

## *Christian Churches in Hong Kong Under Colonial Rule*

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### *Government Surrogates for Social Services*

A hundred years from now when our descendants look back upon the conduct of the Christian churches under British colonial rule, one fact will stand out; namely, how they, with government support, provided an immense amount of social, medical and educational services for the people of Hong Kong.

Church sponsored education began here in the middle of the nineteenth century when many foreign missionary societies opened schools along with their churches. Today, with few exceptions, these missionary schools are still held in the highest regard by the people here. A partial list might include: Ying Wah College and Ying Wah Girls' School, begun by the London Missionary Society and now administered by the Hong Kong Council of the Church of Christ in China; Diocesan Boys' and Diocesan Girls' School, St. Paul's Co-educational College and St. Stephen's School, still run by the Anglican Church; among top Roman Catholic Schools are St. Joseph's College, La Salle College, both Wah Yan Colleges, Sacred Heart Canossian Girls' College, Maryknoll Convent School, and Marymount Secondary School. Hong Kong parents have a great deal of respect for these 'name' schools, and they would do almost anything to get their child enrolled in one of them.



When a tidal wave of refugees from the China mainland flooded the colony during the 1950's and 1960's, the churches provided emergency aid for families in the form of food and clothing. They also addressed the long term educational needs of the children. The Church of Christ in China, the Roman Catholic and Anglican dioceses were among the many

church institutions that responded to the government's cry for help. Not only did they raise needed funds for relief services from abroad, but they also set about opening schools in just about every available empty space they could find. First came the 'roof-top' schools, crude and informal shelters thrown together on the roofs of the hastily constructed housing estates. These were followed by more traditional structures, primary schools which held double-sessions (morning and afternoon). And finally, the larger and more complex secondary schools were built, with student bodies numbering over a thousand. As just one example of how quickly schools multiplied during the refugee period, the Church of Christ in China went from administering 6 schools in 1962 to over 70 by 1982. According to statistics provided by the H.K. Christian Council, today over 40% of Hong Kong's schools are administered by the Christian churches or by church affiliated organizations. It has been rightfully said that without the enormous efforts expended by the Christian churches in the 1960's, the goal of providing a minimum of 9 years of free education for every child in Hong Kong would not have been reached as early as 1978.

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Nor did the churches of the 1960's concentrate only on 'education for the well and able ', but they also pioneered educational services for children and young adults with learning disabilities and special needs. The Pui Oi School, which was established in 1954, became a forerunner for special education schools in Hong Kong. Ten years later the Kwun Tong Vocational Training Centre and the Kei Heep Technical School opened their doors. These two schools bridged the yawning gap between academic and non-academic oriented secondary school education.

In the field of medicine, missionary societies, from the very beginning, also provided grass-roots health care services for the sick poor through their many clinics and social service centres. In 1887 the London Missionary Society opened Nethersole Hospital, Hong Kong's first multi-service modern medical centre. Today such church sponsored hospitals as

United Christian, Caritas and Our Lady of Maryknoll are subsidized by the government, while others, such as Baptist, Evangel, St. Paul's, Precious Blood and St. Teresa's are privately financed. In addition, there are a number of hospitals run by individual groups of Christians that have united under the common bond of Christian service for others. Two examples of these are the H.K. Central Hospital and the H.K. Sanatorium. The clientele of most Christian hospitals has changed gradually through the years and because the government has built many new major medical facilities. Church sponsored hospitals now serve mainly the middle and upper classes. However, about 20% of the territory's hospitals are still church administered.

It was the Christian churches that introduced into Hong Kong many innovative medical services from the West. Yang Zhen Social Service Centre and Sham Oi Church began as early as 1968 to experiment in home health care. The Kwun Tong Social and Health Programme, which opened in 1973, sought to become a "hospital without walls", a new concept much discussed as a possible model for the United Christian Hospital during its early planning stages.

With the Christian churches of Hong Kong shouldering much of the burden of relief work, refugees continued to pour into the territory during the 1960's. Providing basic social welfare services for the poor, the churches were crucial in alleviating massive human suffering during this time. As the year 1967 drew to a close, and the stream of refugees abated somewhat, the city settled down to a more normal pace of life. At this time the churches began to introduce new Western approaches to solving social welfare problems, especially among the youth. The church became a leading proponent of change, transmitting new and more effective methods, updating and renewing Hong Kong's existing social services. Today the Christian churches and their affiliates provide for over 60% of all social welfare services carried out in the territory, with H.K. Caritas and the H.K. Christian Service leading the way.

There can be no doubt that the Christian churches have in the past and continue in the present to make major contributions to the welfare of Hong Kong society. It would be difficult to imagine what the current state of the city's economic and social development might have been without them. And yet, in reflecting on the contributions we have made in the past, especially on these last three decades, when providing

social services seems to have become our primary role and function, there is much for us to ponder as this era of our history now draws to a close.

It is important to remember that prior to the 1960's, the bulk of our social services came not from the local churches but from the foreign missionary societies. While the missionaries worked in our society as representatives of our local churches, their members had actually come from abroad. And while they came largely in response to the appeals from Hong Kong's local churches, they came with the financial backing of not only their home churches but sometimes of their governments as well. As the city's economy developed and local people became more and more affluent, financial contributions from the missionary sending societies began to fall off and many of the missionaries themselves began to pull out. By the 1970's the social welfare situation had changed dramatically. Social welfare networks became more and more up-scale and expensive. They became, in fact, victims of their own success. As the financial burden increased, it soon became too great for the missionary societies and their local sister churches to bear, either individually or collectively. Even though the local churches had, during this time, finally become self-supporting, they had little left over, and so they had to turn to government subsidies and private charitable funding organizations, which were controlled by Hong Kong's upper classes, for support.

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It can be said that for a long time now the true providers of social services for the people of Hong Kong have not been the local churches, but rather, the foreign missionary societies in the past and the government and local philanthropists in the present. Throughout the years, the actual investment of money and personnel by the local churches in social services has been relatively small.

Today the Christian churches in Hong Kong administer over 200 secondary schools, 300 primary schools and an equal number of

kindergartens, close to 1,000 social service centres, and more than a dozen hospitals. Such impressive numbers add to the reputation of the Christian churches at home and abroad. They have also garnered a fair amount of praise and admiration from their sister churches on mainland China. Yet it must be kept in mind that when it comes to financing and personnel, the actual contributions of the local churches, in comparison to those who in fact run these services, is minimal. Aside from participation at board meetings where minor matters, such as personnel problems and promotions, are discussed, and the signing of cheques, church representatives have little decision making power in the day-to-day running of things. School principals and those in charge of the social centres are the real administrators, and these people, in turn, are answerable not to the churches but rather to the Board of Education and the Social Welfare Department of the government, which has, indeed, the final say in everything.

Church leaders for a long time now have been reluctant in opening up positions of responsibility in their social service agencies to the rank and file members of their laity. This failure of church leaders to urge more participation by the laity in society and to form lay leaders has been a serious deficiency in the churches. It is also one of the reasons why the laity in general lack a sense of Christian mission and service.

The emphasis placed during the past 40 years on social services has led to a neglect in pursuing the root causes of social problems. Christian groups attempting to "get to the source of the problems", often gain little recognition and support from the main body of church members. They are often ignored or brushed aside. One of the reasons for this is that we have become so dependent on government support and private financing from Hong Kong's wealthy that any criticism of either group is neither accepted nor welcomed.

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Having been given much of the administration of social services by the government and the wealthy, the churches now find it almost impossible to extricate themselves from the bind in which we now find themselves. This infringes on their liberty. That is indeed a heavy price to pay for involvement, especially when it falls to their lot to make the rich and powerful of our society look good in the eyes of the outside world.

As social services increase and the scope of involvement broadens, the churches find they have little energy left to devote to congregational concerns. As a result, the special Christian character that these services should represent becomes vague and indefinite. The foreign missionaries who provided leadership and quality service in previous years are now few and far between, while the local Christians who have replaced them are seen, for one reason or another, as inadequate substitutes. (One reason might be that what was once seen as a charismatic leadership role in a society undergoing crisis has now become nothing more than just another job for a working professional.)

### *An Intimate Relationship*

In England the Anglican Church is the established church, while in Scotland, it is the Presbyterian. All British monarchs are selected from these two churches. Such a tradition insures intimate ties between cross and crown. Many diocesan bishops, such as those of Canterbury and York, are *ex officio* members of the British Parliament, and as such they wield great influence in British society. This bond of intimacy between church and state was introduced into Hong Kong at the very inception of the colony in 1848. For over a century now, the Anglican bishop, and to a lesser extent the Roman Catholic bishop, have enjoyed a position of rather lofty social status. According to ceremonial protocol, the bishops rank right after the Governor, Chief of the Armed Forces, the Executive Secretary and Chief Justice in attendance at all official functions.

The Anglican churches have enjoyed the special favour of the H.K. government, since they are under the direct control of the British government in London. The special privileges accorded the Anglican churches are, naturally enough, also extended to the London Missionary Society, the English Baptist Church and the Swiss-German Basle Mission, all of whom had established centres for evangelization in the earliest days of the colony.

An important result of this preferential treatment of the churches has been in the deployment of land grants. The site occupied by St. John's Anglican Cathedral remains the only plot of land in the territory that has neither zoning restrictions nor a fixed-date lease. In the years before World War II, the government often sold land-use rights to churches at very low cost. After the War, land values continued to spiral, and to such an extent that many of these churches today have become land-rich. The World Missionary Council (formerly the London Missionary Council) sold the Nethersole Hospital premise for \$1,600,000,000 Hong Kong dollars. In 1994, the American Southern Baptists sold six buildings in Kowloon Tong for \$4,600,000,000. The government in the early days allowed the churches to purchase sites in what have now become prime-real estate areas. However, numerous conditions were written into the leases on how the land was to be used, and these must still be respected. Such schools as St. Stephen's Girls College and St. Stephen's School in Stanley retain spacious and beautiful campuses that are the envy of other schools in Hong Kong. Churches still occupy no small number of sites and residences in Kowloon Tong, which has since become one of the most expensive residential areas of the city. A large area of land on Waterloo Road is called "the Holy Mountain", on which you will find many church institutions, such as Wah Yan College, Baptist College, True Light Girls' College, Yangzhen Social Service Centre, Ward Memorial Methodist, True Light Lutheran Church and more.

In 1979, the need for more land on which the churches could continue to grow and develop became more acute. The Anglican and Roman Catholic bishops and the General Secretary of the H.K. Christian Council met with the then Executive Secretary, Jack Cater, and worked out an agreement that was ratified by the Legislative Council in early May of 1981, which set out the following terms:

1. On government land given to churches to develop social services, the first floor of the premise may be used as a hall for public worship and as a residence (not to exceed 100 square meters) for church personnel, both of which shall be free of property taxes.
2. Additional space in such premises may be put by the church to such uses as church meetings, Sunday schools, liturgies and informal gatherings, as long as such usage does not interfere with the normal function of the said premise.

With power comes privilege and with privilege responsibility. The churches have lived in the benign shadow of the colonial government for many years, enjoying both power and the privileges that come with it. In return they owe a certain allegiance to the government. And as part of that allegiance, they are expected to support the entire colonial system that the government represents. Often the churches do this without consciously intending to do so, but the relationship of church and state is such that it is not always easy to come to a clear cut understanding of their own motivations and actions.

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An example of this may be found in church-run schools. On the surface, the churches provide educational services to the community which aim at the formation of leaders for society. Yet many church persons fail to see that the education they provide in their high quality schools also fosters a privileged form of education that unconsciously reinforces the entire elitist system of Hong Kong society.

Prior to 1960, schools operated by the churches were of the highest reputation, and students attending these 13 'name' schools were considered socially privileged by comparison. (This changed after the 1960's as the churches opened more and more subvented, or government subsidized schools.) Parents were most anxious for their children to attend the 'name' schools, but the majority of seats were monopolized by the children of the well-to-do. Before 1962, there was only one university, Hong Kong University, and its student body was made up largely of the graduates of these elite colleges. After graduation, of course, this select group was absorbed almost entirely into the government or into the large commercial companies. Historically, government and commercial interests that, with few exceptions, worked hand in glove with the colonial system. May it also be said, then, that the churches, directly or indirectly,



through their educational networks, collaborated with the colonial system in supporting the *status quo*?

The number of local church leaders who have entered high society or enjoyed its special privileges are, in truth, very few in number. How, then, can one claim that church leaders themselves have set the tone and established the trends that foster elitism in the church communities? The answer is, they have not.

With the exception of the Roman Catholic bishop, the church leaders of Hong Kong are chosen locally and by procedures which usually reflect the mainstream attitudes of their individual congregations. Christian congregations in Hong Kong are basically middle class and conservative. Those members involved in education tend to make the school the entire focus of their lives. And it is natural for them to support church leaders dedicated to preserving the *status quo*. On the other hand, there is reason to blame the teachings of the church themselves as another factor in perpetuating the present situation.

Hong Kong churches still reflect a Western philosophical dualism that was passed on to them by their parent evangelical missionary denominations. The key point of the doctrine of dualism is that all of reality is divided into two basic principles: the material and the spiritual. The material world belongs to the present and tangible; it is temporary and transient. The spiritual, on the other hand, is the eternal world which is yet to be fully realized but to which all creation aspires to become. In this world view, believers are urged to pursue the spiritual and eternal, and pay little regard to what is material and temporal. In simple terms, this attitude leads to a gradual disengagement of the heart and mind from the material world, narrowing the focus of the believer to a personal concern for the things of heaven alone. Faith becomes individualist and private, divorced from the ordinary struggles of the human community at large. Needless to say, such a faith finds it difficult to resonate with today's world, with its fixation on the pursuit of materialistic values. As a result, modern believers tend to lead double lives. On Sunday, they go to church striving to better themselves spiritually, but from Monday to Saturday, they immerse themselves in the cares of the material world, working hard to make more money and to get ahead.

With the onset of the 1970's, the Evangelical churches experienced extraordinary growth. They received much support and encouragement from the colonial government, receiving from it land and

tax deductions to further their expansion. They, in turn, were able to respond to the demands of the market place by providing young people, who were just beginning to move up the social scale, with a place where they might experience a genuine concern for their individuality, and healthy contacts with others, forming relationships that could grow into lasting friendships. The churches offered these young people spiritual meaning, support and comfort for their lives. This Christian style, this way of being church, has grown and developed rapidly in recent years. From less than 100 church structures at the end of World War II, Christian congregations today exceed 1,100. Evangelical and other Christian bodies also operate over 200 biblical organizations, 17 of which are bible schools and theological seminaries, along with 12 Christian publishing houses.

In summary, then it must be said that while the churches do a lot of good for society, and are also aware of the faults and failures of the colonial system, yet by maintaining vested interests and social privileges, they also play a part in supporting and preserving the *status quo*. For most, "Don't rock the boat" has become the "11th Commandment". In many churches young people are not encouraged to discuss such sensitive issues as politics, human rights, social justice and democracy, but some churches go further by actively prohibiting their clergy and laity from participating in events which are seen as challenging the establishment. Priests who become deeply involved in social activism have been transferred to less sensitive areas or asked to take temporary leave or retire.

### *A Critical and Prophetic Spirit*

Hong Kong has been under colonial rule for over 150 years. Occupied first by British forces in 1841 as a commercial base for merchants, it was then given in perpetuity by China as part of the Unequal Treaty that ended the first Opium War. While the island was relatively deserted, having only a few scattered villages, made up mostly of fishermen and farmers, it offered a magnificent deep-water harbour, and it soon became an entre-port for trade with China. The British used Chinese compradores, Chinese businessmen, who acted as go-betweens, to facilitate their commercial activities. These men became very wealthy and were highly respected by the people. The English, in turn, gave them and

their families special privileges and benefits. Another group of Chinese leaders were formed by the missionary societies in their schools. They prepared and encouraged their graduates, many of whom became converts to Christianity, to continue their studies in universities abroad in Britain. Upon their return to Hong Kong, they found excellent positions in commerce, education and in the civil service. In time, the wealthy merchants and the educated professionals gradually assumed more and more control over the colony's industry and economy. By the end of the 1970's they had a monopoly over goods and services, transportation and electricity, and they were also able to gain a controlling interest in the formulation of government policies. (The low tax rate in Hong Kong is a prime example of the latter.) The main beneficiaries of this system have been the wealthy tycoons, those who exist in no small degree on the exploitation of the lower classes. While Hong Kong is indeed a modern, international metropolis, its citizens still do not enjoy a basic level of human rights, be they civil, political, economic, social or cultural, that can match present international standards. While amassing a H.K. \$320,000,000,000 kitty, Hong Kong has yet to enact a comprehensive pension plan for its citizens. For the ordinary working man and woman in Hong Kong job security and social security do not exist.

While Hong Kong is one of the wealthiest places in the world, with the per capita gross domestic product forecast this year to surpass those of Japan and Germany, finishing close behind that of the United States and Switzerland, the average citizen receives little benefit for his or her years of toil and sacrifice. About 50% of the market value of stocks on Hong Kong's enormously profitable stock market are owned by only 10 wealthy trusts. According to reliable estimates, there are over 600,000 people whose monthly income does not exceed H.K.\$1,400 well below the minimum level needed for survival. Hong Kong can boast of having the widest gap between the rich and the poor in the world, and the gap is getting wider.

These are some of the facts that govern conditions in a Hong Kong with a legacy of colonial rule for the past 150 years. But the vast majority of Hong Kong people, as they fall asleep at night, think little of the hardships of the past and present conditions of the weak and poor, but dream only of how to rise to greater heights in this the world's most competitive marketplace. Colonial education has contributed to maintaining a spirit of conformity. Children are expected to be diligent

and docile. The system stresses memorization over reflection and independent thinking; it rewards acquiescence and discourages questioning. Years of such training tend to produce submissive citizens, people who hesitate to confront authority or challenge the existing structures. Unfortunately, the H.K. churches have also been formed by this system. We should not, then, harbour any illusions that the churches will lead the way forward to building up a more human and equitable society for Hong Kong.

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In all fairness, we must also remember that our local churches have never had the opportunity to become fully independent and self-governing. Before the 1970's local churches were largely dependent on the foreign missionary groups, who not only supplied money and personnel but also their theology, liturgy and pastoral styles as well. And with the fast pace of social development, there was little time for local leaders to assimilate what was happening to the churches before it was too late to act. By the 1970's the local churches were taking steps on their own to become self-governing, self-supporting and self-propagating. The missionary groups gradually began to withdraw their money and personnel, but the old habits of dependency still remained. The Three-Self programme was successful not in eradicating but only shifting them to new sources: the government and the rich, who now held all political and economic power in Hong Kong.

Both the business community and the government have always tried to cultivate good relations with the churches. Church approval gave a certain moral acceptability to their actions. And by the end of the 1970's, the government was appointing church representatives to serve on the Legislative and Executive Councils. It has always been the contention of church leaders in Hong Kong that the church should work from within the system, as "light and salt", to effect change. But the sad commentary on the past 150 years is that they have made little headway in furthering

basic social progress, be it the people's livelihood, the movement towards democratization, or radical reform of the social system. In the final resolution of major political and social issues, the opinion of the churches matters little. In fact, the churches have yet to engage in any reasonable argumentation, not to mention hot debate, with the government over what is right and wrong, just and unjust, moral and immoral in our society. What is even more discouraging is that in certain cases there are those church leaders who hold influential positions in the government and who are so afraid of losing their places of prestige that instead of taking a prophetic stance against what they know to be wrong, they acquiesce in the activities of corrupt political authorities.

A case in point was the question of church participation in the Selection Committee. Members of the committee were chosen by China to select representatives for the Provisional Legislature which in turn would set up the post 1997 regime. Despite the fact that the Legislature had no legal status in Hong Kong, many church leaders responded warmly to the invitation. It is the feeling among them that not to participate would be seen as an affront to Chinese officials. In order not to cause offense, they agreed to play an active role in the unfolding political drama. Even more important was the chance for them to become members of the Legislature and thereby enhance their future political capital.

While the debate about whether it was appropriate or not for church leaders to participate in the Selection Committee or any other such political power structure, some of them indulged themselves in a bit of sophistry by saying they would participate as private individuals and not as church officials. The fact of the matter is, of course, that the Chinese government selected the name of the Anglican bishop not because he was a private citizen but only because he was the bishop, a churchperson with a long record of public service as a member of the Drafting Committee for the Basic Law, the Consultative Committee, the Preparatory Committee and as an advisor on Hong Kong Affairs. Likewise the chairperson of the Christian Council was known more from his position as a church representative than for his personal reputation in China.

The mass of Christian believers and the other citizens of Hong Kong are hoping for a voice that will speak for the people in the new society. As advocates of social justice and concern for the poor and needy, the churches are duty-bound in principle to serve others unselfishly. They must not be afraid, but stand up courageously for what

is right and not to seek to hide themselves within the safe haven of political structures. Every political authority, every governmental regime needs a system of checks and balances that will serve to curb abuses of its authority and help to reign in its natural appetite for power and influence, privilege, personal benefit and private gain. "Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely."

The churches, and especially their leaders, should be wary of being too much involved in the organisation of government. They should maintain a healthy distance from all power structures. Thus they will always be alert and ready to offer objective criticism to those holding power in society.

Only in a society that allows free criticism is progress possible. While Hong Kong today is cast in a pivotal role as an international financial centre, it still operates under the old colonial system. Can the Christian churches renew themselves as they have done throughout the ages in times of crisis? Can they address themselves and society with a critical spirit that leads to positive social reform and a renewal of the best that is in society and themselves? This was the spirit of the Old Testament prophets, whose critique of society was based on love of their people and concern for their welfare. They had an abiding faith in their people's ability to realize their full potential as instruments of a just and lasting peace in their nation and in the world.

*Can the Christian churches renew themselves as they have done throughout the ages in times of crisis? Can they address themselves and society with a critical spirit that leads to positive social reform and a renewal of the best that is in society and themselves?*

Now, more than at any other time in its history, Hong Kong needs this prophetic voice. The colonial era is coming to an end. While the working classes expect to fair better under the Communist regime, things do not always work out according to expectations. We could be in for darker days ahead, especially if the basic rights and civil liberties of ordinary citizens are allowed to erode. The colonial government for all its faults did manage to keep a certain distance from the tycoons of commerce and industry, which gave it the ability to temper greed with

fairness, but the government of the Special Administrative Region will be dominated by these same tycoons. The Chinese government will entrust them with even greater responsibilities than the British government ever did in the past. What many are now saying is that what Hong Kong people fear most is the interference of the Chinese Communist Party in the internal affairs of the Hong Kong government, and what is meant by the promise that "Hong Kong people will run Hong Kong" is that it will be run solely by its wealthy businessmen. If such developments take place, there will be a sharp drop in personal freedoms and in our quality of life. Given this scenario, can the churches, which have a special concern for the poor and the weak, then remain indifferent to their suffering?

It is time for the Christian churches "to arise from sleep". For over a century now they have made the mistake of relying too much on the political establishment, and, as a result, they have helped to prop up the colonial system. The churches should now act with brave resolution to reject any temptations to establish for themselves a "kingdom" in this world. We must not continue to put our faith in our existing schools and social service centres, but rather become once again humble servants of the poor. We have little in the way of worldly strength and power. What we need to build upon is our moral strength and human resources. Putting aside our historical role of rank and privilege, let us face the new order free of these encumbrances of the past that only bog us down in a mire of conflicting interests. We will then be able to be ruled once again by reason and principle, and thus renewed in the Spirit move from strength to strength forward into the future. □