

Christian's Role in Hong Kong Today - A Christian in Society, the Bishop Zen Model

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(Article prepared for Hong Kong Christian Institute after an Interview with the New leader of the Catholic Church in Hong Kong, Bishop Joseph Zen)

What is the Christian's role in society? Or what is a Christian's role in Hong Kong today? These questions are difficult to answer. For some the answer is based on Romans 13, where we are encouraged to follow the government and focus more on personal interests. For others, the fact that Jesus was sentenced to death on political grounds points out that Christians do have a role to play in society. As Hong Kong continues to work out the realities of "One Country-Two Systems," there is debate on the role of the Church in this process. Some feel the Church has no role in this process, others feel the Church has a "behind the scenes" role in the process and still others feel the Church should take a prominent role in this process.

The first two responses are the most popular. Many people just cannot see that they have a role in the society. They are more interested "in the snow on their doorstep rather than the ice on their neighbor's roof," they do not understand their connection to others. When people do see the need to be involved in society often they choose to do it privately. This is more consistent with polite culture. But the new leader of the Catholic Church in Hong Kong, Bishop Joseph Zen has taken a more open and confrontational approach. After his latest comments regarding his fears on the Article 23 legislation, a local deputy to the Chinese National People's Congress said, "his (Bishop Zen's) remarks would only intensify social conflict and lead to chaos."

Bishop Zen understands his comments are not well received by some. At a new conference on 30 September he said that he would continue to follow the late Cardinal John Baptist Wu's motto, "doing the truth in charity." While in the past he may have "overly stressed speaking the truth...he promised he would now place charity first." His hope is that the Church's Justice and Peace Commission would speak out more. However he feels it may take time before people take the Commission seriously. He said sometimes the only way to get people's attention is to speak loudly.

Why does Bishop Zen speak out loudly? He says, "As a Christian we are called to love God and love our neighbor and to love (our) neighbor today does not mean just the one next to you, at your door, it also means society, because now things happen in society...the leader must also give direction for people to know what is right, what is wrong in society." Christians need to be involved with the developments of society. Society for Bishop Zen, "is the family of God, everybody is every-body-else's brother and sister because we are all children of God. This gives to each one a sacred dignity and a whole set of rights, the human rights, inscribed in human nature, unalienable and always to be respected." Bishop Zen believes strongly in human rights.

He also feels he is trying to save or defend human rights from those who would limit or suppress these rights in the name of public order. He feels Hong Kong is in danger of losing freedoms and certain human rights because the current government appears more eager to please the mainland than to explain and defend the rights people have enjoyed in Hong Kong. During British rule according to Bishop Zen, "everyone understood democracy was impossible, neither the UK nor China would allow this but then we enjoyed many freedoms, we did not care for democracy. This government was controlled by the UK government; we knew there was a respect for human rights."

For Bishop Zen the situation has now changed. After the handover, "in spite of the promise of 'One Country - Two Systems', of a high degree of autonomy, there are people who are trying to bring the culture of the mainland here. The ('One Country - Two Systems') is very difficult to put into practice and not necessarily because of a lack of goodwill but simply because people don't understand the Hong Kong system. They can damage it without knowing it. So that means we have to defend our system, especially the freedoms. There is so much difference between Hong Kong and China. That's why, when they damage our system we have to speak out. There is a danger we will lose our system." One cannot be silent when there is a threat to human rights and freedoms.

Bishop Zen does feel there is hope that people will take a more involved role in society. He feels people are well educated and interested in freedoms, they just need to understand their responsibility as Christians. He hopes the various Parish Social Concern Groups and the Justice and Peace Commission of the

Church can energize people toward more involvement and advocacy for the marginalized in society. He says, "there are all sorts of differences in this society, but the same dignity and fundamental rights belong to everyone without exception. If any special regard should be reserved it is the underprivileged who deserve it, while the first in the community should be the servant of all." Lesson 22 of the Parish Social Concern Groups on the Church's Social Teaching says, "Catholics and Church organizations should be encouraged to express opinions related to justice according to the Church's social teachings and employ appropriate strategies to affect public opinion and social policies."

Bishop Zen will continue to speak out on the truth in love. He is only following his call to lead the Church to love God and neighbor. Hopefully he will not be alone in his defense of human rights and advocacy of those on the margins of society. Working quietly or behind the scenes may seem polite or proper and may secure some type of bargain. But should we treat our faith like a business deal? Do we really need to bargain for our faith? Where would our faith be today if Jesus had tried to work out a deal when he faced Pilate?