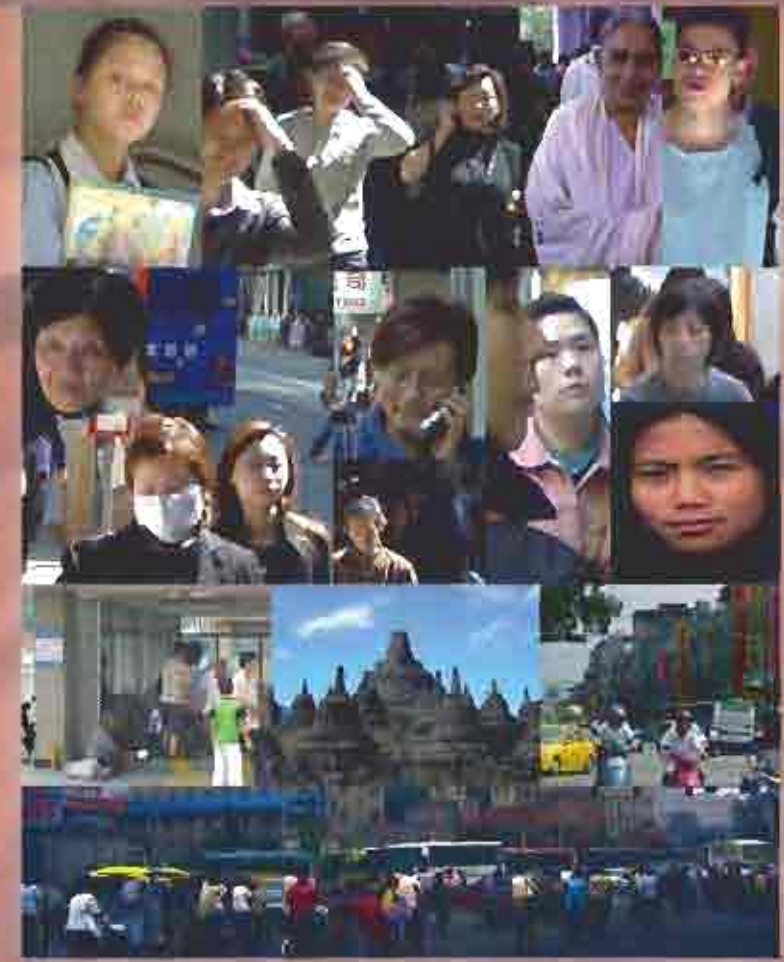




# Pilgrims and Citizens: Christian Social Engagement in East Asia Today

*Edited by:*  
Michael Nai-Chiu Poon



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**T**his volume of essays, the first in a new 'Christianity in Asia Series', from the Trinity Theological College, Singapore, marks a fresh approach to articulate the character of Christian social engagement in East Asia today. Key institutional interpreters of Christianity in China and Singapore, together with colleagues in the West, reflect on a topic that is important and relevant not only to the church, but is also of considerable interest to the secular authorities and those of other faiths.

Singapore and China, in spite of their obvious dissimilarities, share a similar desire to make religion a positive factor in promoting the common good. Hard-earned social stability, after all, can be undermined by ethnic and religious conflicts. Hence, the ongoing political and social engagement by Chinese and Singaporean Christians should be of immense interest to both academics and practitioners.

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# Foreword

Robert Solomon

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For four days in mid August 2005, about one hundred local church and civic leaders engaged academics and church leaders in the region and beyond in an international conference in Singapore, to reflect and explore how faith communities can contribute to the well-being of our societies, cities, and nations. *Seek the Welfare of the City*—the theme of the conference, underlines an important and timely concern in today's world. This importance is punctuated by the rare joint participation of top leaders from the State Administration of Religious Affairs (SARA) in the People's Republic of China, China Christian Council (CCC), and the Institute of World Religions of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in the conference.

## 1. Positive engagement with the world

Christians have a rich heritage of praying and working for the peace, prosperity, and well-being of the cities that we live in, the nations to which we belong, and indeed, of the earth which is our common home.

This arises from a worldview that accepts God as the creator of all, who loves and cares for all, that God is a God of order and has established institutions and governance for the larger good of human societies. Hence Scripture urges Christians to submit to governing authorities that have been instituted to maintain order, justice, and peace. As Paul wrote in the epistle to the Romans, 'Give everyone what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honour, then honour (Romans 13:7).'

The Christian faith is therefore not a world-denying faith or a faith that calls for withdrawal from the world and the society that we live in. Rather, it calls for positive and redemptive engagement with the world that will contribute to the betterment and transformation of human societies. Such a perspective is rooted in a spirituality that has to do with the peace and reconciliation that we believe is offered to us through Jesus Christ our Lord. As Scripture points out, we are ministers and ambassadors of reconciliation. We long to see our societies flourishing in peace, prosperity, righteousness, and justice.

## Editor's Introduction

Michael Nai-Chiu Poon

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This volume of essays, from the conference *Seek the Welfare of the City* held in Trinity Theological College, Singapore in August 2005, marks a fresh approach to articulate the character of Christian social engagement in East Asia today.

The conference presented a welcomed opportunity where key institutional interpreters of Christianity in China and Singapore, together with colleagues in the West, came together to reflect on a topic that is important and relevant not only to the church, but is also of considerable interest to the secular authorities and those of other faiths. The conference was important in the following respects.

The conference took place at a time when East Asia—for the first time since the end of the Pacific War—has by and large emerged from its colonial and missionary past, and have become a relatively socially stable, politically secure, and materially increasingly affluent region. At the same time, there is a concern that this remarkable achievement can be undermined by religious and ethnic divides. East Asian nations find it necessary to engage religious leaders for the sake of continuing social progress. China affirmed recently that religion can play an important role in 'building up a harmonious society'.<sup>1</sup> Zhuo Xinping's 'The Christian Contribution to China in History', the keynote address at the conference, marks a fresh departure on the interpretation of Christianity in contemporary China. The opening addresses by Lim Siong Guan (former head of the Singapore Civil Service, Government of Singapore) and Ye Xiaowen (Director-General of the State Administration of Religious Affairs, People's Republic of China) underline the political context of the discussion on church and society in East Asia today.

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1. Chinese President Jiang Zemin affirmed, in the National Meeting on Religious Activities held in Beijing, 10–12 December 2001 that religion plays an important role in the development of China's national life. Premier Wen Jiabao officially announced the policy on building up a harmonious society in the National People's Congress and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference in March 2005. Cao Shengjie's paper explores the ramifications of this new policy for the church.

Those who are concerned with Christianity in the global South will find this volume of essays a welcomed contribution to the lively discussion on the future of Christianity. The experiences of Christian social involvement in Singapore and China may well offer a fresh model for Christian social engagement today. Philip Jenkins in *The Next Christendom* draws attention to the transformation in Christianity worldwide.<sup>2</sup> In particular, he traces the adaptation of liberation theologies in Latin America, Africa and Asia, and observes how churches came increasingly to be identified with political reform and revolution. He contrasts this paradigm with the segregation of religion from public life in the West. It is remarkable that he referred only to the Philippines and Korea in his assessment on Asia.<sup>3</sup> Are there fresh approaches to Christian engagement with the political and social order, other than that of the late-modern liberal practices in the West and liberation theologies in the South? Will the future of Christianity inevitably follow the social dynamics that Jenkins and other interpreters of global Christianity in the West identify? It is striking that churches in the global South often remain as objects under investigation in these prophecies of the future. Seldom do they draw on the self-assessment from churches in the global South itself. Can we conceive of fresh ways of relating to the wider world other than that of a recluse or political activist, the two prevalent models we find in contemporary Christianity in the West? Daniel KS Koh explores some of these issues in his essay 'Resident Aliens and Alienated Residents'.<sup>4</sup>

Singapore and China—in spite of their obvious dissimilarities—share similar desire to make religion a positive factor in promoting the common good. The hard-earned social stability, after all, can be undermined by ethnic and religious conflicts. The on-going political and social engagement by Chinese and Singaporean Christians hence should be of immense interest to both academics and practitioners. Cao Shengjie, Robert Solomon and Richard Magnus offer insightful reflections on what Christians can contribute to harmony in their nations and societies. Christians in this region often engage the West in dialogue, but seldom among themselves. The conversation among

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2. Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Rise of Global Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).
  3. *Ibid*, 150–2.
  4. I am grateful to Daniel Koh for his permission to include his essay in this collection. Another version of this essay appeared in *Trinity Theological Journal* 13 (2005): 103–124. Koh chaired the session on Historical and Theological Reflections in the conference, and made several important contributions in the Question and Answer sessions.