

## ***Dreams and Visions: An International Conference on Christian Higher Education in Asia***

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*From February 9-11, 2006, the Centre for the Study of Religion and Chinese Society, Chung Chi College, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, organized an international conference on Christian Higher Education in Asia. In fact it had more to do with East Asia, since almost all the representatives present were Japanese, South Korean or Chinese (The People's Republic of China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore). There was only one representative from India present. The emphasis of the conference was more on Protestant higher education than on Catholic. Father Louis Ha Keloon, a historian and archivist of the Hong Kong Catholic Diocese, was invited as a respondent to one of the papers.*

**W**hen the "New China" began in 1949, there were 13 universities established by the Protestant Christian Church and three by the Catholic Church. Their existence was terminated in 1952, following the very drastic re-structuring of higher education by the Communist Government. This marked the sad end of the history of Christian universities in mainland China. In various forms and in markedly different geo-political contexts, the continuation of some of these Christian universities took place in Taiwan and Hong Kong.

"Dreams and Visions" was the general theme of this interesting Conference. In the past when modern higher education was still non-existent, or was only sprouting in the Asian region, Christian higher education was taking the most significant and necessary lead. Chinese, Korean and Japanese Catholic initiatives

followed Protestant ones. The early missionary emphasis on Christian conversion or direct evangelization shifted to the values of the social gospel in the 1920s. Today many representatives of Christian higher education share a rather gloomy feeling of uncertainty, anxiety and crisis regarding the identity and direction of Christian higher education in East Asia now and in the future. However, an optimistic Professor Leung Yuen Sang, a Christian historian at CUHK, pointed out that “the chance for bringing back the past is now” and “remembering the past is a force in constructing the future.”

Most papers depicted the present situation of Christian higher education in South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, as characterized by the effects of rapid changes in the East Asian region. These include the rise of patriotism (the need for loyal citizens), nationalism and modernism (some of the key leaders in Asian nationalist movements were educated in Christian universities), Christian indigenization movements, demographic changes, and secularization. Also listed as factors were the effects of the global open market economy, such as privatization, liberalization and competitiveness, uniformity in the production and communication of information technology, pragmatism, consumerism, and postmodernism. The papers from the PRC representatives could only focus on the past situation, that is, the development of Christian universities in mainland China until 1952.

The understanding of Christian identity proved to be a crucial issue in the discussions. Are Christian beliefs and practices relevant for Asian society or contradictory to academic excellence? Professor Choong Chee Pang of the Lutheran World Federation argued that being a minority and foreign to the Asian context should not necessarily be seen as a disadvantage. Distinctive Christian values can be exceedingly creative and effective, like the parables about yeast, salt and light in the Gospels. If the Christian identity, which can be expressed in different cultural forms, is not taken seriously, and one is only concerned with “education for education’s sake,” there would be little justification for Christian

involvement in higher education. This is so because East Asian secular governments and institutional religions, such as Buddhism (in Taiwan for instance), have more resources at their disposal to do a better job in building and administering schools and universities.

Assistant Professor Wong Suk Ying, a sociologist at CUHK, asked herself why religion has developed in such diverse forms. What is the social role and significance of these religious beliefs and practices? To what extent does academic knowledge reflect the social reality? She argued for the implementation of comparative cross-national and cross-sectional research. What are the effects of the global open market economy in different Asian religious contexts, such as among Buddhists and Muslims, for example? Can we observe similar processes in Asian Christianity?

Father Louis Ha commented that a more in depth study is needed to answer the question of why Christian higher education responded the way it did within the East Asian context. This question will require an ongoing interdisciplinary and intercultural/national approach in the future. This conference on Christian higher education in Asia initiated by Professor Peter Ng Tze Ming, the director of the Centre for the Study of Religion and Chinese Society at CUHK, and sponsored by the International Association for the Promotion of Christian Higher Education (IAPCHE), was certainly a successful step in the right direction.



*Taken at the opening ceremony of the Conference "Dreams and Visions"*