

# **Book Review**

**Michael Nai-Chiu Poon, ed., *Pilgrims and Citizens: Christian Social Engagement in East Asia Today* (Series on Christianity in Asia, Volume 1). Adelaide: ATF Press, 2006. xxi + 209 pp. ISBN: 192069158-8.**

This volume is the first in a series from the Centre for the Study of Christianity in Asia, within Trinity Theological College, Singapore. It consists of essays which arose from a conference entitled *Seek the Welfare of the City*, held in Singapore in 2005.

The primary significance of this volume is that it fills an important gap in the study of the relationship between Christianity and society in Asia. In certain parts of Asia, particularly in India, Indonesia, the Philippines and South Korea, there has been significant discourse on the inter-relationship between Christianity and society, including civil society, politics and social ethics, for at least the past half century. Moreover, this reflection has often been at the very centre of the development of contextual theologies of these nations. Scholars such as M. M. Thomas in India, T. B. Simatupang and Eka Dharmaputra in Indonesia, Emerito Nacpil in the Philippines, and Kim Yong-Bok in Korea have been leaders of such theologies. Thus, there has been considerable theological wrestling in these post-colonial contexts. Indeed, one famous Indonesian text in this area is termed *Double-Wrestle*. This wrestling has had a considerable impact on theology in general in these countries and in their contribution to the wider theological enterprise throughout the world.

However, the specific Chinese world has had much less of this discourse over the last fifty years, because of the vulnerable position of Chinese Christian societies in Asia during this half century. This lack of discourse is understandable, for a number of reasons. There has been the difficult situation of Christianity in China under the Communism of the 1950s and 1960s, particularly as a result of the Cultural Revolution. This, of course, has now changed. It could well be that, by the end of this century, Chinese Christianity could be one of the major presences of Christ's church internationally. Then, in other parts of Asia, the diaspora Chinese have often been in a difficult minority position. Thus, the release of this volume now has great significance.

The volume is largely a series of contributions on theological engagement of Christianity with Chinese culture, primarily in the People's Republic of China and in Singapore. There are interesting sociological and political perceptions of Christianity in Chinese society given by government officials and government academics, including Lim Siong Guan, the former head of the Singapore Civil Service of the Government of Singapore, the Ye Xiao Wen, the Director-General for State Administration of Religious Affairs for the People's Republic of China and Zhuo Xinping, the Director of the Institute of World Religions in the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences of the People's Republic of China. Here the stress is on the positive contributions of Christianity towards the building up of harmonious communities. There is also a critique of the patronising and insidious aspects of colonialism mediated through Christianity, particularly in China.

There are then very helpful Christian biblical and theological contributions from Bruce Winter, Tan Kim Huat, Paul Barnett and Oliver O'Donovan. Here, a number of important points are stressed. Much theology on the relationship of Christianity and the state in Asia and elsewhere in the last half-century has been highly critical of oppressive regimes, and has gone on to be critical of the state more generally. This has included, but has not been confined to, liberation theologies. However, the point is made that the duty of Christianity, as seen in the New Testament and later, is not simply to reform society, but also to encourage and support those aspects of the state's life and policies that are in accordance with the will of God, as seen by Christians. This is an important antidote to the impetus of some previous theologies. Moreover, O'Donovan stresses that both critique and support of the state by the church is not intended so that the church may be separate from the state. Rather, it is intended so that the church may be independent of the state "in the service of the protection of the political community" (p. 195).

Helpful contributions on the specific situation of Christianity in these Chinese contexts are given by Michael Nai-Chau Poon, Hwa Yung, Daniel K. S. Koh, Cao Shengjie, Richard Magnus and Kenson Koh. Here, among other factors, is the important discussion on Christians as "Resident Aliens or Alienated Residents." This builds on the discourse initiated by Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, and seeks a specific answer for Christians in Chinese environments in which they aim to live with the eschatological tension of all Christians, that is, seeing their ultimate covenantal relationship with God and at the same time engaging in society day by day.

This is an important book, in that it begins the engagement of Christianity with contemporary Chinese society in Asia, with a fresh methodology, amid the public emergence of Christ's Church in Chinese societies. For this reason too, this series should be one of great importance to theology internationally.

**By James Haire**

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