Contested Religious Space in Jakarta: Negotiating Politics, Capital and Ethnicity

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HANDBOOK OF RELIGION AND THE ASIAN CITY

Aspiration and Urbanization in the Twenty-First Century

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CONTESTED RELIGIOUS SPACE IN JAKARTA

Negotiating Politics, Capital, and Ethnicity

Chang-Yau Hoon

Religious pluralism has been lauded as a distinct feature of Indonesia. The Indonesian Constitution officially recognizes six religions, Islam, Christianity (Protestantism), Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism, and upholds religious freedom by allowing "all persons the right to worship according to their own religion or belief." According to the 2010 Census, approximately 87 percent of the population of 238 million are Muslims, 7 percent are Protestants, 3 percent are Catholics, 1.7 percent are Hindus, 0.72 percent are Buddhists, and 0.05 percent are Confucianists (Badan Pusat Statistik 2011). Indonesia's diverse religious landscape is reflected in the nation's capital, Jakarta—a metropolis of approximately ten million residents. The city evinces the fact that religion is a "constitutive force of both modernity and contemporary capitalism" (Hancock and Srinivas 2008, 621). The population of Jakarta resembles the national statistics stated above, except that it has lower percentages of Muslims (85 percent) and Hindus (0.2 percent), a slightly higher percentage of Christians (7.5 percent), and a significantly higher percentage of Buddhists (3.3 percent). While most Indonesian Hindus reside in Bali, the higher percentage of Christians and Buddhists in Jakarta can be attributed to the much larger population of ethnic Chinese there (6.6 percent), compared to the national statistic of 1.2 percent. More than 90 percent of Chinese Indonesians are Buddhists or Christians (Badan Pusat Statistik 2011), and it is with this particular ethnic group that this chapter is concerned.

The religious diversity of Jakarta is epitomized by the conspicuous presence of various symbolic religious buildings. For instance, within the vicinity of Merdeka Square and the Merdeka Palace in Central Jakarta stands the largest mosque in Southeast Asia, the
Masjid Istiqlal, which can accommodate 120,000 worshippers. In front of this grand mosque is the hundred-year-old neo-Gothic Catholic cathedral. Two recent additions to these “religioscapes” (Hayden 2013) are the Reformed Millennium Center of Indonesia, which features a Coliseum-like evangelical megachurch that seats eight thousand and houses a seminary, a museum, a concert hall, and a school, and the Tzu Chi Center (or Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation of Indonesia), a colossal building near the Sukarno-Hatta airport that is visible from an airplane. Needless to say, the modern high-rise buildings that sprout across this densely populated city epitomize another form of modern religion, capitalism. Next to these skyscrapers sprawl slums that highlight the paradoxical inequities of this religion. It is, however, premature to celebrate the religious pluralism of Jakarta, despite the opulent religious buildings that the city boasts. Beneath the veil of such diversity lie the less obvious undercurrents of the negotiation and contestation of religious space, which often involve competing actors including religious organizations, capitalist enterprises, and the state.

Urban spaces like Jakarta are both sites for the competition of ideologies and loci for the intersection of the forces of the market and religious fundamentalism (Hartiningsih 2011). The political, economic, and social significance of Jakarta has made it a strategic site where religious space is fiercely contested. In addition to being a cosmopolitan hub, it is a center of vibrant political, financial, and economic activities. The move toward decentralization after the fall of President Suharto in 1998 has redistributed some of Jakarta’s power, but it has not reduced the magnitude of this metropolis, where policy decisions, political brokering, and capital flows continue to take place. Moreover, Padawangi claims that post-Suharto Jakarta has become “the very agent of democratization”—a “megaphone to broadcast social movement messages to the rest of its citizens and to those outside the city” (2013, 857–58). It is therefore unsurprising that all six officially recognized religions, as well as many unrecognized religions (or “beliefs”) and even radical groups, have chosen Jakarta as the site of their headquarters.

The visually impressive and nationalistic monuments that the city houses further attest to its inveterate and symbolic significance. Areas of Jakarta may be contested for both their physical space and the symbolic meaning of these places. This can be seen at the Tugu Selamat Datang (Welcome monument), which was erected in the middle of the water fountain at the Hotel Indonesia roundabout. Located in the Thamrin-Sudirman corridor, the main thoroughfare of the central business district, the monument is a regular site for demonstrations and protests regarding issues ranging from labor and political life to religious and moral life (Padawangi 2013). As a case in point, prior to the passing of the Anti-Pornography Bill in 2008, large-scale protests by both proponents—mainly conservative religious organizations—and opponents—largely religious progressives and women’s rights nongovernmental organizations—took place at this site (Allen 2009).

Another example of spatial contestation at a symbolic site is the commotion that took place during a rally at the emblematic landmark of the National Monument (Monas), which President Sukarno built to commemorate Indonesia’s struggle for independence.
Interfaith activists organized a rally on June 1, 2008, to mark the sixty-third anniversary of Pancasila, the state ideology. It was a demonstration in support of Pancasila, religious pluralism, and religious minorities, especially the followers of Ahmadiyah, whom mainstream Islam deems deviant (Crouch 2009). Indeed, members of radical Islamic groups crashed the rally and violently attacked the activists who supported the Ahmadiyah sect. This was signified as a contestation not of physical space but of ideological space. Through the violence, followers of Ahmadiyah were denied and excluded from the claim to religious authenticity, belonging, and citizenship.¹

In a hub where multiple religions reside, the contestation of space is a commonplace. Amid the forces of capitalism, fundamentalism, and globalization, negotiation among as well as within religions is required to ensure harmonious coexistence. To examine the contested religioscapes of Jakarta and the intricate processes of the negotiation of religious space, this chapter focuses on two religious minorities: an Evangelical Protestant church and a Buddhist organization, both of which have recently built megastructures as their houses of worship. These organizations and their emblematic buildings are not only testaments to the thriving role of religion in the city but also illuminate the local embeddedness and global mobility of religion (Hancock and Srinivas 2008, 619).

To set the context, the first section gives an overview of religious accommodations and contestations in postcolonial Indonesia. It demonstrates that the aspiration of unity in diversity enshrined in the national ideology of Pancasila is put to the test when juxtaposed to the social reality of rising intolerance. Then the chapter narrates the stories of the two conspicuous religious buildings mentioned in the previous paragraph. It identifies the various actors involved in the religioscape in which the buildings’ organizations are embedded, namely the state, ethnic and religious groups, capitalist enterprises, local residents, and the diasporic Chinese community (Appadurai 1990). The analysis encompasses a critical discussion of the murky relationships among religion, capital, and the state; the ethnic and cultural capital of the organizations; and the role of technology in “mediating piety” (Lim 2009) as the two organizations negotiate local and global dynamics. The chapter argues that the skillful juggling of these three-way political-business-religious relations is the key to the success of the two religious organizations in navigating the treacherous terrain of religious contestation in Jakarta.

COEXISTENCE AND CONTESTATION: ACCOMMODATING RELIGIONS IN INDONESIA

Because Indonesia is one of the most diverse countries in the world, identity politics continue to be a challenge to its unity. Religious conflicts, sometimes caused by trivial personal disputes between people who happen to follow different religions, have flared up into large-scale violence (and are likely to do so again), as Indonesia’s tumultuous recent history illustrates (see, e.g., Colombijn and Lindblad 2002; Sidel 2007). This is despite the fact that the national motto is Bhinneka Tunggal Ika (Unity in diversity) and the five
principles of the state ideology of Pancasila are belief in one supreme god, humanism, nationalism, popular sovereignty, and social justice—plus, the 1945 Constitution celebrates the motto and Pancasila. Suharto’s New Order period (1966–98) never seriously dealt with ethnic and religious plurality, because public discourse on social or SARA (ethnic, religious, racial, and intergroup) differences was officially prohibited. Since the 1980s, Islamization has produced a more religious public space in Indonesia, and neofundamentalism has emerged as an important force in Indonesian society. The trend has been toward a more scrupulous observance of the Five Pillars of Islam and public expressions of piety (Fealy and White 2008). Furthermore, the renowned tolerant, nonstandard, syncretic practice of Islam embraced by the Javanese abangin (sometimes known as nominal Muslims), who account for two-thirds of ethnic Javanese (or approximately ninety million people), has collapsed due to the influence of what Hefner (2011) refers to as “religionization.”

The fall of Suharto in May 1998 saw the lifting of the top-down strong-arm tactics employed during the seemingly interminable thirty-two years of the New Order government. While the post-1998 democracy opened the door to ethnic and religious expressions, it simultaneously opened the door to intercommunal challenges. Various episodes of ethnic, religious, and communal violence erupted across Indonesia. Although post-Suharto Indonesia can be seen as a more open and democratic society, the newly opened public sphere has become more contested than ever before. Restrictive governmental regulations and rising intolerance have increasingly circumscribed religious pluralism. The institutionalization of intolerance through the implementation of various regional bylaws based on Shari’a is an example of the “radicalization of public space” (Hartining-sih 2011, 588).

According to a report released by the International Crisis Group in 2010, religious intolerance in Indonesia has been on the rise because of “clashing fundamentalisms,” as hard-line Islamists see the growth of fundamentalist Christianity as a menace. Consequently, radical Islamist groups have carried out “mass mobilization and vigilante attacks.” Moreover, some Muslims have named Christianization (or Kristenisasi) among the most urgent moral threats. With the recent rising popularity of the Evangelical and Pentecostal-Charismatic movements, such tensions have become increasingly marked. The perceived aggressive proselytizing by Evangelical Christians in majority-Muslim areas has raised anxiety among radical Muslims, who have reacted. Another reason for the fear of Kristenisasi is the lack of Muslim understanding of the differences among Christian denominations and the need for each denomination to build a church. Thus, whenever a new church is proposed, Muslims tend to assume that it is being built to accommodate a growth in membership resulting from Muslim conversion (Gudorf 2012).

The construction of places of worship has increasingly become a site of contention. Such buildings are officially governed by a 2006 joint regulation on houses of worship issued by the minister of religious affairs and the minister for internal affairs, which
replaced a joint ministerial decree of 1969. The 2006 regulation outlines a list of onerous requirements for obtaining a permit, including letters of recommendation from various officials and written consent from ninety members of the congregation and at least sixty community members of another religion. The report Disputed Churches in Jakarta (Ali-Fauzi et al. 2011) thoroughly examines thirteen controversies relating to church constructions. The authors highlight the following factors that have caused or exacerbated these disputes: religious or ideological resistance, including the fear of Christianization or any other perceived proselytization; socioeconomic differences, which have led to an inability to obtain consent from residents because they have not received or do not expect to receive any material benefit from such building projects; externalities such as opposition from radical Islamic organizations and the rising intolerance in society; and issues involving the state, such as an unsupportive bureaucracy, contradictory national and local regulations, and weak or inactive security forces.

This context calls for a multifaceted and multidimensional approach to understanding religious geography. Moreover, the aspirations expressed by religious groups across the spectrum from fundamentalism to pluralism must thus be read within the context of the national religious landscape. The next sections further explicate Jakarta's religious landscape as they discuss two significant buildings representing minority religions that have been constructed in this city with a Muslim majority.

THE TALES OF TWO CONSPICUOUS RELIGIOUS BUILDINGS IN JAKARTA

As religious space is intensely and sometimes violently contested in Jakarta, the presence of two conspicuous non-Muslim religious buildings there appears ironic, if not confrontational. The Reformed Evangelical Church of Indonesia (Gereja Reformed Injili Indonesia) established the Reformed Millennium Center in 2008. Hailed as "the largest Chinese church building in the world," this six-hundred-thousand-square-foot megachurch houses the Coliseum-like Messiah Cathedral, a seminary, a museum, a concert hall, and a school (Gospel Herald 2008). The Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation of Indonesia (or the Yayasan Buddha Tzu Chi Indonesia) was inaugurated in 2011. Covering ten hectares conspicuously located in north Jakarta, this is the largest Tzu Chi building in the world. Its premises include the main auditorium, known as the Hall of Still Thought (Jing Si Tang), a Tzu Chi school, and an Olympic-size swimming pool. Planning is under way to add a hospital.

Of particular significance is the fact that both of these are organizations of ethnic Chinese—a historically marginalized minority in Indonesia who constitute only 1.2 percent of the nation's population. During Suharto's New Order, the Chinese minority suffered systematic discrimination from the regime and was forced to assimilate. Restricted from public sector employment, many Chinese entered into business, where their entrepreneurial skills and social network could contribute to the state ideology of national
development. This inevitably gave rise to a Chinese business class and allowed a handful of its opportunists to increase their wealth by collaborating with the military and other ruling elites through the cakong system (Hoon 2008, 40–41). The privileges they received from the New Order regime fostered an image in the public sphere that all Chinese are wealthy, disloyal, and economically motivated. Such stereotypes, coupled with the continuous vilification of the Chinese through various state-imposed discriminatory measures, made them vulnerable to ethnic and class hostility, which culminated in the large-scale anti-Chinese riots that broke out in several Indonesian cities in May 1998.

The post-Suharto process of democratization and reform has restored many cultural and legal rights to the Chinese. Nevertheless, the fact remains that Chinese conglomerates still control a considerable portion of the private economy in Indonesia, and the conduct of wealthy ethnic Chinese has significant implications and repercussions for the population at large. The Reformed Evangelical Church of Indonesia and Tzu Chi operate against this backdrop. This section provides an overview of their beliefs, functions, leadership, and operations, while the next section analyzes them.

THE REFORMED EVANGELICAL CHURCH OF INDONESIA

Rev. Stephen Tong, a renowned Chinese Indonesian evangelist who has been hailed as “the Billy Graham of the East” (Teng 2007, xi), established RECI in 1989. In contrast to most megachurches, which belong to either Pentecostal or Charismatic denominations that tend to hold lively contemporary services to appeal to young people, RECI conducts traditional liturgical worship services and has adopted a Reformed or Calvinist theology that is both orthodox and dogmatic. Although doctrinally conservative, it does not shun the use of media. The church has set up the Reformed 21 TV channel, which is viewable on cable TV in Indonesia and in a live stream on the Internet. The channel broadcasts recordings of Tong’s sermons and gospel rallies, classical hymns, and children’s programs on a 24/7 basis.

The opening of the Reformed Millennium Center in the Kemayoran business district of Central Jakarta in 2008 received worldwide media coverage (see, e.g., International Herald Tribune 2008; Wright 2008). The church complex cost US$40 million to build, and it took seventeen years to obtain a permit. The body of the cathedral is a Coliseum-like structure with imposing pillars over which rests a massive dome. Tong carefully crafted the design, measurement, and proportions of the building to reflect Christian ideology: The dome of the cathedral is supported by four main columns, which symbolize the four Gospels. Between two of the columns are ten pillars, symbolizing the Ten Commandments, and between the other two are twelve pillars, in reference to the twelve apostles. A cross erected in the center of the twelve pillars is sixty-six feet high, to symbolize the sixty-six books of the Bible.

With the proliferation of church attacks by Islamic hard-liners in recent years, Tong is cognizant of the potential danger in the high visibility of his church, especially as the
symbol of a double minority—Chinese and Christians. However, when challenged on the necessity of building a church of such grandeur, he cited the constitutional right of religious freedom and argued that his church is a statement to the world that Indonesia embraces the freedom of religion (Wright 2008). He maintains that his church aims at dispelling the misconception that Indonesia is intolerant of minority faiths. He also emphasizes that RECI is a “national church,” because it was built solely with donations from its members in Indonesia. This is in contrast to most mainstream churches in Indonesia, which were established by the Dutch and continue to receive overseas support.

It is impossible to understand RECI without first understanding its seventy-five-year-old founder. Dubbed a Renaissance man with a rare mastery of theology, philosophy, music, literature, art, and architecture (Intan 2007, xvii), Tong can be seen as a charismatic leader who possesses extraordinary qualities and thus authority over his followers (Weber 1963, 3). Such notions of charisma should, however, be distinguished from the Charismatic movement, to which Tong ardently objects because he condemns Pentecostal and Charismatic theology as shallow and unsubstantiated. His church has become a bastion of orthodox teaching, an alternative to the prosperity gospel preached in the rising Charismatic churches. Tong’s vast knowledge, proficiency in Christian apologetics, and fine oratory skills make him popular among intellectual audiences. Mostly middle- and upper-class Chinese Indonesians and a smaller number of indigenous Indonesian intellectuals attend his church in Jakarta. Among its members are the founder of the giant business conglomerate the Lippo Group, Mochtar Riady, and his family.

Tong claims that his objective in establishing the Reformed Evangelical movement in Indonesia is to reactualize the Reformed faith and revitalize the evangelical spirit among Indonesian churches. He criticizes the mainline churches in Indonesia, most of which inherited Dutch Reformed theology, for having lost the “Reformed spirit” and evangelical zeal as they became ecumenical and developed a contextual theology that is inclusive and liberal (see Hoon 2013a). While Calvinists are not usually evangelistic, because of their subscription to the doctrine of election, otherwise known as predestination (Steele et al. 2004), Tong innovatively combines Calvinism, Pietism, and evangelism in his preaching and practice. Since beginning the movement in 1989, he has opened thirty-five Reformed Evangelical churches in Indonesia and preached to hundreds of thousands of people in massive revival and gospel rallies across the archipelago.

Tong has developed an international profile and is widely respected in the global Chinese Christian community. His Reformed Evangelical Church has expanded globally, opening twenty-four branches around the world, including in Singapore, Malaysia, China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Germany, Switzerland, and the United States. Every week, Tong travels to Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Taipei, and Hong Kong to deliver expository Bible teachings in Mandarin before returning to Jakarta to preach in his own church on Sunday. Through Stephen Tong Evangelistic Ministries International (STEMI), his works have transcended the Chinese diaspora and moved on to the global Christian scene.
THE BUDDHIST TZU CHI FOUNDATION OF INDONESIA

Established in 1966 in a small town in Taiwan by a Buddhist nun named Cheng Yen, the Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Merit Society is presently the largest nongovernmental organization in the Chinese-speaking world. It is most well known for its disaster relief efforts, although it also extends its work to health care, education, recycling, and so on. In 2010, Tzu Chi reportedly had ten million members throughout more than thirty countries (O’Neill 2010, 2). In contrast to traditional Buddhism, which focuses on the cultivation of the self and ritualistic activities around a temple, Tzu Chi represents an emerging “humanist and socially-engaged Buddhism” (Kuah-Pearce 2009, 299) or “Buddhism in action” (O’Neill 2010, 3).

As with RECI, central to Tzu Chi’s success is a charismatic figure who is able to command authority and submission. Such charisma is embodied in the seventy-six-year-old founder and leader, Master Cheng Yen, whose authority is felt in daily institutional operations and pervades the organization, both in Taiwan and overseas (Huang 2009). Her teachings and sayings are recorded and have been published in the volumes called Jing Si Aphorisms. They are also disseminated around the world through the Tzu Chi-owned Da Ai (Great love) TV channel, schools, and hospitals and are printed on the packaging of the organization’s commercial merchandise and disaster relief materials.

In Jakarta, Tzu Chi had humble beginnings, in the early 1990s, in the form of the wives of diasporic Taiwanese businessmen. They visited orphanages and retirement homes, provided aid to victims of natural disasters, and offered free medical help to poor people. Their activities and resources were limited until the entrance of two Chinese Indonesian magnates: Franky Oesman Widjaja (or Huang Rong-nian), the son of Eka Tjipta Widjaja, the founder of the Sinar Mas Group—one of the largest conglomerates in Indonesia—and Sugianto Kusuma (or Kuo Tsai-yuan), a major shareholder in the Artha Graha Group, a giant corporation involved in property, finance, and trade (O’Neill 2010, 95–98). Tzu Chi expanded tremendously with the backing of these tycoons. Following in their footsteps, more Chinese businesspeople joined the organization. Presently, Tzu Chi has ten thousand members in Indonesia and offices in eighteen cities, including five in Jakarta.

Although it is a Buddhist organization, Tzu Chi in Indonesia is registered not as a religious organization under the Ministry of Religion but as a foundation ( Yayasan ) under the Ministry of Social Affairs. O’Neill reported that it has “built housing for the poor of Jakarta and victims of the tsunami in Aceh, distributed rice to over two million families, helped earthquake victims and tuberculosis patients and held free medical clinics for tens of thousands of people” in Indonesia (2010, 93). Through its efficiently and professionally delivered aid and other philanthropic work, the organization has been able to build a close rapport with the government and trust among Indonesians, including the non-Chinese Muslim majority, among whom are 10 percent of Tzu Chi’s members in Indonesia.
Tzu Chi crosses ethnic, religious, and national boundaries when offering aid to those in need. Huang attributes this to “a realization of the bodhisattva’s universal ideal of relieving all beings from suffering regardless of ethnicity or nationality” (2009, 223). To ensure that its mission abroad does not cause controversy or misunderstanding, Tzu Chi volunteers observe the three noes mandated by Cheng Yen: do not talk politics, talk business, or proselytize. Nevertheless, in a Muslim-majority country like Indonesia, philanthropic activities carried out by non-Muslim organizations have always been viewed with suspicion. Pentecostal churches, for example, are often charged with attracting “rice Christians” by distributing food and aid (Gudorf 2012, 65). In the case of Tzu Chi, the fact that it is dominated by Chinese may further complicate the matter, especially when one considers the complex and ambivalent relationship between the Chinese and non-Chinese in Indonesia, the result of a series of historical events and complicated race, class, and religious entanglement (Hoon 2008).

The acid test of Tzu Chi’s motives came in 2002 when it embarked on a major project to clean up the heavily polluted Red River (Kali Angke), which has contributed to major floods in Jakarta. One of the tasks was to relocate the people who lived on the river to the Great Love Village, featuring new homes built by Tzu Chi. O’Neill observes that the villagers “did not believe they were being given new homes for free, especially by a Buddhist organization; they feared the move would be conditional on converting to Buddhism” (2010, 100). After much communication and assurance that no conversion was necessary, they eventually moved to the Great Love Village, which consisted of twelve hundred housing units, schools, a community center, a nursing home, and an Islamic prayer room. This peaceful relocation with no strings attached further enhanced Tzu Chi’s reputation in the eyes of the Indonesian authorities and society.

After more than twenty years of operation in the country, Tzu Chi finally opened its Indonesia head office in Jakarta in 2011. It features a grand edifice with a façade similar to that of the Tzu Chi Abode in Taiwan, except that the Jakarta one is much more colossal. The Tzu Chi Center is in an exclusive Chinese-majority residential area in the Pantai Indah Kapuk (PIK) district of North Jakarta. The school on the premises offers an international curriculum and charges a considerable fee, catering mainly to the children of wealthy Chinese in the neighborhood. The construction of the multimillion-dollar center would not have been possible without the financial backing of its activists, many of whom are ethnic Chinese capitalists in Jakarta. One of the most prominent supporters was Kusuma, also the president of the Agung Sedayu Group, a key developer of the PIK district.

A main feature of the Tzu Chi Center is its three-thousand-seat auditorium, which its members use for religious gatherings. The auditorium is furnished with a large screen, where video of Cheng Yen can be relayed live from Taiwan. The wall of the center stage is embellished with an ocean blue backdrop that symbolizes the universe. In the middle of this universe is a porcelain Buddha sculpture floating above a mosaic of a world map that resembles a tree. In the center of the Buddha sculpture is a globe, on which the
Buddha’s sight is fixed. This sculpture is intriguing because it differs significantly from the conventional Buddhas found in most Chinese temples. Here the Buddha resembles a gentle female figure like Master Cheng Yen and has a halo around her head like the Virgin Mary. Wittingly or unwittingly, such images appear to exemplify what Huang referred to as the “glorification of Cheng Yen” (2009, 36).

The establishment of Da Ai Television in Taiwan in 1998 has greatly enhanced the global spread of Tzu Chi and the message of Cheng Yen. It can reach 79 percent of the world’s population, by means of satellites (O’Neill 2010, 62). Through Kusuma’s personal connections, Tzu Chi was able to obtain a rare license from the Jakarta government to launch Da Ai TV Indonesia in 2006. In addition to relaying Cheng Yen’s teachings and other content from Taiwan, it reports on the foundation’s work in Indonesia in the national language and produces locally made drama series based on the real-life stories of Indonesians, featuring Indonesian casts. The TV channel allows Tzu Chi to reach a wider audience and recruit new members outside the Chinese community.

NEGOTIATING LOCAL AND GLOBAL DYNAMICS

The presence of two conspicuous non-Islamic, non-native religious buildings in the capital of the largest Muslim nation in the world points to several issues related to the dynamics of religious and ethnic politics in the local context. Also, the nature of the city as a site of local-global intersection and the transnational milieu of the two religious organizations discussed above raise important questions about the global dynamics of religious movements. This section examines the dynamics of local and global factors in the negotiations of religious space by RECI and Tzu Chi.

While the relationships between the state and religion, business and religion, and the state and business have been widely discussed and theorized about in the literature (see, e.g., Capaldi 2003; Turner, Possamai, and Barbalet 2011), the three-way political-business-religious relationships have not been sufficiently investigated. It has been a common practice for minority groups in Indonesia to become the clients of ruling regime patrons, as political shelter. These groups include the ethnic Chinese and members of the minority religions, especially Christians and Buddhists (Chua 2008; Budijanto 2009). As members of a “market-dominant minority” that has economic but not political power, ethnic Chinese capitalists have a long history of seeking military and other power broker patrons for protection (Hoon 2014). With their experience and networks, these capitalists often become the intermediaries who connect the church or temple to the power holders.

The very presence of both the RECI and the Tzu Chi buildings was made possible by the organizations’ having business moguls such as Riady, Widjaja, and Kusuma in their congregations. These Chinese business elites have not only financially supported the building projects but, more important, also lent their social capital, connections, and networks to the organizations to facilitate the onerous process of securing permits. In
the absence of strong state institutions, state regulations—including those governing the permit needed to build a religious place—are often subject to negotiation, as bureaucrats use them as a ludicrous method of rent seeking (McLeod 2010). Hence the application for a permit inevitably involves certain forms of illegality, such as bribing state officials and paying local residents for their signatures. Because such practices are deemed incompatible with the moral teachings espoused by religious organizations, the role of these capitalists in their building projects is usually clandestine.

In the article “Face, Faith, and Forgiveness: Elite Chinese Philanthropy in Indonesia,” I identify three impetuses behind the altruism of Chinese Indonesian businesspeople, namely to “buy face,” to fulfill the requirements or expectations of a religion, and to seek moral pardon for questionable business conduct (Hoon 2010). While all three factors are, to varying degrees, relevant in explaining the contributions of the business elite to RECI and Tzu Chi, the present study observed another crucial factor. A Chinese Buddhist activist in Jakarta informed me in 2013 that the relationship between the tycoons and Tzu Chi is reciprocal and mutually beneficial. Because Tzu Chi has established a close rapport with the military and the government through its remarkable disaster relief work, involvement in this organization helps these businesspeople rebrand their image in the eyes of the government and the public, which benefits them and their businesses. While these speculations are not verifiable, they illuminate an important insight into the reciprocal relationship between capital and religion, which can inspire further research.

As preceding sections mention, perceived proselytization is one of the key factors in the disputes over religious space in Jakarta. For an evangelical church like RECI, which bears the Great Commission “to make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19), its mission to seek converts is a religious mandate. Perhaps one of the reasons that it has not experienced any reported conflict with Muslims lies in Tong’s intellectual approach to preaching the gospel. This intellectualization is similar to that of Nicky Gumbel, the leader of the global evangelism program called the Alpha Course, which uses an “evidence-based approach” to craft an appeal through references to historical and scientific evidence that also shares meaning and value with great literary and artistic works (Kong 2013, 31). In Gumbel’s case, Kong asserts that “the appeal to the intellect through anchoring the understanding of Christianity in historical, literary and scientific evidence predisposes the programme towards the better-educated, transnational elites” (35). Likewise, Tong’s church appeals largely to an intellectual elite rather than to “rice Christians” or those who might be attracted to the faith because of material benefits. The conversion of the last two groups often accounts for most of the conversion controversies in Indonesia (Gudorf 2012, 65).

On the other hand, Tzu Chi adopts a different approach to proselytization than the evangelical Christians. Its hierarchy of membership reveals the process (Huang 2009, 71). In general, there are three levels of membership, differentiated by their uniforms. Those in gray are the ordinary members, whose responsibilities are to pay their monthly contributions, participate in volunteer work, and receive training. Above them are the
dark blue—uniformed intern commissioners, who take on the additional duties of collecting donations and recruiting new members. They are promoted to the rank of commissioner—with the same blue uniform but with an additional photo ID tag on the upper left pocket—when they fulfill the minimum proselytization requirements, and they are expected to be totally committed to the master’s teachings and to continue recruiting.

In my July 29, 2013, conversation with an executive committee of Tzu Chi Jakarta, I was told that members at the first two levels can follow any religion. The lack of a compulsion to convert explains why Muslims and Christians can be members of Tzu Chi in Indonesia without experiencing opposition from or conflict with their faith. The Tzu Chi model challenges the conventional conversion discourse, which focuses merely on the religion switching of the individual. Woods refers to the “proselytization bias” of such a discourse and argues that “conversion does not require the rejection of one set of beliefs in place of another, but more of an expansion of belief and understanding that enables the co-existence of two distinct belief systems. . . . Conversion is less a process of religious switching (than one) of spiritual self-development: adherents create their own bespoke spiritual commodities—a process of ‘spiritual shopping’—that best suit their personal needs” (2012, 446). This conceptualization departs from the modernist discourse of conversion and reflects the increasingly flexible and syncretic nature of religious behavior in postmodern society. But while Tzu Chi’s conversion model has not antagonized other faiths so far, there is no guarantee that it will not become a potential fault line with the rise of the more hard-line fundamentalist movements in Jakarta.

The fact that contestations of religious space can occur as much within a religion as between religions is often overlooked. In her study of Pentecostal churches in Indonesia, Gudorf asserts that opposition to Pentecostal building permits does not always come from Muslim groups but sometimes originates with other Christians, who “resent Pentecostals poaching their flocks” (2012, 70). Tong’s judgmental and sometimes hostile attitude toward the Pentecostal-Charismatic and mainline ecumenical churches has not won him many friends in those circles. While many churches seek shelter in national Christian organizations, Tong’s is not a member of Indonesia’s largest and most politically significant Christian organization, the Communion of Churches in Indonesia, or the Indonesia Evangelical Fellowship or the Communion of Chinese Churches in Indonesia. The survival of his church depends on the reputation, connections, and social capital that he has built up over the years, together with those of his prominent congregation.

Tzu Chi, on the other hand, carefully positioned itself primarily as a social organization when it entered Indonesia in order not to present itself as a competitor or threat to existing Buddhist organizations. It has also strategically worked with local Buddhist leaders and forged friendly relationships with other Buddhist groups in Indonesia. Before Widjaja and Kusuma joined it, Tzu Chi was greatly helped by the former general chair of Walubi (the Indonesian Buddhist Representative Council) Siti Hartati Murdaya, who now sits on the board of Tzu Chi Indonesia.7 Tzu Chi is not a member of either Walubi or KASI (the Supreme Conference of Indonesian Sangha), two of the largest
Buddhist associations in Indonesia. Hence, it is able to stay above the ongoing polemics between them.

The Chinese ethnicity of both RECI and Tzu Chi members can be both a blessing and a curse in navigating the treacherous waters of the contested religious space in Jakarta. Needless to say, the greatest advantage of their Chineseeness is their ability to attract capital. Besides the tycoons, most members of RECI and Tzu Chi are ethnic Chinese who belong to the middle and upper classes. Being Chinese and being members of a minority religion, these people are doubly marginalized in a Muslim-majority country where the Chinese have a long history of being othered and excluded from the national imagination, notwithstanding their Indonesian citizenship (Hoon 2008). Tong, an Indonesian citizen, has attempted to “authenticate” and claimed national belonging for his church by emphasizing its localness, based on the fact that it has not received any foreign funding. Notwithstanding the ethnicity and citizenship of their members, the “foreignness” of RECI and Tzu Chi lies in their class exclusivity, which is visible in the elite locations, including gated communities, where they build their places of worship. The double minority status of both RECI and Tzu Chi and their conspicuous presence could make them the targets of radical religious vigilantes during times of social unrest. The strategic locations where these organizations choose to build their houses of worship greatly reduce such risks, however. Also, tight security checks are regularly employed for all incoming vehicles, and extra security forces from the police or military are deployed during major religious events. This reinforces the ideas that security risks are a real concern and that both of these organizations are well connected to state functionaries.

The ethnic capital of RECI and Tzu Chi has enabled both to tap into the transnational network of the global Chinese diaspora. The Reformed Evangelical movement began in Indonesia, and then Tong's ministries globalized it, first throughout the Chinese Christian world and then throughout the global Christian scene. In contrast, Indonesia was on the receiving end of the transnational flow of the Tzu Chi movement, which originated in Taiwan and then expanded globally through the Taiwanese diaspora. Nonetheless, it can be argued that both these religious movements, "which traverse borders and become vehicles of transnational networks while being rooted in localities and enacting symbolic re-localizations in the built environment, capture the complexity of what it means to be a religious subject and to perform urban citizenship" (Hancock and Srinivas 2008, 62).  

The global reach of both movements also reflects what Kong referred to as "religious globalization," which she defined as the homogenization of religious practice made possible by technology (2013, 22). In the case of RECI, this process is evident in Tong's orthodox teachings and monopolized interpretations of the Bible, while in the case of Tzu Chi, it is exemplified in the regulation of the body of each member via his or her uniform, gestures, diet, and eating habits, which must follow the requirements stipulated by Master Cheng Yen. Capitalism and the media enhance the globalizing efforts of religious practices, facilitating both the imagined communion of religious followers around
the world as a religious community and the promotion of the cult of personality surrounding leaders of religious movements. The capitalization of religion can be seen in the sale of commodified religious products, from the sermons and teachings of Tung and Cheng Yen to other religious materials and ornaments they have endorsed.

RECI and Tzu Chi have strategically used technology to “mediate piety” (Lim 2009) by setting up their own TV channels. The use of media has provided us with a new understanding of the spatial embeddedness of religion because access to religious materials is less than ever limited by one’s physical presence at Sunday services or preaching sessions. While this changes the spatial conceptualization of religion, it does not reduce the spatial significance of religious sites. The Tzu Chi headquarters in Taiwan—the Abode of Still Thoughts, where Cheng Yen resides—is an important pilgrimage site for all members around the world. As the master cannot travel on airplanes because of a health problem, the abode has become even more important and symbolic. It is a site to which followers travel with the objective of receiving wisdom and instructions from the master (Huang 2009, 240). On the other hand, RECI has become a site where religion and capitalism intersect. Since the Reformed Millennium Center was inaugurated, all the national and international conventions of the Reformed Evangelical movement, which were previously held at hotels or conventional centers, have been held on its premises. Such events attract local and international participants, who are encouraged to attend a concert at the concert hall; to visit the church museum, which features Tung’s private collection of classical Western paintings, Chinese vases, and artifacts; and to stay for the weekend, to participate in the Sunday service, where they can listen to Tung live. The experiences of both pilgrims at Tzu Chi and tourists at RECI attest to the capitalist function of religious sites and further complicate the spatial meaning of religion.

CONCLUSION

The city is a site of global intersection. The transnational milieus of RECI and Tzu Chi highlight the global dynamics of religious movements, which are now further enhanced by technological advancements, particularly those related to media and the internet. As such, religious sites in a particular locality may have a larger spatial connotation. This is exemplified by the recent bombing of the Ekayana Buddhist Vihara in West Jakarta by Muslim extremists in retaliation for the persecution of the Rohingya Muslim ethnic group in Myanmar (Jakarta Post 2013). This attack was a consequence not of religious or ideological conflict in Jakarta but of events that occurred more than a thousand miles away in Myanmar. Like this vihara, both RECI and Tzu Chi signify transnational spaces in which the flow of information, capital, and people is taking place at an increasingly rapid pace in the globalized city of Jakarta.

This bombing also serves as a vivid reminder of the vulnerability of minority religions in a symbolic urban site like Jakarta, where religious space is ferociously contested. The ongoing competition over religious space also demonstrates that religion is still highly
relevant in this modernizing city. Such competition is not likely to subside as long as the growth of a particular religious group is perceived by another as a threat. The ideal of religious harmony imbued in the state ideology of Pancasila has not been realized on the ground, due to the failure of the state and its institutions to provide security to religious minorities. The state is likely to maintain the status quo in order to continue to reap material benefits from the capitalists and religious groups that seek its patronage. The burden of survival has fallen on the shoulders of the religious minorities, who must exercise agency to circumvent discriminatory government regulations and find alternative shelters.

In a city where people experience “multiple degradations (social, familial, moral, capitalist and so on) and polarizations” (Woods 2012, 449), religious organizations like RECI and Tzu Chi will continue to thrive, because they are able to fill the vacuum left by deficient secular and state institutions. Their conspicuous presence in Muslim-majority Jakarta appears to be a bold statement against rising religious intolerance and the violence carried out by vigilantes under the banner of religion. In a country where corruption is deeply entrenched and state regulations are inadequately enforced, the flexibility and adaptability of capitalists are requisite to fill the void. The networks, connections, and capital of the wealthy businesspeople in RECI and Tzu Chi have been indispensable to the success of these organizations. The relationships between these groups and their members, however, are reciprocal. Philanthropy has allowed these capitalists to gain reputation and goodwill, which may create further business opportunities among the congregation. More research into these three-way political-business-religious relationships may further reveal the key to the survival of certain minority religions in urban spaces.

NOTES

1. This confirms the assertion that religious belief and doctrine can be potent justification for claims to territory as fault lines emerge when groups clash over territorial belonging (Woods 2012, 447).

2. Hefner defines religionization as “the reconstruction of a local or regional spiritual tradition with reference to religious ideals and practices seen as standardized, textualized, and universally incumbent on believers” (2011, 72–73). Religious practices in Indonesia have gone through religionization since the 1946 establishment of the Ministry of Religion, which officially recognized only six world religions, which it sought to rationalize and standardize.

3. The Gospel Herald (www.gospelherald.com) is the world’s largest pan-denominational Chinese Christian news provider.

4. Tong’s twin attacks on the Charismatic movement and “liberal” mainline churches are recorded in his acceptance speech for an honorary doctorate of divinity at the Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia in 2008 (www.youtube.com/watch?v=IE34znkFfY; see also www.wts.edu/stayinformed/view.html?Id=1100).

5. Some of the data on Tzu Chi in Indonesia are from an interview I conducted with an executive committee of the organization in Jakarta on July 29, 2013.
6. Tzu Chi has published the memoirs of Widjaja and Kusuma in a book series called Seeing the Shadow of Bodhisattva, in which Master Cheng Yen defines a bodhisattva as someone who expresses great compassion in helping others. This image differs greatly from that of the controversies in which these businesspeople are involved because of questionable business practices (see, for example, Chua 2008).

7. Murdaya is the wife of one of the wealthiest Chinese Indonesians. The Jakarta Anti-Corruption Court found her guilty of bribery and sentenced her to thirty-two months in prison in February 2013 (Jakarta Globe 2013).

8. Huang maintains that "by the year 2000, the Tzu Chi diaspora had more or less become one of the 'four faces of globalization', like Christian Evangelicalism and the Sai Baba movement from India" (2009, 209).

REFERENCES


