numbers for various megachurches see <http://leadnet.org/world/> [Accessed on 17. February 2017].

93 Chong, “Megachurches in Singapore,” 218–220.

94 *Ibid.*, 217.

95 *Ibid.*, 219; cf. Chong and Hui, *Different Under God*.

96 Chong, “Megachurches in Singapore,” 225.

97 The financial strength of New Creation Church is manifest in one of its latest projects. Its business arm, together with property developer CapitaLand, has built a new cultural and civic center

that many US megachurches that once had a TV ministry have dropped those endeavors.⁹⁸ This is mainly due to high costs and the failure to produce enough revenue to buy time on transregional TV stations and national networks. Joseph Prince Ministries had to meet these costs to be able to secure a niche in that market. Initially, funds were provided by New Creation Church, but they are no longer needed, as the US audience seems to generate enough profit to keep the program running, freeing up funds for other missionary endeavors, such as establishing a televangelist presence in Asia, and especially in China. The international missionary activities of Joseph Prince and New Creation Church, thus align with Singapore's position as "one of the Christian hubs of Asia"⁹⁹ and with Singaporean Christians' vision of Singapore as a missionary-sending country in the global field of Christianities.

In November 2013, Prince embarked on his first US tour, preaching in sold-out arenas. The tour coincided with the release of his (then) latest book, *The Power of Right Believing*, published by the US-based Christian publishing house FaithWords.¹⁰⁰ The preaching tour was a typical example of activating the structures of the contemporary Pentecostal network "held together by [...] publications and other media productions, conferences, revival meetings, and constant travel" of highly mobile pastors such as Joseph Prince.¹⁰¹ His preaching engagements were recorded and broadcast at his home church in Singapore and helped to integrate his home congregation into the missionary work at the other end of the world. Pastors at home regularly reported from the American missionary front on the success of their senior pastor abroad.

in Singapore (The Star Performing Arts Center at Buena Vista MRT station), including a state-of-the-art 5,000-seat auditorium, which New Creation Church rents as a location for its four Sunday services. The combined cost of the project was S\$880 million, and New Creation Church, via its business arm, invested S\$500 million into the project. Most of New Creation Church's investment costs came from church surpluses, donations, and revenues from the Church's business arm. Fiona Chan, "Church pumps in \$220m more; New Creation Church's total stake in lifestyle hub will be \$500m," *The Straits Times* (September 16, 2008).

98 In the year 2000, 44 percent of US megachurches had their own radio ministry and 38 percent produced their own TV programs. In 2008, only 24 percent of the megachurches had their own radio program and only 23 percent had their own television ministry. Most of the programs were broadcast regionally and only 4–8 percent of the programs were broadcast nationally or internationally. Scott Thumma and Warren Bird, "Changes in American Megachurches," Hartford Institute for Religion Research, 2008, 9, <http://hrr.hartsem.edu/megachurch/Changes%20in%20American%20Megachurches%20Sept%2012%202008.pdf> [Accessed on 16. February 2017].

99 Robbie B. H. Goh, "Christian Capital: Singapore, Evangelical Flows and Religious Hubs," *Asian Studies Review* vol. 40, no. 2 (2016): 254.

100 Joseph Prince, *The Power of Right Believing: 7 Keys To Freedom From Fear, Guilt, And Addiction* (New York: FaithWords, 2013).

101 Robbins, "The Globalization of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity," 122.

That success—measured in terms of book sales and rankings in bestseller lists, number of attendees at his speaking engagements, and guest appearances on the programs of other known pastors within the network—is referred to as the Gospel Revolution, the successful spread of his Grace theology through various media outlets.

On November 10, 2013, assistant pastor Lim Lian Neo informed the Singaporean congregation that their senior pastor had made it onto *The New York Times* Best Sellers list with his latest publication.¹⁰² She explained that this was not due to the countless books sold to audiences in Singapore, but solely to purchases made in the US. She showed pictures of long lines of people lining up in front of Barnes & Noble bookstores in the US hours before the book signing session started. After that, she played short video clips of people happily holding up their Joseph Prince books for the camera, giving testimonies of how much they were impacted by the teaching of Grace and how it had transformed their lives.

On November 24, 2013, assistant pastor Neo told the congregation in Singapore that during the last two weeks their senior pastor had preached to more than 65,000 people in the US and asked the audience to give Jesus praise for this accomplishment. Further, she explained the role of New Creation Church in Singapore in this missionary endeavour:

It is just so awesome what the Lord is doing. You know, I want you to know that the Gospel Revolution is happening right across America and the world. Glory to Jesus! It is happening around the world. And I want you to know that this revolution has its epicenter right here: Singapore, New Creation Church! We are at the epicenter of God's glorious revelation of his son! Amen! (transcript by the authors)

Here, Singapore is visualized as the epicentre of a new Gospel Revolution, which is rolling like a wave over the entire globe, taking the US and the rest of the world by storm. America is envisioned as a missionary field to be successfully conquered, rather than the source of the Gospel Revolution. Thus, New Creation Church's vision is a further example of how religious actors in the global network of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity envision alternative missionary world maps, in which the US is an important reference

102 *The Power of Right Believing* was listed on *The New York Times* Best Sellers list in the category "Advice, How-To & Miscellaneous" for three weeks in November 2013. The book entered the list at #2 (November 10, 2013), dropped to #15 in the second week (November 17, 2013), and to #17 in the third week (November 24, 2013).

point, one stepping stone in a larger project of global evangelism. Further, this vision aligns with the Evangelical and Pentecostal Christian discourse that refers to Singapore as a new “Antioch of Asia”—a new missionary-sending hub that capitalizes on Singapore’s socioeconomic and geographical strategic position as a global city and that aspires to become a “Christian ‘gateway to Asia’.”¹⁰³

To summarize, just as in the first historical example, the transcultural approach allows us to depart from popular narratives that envision the world from a singular point of view. The transcultural perspective sensitizes us to a variety of narratives and perspectives that compete with and contest each other. Further, it allows us to perceive centre and periphery as relational nodes, which are dynamically reversed by context and the position of social actors. Therefore, the transcultural perspective makes audible a multiple voices and narratives, highlighting the complexity of social processes.

In addition, the transcultural approach helps to reconstruct the history of religions through a focus on relations, dynamics of re-localization, and what Arjun Appadurai calls “forms of circulation.”¹⁰⁴ Appadurai emphasizes that “transcultural dynamics” are constitutively part of what he calls the “production of locality,”¹⁰⁵ as was the case with Joseph Prince and his church, who envisioned Singapore as the new epicentre of the Gospel Revolution. Appadurai also highlights the role of “transcultural dynamics” in the production of “local subjectivity,” as we saw exemplified in the construction of a specific “Asian-ness” inherent in Christian small groups.

In the case of the “Asian-ness” of the small group models or the vision of a Gospel Revolution spreading from Singapore to the rest of the world, a transcultural perspective helps to situate these narratives in relation to other narratives and to analyse how hegemonic positions become contested and agency is re-claimed. In that process, the narrative of a unidirectional flow of missions which “starts historically in the West and expands to cover the globe”¹⁰⁶ and in which religious actors outside “the West” are only seen as passive receivers, adaptors and copyists, is re-examined. As a result, it reveals the inherent multidirectionality and multivocality of the processes and actors involved.

103 Goh, “Christian Capital,” 254.

104 Arjun Appadurai, “How Histories Make Geographies,” *Transcultural Studies* 1 (2010): 4–13, doi:10.11588/ts.2010.1.6129.

105 *Ibid.*, 6.

106 Robbins, “The Globalization of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity,” 118.

Ultimately, the aim is not to deny the role of North America as one—but not the only—important reference point in the social practices and in the imaginative horizon of religious actors, either as the point of origin or the goal of missionary activities. Rather, the point is to reposition the network of actors, organizations, and discourses involved and make the multicenteredness visible and the many voices audible.

Conclusion

Recent debates in the wake of several cultural turns have also left their mark on the academic study of religions.¹⁰⁷ Theories, methods, and the very category of religion itself have come under increasing scrutiny and critique. The transcultural approach we discussed in this paper should not be expected to answer all of the many questions that have been raised in these debates. Nor are, as we have seen, its theoretical concerns exclusive to the transcultural approach; instead these concerns are often shared by other scholars within the study of religions, even though they may not place their specific discussions within the framework of transculturality. At the same time, we are convinced that the transcultural perspective provides us with an innovative way of rethinking newer and older theoretical concerns and debates in the academic study of religions and may provide us with a suitable terminology to capture the complexity and dynamics of both culture and religion in all their entanglements.

Religious studies has never developed its own distinctive methodological toolkit. Instead, from its beginning, the study of religions has been characterized by an “integrated approach,” where the subject matter, research material, and epistemological frame determine the methods and approaches suitable to answer the questions raised.¹⁰⁸ It is our expressed hope that the reader might consider the transcultural approach discussed here against the background of such a methodological plurality and explore on his or her own, if, for their respective research interests and source material, such a transcultural perspective “might reveal a cosmos not known before.”¹⁰⁹

107 Doris Bachmann-Medick, *Cultural Turns: New Orientations in the Study of Culture* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016).

108 Michael Pye, “Methodological Integration in the Study of Religions,” in *Approaching Religion: Based on Papers Read at the Symposium on Methodology in the Study of Religions Held in Åbo, Finland 1997*, ed. Tore Ahlbäck, Scripta Instituti Donneriani Aboensis 17 (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1999), 188–205.

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