

# Travelling faiths and migrant religions: the case of circulating models of *da'wa*, the Tablighi Jamaat, Foguangshan and religious organization

DIANA WONG\* AND PEGGY LEVITT†

\*formerly Universiti Sains Malaysia  
dwongingboh@gmail.com

†Wellesley College and Harvard University  
plevitt@wellesley.edu

**Abstract** *In this article, we propose conceptual and methodological tools to study religion in motion and make an analytical distinction between two types of religious movement – travelling faiths and migrant religions, namely travel based on mission and travel based on migration. Migrants carry religions as they cross territorial borders, but often remain, at least initially, within the local ethnic confines of the migrant (and home) population, even as they reterritorialize and adapt to new contexts. Travelling faiths are religious movements with universal claims around which a religious community forms (deterritorialized religions) and that travel in order to proselytize. Mission is one form that religious travel takes, which, especially in its Christian form, entails reaching out to a religious community with the intent of conversion. But religious outreach undertaken by travelling faiths can, and often is, directed at the existing religious community as a call to renewal and renovation. It demands a kind of conversion, if not to a new faith, then within the existing one. Travelling faiths often remain in their ethno-linguistic community, even as they embark on their transnational journey. Others succeed in a different kind of movement. Their missions, be they directed at purifying the practices of current members or converting new ones, cross the diasporic ethnic boundary. As we show in the case of Malaysia, part of the success of the Islamic Tablighi Jamaat movement is its ability to traverse that divide, while the Buddhist Foguangshan movement, although enormously successful on a global scale, has remained largely within the ethnic Chinese domain. When religious boundaries are transcended, globality assumes a particular significance.*

**Keywords** MIGRATION, RELIGION, TRANSNATIONAL, ETHNIC, GLOBAL, TRAVEL

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The role of migration is central to the study of contemporary religions in motion (Levitt 2012; Vásquez 2008). Today's deterritorialization of religion occurs in no

small measure because faith-bearing migrants serve as key carriers of ‘new’ religious beliefs and practices, particularly in the West. The arrival in London of the Kimbanguist Church from its Congolese homeland (see Garbin in this volume) is a prime example of this type of *circulation of migrant religions*. In similar fashion, migrants from China, India and Indonesia brought Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity – largely in their folk versions – to Malaysia in an earlier age of globalization.

Another key driver of religious mobility, apart from migration, has been mission. Mission more than migration drove the extensive dissemination of Christianity beyond the territories of European settlement in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; such missions, like Christian missions in Malaysia, were particularly successful among immigrant populations. Also, missions almost invariably followed migrants; religious specialists from the homeland would trail migrants to provide the religious services they needed and from which they might otherwise wean themselves. The Christi Sufi order sent Soofie Saheb from India to South Africa in 1895 to consolidate Islam’s hold over ordinary Muslims there (Sadouni in this issue).

In the recent history of religion in motion, we see that religions have travelled as much to migrants as through migrants. The deterritorialization of religion in the wake of contemporary migration has been the outcome of these two empirically distinct processes. We thus propose an analytical distinction between travelling faiths and migrant religions (Diana Wong in this volume). Migrant religions travel within the local ethnic confines of the migrant (and home) population, even as they reterritorialize and adapt to new contexts. Travelling faiths, conversely, are religious movements with universal claims around which a religious community forms (deterritorialized religions) that travel to proselytize. Travel is used as a tool in religious outreach to distant communities of the unconverted.

Our findings suggest two additional useful ways of differentiating religious movement. Mission is one form of religious travel. Especially in its Christian form, mission is outreach to another religious community with the intent to convert. However, religious outreach undertaken by travelling faiths can, and often is, directed at the existing religious community as a call to renew and renovate. This form of outreach differs from outright proselytizing to non-believers; it is not the same as the kind of ethnic chaplaincy, with its provision of conventional religious services, that the term ‘migrant religions’ suggests. Travelling faiths in a sense demand a kind of conversion, if not to a new faith, then within the existing one. Such is the classical intent of *da’wa*, the call to renewal within the faith that we see in South Africa (Sadouni, this issue).

Such *da’wa* missions, even as they travel across national boundaries, tend to target their own religious migrant communities in the diaspora because they are often unsuccessful in their efforts to convince outsiders to join. Some, however, are able to cross that ethnic divide and package themselves culturally and linguistically in a manner that is acceptable and appealing to followers outside the original ethno-religious community. As we show later in this article, using the case of Malaysia, a large part of the success of the Islamic Tablighi Jamaat movement is due to its ability

to traverse that divide, while the Buddhist Foguangshan movement, although enormously successful on a global scale, has remained largely within the ethnic Chinese domain.

To elucidate these different forms of movement and the different kinds of crossings they entail, either within or beyond the ethnic group, we begin by proposing ways to study religion in motion. We then use these tools to analyse two cases of travelling faiths – one that stays within the ethnic community and one that successfully reaches beyond it.

### **Studying religion in motion**

The study of religion has often been characterized by a focus on religious life within contained spaces – be they religious traditions, congregations or nations – and by the assumption that stasis and separation, as opposed to circulation and connection, are the norm. We argue that seeing religion as a contingent clustering of diverse elements rather than a packageable, stable set of beliefs and practices rooted in a particular place yields greater analytical purchase. Religious assemblages made up of actors, objects, technology and ideas travel at different rates and rhythms across the different levels and scopes of the social fields in which they are embedded (Levitt 2013). The task for the researcher is to explain this contingent clustering. What happens along the journey and at the sites of encounter, where what is circulating and what is in place come together? Why do some things move easily while others get blocked? What kinds of underlying power dynamics explain why some topics get silenced while others are openly discussed?

There are many ways to grapple with these questions. Here we suggest three conceptual hooks that might help us answer them.

#### *Carriers of religion*

People are one important driver of religion in motion. However, individuals move for different amounts of time across varying distances, producing different levels of contact with the potential recipients in the places to which they travel. Not everyone moves with the intention of permanent settlement, nor are they allowed to. Migrants as well as pilgrims, tourists, professionals, students, religious leaders and scholars all carry faith – each engaging with their destination with different degrees of intensity and impact.

Travelling objects and rituals also carry faith, their symbolic value and meaning often changing dramatically along the way (Durand and Massey 1995; Oleszkiewicz-Peralba 2007). Migrating deities and spirits can themselves be socially mobile. Sinha (2005), for example, found that while the lower classes worshipped the Hindu god Muneeswaran in India, the aspiring middle class came to worship him once they immigrated to Singapore (Hewelmeier and Krause 2009; Lambek 1993, Meyer and Moors 2006).

Religious status, piety and authority are also negotiated across time and space. Richman (2005) found that Haitian migrants used faith to extricate themselves from

one sacred space and reinsert themselves into another. Although many of her respondents were Catholic, they also believed in *iwas*, saints who could afflict and protect members of their descent groups. As people became dissatisfied with the large sums they had to spend caring for *iwas*, they converted to Protestantism to free themselves from the obligation.

### *Geographies of circulation*

To understand how and why these different religious carriers move and cluster as they do, we need to take into account the geographies within which they circulate – the intersecting planes and networks that constitute transnational social fields and their boundaries. Objects, people, values and rituals, to name a few, travel through what Lefebvre (1991) called ‘textures’ of space, contours of representational regimes, and signifying practices by which space is made place and filled with meaning. Different governance regimes operate within its different scales.

Some terrains are clearly more stable than others. The social fields connecting Mexico and the United States, Britain and South Asia, and Germany and Turkey have relatively long and consistent histories. In contrast, less developed and more uncertain social fields, such as those plagued by civil unrest or climactic disaster, are more difficult to navigate. Not only can communication be hampered, but what travels is more likely to encounter blockages along the way. In some parts of the world, religious elements circulate in the context of failed states and markets, while in others they encounter strong states and booming economies.

The geographies that religious actors and objects traverse are not virgin territories. Spaces become places because of their history, politics and ethnic make-up. They are deeply rutted; just as each new eruption of lava slowly settles into the cracks and crevices of the volcano, so new cultural infusions have to accommodate to the existing terrains. New overlays land on pockmarked geographies, enabling some things to travel easily while inhibiting others.

### *Sites of encounter*

Religious assemblages circulate through diverse geographies, encountering people, ideas and practices along the way. What explains how and why things that are circulating and things already in place come together as they do? How do we explain the constant accretion and shedding that happens as religious assemblages travel?

One broad set of factors influencing these sites of encounter are the social statuses of the carriers and receivers, be they individuals or organizations. Some researchers suggest that ‘marginal men’, who take risks because they are less constrained by social norms, are more likely to adopt radical innovations (Rogers 2003; Strang and Stroule 1998; Wejnert 2002). Others find that powerful, respected individuals put pressure on their peers to change. Similarly, organizations that perceive themselves as similar should look and act similarly (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Dobbin et al. 2007). When congregations or denominations see themselves as sufficiently alike, they are more likely to mimic each other’s behaviour.

A second broad set of influences affecting what happens at religious sites of encounter is the difference between the objects or rituals in motion and those that are already in place. By this we mean not only how easy something is to package, communicate and transmit, but also how distinct it is from what is currently being done.

Some rituals and objects are clearly more portable than others and some messages more transposable. Fasting, praying, singing, making offerings, playing music and dancing can happen anywhere with certain adjustments. Werbner (2005), for example, sees charisma as portable. While the plots of the stories about the Sufi saint she studies were tailored to local circumstances, the narratives were paradigmatic. Therefore, though their underlying logic remained the same, the stories resonated with people in Morocco, Iraq, Pakistan and Indonesia.

Portability and adoption also depend in part on boundaries, or the discrepancy between what is already in place and what is new or different. Boundaries can be high when adoption requires a major change, or they can be low when what is travelling has a lot in common with what is already in place. Boundaries can be thick, creating tight data packets that travel easily and efficiently, or they can be thin, creating leaky packages that move with greater difficulty because they are more likely to spill. Written traditions travel in packages that are literally bounded, while stories transmitted orally are more likely to change when they are translated and retold over time. Finally, boundaries tend to be selectively permeable, only permitting things with particular shapes and textures to infiltrate them. Ideas and practices that are too 'round' to fit the metaphorically square-shaped gates simply cannot pass.

The frequency and strength of contact between circulating and rooted elements also influences the nature of the encounter. One aspect of this factor lies in the way ideas and objects are introduced into the field. Think of the difference between the allergy sufferer who rubs cortisone cream onto her skin and the person who uses an inhaler to treat the same symptoms. The drug has a greater impact when it is introduced directly into the bloodstream. The tourist brushes up against the surface of religious life, while the pilgrim, although also a short-term visitor, engages with it more reflexively.

The characteristics of the pathways or channels that religious elements traverse, whether real or mediated, also affect sites of encounter. As we argue below, faith moves through religious organizational structures of different strengths and scope. Most Sunni Muslim mosques stand alone; they do not form part of large organizational hierarchies. Other religious organizations rely on a centre-periphery structure, whereby the mother institution or headquarters exerts some control over its members. How tightly structured these networks are and how much the centre directs its outposts strongly influences religious movement.

Finally, the nature of the circulatory encounter depends on the presence of exogenous elements that stimulate, enhance or cancel out its effect. Certain ideas and practices travel together in a kind of partnership, producing an interaction effect. Sometimes their relationship is parasitic; what is introduced piggybacks onto a host that it decimates as it travels. Other flows cancel each other out. Finally, other ideas and practices depend on each other symbiotically for survival (Levitt 2007, 2013).

## **Calling in Malaysia**

As a plural society, which for the past few centuries has been peopled by immigrants from various cultural hinterlands in Asia, Malaysia has long been a site of encounter between diverse migrant religions. In the contemporary Malaysian religious landscape, however, what stands out is the presence of diverse travelling faiths, or deterritorialized religions with different models of mission (*da'wa*). In this section, we explore two such travelling faiths, both with a global reach and a strong presence in Malaysia, the Islamic Tablighi Jamaat (TJ) and the Buddhist Foguangshan (FGS). We base the account on information gathered through fieldwork conducted in 2006, as well as 'insider literature' in the vernacular from within the movements themselves.

TJ, which Maulana Muhammad Ilyias founded in Nizamuddin, India, in 1926, is the largest Islamic movement in the world today. It has centres (*markaz*) in almost 150 countries and a global following of between 60 and 70 million people. FGS, the monastic order that the Chinese Buddhist monk Hsingyun founded in Taiwan in 1967, together with its attendant lay organization, the Buddha's Light International Association (BLIA), is one of the largest Buddhist movements in the world today, with 1500 monastics and more than 170 centres in 80 countries. These two movements are arguably among the most prominent Islamic and Buddhist movements in Malaysia today. Both were initially labelled foreign imports and met with some hostility from local Muslim and Buddhist groups when they were first introduced. We want to understand how contemporary religious movements travel and succeed in acquiring a global following. Since global followings are but an aggregate of local chapters and local conditions that vary as religions circulate, what are the conditions that made it possible for these groups to land? Who were the carriers and the audience? What were the pathways in their geographies of circulation? And what explains their successful yet distinct adaptation and spread?

### *Tablighi Jamaat in Malaysia*

The first TJ missionary travelled from India to Singapore and Malaysia as early as 1952 to work with the mercantile Tamil Muslim diaspora that had settled there (see Noor 2007: 197 for one of its earliest followers' account of the movement in Malaysia). Outside the Tamil diaspora, however, and even within it, TJ's reception was cool. 'Malay-dominated *masjids*', the above author noted, were not prepared to receive its delegations. A report sent back to TJ headquarters in Nizamuddin said it was difficult to spread its teachings among the Malay Muslim majority because they were so closely identified with the Indian diaspora. Nizamuddin, on the outskirts of New Delhi, where the TJ was founded, is still the movement's centre; its leaders are still direct descendants of its founders. They speak Urdu (although English and Arabic are its other two international languages) and the TJ vocabulary is peppered with Urdu terms. The South Asian cast of this Islamic movement is further accentuated by the manner of dress, said to be Islamic, decreed for its followers – *purdah* for the women and, strikingly, the distinctively South Asian white cotton tunic (*kurta*) and ankle-length trousers, topped by a white skullcap (*kopiah*), for the men.

The report listed three impediments to the movement's successful circulation in the Malaysian Muslim context – the forces and sources of resistance at the site of encounter. These were that Urdu-speaking assemblies (*jamaats*) could not communicate with the Malay public; the strong ethnic identification of the TJ, such that it was known locally as the 'Jamaah Tabligh India'; and the suspicion provoked among local Muslim society that the TJ was a 'new religion' with elements of Shia and Qadiani teachings (Ali 1982: 40–1).

Islamic critics of the TJ questioned many of its practices, particularly the group travel on mission for a specified number of days (*khuruj*), on the grounds that such un-Koranic innovations disrupt family and professional life because men leave their families and jobs for weeks and months on end and this prevents followers spending more time studying or working toward the establishment of the Islamic state. The *khuruj* has been the central tenet of the TJ mission since its foundation and it remains its core feature.<sup>1</sup> In addition to the five Koranic obligations for all believers, the TJ requirement to set aside one-tenth of one's earthly time to go on *khuruj* on the path of Allah is quite a commitment, in fact it amounts to three days a month, 40 days a year and four months in a lifetime. This innovation shifted the locus of religious education from the *madrassa*, or religious school, to the mosque, and from a select few to the general public. As such, it made missionaries, the carriers of this travelling faith, out of laymen.

These travelling lay missionaries had, however, to be housed and fed. In Kuala Lumpur, the Tamil-Muslim Masjid India mosque received them, but even there hostility toward the TJ was so strong that the mosque leaders forcefully had to persuade members to host the travellers, so difficult was this initial site of the encounter. It was only in 1969, 17 years after the first mission to Penang, that a breakthrough with the Malay Muslim community was achieved. This happened because an Indian zoology professor called Abdul Rahman happened to be on *khuruj* in Kuala Lumpur in 1969 at the time of the 13 May riots. As violence spread through the capital, university academics from the TJ mission from India were allowed to preach at the university mosque, Masjid Ar Rahman in Lembah Pantai, as well at the Masjid Kampung Baru, a Malay settlement in the heart of the city and close to the scene of some of the worst fighting. From this watershed window of opportunity in the country's history, the seeds of the Malaysian TJ were thus sown and took root in the local universities.

Subsequent assemblies (*jamaats*) from the South Asian subcontinent (no longer just Tamil speakers from Madras) deliberately courted the local Muslim community and Malaysian leaders. Recognizing the unique challenges posed by their particular national context of reception, they asked the leaders in Nizamuddin to send more English-speaking *jamaats* to reach out to Malays, as so few understood Urdu. In 1976, the inspirational Bhai Padia of South Africa took time off during his two-week *khuruj* to Malaysia to visit many of the universities in the area. University students made up much of the audience attending the talks he gave in English. As a result, more than 40 student *jamaats* began a 40-day *khuruj* to the surrounding Malay countryside.

In 1974 only three mosques in Kuala Lumpur engaged in TJ activities. By 1977, as a result of student activism, 20 such mosques had been founded (Abdullah 1992: 7). The 1980s were the glory years of TJ expansion, spurred on in no small measure by the return of Malay Muslim students who had joined the TJ while studying abroad on government scholarships – another enthusiastic pool of carriers. Mohamad Hanapi's memoir (Noor 2007) contains a veritable hall of fame of TJ academics and professionals in the country, including Dr Nasuha, the present head of TJ Malaysia, who joined TJ while studying optometry in Melbourne, Australia. The TJ was so successful at recruiting the newly educated Malay middle class that the state initially feared its model of otherworldly piety would thwart its modernization programme and took measures to have it banned. TJ survived, however, to celebrate its latest *ijtimak* in 2009 with 200,000 participants and graced by the presence of the country's prime minister. Today the TJ ranks among the major Islamic movements in the country.

Who are the carriers of a transnational travelling faith or religious movement such as the TJ? For the Indian sub-continent, including Pakistan and Bangladesh, the initial movers were Islamic scholars (*ulama*), beginning with the founding family itself. The lay character of the TJ is so striking that it is easy to overlook the role in its spread of the religious professionals (*alims*) and, in particular, of the founding families in Nizamuddin. The practice of making an oath of personal allegiance (*baiyat*) to particular religious leaders in the movement further attests to the importance of religious leadership in it. *Alims* are also the first category of people the TJ courts in a new country. Missionaries sent to a new country on *khuruj*, however, are in the main lay people.

In this new geography of mission, the Indian diaspora was TJ's obvious point of entry. Its early success in Singapore, Malaysia, South Africa and the UK occurred because each had a strong diasporic base with a shared linguistic heritage. The success of TJ's transnational career, however, lay ultimately in its ability to cross the diasporic ethnic boundary, into, in this case, the Malay Muslim world. It moved across that ethnic divide, at least initially, via the medium of English, the newly acquired language of the emerging Malaysian middle class. TJ, unlike the Arabic-centred small cottages (*pondoks*) and religious schools (*madrassas*) then in place, allowed for Islamic education and edification through the vernacular, Urdu, as the language of its canonical literature. Because South Asia was formerly under British rule, much of the literature was soon translated into English and made available to an English-educated *umara*, like the Malay students of the NEP, who could not read Arabic. There were also a fair number of Malay *alims* who had studied at the Deobandi school and could translate Urdu into Malay. Today, almost all the material the movement uses is in Malay.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, the emerging academic and civil service middle class were largely responsible for carrying TJ into the Malay Muslim world. To this newly educated and enriched class, born out of the encounter with Western education and nurtured for ethnic competition, TJ promised a path to individual and collective redemption, although to achieve it demanded much time and money. This pattern of middle-class penetration differs from the one scholars have noted in the West, where much of the

literature (see Kepel 2004; Roy 2006; Sikand 2002) highlights the movement's involvement with working-class immigrants. According to this work, the TJ has grown primarily among disoriented Muslim youths, especially the children and grandchildren of Muslim immigrants in France and among South Asian immigrants and their descendants in the UK. In these largely working-class (or unemployed) immigrant communities, already set apart by their ethnic minority lifestyles, TJ's message resonates with and reinforces the lifestyle of ethnic exclusivity and societal parallelism that is already in place.

*Foguangshan in Malaysia*

In the 2000 census, 76 per cent of the Chinese population in Malaysia claimed to be Buddhists. In reality, Chinese folk religion, carried to Malaya largely by illiterate migrants, incorporated elements of Buddhism, in particular the Buddhist deity Kuanyin, but was far removed from the canonical Mahayana Buddhism known among the gentry and practised in the great monastic orders in the homeland (Wee 1977). The establishment of canonical Buddhist teaching and institutions in Malaysia only took place when foreign monks from different Buddhist traditions settled there in the early 1950s. These new carriers of religion gave what had become a Chinese settler (as opposed to sojourner) society the option of embracing a distinctively Buddhist identity – turning what had been a migrant religion into a new religious assemblage formed partially in response to a travelling faith.

Mahayana Buddhism achieved a firm monastic and lay footing in Malaysia through the efforts of a Chinese monk, Ven Chuk Mor, who fled mainland China when the communists took over in 1949. The profound legacy of this Chinese-speaking leader in exile from the Chinese Mahayana Buddhist tradition was equalled and complemented by the work of his contemporary, the Sri Lankan monk Reverend Dhammananda, who arrived in Kuala Lumpur in 1952 and remained in the country until his death in 2006. This English-speaking monk from the Theravada tradition, who came to serve as ethnic chaplain to the small Sri Lankan migrant Buddhist community, soon reached out with missionary zeal to the English-educated Chinese middle classes who were living primarily in the capital. They could not understand the Chinese-language Mahayana texts and lectures that Ven Chuk Mor and his associates circulated. Both monks worked closely together, their half-century collaboration producing a set of national Buddhist institutions and religious culture attracting substantial numbers of lay followers, especially among the university-educated Chinese middle classes. As itinerant Buddhism began a process of localization, a pluralistic and non-sectarian 'Malaysian Buddhism' became a work in progress among this Chinese settler society in the diaspora.

In the 1990s, however, various transnational Buddhist movements from Taiwan established local chapters in Malaysia. Their rapid expansion soon overtook the local associations, sparking competition between national and transnational missionaries with different visions of appropriate religious practice. Just as the fragile attempts to establish a non-sectarian Buddhism as a national religion within the Malaysian

context (see Lee and Ackerman 1997) were beginning to bear fruit, these transnational Buddhist movements attracted local followers who embraced a specific organizational identity that transcended national borders and was headquartered in another country. This organizational identity was seen as ‘a form of sectarianism’. We focus here on the most prominent of these ‘imported’ movements, Foguangshan (FGS), and its lay association, the Buddha’s Light International Association (BLIA).

The first FGS temple in Malaysia was established in 1989; 20 years later, there were 17 FGS centres throughout the country, including the imposing Dong Zen temple located on a 16-acre plot of land outside Kuala Lumpur. Most of the 30-odd FGS monks and nuns serving in Malaysia reside in the Dong Zen temple. The temple also houses the Dong Zen Institute of Buddhist Studies, where aspiring FGS monks and nuns are trained. The BLIA lay organization claims over 10,000 members organized in 27 sub-chapters as well as student fellowships in schools and tertiary institutions.<sup>3</sup>

The *khuruj* is at the heart of the Tablighi Jamaat model of *da’wa*; in fact, teams of laymen, sometimes under the leadership of an *alim*, constantly circulate to spread the word. At the heart of FGS is the incessant global mobility of its charismatic founder monk, Hsingyun. Hsingyun fled to Taiwan in the wake of the communist takeover of mainland China, where he founded FGS in 1967. A gifted speaker and writer, he first visited Malaysia in 1963 as a member of a delegation of Buddhist monks visiting Southeast Asia. However, even before his visit, his many writings, especially his 1955 biography of Buddha, the first written in modern Chinese, had already been circulating in the Chinese diaspora. Many lay Buddhist leaders in Malaysia today say they entered the world of Buddhism by reading Master Hsingyun’s writings – their pathway into this new religious geography was literature. In 1977, the entire lay leadership of the Young Buddhist Association of Malaysia, made up primarily of graduates from local state universities, visited Hsingyun in Taiwan, and all took discipleship vows, becoming his earliest followers in Malaysia.

By the time Hsingyun’s visited Malaysia again in 1983, he already had strong ties to the local Buddhist establishment, which he strengthened through several lectures in the 1980s. By the time he sent one of his disciples from Taiwan to establish the first FGS centre in Klang in 1989, he was widely known to the Malaysian public not just as a Mahayana Buddhist monk, but as a leading Chinese public intellectual. His commanding presence at public rallies and ceremonies in Malaysia over the past two decades, which the national media publicized widely, has attracted new segments of the population to the Buddhist fold, in particular the emerging educated middle classes.

Once someone is in the fold, the lay organization (BLIA) takes over. Its major source of strength is the availability of a cadre of well-trained monastics, the majority of whom are nuns. They are, however, not so much missionaries as supporting staff. FGS monastics circulate on three-year terms to the various FGS centres around the world; they work as professionals who look after the flock. They are the key disseminators of Buddhist knowledge at annual retreats and seminars, and they act as general resource people for the local BLIA chapters. These chapters are organized as

congregations, and volunteerism is stressed as a key component of membership. Members are constantly called upon to help in welfare activities, disaster relief and environmental campaigns. BLIA members can also train as *dharma* lecturers; there are currently more than 500 certified FGS *dharma* lay lecturers, many from Malaysia, who travel around the world giving talks.

Writing, speaking and peripatetic tours are not Hsingyun's only activities; he also engages in diplomacy and technology. To develop this formidable religious network, Hsingyun has proven himself a consummate networker. He has cultivated ties with the Buddhist establishment in Malaysia, as well as in other parts of the world. He has also relentlessly cultivated the political establishment in every country in which the organization has chapters. On virtually every trip to Malaysia, he meets leading politicians, including former prime ministers Mahathir Mohammad and Abdullah Badawi. He also counts senior Chinese politicians in Malaysia among his disciples.

Unlike the TJ message, which an army of lay foot soldiers assigned to specific local terrains and their mosques carry, the FGS message is transmitted to a general reading and listening public. Technology is critical to its mode of transmission. Hsingyun recognized the value of the media from the outset. His sophisticated use of a range of technologies has allowed him to reach out directly to a Chinese diasporic audience for whom Buddhism had been more of a religion of the past than of the present and the future, and to change their minds.

In fact, FGS's message is crafted very much in terms of the present and the future. Hsingyun's 'humanistic Buddhism' speaks to the moral, spiritual and economic vicissitudes of modern life and embraces progressive ecumenical issues such as gender equality, environmentalism and inter-faith dialogue. At the same time though, the FGS reaffirms the traditional Chinese values of family and cultural roots, and is implicitly and explicitly rooted in a revalorization of Chinese culture. The Hsingyun disciple and BLIA member is called upon to be a Buddhist universalist, global citizen, and proud of being culturally Chinese. It is no coincidence that FGS has travelled extensively to the global Chinese diaspora, yet it has been unable to expand beyond the confines of the Chinese community in Malaysia.

### **Travelling faiths compared**

TJ and FGS are arguably among the most successful transnational religious movements of our day. However, their models of *da'wa*, or propagation, contrast sharply. Our close study of the sites of encounter where the 'travelling faiths' have come to rest has focused on the carriers as well as the receivers of the new faith. It drives home the importance of the local institutions through which travelling faiths take root. It also underlines differences in the audiences the travelling faiths target, as well as the forces and sources of resistance to their reception. Resistance has often come from the state religious establishment or from nationally based religious reform movements that see themselves as competing with transnational reform movements for the same audience, namely the newly emerging middle class. The religious landscapes on which modern travelling faiths attempt to take root are not inert

traditional religious fields. In the case of the FGS, religious developments had been underway in Malaysian Chinese Buddhism for several decades. Similarly, the TJ was not the only Islamic reform movement reaching out to the Malay Muslim student audience. National and historical contexts strongly influence how easily religions travel and where and among whom they come to ground.

Our research revealed clear similarities and differences between these travelling faiths. Both TJ and FGS circulated widely. Both were founded by charismatic leaders who, in part, achieved authority and legitimacy through their scholarship. Both appealed to an emerging middle class in the context of a developing economy. Both are also founder movements that arose outside the core civilizational centre of the religious tradition, deterritorialized, as it were, from their inception. TJ is based in Nizamuddin, India; not only is it located outside the Islamic heartland of the Middle East, but it has also consciously decided to remain outside the Islamic state of Pakistan. FGS is based in Taiwan, on the edge of Chinese culture and far from the centres of orthodox Mahayana Buddhism.

These founder movements at the religious periphery arose out of the desire to rid peasant religiosity of its syncretic impurities and impose scriptural orthodoxy. At the periphery, however, scripture had to be vernacularized to be understood. The success of both movements has depended on their ability to produce a corpus of eminently readable secondary canonical literature written by the founder or his close associates: for the TJ, these were texts translated from Arabic into Urdu and English and then Malay; for FGS, they were texts in technical Buddhist terminology translated into modern Chinese. The modernity of these movements is defined by their ability to reconstitute themselves as assemblages that include the written vernacular and the technologies with which to spread it. Print media plays a critical role. It made literacy a precondition for membership, and it made membership an entry into the world of literacy and formal learning.

It was also the vernacular that enabled these faiths to journey transnationally as they followed the pathways of diasporic populations. Unlike many other transnational religious organizations, however, they travelled to rather than with the diasporic populations. As reform movements, in both cases they primarily directed the mission (*da'wa*) inwards towards a pre-existing cultural and religious universe. For TJ, this meant circulation in an Islamic world constituted by multi-ethnicity; for FGS, it meant circulation in a Chinese cultural world constituted by multi-religiosity. Consequently, in Malaysia TJ eventually succeeded in crossing the ethnic boundary, while FGS has not. Why? This is one of the key questions in the study of travelling faiths today.

FGS has tried to proselytize to Africans in South Africa, but with little success. The critical differences between the two movements we describe here helps explain why this might be the case. One characteristic that differentiates FGS from TJ is the key role that monastics play in its circulation. Audiences outside the Chinese cultural milieu do not easily accept the Buddhist discipline (with its Chinese cultural cast) required of monastics. Another difference is the key role played by the founder, Hsingyun, whose constant travel to the diaspora always includes highly publicized meetings with important political leaders. While these appearances spur on the FGS's

spread, they are also limited to the charismatic efforts of one person. The founding family of TJ never travels away from the centre in Nizamuddin. TJ travellers are lay people on *khuruj*. There are far more of them; they travel everywhere and they are closer to the people they are trying to convince.

Another issue is the organizational identity with which the travelling faith imbues its followers. It is not just Islam, but TJ; it is not just Buddhism, but FGS. A TJ Islamic identity is more easily cross-ethnic because it makes universalistic claims within the world of Islam. It is a call to renewal of Muslims, not of Islam, which remains the one true faith. Hsingyun's appeal is highly culture-specific. FGS is a deliberate attempt to renew Chinese Buddhism, which Western audiences, although responsive to Buddhist movements, have not found attractive. The meta-cultural Chinese frame of FGS feeds into contemporary discourses about a greater cultural China not confined by the political boundaries of the People's Republic (see Wu 2008). FGS local chapters, especially in the United States and Australia, organize Chinese language classes and lectures on Chinese culture for their members in the diaspora. Apart from these services, Hsingyun clearly sees his movement as contributing to the emergence of a Chinese modernity in which religion will play an honoured and accepted role.

FGS has thus remained hostage to its vernacular (albeit to a homogenized Mandarin and not the vernacular dialects). Because it globalizes Chinese culture and identity through a modernized Buddhism, FGS appeals mostly to diasporic, minoritized Chinese settler populations already unsettled by social and geographical mobility within a modernizing state such as Malaysia. Its self-representation in terms of Chinese culture, however, has prevented its dissemination across the ethnic and linguistic border. Its geography of circulation, although global, is limited to the Chinese ethnic diaspora. The ethnically constituted diasporic space is one of the most important spaces within which religion travels. When its boundaries are transcended, globality assumes a particular significance.

TJ, on the other hand, has operated with several vernaculars and, perhaps equally importantly, with the extensive use of the 'global' English language. Indeed, that is probably why Hinduism and other Indian travelling faiths, like TJ, move within the British Commonwealth: their transmission is made possible by the extensive use of English and the middle-class character of their respective audiences. Only the emerging educated middle class had the means to link itself to a global travelling faith. Their class status meant they were educated, giving them the literacy required to read the written materials then circulating. Using these written materials, attending foreign meetings and being in contact with transnational co-religionists also constituted obvious cultural capital and provided a means of deploying the 'strategies of distinction' that differentiate them from the lower classes still surrounding them and from which they had just emerged.

Our findings reveal how much the socio-demographic characteristics and skills of the carriers and receivers of travelling faiths influence their trajectory and landing. They also highlight how the content and symbolic meaning of the language and instructional technologies of transmission shape what actually happens when what is

circulating meets what is already in place. Despite their journey to Malaysia during roughly the same period, under similar political and economic conditions the TJ and FGS travelled in and to different geographical places, traversing differently inflected ethnic and cultural paths. The nature of these ethnic and cultural routes allowed TJ to scale the ethnic divide, while the FGS remained within a Chinese diasporic space, although also extending globally.

Both migrant religions and the two different types of travelling faith we describe drive the globalization of religion. Its reach is uneven, compartmentalized and, in some sense, incomplete. When travelling faiths stay within the sacred geography of a linguistic or culturally defined space, they are no less global, only segmentedly so.

### Notes [ARE THESE STILL RELEVANT?]

1. This is a method the TJ often use. The invitation is to follow a *jamaat* back to the subcontinent for a four-month *khuruj*. [CHECK PLACING OF NOTE. ORIGINAL PLACEMENT LOST IN RE-WRITE.]
2. This is not the case in South Africa. According to Moosa (2000), the merchant class imported the TJ via Gujarat. Like Malaysia, South Africa was part of the British Empire, with an older established Indian diaspora as opposed to the first generation labour migrants of western Europe. [CHECK PLACING OF NOTE IN TEXT]
3. From an interview with BLIA president, 7 August 2009. [CHECK PLACING OF NOTE.]

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