

**Orientis Aura:**  
**Perspectives in Religious Studies**

**[Book Review]**

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Title: Imperial to International: A History of St. John's Cathedral, Hong Kong

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This book is the one of the first in a new series focusing on the study of Anglicanism in China. And in focusing on St. John's Cathedral, founded in 1849, we are given a unique window into how not only a denomination (Anglicanism), but also a nation, has moved from being imperial to becoming international. St. John's Hong Kong is the oldest neo-Gothic cathedral in East Asia and China still in operation, and its current ministry includes outreach to migrants, many thousands of domestic workers that pour in from the Philippines and Indonesia, and a focus on AIDS/HIV. The cathedral is probably one of the most international in the Anglican Communion – with Sunday services in English, Mandarin, Cantonese and Filipino (Tagalog).

Wolfendale's book is the fruit of meticulous research. But it is also written in a warm, fresh and approachable style – at times bordering on an eye-witness account. The book traces the origins of the cathedral from being a colonial parish church and bishop's seat to a truly cosmopolitan community, incorporating significant local and international ministries. As such, the book closely foreshadows the history of the Hong Kong Sheng Kung Hui – the Province that came into being after the British withdrawal in 1997.

*The Church of England Yearbook* – a volume not noted for its use of superlatives – describes that Province as 'dynamic' (2010). It is indeed that. Only inaugurated in 1998, it dates back to the missionary endeavour of the mid-nineteenth century, supplanting the Province of Chung Hua Sheng Kung Hui (the Catholic Church in China), which was established as a joint enterprise by Canadian, American, Australian and British clergy and missionaries in 1912. Initially comprising Hong Kong, Macau and other outposts, the Province of Chung Hua Sheng Kung Hui ceased to exist in the 1950s when Mao's Communist Party came to power. However, Hong Kong and Macau continued as independent dioceses in communion with Canterbury until the 1990s.

With Hong Kong returning the Chinese sovereignty in 1997, the Province was formed in 1998 as Hong Kong Sheng Kung Hui. It is one of the smallest Provinces in the Anglican Communion. Yet it is one of the most influential – serving eight million people through a network of entrepreneurial welfare bodies, community centres and projects, and dozens of schools. It is one of the most remarkable and dynamic forms of Anglicanism today.

Wolfendale's volume complements Archbishop Paul Kwong's excellent *Identity in Community: Toward a Theological Agenda for Hong Kong* (2011). The great strength of Wolfendale's book is the historical detail and pen portraits. Of particular note is the careful and moving account of St. John's during the Japanese occupation, and the great tenacity and resilience of the clergy and members of the congregation in caring for refugees, renegades, and resisters. The cathedral – like many Christian churches under Japanese occupation – was treated with contempt by its captors. With the nave used as a canteen, the chancel as a cinema and sanctuary for fencing practice and jujitsu, the work of rebuilding after the reoccupation in 1945 was immense.

What Wolfendale's account gives us, so memorably, is a history of hardiness and resolve; a triumph of faith, hope and love. More than anything else, perhaps, it is this spirit that has helped transform a formerly imperial church into one of the world's great international cathedrals. But this is no standard history of past cathedral glories. Hong Kong is still the main gateway to China. And Wolfendale shows that St. John's now stands as a living sign of what Anglicanism does when working and praying for all who it can touch, and all who touch it. In this – our twenty-first, and so far undeniably Chinese century – St. John's Cathedral's most pivotal and strategic role is surely yet to come.