



The Future of Utopia

Peter van der Veer

To cite this article: Peter van der Veer (2016): The Future of Utopia, History and Anthropology, DOI: [10.1080/02757206.2016.1167051](https://doi.org/10.1080/02757206.2016.1167051)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02757206.2016.1167051>



Published online: 07 Apr 2016.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 5



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

The Future of Utopia[†]

Peter van der Veer

ABSTRACT

The widespread notion that the city is secular and that therefore society's future is secular is in need of serious reconsideration. This paper argues that religion does not melt away but rather morphs into modern forms of aspiration, speculation, and contention. Religion is therefore crucial to social inquiry into the nature of the urban. The paper argues that in Asia the Christian modern is close to the secular modern with fragments of rational planning and calculation in constant interplay with fragments of the magic of speculative modernity. Both communism and market capitalism are ideological cousins of Christian millenarianism. In a comparison of India, China, and Singapore it argues that the Christian form of modernity has been much better able to penetrate and coalesce with Sinic civilizational traditions than with Indic civilizational traditions.

KEYWORDS

Urban; Secular; Religious; Planning; Asia

The Urban Future

The urban signifies the future, nowhere as clearly as in the aspiration of the Chinese government to make the urban the imminent future of many more millions who now live in the countryside. By 2020, 60% of the Chinese population should live in cities. Over half of the world's population already lives in cities, while India and China are rapidly pushing their populations into urban areas. So, the future of Asian cities seems inescapably urban. Not that anyone who is outside the city wants to escape urbanization. The urban dream holds especially young people under its sway. The irony is that there is an opposite dream of urban dwellers who often dream of having a house in countryside, of escaping the city at least for a while.

The definition of the urban seems to require its opposite, the rural. In fact, however, it has always been very hard to draw a hard and fast empirical boundary between city and village, although the ideological use of the distinction has always been important. One finds urban villages in the city and one finds city dwellers building houses in the village. This interconnectivity shapes the landscape of Gujarat, Punjab, Kerala as much as that of Fujian and Guangzhou. In Thailand one finds that the imagined and real urban-rural divide between Bangkok and the North has enormous political consequences in the struggles between the "red-shirts" and the "yellow shirts", the two opposing political movements in Thailand.

CONTACT Peter van der Veer  vanderveer@mmg.mpg.de  Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity, Göttingen, Germany.

[†]A version of this paper was given as a keynote in a conference on Urban Futures at Harvard University, 24–25 April 2015 and another version as the Annual Lecture of the British Association for the Study of Religion at the University of Kent at Canterbury, 7–9 September.

The dichotomy of the urban and the rural in the definition of the urban is as fuzzy as that of the local and the global. Urbanization and globalization are processes that are deeply connected and produce new spatial formations. They are best seen as aspects of the production of locality. When considering global financial markets it is striking that the global city provides a necessary context for them. At the same time, despite all the attention to the global nature of these cities, one cannot ignore the central importance of national borders and definitions of citizenship, based on national politics and nationalism that shape the urban conditions that ethnic groups try to negotiate through their transnational networks. Media images, produced in Bollywood, Hong Kong, Taipei, Shanghai, and Seoul, are an important element in the imaginary of the urban. They provide imaginations of cities that are globally consumed as well as the ideational materials for the production of locality for people in all these places and of those who desire to move there. In the past, Western cities, like Berlin, London, Paris, and New York offered much material for the imagination of urbanity, but today the speed of transformation in Shanghai and Singapore provides a seemingly more future-oriented vision.

When one uses terms like aspiration and speculation, as in Appadurai's (2013) cultural analysis of the future, there is a suggestion of a directional or vectoral move towards an unknown and risky, but desirable urban future that connects migrants' motivations to governmental development policies. One could call that "the urbanization of the mind", but with its growing success one wonders what the limits of the city are, not so much spatially, but socially. What is outside of cities if almost everyone lives in them? Korea with its almost 80% urban population is a good example. In other words, is there a difference between the study of the city and the study of society? The urban seems to be modern society's present and future.

Religion, on the other hand, appears to signify the past, to belong to the underdeveloped countryside that is literally left behind in the move to the urban future. But the question is whether religion is some old furniture that one can leave behind when entering the urban future. The notion of shedding old identities and aspirations and replacing them with new ones, like putting on a new overcoat, seems like a Christian narrative of total conversion, not a description of what really can happen. Is the move to the urban modern a secular move, as many social scientists in the 1960s and 1970s thought? Or does religion not melt away but rather morph into modern forms of aspiration, speculation, and contention? Such are the questions that are almost never raised in secularized urban studies, but are crucial to social inquiry on the nature of the urban.

Historically, the city has always been acknowledged as the centre of religious civilization, as in the Thai use of the Indic concept of the mandala in what the late Tambiah (1985) called "the galactic state". To understand the relation between the civilizational centre and the periphery is not only pertinent to Bangkok, but also, in culturally specific ways, to Beijing, Seoul, Hanoi, Delhi, Istanbul, Vienna, Paris, London, and Madrid; not to speak of the centres of world religions, such as Jerusalem, Mecca, and Rome. However, the sacred centre belongs, one could argue, to the religious civilizations of the past. It does not make much sense to understand Bangkok today primarily in terms of the mandala. Today's civilization is late modernity or even post-modernity, future oriented, glorifying the past only as the basis of future change. Nevertheless, despite its ideological rejection of hierarchy and thus its affirmation of continuous space, modernity continues to have the city as civilizational centre, be it the city as the centre of the modern nation-state

or as world-city, a crucial node in the global network of mega-cities. The notion that the city is the centre of civilization, that its residents are urbane and that those outside of it are pagans has not changed, although civilization has changed from religious to secular, from transcendent to immanent, or so at least the story goes. Churches, mosques, shrines in cities may continue to be important as tourist attractions. But it is tourism and not pilgrimage that defines the popularity of the Notre Dame, Westminster Abbey, the Hagia Sophia, the Pagodas in Bangkok, Tiananmen Square. From this perspective if in Asia pilgrimage and worship are still alive this only shows that Asia is Europe's Past.

Now everyone knows that this just-so story of modern civilization, of modernization and secularization is full of traps and contradictions. Simply declaring or demonstrating that it is not a true story, though, is not sufficient, because at every corner, in every argument aspects of it suddenly pop up again. The reason why a refuted story does not fade away is rooted in ideology and especially the ideology of the state and of its servants, the intellectual class. Too much is vested in it. The holistic essentialism of the concept of modernity serves a multiplicity of purposes, intellectually and politically, like it did for earlier notions of civilization, such as Hindu civilization, the World of Islam, or Confucian civilization, all ideological shorthand to emphasize unity while hiding enormous diversity in histories, languages, and societies. The way forward is to understand that modernity is fragmentary, to pay attention to its fragments, and especially to attempts to connect the pieces, to bricolage and assemblage (Van der Veer 2016). One can go on and on in showing that the city is not really secular or in proving the resilience of religious traditions in the urban setting, but nobody seems to be really listening. It may be a better strategy to ask what urban studies focus on and what they might miss because of their secular bias.

Urban Planning

"The urban" is a theoretical object and just as difficult to define as other theoretical constructs, such as "society" or "culture" or "religion". It is therefore not surprising that many urbanists, like Lefebvre (2003), Thrift (2007), or Merrifield (2012), turn philosophical or poetic when they want to describe the city. Definition is obviously not the goal of inquiry. We should rather ask whether the urban is a space with a new set of *problematics* that require new approaches. What distinguishes urban sociology, urban anthropology, or urban geography from the rest of these disciplines? Of course there is a scalar element that distinguishes cities from villages and big cities from small ones, but while their scale may be similar, cities are as different from each other as they are different from non-cities. These differences are directly related to the historical pathways of the larger societies in which they are embedded. I would therefore argue that the differences between, say, Singapore and Seoul are to be explained in terms of their cultural and political environment rather than in terms of urban development. One needs to ask whether the urban is an explanatory category, whether there is something specific to the urban scale that explains other phenomena. Perhaps the best approach is that we ask which particular practices have the urban as their object. It seems to me that urban planning is the most important of them.

The city is an object of secular planning which is based on a modern, rational vision of the future. It does not require any discussion that the scale of the urban requires

considerable planning efforts, concerning housing, transport, shopping, hospitals, and schools, and that while these efforts are considered to be those of material and social engineering, and thus require instrumental rationality, they are framed by political aspirations. In some cases, such as in Singapore or Shanghai, planning aspires to the secularization of space. In other cases, such as in Mumbai, Bangkok, or Seoul politicians have to negotiate with religious actors to plan space (see Van der Veer 2015). In these cities politicians may be themselves religious actors. In the modern world urban planning is a secular process based on technical and financial expertise and arguments. Urban renewal and urban expansion are based on the efforts of engineers, architects, and construction workers combined with the deliberations of city bureaucrats and project developers. With the gradual urbanization of human society over the last century and its acceleration in Asia over the last decades urban planning is at the heart of social transformation. Whatever the theoretical difficulties with the generality of the notion of “modernization” it is here that it seems least problematic. The financial and political aspects can be understood from the perspective of political economy and the technical aspects from the perspective of science and technology. The aspiration is to make something for the future, one plans the “yet to come”.

What anthropologists have been pointing out, however, is that the implementation of urban planning meets all kinds of unplanned realities “on the ground”. The clash between the vision of planners and the perspectives of those who are living in these visions is particularly striking in cases of radical modernist planning, as for example Niemeyer’s Brasilia or Le Corbusier’s Chandigarh, but it is everywhere (Holston 1989). From this work it emerges that the rationality and functionalism of urban planning is in fact part of a visionary exercise that can be called utopian, metaphysical, or even magical. The extent to which urban planners are able to ignore social reality or to dismiss it is an indication of the aspirational nature of their endeavours.

One of the ways in which social reality can be dismissed or radically transformed is by urban renewal and the destruction of the past. In projects of urban renewal in China one finds a secular iconoclasm, reminding us of the Maoist slogan of “smash the old to build the new”, but more successful than any Maoist campaign. Especially sacred spaces are destroyed in secularist urban planning. Making religion invisible, however, has unintended consequences. One of the foundational ideas in Durkheim’s sociology of religion was that the sacred and the profane were spatially separated, but the spatial dichotomy is in fact not clear at all. It is precisely the mixture of sacred and profane in urban space that has to be confronted by urban planning. Cemeteries, religious shrines, haunted places; subterranean forces are part of reality, but often a repressed reality in the master plan. Unsuccessful urban planning results in abandoned projects, unfinished housing complexes where development is literally haunted by the ghosts of unfulfilled aspirations. Thai movies are excellent in showing how especially gated communities with their mixture of economic success and lack of social cohesion are the sites of horror. In his recent ethnography of Changmai in Northern Thailand Johnson (2014) focuses on abandoned projects and only half built places and shows how the frustration of developmentalist aspirations turns cities into haunted places.

Another admixture of sacred and profane is speculation. Because of the large amounts of money that are involved in urban planning and project development the spoils are enormous. Urban planning is an arena of great speculation, in which information is a

crucial asset. Given the inequality of access to information, the shifting nature of political decision-making, no one can be certain about where things are heading. This fundamental uncertainty can be addressed in a variety of ways, but one set of possible approaches can be called “religious’ or magical”. Participation in lotteries, buying shares or land at the advice of religious specialists, practices of self-cultivation, prayer, ritual worship of deities, Ponzi schemes, investment in houses, project development, they all are parts of speculative practices that cannot be easily divided into secular versus religious or religious versus magical. In Asia the opening up of markets previously highly regulated by state socialism and accelerated development has created a feverish atmosphere of opportunity, luck, and misfortune. Everyone, from high to low, is in some way participating in urban aspirations that are tied to urban planning. The energy that Asian cities somehow exhibit is that of grasping the opportunity, an evanescent prospect.

All this goes to say that the process of urban planning, despite its image, cannot be separated from utopianism. Its image of engineering, overcoming technical obstacles, dealing with recalcitrant populations, all in the name of progress, hides the magic of speculation. It also represses the very real possibility of failure. This is clear from the history of “master plans” in South Asia which show an enormous confidence on the part of urban planners that their spatial interventions can create a “modern” society with civic bonds and modern civilization without the ghosts of the past (see Hull 2011). Planning is in many ways as magical as some of the obstacles, resistances, and “facts on the ground” that it encounters.

Singapore as the Planner’s Dream

For a case of highly successful, rational planning to create an urban future in Asia let us examine somewhat closely Singapore. Singaporean planning is single-mindedly future oriented. To quote the architect Koolhaas 1997 evocation of Singapore:

Almost all of Singapore is less than 30 years old; the city represents the ideological production of the past three decades in its pure form, uncontaminated by surviving contextual remnants. It is managed by a regime that has excluded accident and randomness: even its nature is entirely remade. It is pure intention: if it is chaos, it is authored chaos; if it is ugly, it is designed ugliness; if it is absurd, it is willed absurdity. Singapore represents a unique ecology of the contemporary.

As is usual with Koolhaas’ pronouncements, this is somewhat over the top, but it captures the futurism that characterizes Singapore.

Singapore today is a product of inimitable urban planning and social engineering. What has been achieved through the one-party dominance of the People’s Action Party under the leadership of Prime Minister Lee Kuan-Yew and his son is in many ways admirable. Since its formation in 1963 Singapore has developed into one of the ten richest countries in the world. It has been spared much of the social unrest that besets its neighbours, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand. Through a well-conceived master plan public housing has been distributed on an ethnic-quota basis that has prevented ghetto formation. Since the 1960s the entire urban space has been reorganized by destroying the old kampongs and placing people in the new Housing Development Blocks.

The effects of secular planning on religion in Singapore are remarkable. The colonial government had already successfully repressed the kongsis and the secret societies as

an illegitimate alternative to the state, but modern Singapore had to become a nation-state. The Singaporean government has successfully promoted a multicultural nationalism instead of a Chinese majoritarian nationalism in order to prevent any kind of backlash in the surrounding Malay-dominated states of Malaysia and Indonesia. The somewhat compulsive references to the racial riots of the 1950s and 1960s and the regular celebration of racial harmony are all part of this performance of multiculturalism (see Goh 2008). This has also meant that the state has marginalized the expression of regional Chinese identities, based on the main, mutually unintelligible, Chinese languages (Hokkien, Teochew, Cantonese), to forge a modern national identity, based on a state-sponsored secular (to some extent Christian) work ethic, buttressed by so-called Confucian Values (family, filial piety, hard work, scholarship), and the teaching of standard Mandarin in school. The destruction of the kampongs and the building of Housing Development Blocks (with an ethnic-quota system that distributes housing roughly according to ethnic percentage in the population) also entailed the dismantling of regional Chinese identities that were historically based on religious networks and secret societies.

Since temples can only get a lease of the land from the government for thirty years they have to raise enormous amounts of money to be able to stay where they are or otherwise they have to move to cheaper locations at the margins of the city, often in industrial areas. Temples have to move often due to the pressures of real estate or urban renovation and the building of roads and metro lines. This makes religion quite invisible in the central areas of Singapore. An alternative is to combine temples of different communities in one space that is leased by unified efforts. Thus one finds temples of different Chinese communities under one roof, but also temples with a Chinese, a Hindu, and a Muslim shrine under one roof. Another alternative is to rent Housing Development Blocks apartments and use them as temples, partly undermining the secularization of space by the government. The Singaporean case shows the effects of secular urban planning on religion quite clearly, but it also shows the transnational possibilities of religious networks to escape from the secularism of individual states. Singaporean Chinese have been adept in keeping their transnational networks that connect them to temples outside of Singapore, primarily in Malaysia and China, alive. Dean (2015) has collected evidence that with Singaporean support hundreds of temples in Fujianese hometowns of Singaporean Chinese have been rebuilt and that ritual networks have been re-established after the secularist onslaught of the 1950s and 1960s in Communist China.

The Christian Gospel

This means that at the time that Singapore was officially secularized by urban planning, religious organizations, movements, and institutions developed ritual activities and spaces in South China. Secularization of urban space by real estate pricing in Singapore and outright secular destruction in Communist China are countered by the resilience of temple communities in Singapore and their ability to escape the grip of nation-states through transnational networks. In Singapore itself we find the spirit cults in the interstices of society, that is to say, in the Housing Development Blocks, and in my own fieldwork in Singapore in 2014 I have visited many which were very diverse, ethnically and religiously. But how to interpret the spirit of modernity that energizes urban planning in Singapore? Globally, nationalism provides the spirit that keeps the fragmentary experiences of

modernity together. In Singapore and in the rest of Asia that nationalism is haunted by the spectre of accelerated development. The postcolonial anxiety to “catch up” with the West and ultimately to surpass the West, pervades Asian discourse. The spirits in the Housing Blocks may express some of the anxieties and frustrations of unsatisfying development, but both in Singapore and in Seoul it is evangelical Protestantism that portrays the millennial promise of Christ to turn development into civilizational progress. At the height of the cold war in the 1960s both Singapore and Seoul were reborn as models of total transformation. Both claim to be the centres of Christian revival and evangelism in Asia. Both have megachurches, although Seoul being four times bigger than Singapore it also has bigger churches. In the Yoido Full Gospel Church, the largest church in the world, I heard the founding Pastor say in a sermon in November 2012 that nothing had been there when he came to the area to build his church and Lo and Behold, now it was fully developed; indeed with his church as one of the largest property owners and stakeholders. This is the gospel of sudden prosperity. Similarly, in Singapore the evangelist churches are deep into real estate. Evangelical Christianity seems to be one of the most successful forms of millenarianism in Asia, immediately followed by communism and market capitalism. Their message is: “here is success, here is power”. Sermons are mixed with entertainment by classical or pop music, tying young people to the notion that church is hip. Pastor Kong Hee of the City Harvest Megachurch in Singapore has been convicted for misusing church funds for investing 24 million US dollar in the career of his wife, the pop singer Sun Ho (“Kong Hee” 2015), but that will not put an end to the success of Evangelical Christianity. One only need remember the Televangelist Scandals that rocked the US twenty years ago to be reminded that evangelism thrives on scandal and confession (see Harding 2001).

Seoul and Singapore share an aspiration to become the model for the rest of the world, to be a new America, a promised land of undying optimism. In all Asian cities the Christian message is supplemented at the level of the individual by shelves full of American self-help books and business-success books that assist one in living “up to one’s full potential”. Despite the emphasis in these messages on a curious combination of spiritual self-fulfilment and making your work your life, perfectly fitting a 24-hour economy, living up to one’s full potential seems to be primarily achieved in the act of buying and consuming, another aspect of the global American lifestyle. Shopping malls are the main public venues in many Asian cities today and in close imitation of the American example much is destroyed to be able to build big traffic arteries and metro lines for mass transit through the city. Today’s conviviality in modern Asian cities is more and more located in mass encounters in huge shopping centres. Ultimately it is not Simmel’s (1950) over-stimulation of the senses or the supposed eroticism of consumption that awaits us in these malls, but the utter boredom of endless repetition of the same. A critique of mass consumerism should, however, not ignore that people like their city to be well-planned and look modern, even when they are poor and risk eviction from their houses to make way for urban renewal (Harms 2012). Nevertheless, the desire for total order and the well-disciplined citizen-consumer always represses other existing desires for creative chaos, abandon, and other sources of vitality. Ultimately, a fully planned urban future may be the overall aspiration of urban planners, but it can only be really successful in a controlled space like Singapore.

Singapore is a success story in providing housing and welfare to its citizens which is a remarkable achievement especially if one considers the dire poverty of millions in the

region. As an island it has been able to insulate itself from its environment, Malaysia and Indonesia, by making it very hard to gain citizenship and by strictly regulating work permits. What many politicians in many countries are dreaming of, Singapore does. It controls its immigration very effectively and at every economic dip lets its immigrant workers leave, turning the social costs over to the sending countries. Its rural hinterland is abroad and it does not have to deal with it. This is obviously not the case anywhere else today, but it makes Singapore the urban future, an urban nation-state without a rural hinterland.

It is hard to escape the idea that the Christian modern is close to the secular modern with fragments of rational planning and calculation in constant interplay with fragments of the magic of speculative modernity. Both communism and market capitalism are ideological cousins of Christian millenarianism. It is remarkable that this form of modernity has been much better able to penetrate and coalesce with Sinic civilizational traditions than with Indic civilizational traditions. To fully appreciate the cultural and political specificity of urban futures in the Sinic world of Singapore, Shanghai, and Seoul we have to turn to the Indic world and examine the urban future of Mumbai, a colonial port city like Singapore and Shanghai.

Alternative Religious Modernities in India

Not less than Seoul or Singapore or Shanghai Mumbai is a site of modern urban aspirations, one of the most interesting being the current attempt by the Dawoodi Bohras, an Ismaili Shi'a trading community, to determine its urban future by a total transformation of their neighbourhood, Bhendi Bazar, in Fort Bombay, to a modern high rise gated community centring around the shrine of the saint. It involves relocating 20,000 residents to temporary housing when the neighbourhood is demolished and rebuilt. The Bohra community is incredibly well connected to both the government and to the business community and seems to have managed to get the right clearances for cluster development. Its leader, the Syedna decreed that this should happen and one can only compare his authority to that of some of the Hassidic leaders in Brooklyn, New York. However, the Syedna passed away in early 2014 and we have to see whether his charisma will carry the project through. Already there is a virulent dispute about succession between his son and his half-brother (Johari 2015) and, as is usual in India, the court case is pending (and may pend for a long while).

Not only the Bohras are full of urban aspiration, but the rest of Mumbai is too, although speculation may be a better term. The focal point of speculation, like everywhere else, but perhaps more excessive, is real estate. While Singapore has been able to house more than 80% of its population in public housing, in Mumbai the urban poor, half of the population, live in slums and on the pavement. Since the middle class needs servants they live at close quarters and therefore the slums are at close proximity to condominiums. There is an intimacy to inequality in Mumbai that one cannot find in more segregated cities. The poor and the relatively well-off share problems with utilities, water and electricity. No doubt in unequal measure, but hardly anyone is above it all, except perhaps Mukesh Ambani, the chairman of Reliance Industries whose 27-storey high residence in South Mumbai is worth more than a billion US dollars, and is the world's second most expensive residence, after Buckingham Palace. But even Ambani resides in a city where the living conditions allow the spread of infectious diseases that have little regard for social distinctions. The

indifference for the plight of the poor is rooted in India's caste hierarchy and, for a long time, the social science assumption was that the urban future would make caste and religion irrelevant. The opposite is true. The untouchables of the village form the majority of the urban poor, closely followed by that other discriminated category in India, the Muslims. They do feel that in the city they are free from some of the indignities that characterized village life, but objectively they are stuck in the same socio-economic position as before. The Muslims have seen their dominance in Mumbai culture vanish with the vast majority being increasingly disenfranchised, while some wealthy trading groups, like the aforementioned Bohras, escape that fate, but cannot go entirely scot-free. As usual the underprivileged use their distinctions to resent and fight each other. The growing wealth of the happy few and their indifference towards the rest is another side of the American Dream that is taking shape on Asian soil. It is not only growing inequality, but also a culture in which hierarchical obligations have been transformed into hierarchical indifference. The ways in which middle-class lifestyles that are modelled on the American ones are coupled with older hierarchical notions is an interesting aspect of this transformation. It seems that religion is one of the sites in which this transformation is happening, since the older obsessions with ritual purity are replaced by middle-class religiosity. It is the Bohra attempt to gain middle-class respectability by creating first world condominiums while keeping their spiritual and material distance from other Muslims and from their Hindu others that exemplifies this transformation perfectly, following on the footsteps of the Mumbai Parsis—the Ratan Tatas, the Homi Bhabhas, the Zubin Mehtas—whose westernized culture is combined with being the largest private landowners in Mumbai through charitable trusts. For the Hindus the Gujarati Swaminarayanis are an example. This is a Hindu religious community that is in principle open to all Hindus, but in fact caters to a middle-class, higher caste Gujarati community. Swami Narayan was a nineteenth-century guru who was particularly successful among Gujaratis, and especially among the peasant caste of Patels. This urbanized caste has over the years become a transnational community with strong business networks. In Gujarat the Patels have allied with Brahmans and Banias (a higher merchant caste) to create a middle-class bulwark that socially excludes lower castes, but politically includes them through effective patronage. One can see in this community an alignment of business interests, marriage strategies, political influence, and religious conservatism. Its architectural imprint on cities is in gigantic temple complexes that are at the same time religious theme parks featuring a futuristic Hinduism based on the Vedas.

The spirit of modernity also haunts Mumbai, but instead of a secular Christianity Hindu nationalism is its main carrier. More than anything else the urban is the site of frustrated aspirations. The Muslims are the scapegoat for these frustrations. The clearest expression of that is the election of the new Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi, leader of the Hindu nationalist BJP, under whose rule in Gujarat thousands of Muslims were killed and the Muslim community was gradually marginalized. Urban planning in a city like Ahmedabad, the capital of Gujarat, despite its Islamic past, is one in which Muslims have no place. Quite literally, the public bus routes end before Muslim areas are reached. The enthusiasm with which Modi was received in September 2014 at Madison Square Gardens in New York by the Indian community testifies to the extent that Hindu nationalism is thought to bring India to the future. Mumbai's trading cosmopolitanism of the nineteenth century, in which Muslim trading communities played a major part, is

slowly replaced by a Hindu majoritarianism. Muslims are now thought not to contribute to the wealth of the nation and seen as blocking the way to a better future. This can be interpreted as a self-fulfilling prophecy considering the increasing exclusion of Muslims from educational mobility and basic amenities. However, while Muslims are in majority part of the urban poor they distinguish themselves from the other major constituent, the untouchables, by the memory of their glorious and martial past which becomes the basis of armed resistance. The contentious nature of Hindu-Muslim relations in Mumbai is exacerbated by the existence of a powerful mafia-like Hindu Maratha political machine, called the Shiv Sena, the Army of Shivaji, the Maratha general who in the eighteenth century successfully fought the Mughals. Of course the Shiv Sena has earlier fought Hindu immigrants, especially Gujaratis and Tamils, to wrest political control over the city, but over the last twenty years the Muslims are the target, and especially the Muslims from the North and from Bangladesh. This has led to a series of attacks, counter-attacks, bombings from the 1990s in Mumbai, resulting in a growing distrust and antagonism between the two communities.

Mumbai's upper strata would like to develop Mumbai into Singapore, but a secularist project to marginalize religious institutions and activities, such as the huge Ganapati and Muharram processions, would find few supporters. The immensely popular Siddhivinayak Temple, for example, is pushing away the adjacent apartment buildings instead of the other way around and not because it is a heritage site (it is in fact a recent temple), but because its popularity has been growing exponentially. Even the Ambani brothers would be upset by any attempt to marginalize religion, since they are staunch adherents to the Pushtimarg, Hinduism's own prosperity cult. The Chinese modernist urge to repress popular religion is hardly found in India. To remove the slum dwellers and pavement dwellers who amount to half of Mumbai's population would be simply impossible, but it would also not be supported by the middle classes who need cheap labour. The political and cultural reality in Mumbai is totally different than that in Singapore, Shanghai, or Seoul. There is no Asian urban future, largely because there is no Asia. Singapore, Shanghai, and Seoul are also quite different from each other, but there are a few commonalities worth pointing out. In these cities the four c's—Christianity, Confucianism, Communism, and Capitalism—have a millenarian vision in common that is founded on an all-consuming work ethic, family values, and an obedient attitude towards established authority. Today much of this is infused with the American dream of endless consumption. Certainly, both in Singapore and Seoul the majority of the population declare themselves to be Buddhists, but Buddhism has morphed into something that resembles Christianity in ways that have been documented in Taiwan by Madsen (2007). I would suggest that Protestant Christianity captures the spirit of East Asian modernity best. This might be the reason why the Chinese Communist Party is terrified with the idea that this rival millenarianism is expanding and makes Communism seem backward and obsolete.

The theologian Harvey Cox published his bestselling *The Secular City* in 1965 and assumed with everyone else that religion was in decline. He asked how the biblical God, who acts in history, was present in the secular city. In a new introduction to a reprint of this classic in 2013 he acknowledges that the city has not become secular and that what is the secular has become widely debated among philosophers, anthropologists, and sociologists. Moreover, this debate cannot be narrowed down to Western cities. What he sees as the characteristic of the city today is that it is a space for cosmopolitan

encounters, in which religion is a major element. Here urban planning is part of governing immigration, both national and transnational. It is the question of the stranger, raised by Simmel (1971), as well as that of the established and the outsider, raised by Norbert Elias (Elias and Scotson 1994). The city is an arena in which migration is contested and religion is to be found at all sides of the contestation. The only ones left to ignore these religious contestations are the successfully secularized urban theorists. A good example is the urban theorist Ash Amin, who reduces religion to the bio-politics of race in his recent book *Land of Strangers* (2012) despite the fact that most of urban contestation in Europe is precisely about the religious stranger. The future of the city as utopia is not secular, but religious in all its manifestations from belief in rational planning to the encounter of strangers.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

References

- Amin, Ash. 2012. *Land of Strangers*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Appadurai, Arjun. 2013. *The Future as Cultural Fact: Essays on the Global Condition*. London: Verso.
- Cox, Harvey. 2013. *The Secular City*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Dean, Kenneth. 2015. "Parallel Universes: Chinese Temple Networks in Singapore, or What is Missing in the Singapore Model?" In *Handbook of Religion and the Asian City*, edited by Peter van der Veer, 273–299. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Elias, Norbert, and John L. Scotson. 1994. *The Established and the Outsiders*. London: Sage.
- Goh, Daniel. 2008. "From Colonial Pluralism to Postcolonial Multiculturalism: Race, State Formation and the Question of Cultural Diversity in Malaysia and Singapore." *Sociology Compass* 2 (1): 232–252.
- Harding, Susan. 2001. *The Book of Jerry Falwell*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Harms, Erik. 2012. "Beauty as Control in the New Saigon: Eviction, New Urban Zones, and Atomized Dissent in a Southeast Asian City." *American Ethnologist* 39 (4): 735–750.
- Holston, James. 1989. *The Modernist City: An Anthropological Critique of Brasilia*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Hull, Matthew. 2011. "Communities of Place, Not Kind: American Technologies of Neighborhood in Post-colonial Delhi." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 53 (4): 757–790.
- Johari, Aarefa. 2015. "A Year After Leader's Death, Bohra Muslims Stand Divided and Waiting for a Legal Verdict." *Scroll.in*, January 7. Accessed November 8, 2015. <http://scroll.in/article/699054/a-year-after-leaders-death-bohra-muslims-stand-divided-and-waiting-for-a-legal-verdict>.
- Johnson, Andrew Alan. 2014. *Ghosts of the New City*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- "Kong Hee 'Key Man behind Church Scandal'." 2015. *The Straits Times*, October 23. Accessed November 8. <http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/courts-crime/kong-hee-key-man-behind-church-scandal>.
- Koolhaas, Rem. 1997. "Singapore Songlines." In *S,M,X,XL*, edited by Rem Koolhaas and Bruce Mau, 2nd ed., 1008–1087. New York: Monacelli Press.
- Lefebvre, Henri. 2003. *The Urban Revolution*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Madsen, Richard. 2007. *Democracy's Dharma*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Merrifield, Andrew. 2012. "Whither Urban Studies." Panel Talk Presented at the University of Manchester, November 16. Accessed November 8, 2015. <https://citiesmcr.wordpress.com/2012/12/10/whither-urban-studies/>.
- Simmel, Georg. 1950. "The Metropolis and Mental Life." In *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, edited by Kurt Wolff, 11–19. New York: Free Press.

- Simmel, Georg. 1971. "The Stranger." In *Georg Simmel: On Individuality and Social Forms*, edited by Donald N. Levine, 143–50. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Tambiah, Stanley. 1985. "The Galactic Polity in Southeast Asia." In *Culture, Thought, and Social Action: An Anthropological Perspective*, edited by Stanley Tambiah, 3–31. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Thrift, Nigel. 2007. *Non-representational Theory: Space, Politics, Affect*. London: Routledge.
- Van der Veer, Peter, ed. 2015. *Handbook of Religion and the Asian City*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Van der Veer, Peter. 2016. *The Value of Comparison*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.