

BOOK REVIEW OF Chong, T. (Ed.). (2018). Pentecostal megachurches in Southeast Asia: Negotiating class, consumption and the nation. ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore

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Author:	Juliette Koning

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Manuscripts

Juliette Koning

Oxford Brookes University, United Kingdom; Email j.koning@brookes.ac.uk

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There has been a growing interest in examining the upsurge of Pentecostalism and Charismatic Christianity in Southeast Asia since the late 2000s and the edited volume by Terence Chong (*Pentecostal megachurches in Southeast Asia: Negotiating class, consumption and the nation*) is a welcome addition to this emerging field. The contribution of this edited volume to the body of research currently available, lies in focusing on the megachurch as the locus of Pentecostal practices. Beyond the overarching question of how to explain their rapid growth and popularity, the book is relevant specifically as it provides some unique insights to what goes on ‘inside’ these independent megachurches. The chapters delve into such questions as, who are the leaders and what is their story, who are the members and why did they join, how are these churches organized and managed, what discursive practices do they employ, and how do they position themselves within their respective nation states? From the outset volume editor Chong makes the point that in order to understand Southeast Asian Pentecostalism (yes plural) it is important to see them as ‘contextual theologies’ moulded by local cultures and politics (p.2).

The local context against which this book explores the phenomenon of Pentecostal megachurches comprises of urban areas with emerging middle classes in Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Singapore. Not quite a full overview of Southeast Asia, as the title might suggest, but a choice based on countries that have seen rapid growth rates (Indonesia and Malaysia) and significant expansions (The Philippines and Singapore). For each country we are offered two chapters which in some cases leads to overlap but at the same time being presented several cases from each country shows that notwithstanding similarities across the various megachurches, each is also unique. This diversity within, is important as it heeds against a reductionist view of Southeast Asian megachurches. Although the book uses the well-known definition of megachurches as those churches that have weekly attendances of at least 2,000 members¹, most chapters offer critical notes as to what constitutes a megachurch and that there is no ‘one size fits all’.

The book starts with an introduction by Chong who addresses why in Southeast Asia, Pentecostalism is an almost exclusively middle class phenomenon (although the Philippines offers a somewhat different story) in which neoliberalism, mass consumption and religious identity politics go hand-in-hand and how the deeply this-worldly spiritual experience easily seems to blend with some of the existing folk religions. Chong also succinctly summarises several core observations from the combined chapters which is a good starting point for positioning the case studies that follow. The observations suggest that 1) Southeast Asian megachurches have successfully broken through the sacred-secular divide, 2) their leadership exhibits gripping personal stories of trauma and salvation, 3) they all express expansionist visions and forge transnational as well as local alliances, 4) these churches are rooted in what Chong refers to as ‘religious nationalism’, the idea that the nation belongs to God, and 5) this religious nationalism includes social engagement, or welfare services for the local communities. The chapters on Indonesia, Malaysia, The Philippines and Singapore are all written by scholars who have done fieldwork in one or more megachurches.

¹ Thumma, S., & Bird, W. (2008). Changes in American megachurches: Tracing eight years of growth and innovation in the nation’s largest-attendance congregations.

http://www.hartfordinstitute.org/megachurch/megastoday2008_summaryreport.html

The first case studies discuss megachurches in Indonesia and Malaysia. Both countries have seen an enormous growth in Pentecostalism since the Asian miracle in the early 1990s. Both are also Muslim dominated nations that prohibit proselytization (of Muslims) which make some of these developments quite sensitive, leading to increased religious tensions. Chapter two by Chang-Yau Hoon takes us to the largest Pentecostal denomination in Indonesia, the Bethel Church of Indonesia (GBI, *Gereja Bethel Indonesia*) that since its inception in the 1970s grew from 11,070 to 2.6 million members (worldwide). A key factor in its growth, in a volatile ethnic and religious setting, lies on the one hand in presenting GBI as a church that embraces a universal Christian identity and on the other hand in adapting to the needs of the local congregation; an 'imaged community' is created (p.27). This results in quite diverse GBI churches in terms of vision, leadership and membership. One of the Jakarta examples presented indicates how the GBI church caters to the middle and upper class business community by operating a prosperity gospel and successfully using its transnational networks. The main message of the chapter is that we need to tread carefully in assuming that all megachurches are the same, even within one and the same denomination.

In chapter three, En-Chieh Chao investigates GMS (*Gereja Mawar Sharon*, or the Rose of Sharon Church) in Surabaya; a church that broke away from the GBI. GMS is popular among middle-class university students and young professionals (ethnic Chinese and Javanese second generation Christians), using pop-culture styled worship focused at personal spiritual growth. The story of the leader, Philip Mantofa, is exemplary, going from a sinful past to a blessed present. The 'success' of GMS is attributed to delivering sermons in different languages and using translations, which made it possible to reach an audience across linguistic divides both inside and outside Indonesia. The ultimate goal of increasing 'souls' is a core characteristic of all megachurches, but in the case of GMS, so we are told, it is made an 'open and unapologetic priority' (p.60).

The next two chapters offer us a glimpse of megachurches in Malaysia. Jeaney Yip presents the case of the Calvary church in Kuala Lumpur (chapter four) while Chong Eu Choong (chapter five) discusses the development of the Bethesda church in Klang Valley. Both churches cater to the middle class, creating a sense of community among those experiencing upward mobility. Yip focuses on the material, organizational and linguistic resources as applied by Calvary church that allow the middle class to 're-script their identities' according to their aspirations as well as to find 'security in uncertain times' (p.89). The language of faith, obedience and blessings sparked with references to local traditions, the use of large auditoriums and praying towers, and its transnational orientation and networks resonated with the middle class in ways that assisted Calvary church to achieve its growth ambitions. The Bethesda church, on the face of it, follows a similar approach. Choong shows that the English-language services of Bethesda self-select an audience of middle class professionals in search of spiritual and material blessing. Through the use of cell-groups and ministries for specific groups (the young, women), the church offers a 'personalized and intimate' experience while offering seminars on how to be good parents (family) and engaging outreach activities to support the, poorer, wider community. The modernization thesis, according to Choong, is still a relevant lens through which to understand megachurches such as Bethesda.

The book continues with two chapters on The Philippines offering a rather different local context in which the megachurch developed, namely one that is overly Christian. Jayeel Serrano Cornelio in chapter six, brings us the story of the evangelical Jesus is Lord (JIL) church. Other than the cases so far, this is a megachurch that caters to the working class and 'indigenized its organizational structure' making it an all Filipino church (p.129). According to Cornelio, this 'embodiment of Filipino Christianity' adds a unique case to the wider 'tapestry of Asian Christianities' (p.143). In addition to sharing practises found in other megachurches (the music and high tech use of multi-media, and the health, wealth and prosperity messaging),

JIL actively engages in political activism and brings forward its own political candidates. JIL thus offers us a case of religious nationalism; using the church to 'redefine the character and destiny of a nation' (p.138). Joel Tejedo in chapter seven, provides an historical overview of megachurch development in the Philippines, highlighting that one of the largest megachurches in the country is in fact a Catholic charismatic church. His overview concludes that Pentecostal megachurches can be a force of change by offering a 'new paradigm of Christian witness' (p.169); one that can alleviate those in poverty into well-being. The example used is the Word of Hope Christian Church (WOH) with an acclaimed membership of 40,000 in Metro Manila and suburbs and their care for the urban poor, educational programs and political advocacy.

The last two chapters are used to address developments in Singapore. In chapter eight, Daniel Goh, offers a compelling comparison of two megachurches, FCBC (Faith Community Baptist Church), founded by Lawrence Khong in 1986 and New Creation Church, founded in 1983 by Joseph Prince; a period marked by a 'crisis of relevance' for Christianity in Singapore (p. 182). The chapter offers sophisticated details that lead up to the conclusion that the two churches travelled rather divergent trajectories due to very different interpretations of 'grace'. 'Extreme grace' with 'extreme discipleship' and a stronger local focus for FCBC (a moral economy of demand) versus 'pure and unadulterated' grace focused on 'clients' with a strong global outlook for New Creation (a moral economy of supply). These differences according to Goh neatly reflect the 'cultural contradictions faced by Singapore society in state-led globalization' (p.182). The final chapter (chapter nine) by Terence Chong discusses the rise and fall of Singapore's City Harvest Church. Run by the couple Kong and Ho, it became famous for the use of pop culture to spread the Word of God. The success story ended due to suspected financial irregularities and the membership declined rapidly. The fact that megachurches such as CHC are able to blend the sacred and the secular, according to Chong, can be found in 1) Singapore's history of ecclesiastical theatre, 2) doctrinal flexibility, or the fact that converts can also practice local customs, and 3) an ease with postmodern identity politics and role playing (of church leaders for instance).

This collection of Southeast Asian case studies offer the reader important insights into the many different faces of the megachurch phenomenon in this region. The chapters make for animated reading and it is therefore somewhat regrettable that the edited volume does little to theorise these Southeast Asian megachurch developments beyond each individual case. This might be a relevant next step in order to keep pushing forward the growing body of knowledge on Southeast Asian Pentecostalism.