Jochen Teuffel, Lutheran Theological Seminary, Hong Kong

On Vocation for Single Female Christians in Hong Kong

Joining Sunday worship in one of the numerous small Chinese congregations in Hong Kong – often located in a commercial building – a European visitor inevitably notices a fairly high number of participants in their twenties or thirties. Most Christians, some 8% of the population, are first-generation-Christians who were born and raised in non-Christian families. This phenomenon can be explained with the common mission strategy of the various Chinese-speaking churches which mainly target teenagers and students through various fellowships and leisure activities. As some 50% of the secondary schools in Hong Kong are run by Christian churches or church-affiliated organizations with "Christian religion" as a mandatory subject, churches have privileged access to students. After joining Christian fellowships and congregations for some time, young Chinese people – normally between 15 and 25 years old – decide for themselves to become Christians and to get baptized.

What makes Christian missions particular to Chinese people, not only in Hong Kong but also in Mainland China and among the Chinese Diaspora in Southeast Asia (like Malaysia or Indonesia), are individual conversions, different to the tribal conversions of most other Protestant missionary approaches in Africa, Asia or Oceania. Wherever families, clans or whole tribes became Christianized, the cultural and religious identity of the local community was generally preserved.[1] Though the missionaries in the 19th century – who based their own individual conversion experiences in the awakening movement – originally aimed at individual conversions of tribal people, they came to know that within a tribal setting, worship was entirely a communal affair. Anyone who gives up the religious practices of the tribe at the same time excommunicates him- or herself from this community and thus forfeits his or her living. This means that within a tribal society it is very difficult to convert a single member of a family to Christ. As a consequence, German missionaries (such as Christian Keyßer among the Papuas or Bruno Gutmann among the Chagga in present-day Tanzania) made a

1 Cf. Georg F. Vicedom, "Trible Conversion," in *Concise Dictionary of the Christian World Mission*, ed. Stephen Neill, Gerald H. Anderson and John Goodwin (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1971), pp. 605–606.

tribal community witness to the Gospel until the whole community (represented by a chieftain) was willing to become Christian.

Different to carrying out missions among tribes (including the Germanic and Slavonic tribes in Europe in the past), modern Christian missions to China, from their very beginning (Matteo Ricci), encountered a civilized and culturally advanced society with a pluriformity of worshipping and different religious teaching in various schools of Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism. Individual people – though being incorporated in a family system – are able to decide for themselves whether they will become Christian or not. Such a decision may cause irritation, probably even disapproval, among other family members, yet the individual decision of the convert can be maintained within the family without any excommunication. It is even possible that other family members will eventually become Christians too, after they have recognized the positive influence of Christianity on the life of the convert or on themselves. Based on such individual conversions the missionary situation among Chinese people resembles the situation of the early church within the urbanized, poly-religious culture of the Roman Empire in the second and third century bc.

However, the pattern of individual conversions within the Chinese ethnic group is the starting point for a problem for the Christian mission which is widely ignored, particularly among Protestants. The conversion rate among young Chinese women is significantly higher than it is among men, comparable to the sex ratio in the early church within the Roman Empire.[2] Women seem to be more religious and receptive to Christian life. Though there are no statistics at hand, one can estimate that the ratio between young Chinese women and men converted to Christianity is about two to one. At a first glance that does not sound particularly significant, since the participation of women in church life in Europe or the US is likewise significantly higher than it is among men. However, in the situation of a first-generation church, as is the case here in Hong Kong, the disproportion in terms of gender does have a fundamental impact on the future life of young female Christians. When it comes to marriages, about 50% of young Christian women cannot get married to a Christian husband. Most likely they will remain single for several reasons:

In the traditions of the early Church fathers, pastors in Chinese churches in Hong Kong often warn against marriages with non-Christians. Some fundamentalist churches even prohibit such marriages to their members. At a difference

2 Cf. Rodney Stark, "Reconstructing the Rise of Christianity: The Role of Women," *Sociology of Religion*, Fall 1995, Vol. 56, Issue 3, pp. 229–244, hereafter 231–233.

to a rather secularized society in Europe, religious affairs still have their impact on the daily life of families. A traditional Chinese family – no matter whether following Buddhist or Taoist practices – is engaged in common ancestor worshipping. Every household has its own shrine, where ancestors are remembered and food-offerings are placed. Such a religious form of living along with different ethical values makes it problematic for Christians to found a family with someone who is not Christian.

The rather Puritan form of Christian living does not allow young Christians to participate in various forms of dating entertainment such as discos or bars. It confines the social life of Christians, other than that of their families and their professions or studies, to the church. In this way the marraige market is limited to their own congregation or at least to other Christians.

Following the Chinese family tradition, unmarried daughters are supposed to stay with their parents in their home, supporting them financially and taking care of them in their old age. Becoming a Christian therefore, for quite a number of young women, means that they will remain unmarried and in their paternal, non-Christian families. Though from a contemporary European perspective one may regard such a form of life as burdensome and thus to be pitied, in the context of Chinese culture which emphasizes filial piety, living together with parents is generally recognized as virtuous.

Nevertheless, in general, the particular situation of unmarried women is widely ignored within the churches in Hong Kong. The pastor's attention is mainly given to the young married couples and families which have emerged from dating, and marriages between members within the same congregation. Though there might be a fellowship of single women in a congregation, their form of life does not find proper recognition within the church. Instead, the glamorous Church wedding services, normally attended by the whole congregation, endorse marriage as the one blessed status in life to be pursued. However, such a "blessed" status remains unattainable for every fourth young woman within the church. Whereas almost every heterosexual man in church can become married (even causing rumors that young "non-believing" bachelors join Christian congregations in Mainland China in order to find a wife) single women have to get by with their (often unwanted) form of life which, in the Chinese culture, is widely regarded as deficient.

As we have already mentioned, the church situation in Hong Kong to some extent resembles the situation of the early church, however with one important difference: The early church paid particular attention to the situation of single Christian women. In their numerous treatises on virginity (and widows) the church fathers had high praise for this form of living. We may suspect that

behind such virginity asceticism lurked a certain animosity towards sexuality and hostility to a bodily existence based on body-soul dualism. Yet those treatises were often written out of pastoral concerns for the numerous unmarried women in church. When those sisters were addressed as "the holy virgins (*virgines sanctae*)" to be "the most illustrious portion of the flock of Christ"[3] or as "the spouses of Christ"[4], their status was regarded to be higher than married men and women in church because of an exclusive intimacy with God.[5] In addition, the church supported small communities of unmarried women (either virgins or widows) where they could live together with a considerable amount of personal freedom. Thus unmarried women were no longer confined to a life within their parental family as was the common custom in the ancient world.

Starting from the 4th century, the church introduced a liturgical ceremony for the personal consecration of virgins, whose solemn rite basically consisted in taking the veil. Whereas weddings remained mainly a family affair outside the Church without any pastoral assistance, the personal consecration of virgins introduced their status as a blessed form of living to the other church members.

The Roman Catholic Church, at a difference to the Protestant churches, still follows the tradition of the early church. Young women are encouraged to pursue the status of a consecrated life, which applies very well to the situation of unmarried Catholic women in Hong Kong and Mainland China. Currently there are 519 sisters living in convents and nunneries in Hong Kong.

The need for a calling

What people who have been raised in Christian families (and even "eborn" Christians) can hardly imagine is the fundamental impact of being individually converted to Christ in a non-Christian culture. Such conversion asks for more than just a rather vague spirituality; one has to have a calling for a particular way of life as a Christian after baptism, in line with St. Peter's question: "*Lord, where*

3 Cyprian, *The Dress of Virgins* (De habitu virginum) 3. Compare Geoffrey D. Dunn, "Cyprian's Pastoral Care of Women in Carthage," http://dlibrary.acu.edu.au/research/theology/Dunn.htm (accessed 4 October 2007).

4 Tertullian, On the Veiling of Virgins (*De virginibus velandis*) 16.

5 Cp. Peter Brown, "The Notion of Virginity in the Early Church," in Christian Spirituality: Origins to the Twelfth Century, ed. Jean Ledercq, Bernard McGinn and John Meyendorff (New York: Crossroad, 1985), pp. 427–443. Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity December*, (Columbia University Press, 1988).

shall we go?" (John 6: 68) For young married women their calling as Christians seems to be obvious: raising one or two children in a Christian way within their family (with the help of a domestic helper either from the Philippines or Indonesia) and going to work in a business company in order to contribute to the living of the family.

For unmarried women, however – likewise employed while living with their parents – the question of the calling becomes urgent, in particular in the second half of their thirties when they realize that they most likely will not become married. Thus, for some of them, the desired calling can be the call to ministry in the church. Most of the denominations in Hong Kong, even the conservative Evangelicals like the Christian Alliance Church, do have female pastors or evangelists. Based on their own savings during their more than ten years of employment they are able to register as students in one of the more than 20 seminaries in Hong Kong, even without any scholarship from their mother church. It is no surprise that a significant number of female students in their late thirties and forties enrolled in a Master of Divinity or Bachelor of Theology Program at the Lutheran Theological Seminary are unmarried. A dedicated life to Christ in the form of becoming a minister may work as a calling, but not for all unmarried women. And even among those who enter the seminary, there is a significant number who do not take on the external calling from the church as a minister, or who are forced to quit the ministry because of tensions within the congregation or because of their own lack of capabilities.

The calling of the ministry can certainly not be the solution for the majority of single female Christians, yet it indicates the seriousness of the problem. What Protestant churches in Hong Kong and China need is to rethink their family-centred image of a Christian life. This image has been introduced by the Protestant mission (different to the Roman Catholic) in the 20th century where most of the (male) missionaries from America or Europe were (or became) married too. Those missionaries inherited a balanced gender-ratio within church due to the tribal conversion of their own Germanic forefathers and foremothers. Therefore they could not imagine that something like gender-disproportion among the converts would mean that the Christian family model could not be guaranteed to all of the women converted. A balanced gender-ratio within church could be achieved in a tribal setting in Africa or among the mountain tribes in Southeast Asia and in Oceania, where conversions took place within whole clans and families. The case of China (and, one may add, Vietnam and Cambodia as well), however, involved individual conversions and was therefore different. Within a (former) folk church, like in central Europe or Scandinavia or within a Christian

civil religion like in the US, there are no marriage limitations due to gender disproportion, though participation in worship activities is also significantly higher among women.

Protestants have to rethink their theological and ethical heritage in terms of the normative form of matrimonial living. It was the Reformation, after the First Diet of Speyer 1526, which eventually purged out virginity as Christian vocation and reinforced family life as the only approbated Christian way of life in Protestant territories, by closing down women convents and nunneries. The re-familiarization of Christian life into the domestic estate (*status oeconomicus*), sometimes enforced, restricted the communal life (*vita communis*) of the church to the parishes and confined the life of women to a patriarchal family household. It is true that, to some extent, thhe reformers address various abuses in monasticism of that time, and rightly reject the meritoriousness of a monastic life and its undergirding two-stage ethics – monastic life as an alleged state of perfection (*status perfectionis*) and taking vows as second baptism. Butthe general rejection of monastic vows and the consecrated life as expressed by Martin Luther in his "On the monastic vows" (*De votis monasticiis iudicium*)[6], as well as in article 27 of the Augsburg Confession, does have its own theological shortcomings.[7] The disapproval of perpetual vows is not substantiated by the Biblical witness.

If one reads the relevant passages in the New Testament carefully, the preferred status with regard to the eschatological angelic life (*bios angelikos*, cf. Mk 12:25; Mt 22:30) is clearly the unmarried one. Jesus Christ himself – according to the Gospel of Luke – even advocates virginity as the exclusive form of a Christian calling:

> Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage; but those who are considered worthy of a place in that age and in the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage. Indeed they cannot die anymore, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection. (Luke 20:34–36)

6 Weimar Edition, Vol. 8, 573–669.

7 For a considerate and ecumenical discussion compare *Confessio Augustana. Bekenntnis des einen Glaubens*, ed. Harding Meyer and Heinz Schütte, Paderborn: Bonifacius-Druckerei, 1980, 281–318. Article 27,20 at least concedes that one can be excepted to become married by "a singular work of God," whereas the Apology of the Augsburg Confession even calls virginity "a more excellent gift than marriage." (Article 23, 38–39).

Jesus likewise praises sexual continence and virginity as particular characteristics given to some of his followers for the sake of the kingdom of heaven (cf. Matt 19:10–12). St. Paul, while admitting that all Christians may marry (1 Cor 7:25), nevertheless recommends that unmarried Christians should remain in their status because of the upcoming end of this age (1 Cor 7:25–31) and because of the greater freedom in serving the Lord (1 Cor 7:32–35). Marriage appears to be provisional in order to avoid *porneia* (1 Cor 7:1–6), yet the apostle wished that all would have been able to abstain from any sexual relation (1 Cor 7:7). Finally John the Seer in his vision of the Lamb on Mount Zion and his one hundred forty-four thousand name-bearers recognized that those followers of the Lamb remained in the state of virginity:

> It is these who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are virgins; these follow the Lamb wherever he goes. They have been redeemed from humankind as first fruits for God and the Lamb, and in their mouth no lie was found; they are blameless. (Rev 14:4f)

In light of Christ's resurrection, which inaugurated God's restoration of his creation, procreation no longer has any meaning in terms of salvation. God's promise of progeny applies to his elected people of Israel and in particular to their progenitor Abraham, but no longer to the new covenant in Jesus Christ. Procreation itself is not a calling for the children of God's kingdom to come. It is permitted, but not requested, for Christians. The late Max Thurian, who served as a priest in the Community of Taizé, rightly points out that celibacy (which according to its Latin origin *coelebs* simply means "bachelor" and thus is not confined to ordained ministers) has an eschatological foundation when he writes the following:

> Celibacy relates to the resurrection of the dead; it is a sign of eternity, of incorruptibility, of life. For marriage has as its natural end the procreation of children, it assures the continuance of the human race and the creation of new beings, since human beings are fated to die and need to leave successors. But at the resurrection of the dead, those who have been accounted worthy will no more see death: 'They cannot die any more because they are equal to angels and are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection' (Luke 20:36). In the other world, since they are immortal, there is no further need for them to make sure that they have descendants. Besides, in the kingdom of God, there is one sole Father, since all, like the angels, are called sons of God. The celibate state, on account of this relationship with the resurrection of the dead, with eternity and with the angels, is a sign of the world to come, which the priest lives with his whole existence as a follower of Jesus Christ.

Celibacy as a "sign of eternity" does not mean that such a status is regarded to be the preferred one for Christians. Neither does it imply any meritoriousness in terms of salvation, as it witnesses (but does not enact) the future resurrection

from the dead already perfected in Christ's own resurrection in a particular way.[8] Protestant churches, not only in Hong Kong or China, are invited to recognize celibacy (or virginity) for the sake of Christ as a blessed status within the Church. With such recognition the life of single Christian women is freed from any sense of being deficient. Though in most cases being unmarried is hardly a desirablestatus,, the calling to celibacy affirms such a form of living as being recognized in the eyes of God: "It is not because of a lack of attractiveness or the lack of eligible men, but because of God's particular calling that you remained unmarried." Such a calling to celibacy does not need the response of a personal consecration or the vow of chastity, though a liturgical form of confirmation may foster its recognition within the church.

Once the calling to celibacy is recognized within Protestant churches, two questions are to be answered: a) what are the particular contributions of unmarried women to the life of the Church and to the Kingdom of God, and b) what particular form of a communal life can be established for unmarried women within the Church. Such questions do not call for norms and rules but for inspiring examples likely to be found in the ways of the early church. After all, unmarried women in their faithfulness to Christ deserve the same recognition the early church gave to their foremothers.

Bibliography

Brown, Peter, "The Notion of Virginity in the Early Church," in *Christian Spirituality: Origins to the Twelfth Century*, ed. Jean Ledercq, Bernard McGinn and John Meyendorff (New York: Crossroad, 1985), pp. 427–443.

Brown, Peter, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*. December (Columbia University Press, 1988).

Camelot, P. T. "Virginity." *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 14. 2nd ed. Detroit: Gale, 2003. pp. 544–548.

Confessio Augustana. Bekenntnis des einen Glaubens, ed. Harding Meyer and Heinz Schütte, Paderborn: Bonifatius-Druckerei, 1980.

Dunn, Geoffrey D. "Cyprian's Pastoral Care of Women in Carthage," http://dlibrary.acu.edu.au/research/theology/Dunn (accessed 4 October 2007).

8 For further theological considerations from a Protestant point of view compare Halkenhäuser, *Kirche and Kommunität* and Joest, *Spiritualität evangelischer Kommunitäten*.

Halkenhäuser, Johannes, *Kirche und Kommunität. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte und zum Auftrag der kommunitären Bewegung in den Kirchen der Reformation. Bonifatius-Druckerei*, Paderborn, 2. Auflage 1985.

Joest, Christoph, Spiritualität evangelischer Kommunitäten. Altkirchlich-monastische Tradition in evangelischen Kommunitäten von heute, Göttingen Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 1995.

Stark, Rodney, "Reconstructing the Rise of Christianity: The Role of Women," *Sociology of Religion*, Fall 1995, Vol. 56, Issue 3, pp. 229–244.

Sweeting, Anthony, "Education in Hong Kong: Histories, Mysteries and Myths", in *History of Education*, Volume 36, Issue 1 January 2007, pp. 89–108.

Thurian, Max, *The Theological Basis for Priestly Celibacy*. Congregation for the Clergy, Vatican, 1. January 1993. http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cclergy/documents/rc_con_cclergy_doc_01011993_theol_en.html (accessed 4 October 2007).

Verbindlich leben: Kommunitäten und geistliche Gemeinschaften in der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland. Ein Votum des Rates der EKD zur Stärkung evangelischer Spiritualität, EKD-Texte 88, Hannover 2007.

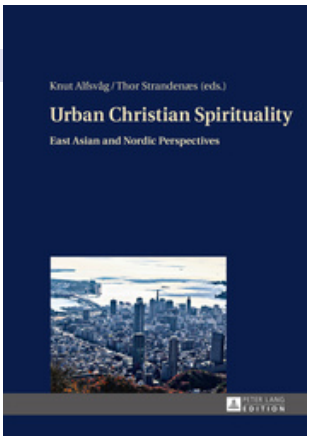
Vicedom, Georg F. "Trible Conversion," in *Concise Dictionary of the Christian World Mission*, ed. Stephen Neill, Gerald H. Anderson and John Goodwin (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1971), pp. 605–606.

PETER LANG
INTERNATIONALER VERLAG DER WISSENSCHAFTEN

Alfsvåg, Knut / Strandenæs, Thor (eds.)

Urban Christian Spirituality

East Asian and Nordic Perspectives



Frankfurt am Main, Berlin, Bern, Bruxelles, New York, Oxford, Wien, 2015. 198 pp.

Print: ISBN 978-3-631-65786-7 hb. (Hardcover)
SFR 60.00 / €* 52.95 / €** 54.50 / € 49.50 / £ 40.00 / US$ 64.95

eBook: ISBN 978-3-653-05181-0
SFR 63.20 / €* 58.91 / €** 59.40 / € 49.50 / £ 40.00 / US$ 64.95

Online bestellen: www.peterlang.com

Über das Buch

This book explores some of the challenges presented to church and mission from the contemporary culture of globalization and how this affects Christian spirituality in various ways. The attention is primarily focused on contemporary East Asian urban life, but from the assumption that this may not be all that different from what is experienced in urban contexts in other parts of the world. The authors all share an affiliation with institutions related to the Norwegian Mission Society and its work in East Asia.

Inhalt

Contents: Thor Strandenæs: Constructing Christian Spirituality in the City – Ekman Pui Chuen Tam: Christian Spirituality for People in the Metropolitan City: A Concern with Rapid Urbanization in Mainland China – Shujiro Sumikawa: Christ the City and the Way of Tea – Bård Mæland: Escape and experiment: Perspectives on urban spirituality – Knut Alfsvåg: The spirituality of sin – Kari Storstein Haug: Cultural Affirmation or Innovation? Christian Spirituality in Its Thai Cultural Context – Thor Strandenæs: Folk Religious Spirituality in Hong Kong: Its Relational and Utilitarian Aspects - a Challenge for the Christian Church – Lap Yan Kung: Leisure: Work, Freedom and Spirituality – Jochen Teuffel: On Vocation for Single Female Christians in Hong Kong – Immanuel Scharrer: Foreigners in the city and Christian Spirituality caring for them. The situation in the cities of Taiwan with special interest on migrant workers in Tao Yuan County – Thomas Yu: Chinese Filial Piety against the Impact of Post-modernity: A Christian Confucian Re-vision.

Autorenangaben

Knut Alfsvåg is a professor of systematic theology at the School of Mission and Theology at Stavanger (Norway). Formerly, he was a missionary to Japan.
Thor Strandenæs is a professor emeritus of missiology at the School of Mission and Theology at Stavanger (Norway). Formerly, he was a missionary to Hong Kong.

Peter Lang - Internationaler Verlag der Wissenschaften
Moosstrasse 1 - Postfach 350
CH-2542 Pieterlen / Schweiz

Tel. ++41 (0)32 376 17 17 - Fax ++41 (0)32 376 17 27
e-mail: info@peterlang.com
Website: www.peterlang.com