

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

**[Book Review]**

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Title: The Practical Prophet: Bishop Ronald O. Hall and His Legacies

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At the beginning of the twenty-first century, China is now well on the way to becoming the world's most populous Christian nation. Christianity has moved from being a carefully monitored – and even persecuted movement during Mao's regime – to becoming a faith comprising beliefs and behaviours that the state now actively wishes to encourage amongst its citizens. It would seem that socialism or capitalism is not enough to provide cohesion and meaning that might sustain a nation of such diversity. So, faith has a future in China after all, it seems.

Moira Chan-Yeung's appraisal of Bishop R. O. Hall is a welcome and timely contribution to the growing body of literature on Chinese Christianity. This book is the third

volume in the prestigious ‘Historical Studies of Anglican Christianity in China’, under the skilful editorship of Philip Wickeri. Co-published with Hong Kong Sheng Kung Hui, these volumes throw fresh light on the intensive and extensive history of Anglicanism in China in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

R. O. Hall was the longest-serving, and arguably the most influential, Anglican bishop serving overseas during the twentieth century. After distinguished service in the Great War, including the award of a Military Cross, Hall trained for ordination at Cuddesdon. After ministry in Newcastle, and also with the Student Christian Movement, he became bishop of the diocese of Victoria and Hong Kong in 1932.

Hall managed to evade capture during the Japanese invasion of Hong Kong in World War II, and he ordained Florence Li Tim-Oi to minister to the needs of refugees who had fled Hong Kong and reached neutral Macau. She was the first woman to be ordained in the Anglican Communion, for which Hall is often remembered.

Yet as Chan-Yeung's appraisal shows, Hall's ministry was a more systematic and extensive exercise in social engagement, and marked with a burning compassion for the less privileged. Throughout his ministry, he emphasised the needs of ordinary people, especially victims of social or political upheaval.

Hall drew inspiration from the social theology of F. D. Maurice, which led to significant contributions to the development of social welfare, low-cost housing, and education. He established an orphanage in [Tai Po](#), which later became the [St Christopher's Home](#). Under Hall's leadership, the Anglican Church became a major partner with the Hong Kong government in the provision of social services. (Indeed, this partnership in ministry has continued to flourish and expand under the former Archbishop, Paul Kwong, and his successor, Andrew Chan.)

One of the great strengths of Chan-Yeung's book is that it rehabilitates a vision – one of intensive and extensive public impact – but profoundly rooted in a lively social theology. Hall's ministry did not centre on a simplistic concern for converting handfuls of Chinese citizens – a task which seemed to preoccupy other missionaries active in the field. Hall saw mission as

something much deeper – as the leaven that changed the very nature of the society it worked in, rather than just rescuing a few souls from it.

Chan-Yeung's book offers new and refreshing insights into Hall's life and ministry, and it deserves to be widely read and studied. The legacies that Hall has bequeathed Chinese Christianity – centres for education, development, welfare – now explain, in part, why the faith has such rich potential in China.

As Chan-Yeung shows, Hall saw the world as the place where the Kingdom of God could be built. So Hall's ministry set about transforming the social worlds that people inhabited. Hall understood that this was what would change people's lives: enriching the soil prepared the ground for the seed of the gospel. And here, Hall was a typical – if all-too-rare – practical prophet.