

The Social Roles of Hong Kong Churches after the Return to Chinese Sovereignty in 1997

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This article analyzes the self-understanding of various religious groups in Hong Kong regarding their social roles during the period of political transition from colonial rule to incorporation into Mainland China (1984-1999). The thesis of this article is that the self-understanding of various religious groups in Hong Kong regarding their social roles has undergone a major change during this period. Churches, as major co-workers of the government in the educational and social establishment before 1997, sought new social roles as a response to the new political developments.

In traditional Chinese society Confucianism assumed a supreme position, while other religions were subjected to its political authority and its ethical value system. However, in Hong Kong this social structure changed radically under colonial rule. Unlike Confucians in traditional Chinese society who enjoyed official support, Confucians in Hong Kong became civil religious group leaders or professors in universities, without any special support from the government. Hong Kong churches, because of a strong connection with the colonial government, rose to assume supreme status as co-workers of the government in the educational and social establishment. This kind of privilege was formerly enjoyed by Confucians in old China.

The 1997 handover of Hong Kong to mainland China caused a drastic change in the social functions of religious communities. Buddhists, Taoists, and Confucians gave full support to Tung Chee-hwa, the first Chief Executive of Hong Kong after the handover, because of his cultural concessions. They accused the British colonial government of not giving all religious groups in Hong Kong equal treatment. They requested privileges to perform more significant social functions. This resulted in Taoists being granted the right to perform official weddings in one of their temples. The Buddhists benefited even more. They successfully established a holiday for Buddha's birthday. Both Buddhist and Taoist leaders were enlisted in the new arrangement of the order of protocol at major official functions, while the official status of Christianity's social functions was downgraded.

Christian churches in Hong Kong have already become aware of the necessity to transform themselves in this new socio-political landscape, relating especially to dimensions of their national identities and social roles. As for their social role, Hong Kong Christians faced more serious difficulties and challenges. What kind of social roles should they assume in this new era? How should they relocate themselves in a new society, in which religious pluralism becomes increasingly obvious with the emergence of the socio-political awareness and prestige of other religious groups? Many Christian leaders prodded awareness among Christians about their obligation to fulfill a prophetic role in society.

Hong Kong churches are confronted with new opportunities for spiritual renewal, for relocating their public position, and for fulfilling new social functions. They should serve the public as a "servant of all" without regard to race, gender, ethnicity, or religion, as Jesus commanded his disciples to do.