

Orientis Aura:
Perspectives in Religious Studies

[Book Review]

Author: Paul Kwong

Title: Identity in Community: Towards a Theological Agenda for the Hong Kong SAR

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The admirable volumes in the ‘Explorations in Intercultural Theology’ series seek to explore postcolonial discourse and the places where religion and cultures meet. Rooted in the idea that cultural-religious exchange and conflict are determined by power relations, the volumes in this series pay close attention to theories of communication, hermeneutics and cultural theory, and explore arenas such as ethnicity, fundamentalism, syncretism, class, race and gender. The interdisciplinary approach adopted in the series makes this one of the more refreshing and cutting-edge publishing enterprises in recent years.

In *Identity and Community*, Paul Kwong – the Anglican Archbishop of Hong Kong – has made a timely and impressive contribution to this series, and one with much depth and stature that illuminates the hybridity and diversity emerging in Hong Kong, which forms the basis for his study. Developing the idea of identity and community as a hermeneutical portal for exploring the theological and missiological agenda of Christians in Hong Kong, Kwong's thesis analyses the diverse perspectives on the territory's recent history, comparing the methodological approaches of indigenous theologians with contextual theologies from other parts of the world. He argues that the abundance of cultural and religious identities in this Special Administrative Region (SAR) of China, which overlap and occasionally collide, is likely a source of empowerment and richness rather than a problem. Indeed, in embracing otherness and diversity, the Christian community is faced with more of an opportunity than a problem. The key is wisdom and discernment – knowing how to affirm the diversity, and without making premature choices that foreclose on other, better options that may emerge later.

Kwong's book is unusual on several fronts. Most doctoral dissertations do not make good books, but this is a

welcome exception to the rule, with clarity and consistency that will be of great help to all those trying to understand the complexity of how Christianity is emerging in modern Chinese cultures. The volume is also welcome in other respects. The inter-disciplinary approach adopted by Kwong marks a welcome break from the usual and relatively dry approaches to missiology in this context, and in this sense, we are offered a mature and fleshed-out postcolonial vantage point from which to assess the issues. That said, the historical treatment is refreshing, and being written by an ‘insider’, it has an authentic and insightful feel that other scholars approaching the subject might struggle to emulate. The volume also engages with a rich repertoire of postmodern methods and insights, but without ever collapsing into unnecessary relativism. Kwong writes with conviction, but without occluding the scholarly enterprise that is undertaken in this important and timely work of contextual theology and missiology.

The book is divided into three parts, each with three chapters. The first two chapters cover the challenges to British Hong Kong (1984-7) in the run-up to the handover back to China, and then the crises in Hong Kong from 1997-2002 – essentially the struggles for the essential nature of the SAR in relation to China. Chapter three

examines the changing strategies of Chinese government policy and the relatively rapid (though historically grounded) rise of Hong Kong identity. The second part of the thesis then returns us to questions of British identity in Hong Kong for Christians and Anglicans (1842-1982), and the emerging transitional period (1982-1997), before the churches began to develop a more concrete, independent and postcolonial identity after 1997. In some respects, this is one of the wealthiest parts of the thesis. Anyone wanting to understand how the Anglican Church has emerged in Hong Kong in the postcolonial era – a strong, self-confident and distinctive body that holds a unique place within China and is also at the same time playing an increasingly important and vital role in the wider Anglican Communion at many levels – would be wise to engage with this section. Kwong manages to present this material with composure and deftness, reflecting the same delicate nuance of the subject discussed.

The third part of the thesis opens up the agenda raised by the exploration, as well as issues of methodology and theological reflection. Kwong fruitfully dialogues with relevant and key theological methods (Liberationist, pastoral cycle, multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches, Minjung, etc.), which, in turn, allow reflection

on the emerging Hong Kong theological agenda facing the SAR. The final chapter, and the conclusion, return us to questions of identity explored in the introduction, which established that the abundance of cultural and religious identities in this —overlapping and occasionally colliding—is a likely source of empowerment and richness rather than a problem. In welcoming the diversity and richness of Hong Kong identity, the church – and perhaps especially the Anglican church – has a real opportunity to model a praxis that is not only ideally suited for its local context, but also suitable for replication globally. Indeed, there is some sense in which Hong Kong is a torchbearer for the kinds of possibilities and potential for postcolonial and multicultural ecclesial praxis:

I have argued that sharing God's loving and embracing presence draws us, of necessity, into the building of a sustainable community where all can maintain their different identities while living together in harmony. This has been our experience in Hong Kong, and we hope and pray that it can become our experience in the Communion as a whole' (p.236).

This is an exemplary book, and well worth patient and detailed exploration. Whilst some may perhaps

obviously ask ‘what has Hong Kong to do with us’?, here is a book that offers a deep, nuanced and careful answer to such a question. The future for global Christianity – of whatever denominational hue – will increasingly have to be worked out in the context of many context-specific Christ-Culture-Church debates. Any church that has engaged with such questions – of enculturation, praxis and post-colonialism, for example – and done so deeply, and well, will have important ideas and rich resources for those churches that have yet to begin this complex journey of discovery and discernment. Kwong’s book shows that Hong Kong Anglicans – with their rich and complex colonial legacy, abundant multiculturalism, and their relation to China as an SAR, are further down this road of discernment than many other places. As such, the Anglican Church of Hong Kong, although the newest Province of the Anglican Communion, is ironically one of the better-placed Provinces to take a leading role in the formation of a shared, robust and missiologically rich ecclesial polity for the wider Communion.

As Kwong shows, this has been done through the careful, considered and wise processing of their past; engaging richly and deeply with the present; and cultivating and forming theological resources and

strategies for the future. The great question before the churches – indeed all humanity – that faces us now, and will face us in the future, is ‘how shall we live?’. Here is an essential book that answers this question for Hong Kong. And, I suspect, provides some very important and vital clues for all other Anglican Provinces throughout the Communion facing the very same question. How shall we live? As Kwong concludes,

We are a tradition that speaks of the *via media*. The *via media* enables us to be comprehensive, to practice tolerance and exercise restraint. In Chinese culture we like to talk about harmony and the middle way. By approaching our relationships within the Anglican Communion as somehow involving a search for identity in community, a search in which different identities are coming into conflict, overlapping and evolving, we may be able to better understand who we are as churches in our contexts and who we can become together’ (p. 236).