

## *Glass Cathedral: Gay Novel or Liberation Theology? An Interview with Andrew Koh* Angus Whitehead

Singaporean Andrew Koh was a founding member of the groundbreaking Necessary Stage theatre company in 1987. In Singapore he is best remembered as the author of *Glass Cathedral* (1995), Singapore's second gay novel[la], which won the 1994 Singapore Literature Prize Commendation Award and was subsequently shortlisted for the 1996 Commonwealth Writers Prize for the Best First Novel Regional Awards. A collection of poetry, *Hybrid from the East*, was published in the UK in 1997. A second novel awaits publication. After initially leaving Singapore for London in the mid-1990s he now lives in Sydney as a healthcare worker and qualified Chinese medicine practitioner. Sixteen years after its initial publication, *Glass Cathedral* is finally receiving attention and reappraisal in the wake of its republication by Epigram Books as a Singapore Classic, alongside works such as Goh Poh Seng's *The Immolation*, Robert Yeo's *The Adventures of Holden Heng* and Lloyd Fernando's *Scorpion Orchid*. The interview took place on 8 November 2011 at a restaurant on the site of Koh's alma mater St Joseph's Institution, Bras Basah Road, Singapore, just days after Koh returned to the city-state and gave a spirited reading from and talk about *Glass Cathedral* at the Singapore Writers Festival.

In this interview Koh discusses his Catholic upbringing, and his employment as a policeman during Singapore's policy of entrapment of homosexual men during the 1990s. Koh goes on to discuss how he came to write *Glass Cathedral*, his leaving Singapore in response to the nation-state's repressive climate and unsympathetic response to queer writing. In the second half of the interview Koh discusses homophobia in Singapore, the Catholic Church, and elsewhere and its roots in misogyny. Koh also draws attention to other issues explored in *Glass Cathedral*: the marginalisation of minorities in a supposedly multicultural nation state and the impact of Singapore's secret history, the so-called 'Marxist Conspiracy' of 1987, on the novel.

**AW:** How did you come to write Singapore's second queer novel?

**AK:** As a Singaporean Catholic teenager I started reading novels, particularly gay novels and the ones that I could get hold of were invariably British or American. It sort of pissed me off that there didn't seem to be a novel that portrayed gay life realistically enough. The protagonists all die or they all end up living miserably as if to say 'that's the fate of being gay'. But when I started digging into the history of what they call 'queer history', I found that obviously that wasn't the case. Apart from my own personal experiences, I just thought 'that's ridiculous'. And I thought I'd like to write something that was reasonably realistic, reasonably true to what life is here and yet not have the death narrative ... and just took the plunge basically.

**AW:** Was writing 'Glass Cathedral' an easy process?

*Glass Cathedral: Gay Novel or Liberation Theology? An Interview with Andrew Koh.* Angus Whitehead.

*Transnational Literature* Vol. 5 no. 2, May 2013.

<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

**AK:** Once it got going it was an easy process and there is a myth that I thought was a pretension but turns out to be not: the story did ‘take on a life of its own’. I think if you immerse yourself enough in the story – I didn’t have an arch, I didn’t plan things right from the start. I know some writers are very disciplined – they plan the full character and the whole outline etc but for me it was a very organic, evolutionary process. It was a story that needed to be told. I had the opening scene. From there on in my attitude was ‘Just get going – and see how it goes.’ So it was very experimental too. Because it was the first time I had started writing a fiction, or what I thought would be a fiction. I was completely oblivious to the process. I mean I had read about what other writers have done. Didn’t cut any ice for me – I just thought, ‘lets just try it this way’ and that’s how it took off.

**AW:** Did you initially envisage *Glass Cathedral* was going to be a fiction as opposed to a short story?

**AK:** I didn’t know how long it was going to run for. And in some ways it ended shorter than I would have liked. It probably isn’t substantial, but it felt right ... at the time. I mean one of the feedbacks that I got from the judges was that it needed more detail so I was learning from it as well. And I thought ‘Yeah, could’, but how do you put in the details without sounding like padding?

**AW:** I wonder if we can see parallels between you and Colin, the protagonist in the novel ... a similar trajectory?

**AK:** I’ve been asked several times whether it’s a biography. No it’s not. Yes, it is set in NUS [the National University of Singapore] and blah blah blah, but God I wish that I had sort of an experience when I was in NUS because I really didn’t come out till I was about 24, 25. In my honours year, when I came to terms with that my NUS life was almost over as an undergrad. Whereas he was at the beginning of his life at NUS.

**AW:** That’s right ... Colin at the start of the novel seems to be someone who is aware of his sexuality but he’s not come out yet.

**AK:** Well, yeah, very much in a closet but he seems ... we never went through that whole process of how he came to terms with himself but we start at the stage with Colin where he is already more or less at the tail end of that process. And he just needs a catalyst, which is in the form of James.

**AW:** James seems to make fun of Colin for having a typical Catholic schoolboy upbringing: Primary school, SJI, Catholic Junior College. Would you say that you were quite a typical Catholic boy?

**AK:** Yes, I was. And so I was, if you like, poking fun at myself. For a Catholic boy like me its so second nature that you don’t think about it, Well, I didn’t think about it. St. Anthony’s Boys School then the next Catholic school then the next Catholic school until you’re exhausted. And if there was a Catholic university – which thank God there isn’t because it would have been run by Opus Dei – I probably would have ended there at that point in time before I wised up.

**AW:** Before NUS, you did mandatory National Service as a member of the police force. Significantly, this was the early 90s during the period of Singapore’s policy of entrapment of practicing male homosexuals engaging in ‘acts of gross indecency’ in

*Glass Cathedral: Gay Novel or Liberation Theology? An Interview with Andrew Koh.* Angus Whitehead.

*Transnational Literature* Vol. 5 no. 2, May 2013.

<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

male toilets and other public spaces. You weren't directly involved in any of the operations. But did the policy impact upon you?

**AK:** Not as a police officer. Nobody knew I was gay. There was no way I was going to come out to anybody in the police force. The operation they did at Fort Road [November 1993] was the first I heard of it. It impacted on me emotionally. It basically said to me 'I have no place here if I'm going to be true to myself' ... and I didn't get out of the army to go into the police force to try to stay true to my beliefs, my values, only to have this being challenged all over again. I'm perfectly aware that people can find solutions to it and cope with those issues and go through the army and cope with those issues and live in Singapore, or become priests and remain gay. Hats off to them. I can't. I couldn't. And that's when I felt I had to leave at some point – a physical departure from this place, not just a mental departure. It was scary for me, in that I was hoping very much that I wouldn't be called to do any programmes that would have made me feel complicit in it all. I didn't have an answer for what went on. What was worse was a fellow student from my honours year was a journalist at *The New Paper* there and he wrote about it and the way he described the scene was just a bit too painful. So it came really close to the bone in terms of me being in the police, in terms of me being gay myself, in terms of the fact that I had a fellow student writing about it in support of the operation. It was the slant of the article: we're clamping down and that's good.

For me, homophobia is not just about men liking men sexually. And it's always men who like men, the lesbians are not counted. But I think that one of the strands that underlie homophobia is perceptions and definitions about masculinity: misogyny, male chauvinism. You can have straight men happily looking at lesbian pornography, they get off on it. You can have straight men looking at threesomes where there are two women and one man, but two men? Two men and one woman? Oh my god, the world comes crumbling down. And surely that whole sort of dig and insult that 'oh, two men getting together; so who's the woman? who is the bottom? who is the passive?' is a reflection of the patriarchal view of women. And it's a patronising view, it's a derogatory view, so how can homophobia just be about two men when what really underlies it is three-quarters of the world's population? Half of it is women and a significant portion of it is gay ... you know you're talking about more than half the world's population and these are held in thrall by the straight man's view ... so how can it be just a single issue and so from not being able to subscribe to that was more than just homosexuality. It's a whole caboodle, you know.

**AW:** I'm intrigued as to why you called your novel *Glass Cathedral*.

**AK:** I chose the *Glass Cathedral* because of the English saying: Those in glass houses shouldn't throw stones. And I thought 'that's what we've been doing within this country'. And it was at a time when we were talking a lot about 'Asian values'. We had our own values, but they were never really clearly defined – and when they were they made you sit up and go 'we're not practising them' when you look at the reality. But I was also thinking in terms of the Catholic church – this was pre the sexual abuse cases that hit the world, the scandals all over the world about priests and cardinals and bishops who sexually assaulted seminarians etc. That's the image that I wanted to convey as well – the hypocrisy of what goes on, which was also in the story and I

*Glass Cathedral: Gay Novel or Liberation Theology? An Interview with Andrew Koh.* Angus Whitehead.

*Transnational Literature* Vol. 5 no. 2, May 2013.

<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

think particularly that passage that I read at the Singapore Art Museum panel discussion. The tittle tattle that goes on that can make or break a person's life and that's not just within the church, but in the daily surroundings and that was for me a link to a glimpse of what James could have gone through, which we never see, but tangentially through what Norbert has gone through or not gone through because he didn't really experience that. But what Colin witnessed was in many ways similar to what James would have gone through, an overriding heterosexual norm and narrative that goes on. It's constantly there but we just don't think about it – that whole work ethic that we have in Singapore ... it's constantly there, that whole drumming on about family comes first and family is invariably defined as man, woman, children after that. And nothing else.

**AW:** I felt that that passage came across very powerfully at the reading and I thought again underlined how in the novel the Singlish is done so well. But on another level this is such a scary passage isn't it? At the mention of a priest's possible homosexuality these seemingly benign and harmless senior Singaporean Catholic parishioners are suddenly transformed into participants in a witch hunt, enouncing their sexual perceptions and values: a male priest sleeping with a female prostitute is far better than any expression of homosexuality which seems to be equated with pedophilia.

**AK:** Yes, and that's exactly what we saw post publication of this book with that whole sexual assault. About three years ago some high-ranking cardinal from the Vatican essentially said that: 'these priests are pedophiles, that's why they touched boys but they are also homosexuals.' No they are not the same, but you get those pronouncements, and they're in people's minds all the time, you know?

You ignore religion and religious institutions at your peril. And this government has made the same point. Christians are what? Twelve percent of this population? Twelve and yet we have a disproportionate number of Christian MPs. So we have a minority of this population in Singapore wielding tremendous power. And Christianity is seen as western and therefore more progressive, they get that sort of networking with the American churches, and so they gain economic power and with that, you know they allow the theology to come through.

**AW:** Moving from priests in black gowns walking their rounds, perhaps we could talk about a literary and artistic figure that influenced your theological thinking, William Blake.

**AK:** Yes, I found Blake deeply spiritual and I found his theology deeply resonant and in many ways, it fits in very well with aspects of Catholic theology. Liberation theology is one strand, the sort of Catholic social work movement was the other. We're talking about a poet-artist from the late eighteenth, early nineteenth century who was well ahead of his time, engaging in social issues but also taking it back if you like, to the heart of it. The human individual as the agent of social change but also the need to be aware of one's own values, of going back to this sort of self-examination, taking the whole idea of the divine image for instance and trying to engage and grapple and struggle with what it means to be a divine image and the whole irony that the so called divine image is a double-edged sword. And you can use it to oppress and repress or you can actually use it to empower and liberate. For me,

*Glass Cathedral: Gay Novel or Liberation Theology? An Interview with Andrew Koh.* Angus Whitehead.

*Transnational Literature* Vol. 5 no. 2, May 2013.

<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

that was really no different from the sort of gospels that I was reading, what this historical person – one thinks of as this historical person – called Jesus tried to do. If there were one person who influenced my theology, it would be William Blake.

**AW:** Johann S Lee's *Peculiar Chris* preceded *Glass Cathedral*. Edmund Wee's *The Narcissist* followed your own novel. Both Lee and Wee's are interesting texts, but *Glass Cathedral* I think possesses particular strengths. I was impressed by how well written it was. The novel is challenging: even on a first read one is acutely aware of the 'pressure per square inch' in the prose, but at the same time it's a page turner, on an intuitive, non-academic level it's a good read.

**AK:** Thank you.

**AW:** I also think *Glass Cathedral* exhibits wit and taste without seeming precious, or elitist. So for me it's the wit, the Singlish and the engagement with local that impressed me on first reading the novel. Are you surprised to hear me focusing on these aspects?

**AK:** No, only surprised because at the time these things were never mentioned. Paul Yeoh in his paper 'Writing Singapore Gay Identities: Queering the Nation in Johann S Lee's *Peculiar Chris* and Andrew Koh's *Glass Cathedral*' made a nod towards that but he never really fully analysed it. But it was a conscious effort on my part. I don't want to mock Singlish. Because it's funny doesn't mean it's any less, in terms of its standing towards the official standard of English, and I've always felt that we need to reclaim it at some level, because it's our language and we grew up in that, this is how we communicate, you know, like it or not, why should we constantly bow to an external source? If I can speak your level of English, that's fine, that's when I communicate with you, but when I'm at home who cares if my house is dirty? I live in it not you, so who cares if you think I'm not grammatically correct? It's my language. It's how I communicate not just things external to me but its also how I communicate who I am. Why should I be ashamed of that? To be ashamed of that is to be ashamed of myself, so I was struggling not to present a stereotype – which is so easy. And struggling to find what I had hoped and in your opinion came through –we struggled with that onstage with the Necessary Stage and that is why you see in the early days we've never attempted Shakespeare, never mind anything else. We've sometimes toyed with 1960s 1970s British novels and I think we did a Harold Pinter once ... but we had difficulties because culturally it was different. If we had done it in a different language it would have been a lot easier, but doing English you invariably get the comparison with a British production. But we're not that, so we can't speak British with a British accent and sustain that over a play. So why bother? Lets look at what we've got – and I think that's probably my advantage over Johann Lee – that's always been on my mind. It still is.

**AW:** Is it significant that, unlike *Peculiar Chris*, the novel is written in the first person?

**AK:** The reason it's written in the first person is not because its autobiographical as people seem to assume, but because the reader utters the 'I' and therefore opens up the narrative for self-identification at points and if it doesn't the text challenges you to do that, to put yourself in another's shoes. How does it feel now? Get out of your

*Glass Cathedral: Gay Novel or Liberation Theology? An Interview with Andrew Koh.* Angus Whitehead.

*Transnational Literature* Vol. 5 no. 2, May 2013.

<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

comfort zone. How does that feel? Now do you understand a little bit of what it's like to be an ethnic minority in this country – if you're a Chinese. If you're not a Chinese, do you understand what it's like to be a minority of anything and feel you have no voice? That's what I was hoping it would do and that's why I chose the first person. Reader response, Stanley Fish, all came back (laughs).

**AW:** To turn to the 'queer' aspects of *Glass Cathedral*; you were quite aware that you were writing a queer novel?

**AK:** Yes.

**AW:** And you must have appreciated that given its subject, in mid 90s Singapore it was going to be controversial?

**AK:** Yes.

**AW:** What about your representation of gay sex in the novel. Presumably because you were writing in Singapore it's not so explicit, you've not gone into the supposedly graphic detail that Wee was criticised for with *The Narcissist*. But I wonder if in another sense your representations were quite groundbreaking for the period. Probably for the first time in Singapore literary history through Colin we're fleetingly receiving a sustained positive representation of the physicality of gay sex.

**AK:** I couldn't tell you quite honestly. When I wrote that I wasn't conscious of breaking new ground. My concern was staying true to the story and to be true to the story I thought, 'kind of silly to have two men who were madly in love with each other and we don't hear anything about sex.' We see it in Harold Robbins, we see it in all the other texts why not in this? And obviously sex has always been for me, from a theological point of view, an expression of that relation, the physicalisation of that relationship inasmuch as voice is a physicalisation of thought. So I thought 'it has to go in somewhere'. And it wasn't easy writing that. I think the reviewer in *Focus* – or was it the *New Straits Times*? – did suggest it descended into purple prose at times and that particular passage was mentioned. And I thought 'fair enough' because I had to struggle with the way of describing it without making it sordid and I did want to convey that sex can be beautiful and its no less beautiful between two men, two women, than it is between a man and a woman. So I wasn't conscious of it being the first or ...

**AW:** Earlier about you touched on homophobic rhetoric framing homosexuality in heterosexual terms: who is the man? who is the woman? If my memory serves me correctly, in *Peculiar Chris*, the protagonist is to an almost studied degree represented as a 'top'. And in one passage at least a 'bottom' is unequivocally represented as the domesticated 'wife'.

**AK:** Oh really? Couldn't remember, wow ...

**AW:** Whereas in your novel that doesn't seem to be the case: both 'bottom' and 'top' are represented positively.

**AK:** Good, good, because I certainly was moving away from that. When I first came out and had my boyfriend and everything – the one that passed away – a close friend asked 'I don't really understand, so who is the wife? Who plays the woman?' I looked at her and said 'both are women and both are men, we are both husbands and we're

*Glass Cathedral: Gay Novel or Liberation Theology? An Interview with Andrew Koh.* Angus Whitehead.

*Transnational Literature* Vol. 5 no. 2, May 2013.

<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

both wives' I said 'that's our advantage over you: you're restricted to your roles, we're not', and again I was very conscious of that usual stereotype and therefore very conscious of that sort of – and that coming from a woman – again it was unconscious mysoginism that she's internalised and she just couldn't go beyond that.

**AW:** This breaking down of these divisive misogynistic stereotypes of gay 'wife' or gay 'husband' or whatever seems quite Blakean: the ideal man embracing both male and female ...

**AK:** Think about 'The Sick Rose' for example, how he talks about the rose and how he breaks it down – and again this is just to tie in with what we said about sex earlier, for him it was like 'why do we have to feel so guilty, and why do we have to look at sex as if it were a dirty worm that is eating away?' It's beautiful, it's exactly what he said, and why do we restrict ourselves to gender roles? Who created the gender roles in the first place? And like all official histories it's orchestrated by the people in power, so if men are in power they want to maintain that. And that is again what I was trying to work through within that book, and that is why in the novel *Sister Acid Tongue* couldn't get her way. She didn't hold any positions of power – it was the men who did. They are the ones who are uncomfortable talking about it. Of course with very good reasons. People are not ready – just like we say 'oh no, Singapore is not ready.' How often do we hear that refrain? It's in the book, you know? We look at Rani, the Indian girl, who says, 'look at your skin color and look at mine. You forget because you are in the majority, you are comfortable, so you don't see something so obvious as a skin colour.'

**AW:** I thought that was particularly well done. You had Rani both articulating and embodying the experience of being marginalised due to race, the boys representing the same via sexual orientation: Indian woman and Chinese gay men recognising difference while empathising with one another.

At the recent reading Robert Yeo suggested 'if you want to find out what its like to be a gay man in Singapore read *Glass Cathedral*'. I guess that statement needs a little qualification?

**AK:** I would not accept that statement at all. Because – how can you? – it will always be an individual journey. There's collective memory – which is what history is about, what culture is all about – I accept that but I'm a little bit resistant to anything that's overarching. I accept that, but I also want to emphasise that there is a dynamic relationship between that guideline and individual journeys. Every gay man has to find it for himself. Some people come out late in life because they are not ready to come out earlier. And that's fine. Some people can come out earlier in life and that's fine too. It's about finding a place ... and I go back to the Cheshire cat in *Alice*. If you don't know where you're going then any direction will do, which goes back to the question, where do you want to go? But to ask that question, you have to know where you are in the first place, which goes back to the Taoist saying that the journey of a thousand miles starts from where you are standing. If you don't know where you are standing how can you take the first step? How do you know which direction to take? So it starts with the first step. Here. So while it's very flattering I would reject that statement completely. And I think it's dangerous because Colin's journey is different, James's journey is different. A person may be in the same situation and I can think of

*Glass Cathedral: Gay Novel or Liberation Theology? An Interview with Andrew Koh.* Angus Whitehead.

*Transnational Literature* Vol. 5 no. 2, May 2013.

<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

many men in James' situation that are similar, but similar is not identical. And they will have to find their own way. Hopefully with help. But, no, *Glass Cathedral*'s not a guidebook. I would steer clear of that completely.

**AW:** Going back to a point I made at the recent reading – its great that we now have maybe four, five queer Singaporean novels but all of those novels seem to be coming from one group: upper middle class Chinese.

**AK:** Alfian [Sa'at; A Malay, prominent, accomplished and controversial local writer]?

**AW:** Of course, but I was thinking particularly of Singapore's gay novelists.

**AK:** Ng Yi-Sheng mentioned somebody else to me. But that could be plays as well. Muslim gay man. Wrote something a year ago [Irfan Kasban]. And that's in Ng's recent collection [*GASPP; A Gay Anthology of Singapore Poetry and Prose (2010)*]. You might have to look at that, but, no I agree, when you look at the history of HIV for instance the fact that it occupies such a position as it does now in terms of funding, in terms of the progress we've made, I mean you know, we've made huge progress in a matter of what twenty, twentyfive years now? Unheard of. But that's not due to huge numbers of black Africans. It's due to a group of very powerful, empowered gay white men in America. You know, we owe it to them. At the same time it's lamentable, because why do we have to live in a so called civilisation where only the rich and the powerful are able to fight for their own rights? And if you have no rights, you're a goner. And that's the other thing that I wanted to contrast between James and Colin. Colin's clearly not from a rich background, we don't know how poor he is, but he's certainly not dirt poor. And he is getting a university education. You're right, they come from that level, I come from that level.

**AW:** I also get a sense at least in the 1990s of your frustration with authoritarian and regulated Singapore.

**AK:** Then and now. Even this week [mid-November 2011] ... When we hear about the Ministry of Education wanting to build character, you think 'duh!' How do you expect children to build character when the message you have embedded in a curriculum, they deal with minute to minute says something completely different. With the pressures you put on them, how are they going to find the time to build character when all they have to think about is exams. Structures count. And that's the pressure that James in the novel faces as well. 'Take over the family business' – 'I don't like it' – 'but take over the family business. That's fine; have fun go and do other stuff but we expect you to take over the family business because that's the most important thing' – not the family – it's the business part of the family business that is important. Not fulfilling your human potential. 'What's that?' 'Well, it's a high falutin' arts thing that they talk about y'know', 'be realistic' – that's another term that's banded in Singapore. But for James, taking over the business is not being realistic. 'Have we moved on as a civilisation?' is one of the moral questions of the novel as well.

**AW:** I wanted to ask you about your deployment of liberation theology in the novel, especially through the writings of the Brazilian theologian Leonardo Boff. Not long

*Glass Cathedral: Gay Novel or Liberation Theology? An Interview with Andrew Koh.* Angus Whitehead.

*Transnational Literature* Vol. 5 no. 2, May 2013.

<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

before you wrote the novel Boff had been silenced by Cardinal Ratzinger, the future Pope Benedict XVI ...

**AK:** You've been doing your homework!

**AW:** ... for writing his book *Charism and Power* in 1985 and that's a book alluded to in *Glass Cathedral*. Perhaps we can draw some parallels between what happens to Norbert in the novel and what had just happened to Boff?

**AK:** Yeah, that would be the direct link. Contents aside, but I think it's the fear of the dissenting voice and therefore not allowing dissent to come through. Fear of failure I think on the part of the church. And that for me is literally the Glass Cathedral. This is a church that talks about, in terms of its teachings 'the holy spirit will come and will be revealed and teach you at a deeper level than whatever Jesus had revealed'. And yet to what extent is the church hearing the voice of the spirit in those dissenting quarters? Jesus dissented. He started off as a rebel. He made pronouncements that were completely unacceptable to the official church at that time, the Pharisees and the Sanhedrin, and now we have his church doing exactly the same thing that the Sanhedrin would have done. And you just think, 'stones ... glass houses', except that this is a glass cathedral. And I've always thought, 'what are you afraid of? What are you really afraid of?' Because these are priests and religious who are trying to live the gospels, not just the institutional trappings that evolved over the centuries, but they are trying to get back to the heart of what it means to follow the message of this man who was so radical at this time, he dared to stand up to the religious authority because he was saying that they were not following the message of their Judaism and ok he may disagree with you, da-de-da, but what does it serve to silence it? How do you know that the voice of the holy spirit isn't in someone? Because you're the pope and he's not – that's just an institutional thing – Jesus humbled himself enough to do whatever, that's the whole mystery of the word 'incarnate': God, this big entity, humbling himself and becoming mere flesh and bones. It's like a human being incarnated as an ant. If that's not humility then what is? So a Pope who suppresses different perspectives, Pope, where is your humility in trying to discern the voice of God in these dissenting voices? You're criticising the collusion of the church with dictatorships that ended up oppressing people, so indirectly they are asking the church 'where is your position with the people in power or with the people on the ground who are trampled, as the gospels would have you do. And that's exactly where Norbert is standing. When you have churches that are rebuilt, air conditioned, that are comfortable, that preach middle class values, as does the Catholic church today, in Singapore, then where is the Jesus in all of that? Where is the man who constantly spoke out for the marginalised in his society? I don't hear it. We don't hear stories written about chaplains ministering to prisoners and sex workers. We don't hear about that in the Catholic press. We hear about priests who've led pilgrimages to Medjugorje and made big splashes with this charity and whose won praises from the Vatican and God knows where else – then how is the church different from the society it's in? How can it possibly be a model for a different way of life? And so I question, does Norbert have a place? The Bishop knows of Norbert's struggle, but he chooses to be an institutional man rather than be a bishop and we see that happening all the time. I remember reading a novel somewhere that said once you're admitted to an organisation it's a matter of time before you become an organisation man or

*Glass Cathedral: Gay Novel or Liberation Theology? An Interview with Andrew Koh.* Angus Whitehead.

*Transnational Literature* Vol. 5 no. 2, May 2013.

<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

woman – you are that organisation – and whatever values you have just get frittered away. And that for me is the constant risk you take when you're part of a larger institution. And that was my struggle with wanting to be a Religious. Could I do that?

**AW:** We're back to Blake: 'I must Create a System or be enslav'd by another Man's'.

**AK:** Yes precisely that, precisely what Blake is saying. And I think that must have come from Blake.

**AW:** I guess there's a significance about Boff, not merely his theology, but also the man himself? This postdates your novel but after 9/11 Boff wrote: 'For me, the terrorist attack of September 11 represents the shift towards a new humanitarian and world model. The targeted buildings sent a message: a new world civilisation cannot be built with the kind of dominating economy (symbolised by the World Trade Center), with the kind of death machine set up (the Pentagon) and with the kind of arrogant politics and producer of many exclusions ... For me the system and culture of capital began to collapse. They are too destructive.'

**AK:** In a sense Boff stands with somebody like Chomsky and others who have said similar things. While not denying the terrible tragedy of the whole situation both are saying we really need to reflect deeper. We don't, we never ask, how did this come about in the first place? We always react to what happened. And this is where Buddhism comes in for me, because Buddhism always traces back: before you do anything, take out that mirror and look into it first because your reactions betray something ... but you need to probe, and uncover that. And that's also very much cognitive behavior therapy which does that as well, which challenges thought processes that are associated with emotions and uncovers what that this is really about. Don't project, don't hide, don't mask it, lets get to the core then we can actually deal with it. And if Boff says it that's what it is – that's what liberation theology actually tries to do. Get to the core. When we claim to follow somebody, when we take on that philosophy, what is it about that philosophy? Lets not spin it to our own advantage and if we do then lets at least have the courage to say that's what we're doing. And Norbert's situation is about that: trying to stay true to a vocation. Yes he's called to the priesthood, and a number of times I've heard, 'oh priests are only human. So you've got to forgive them their failings.' I'm sorry I don't buy that. I admit they're human, but if you choose to believe that you are called to the priesthood it's to live a life in spite of human failings, so I'm going to reach out to so and so because that's true to what the gospel is. No matter how uncomfortable I am with it, in spite of my discomfort, because that's what it means, I have to be a priest to that person. I'm not going there as me with my discomfort, with my personal value judgment, because I'm there to be a shepherd. And there's the whole image of the shepherd as well, you know? People like Leonardo Boff, Hans Kung, Charles Curran are trying to do, they're trying to look after all the sheep. And pay particular attention to the ones that are not so well, the ones that are frail, that tend to be straying behind, and the one that may be prone to sickness. After all the healthy will look after itself. And yet we have a church that's completely the other way around! It wants the successful businessman because it fills the coffers, it wants the politically influential person because then it can influence society insidiously and so on and so forth. It reaches out to the middle and upper classes. They're not interested in the marginals.

*Glass Cathedral: Gay Novel or Liberation Theology? An Interview with Andrew Koh.* Angus Whitehead.

*Transnational Literature* Vol. 5 no. 2, May 2013.

<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

And the church's justification for that is that 'if we have all this money we can then help the poor. I'm sorry, Lord Acton comes in here. Power corrupts and absolute power tends to corrupt absolutely. The history of the church has shown that. And that's what people like Boff and not just the overt liberation theologians but people like Timothy Radcliffe, the former Master General of the Dominicans are trying to say. Beware of power. Don't be afraid to use it, but don't let it control you, and the only way to do that is to keep going back to what the gospel is trying to say, what are you called to? And that is what Norbert struggles with, that when he came to an understanding of his priesthood, where he struggles with his own sexuality. When he came to self-acceptance, he realised that, oh, the priesthood is not about being comfortable in an air conditioned church and being invited out for great dinners and then pontificate over things and preach and have your theatres every Sunday swanning around in a cassock, but getting off that high horse, not wearing a dog collar, being a part of society in order to reach out to those who are neglected by society, we can't accept that. The men and women in the novel do not accept that. Is the current church accepting that? Is current society accepting that? That's why I brought them in.

**AW:** I wasn't savvy enough to discover too much about Charles Curran and John McNeil whom you mention in the novel ...

**AK:** John McNeil was a Jesuit who wrote a couple of books at least about homosexuality and the church. And then of course he was silenced. Charles Curran is a moral theologian who also challenged the whole concept of morality. So they were mentioned because of the moral arguments against homosexuality. And Leonardo Boff was mentioned because of the movement to get back to looking at the marginalised people. Trying to make the church allied to a different group rather than to power. All three were important that's why they were mentioned. To triangulate and say, where are we going with this?

**AW:** The portrayal of Christianity with a social conscience, particularly in figures like Norbert and Sister Acid Tongue in the early 1990s brings us close to PAP accusations of the Catholic church workers being influenced by Marxism and liberation theology and of involvement in the so called Marxist Conspiracy of 1987. Did you have Operation Spectrum in mind when you wrote *Glass Cathedral*?

**AK:** Of course! Ofcourse. I was with the Young Student Christian Movement, although I came to it very late. So I had occasion to meet people like Vincent Cheng. Being involved in The Necessary Stage we'd heard about the theatre group Third Stage that was putting up all these other plays. In many ways they were our inspiration because they were dealing with social issues that nobody wanted to deal with and at that time about the experiences of Indonesian and Filipina female domestic workers and the abuse that goes on with that, and still does, were very much at the back of my mind – and invoking Leonardo Boff was more than a nod to that.

**AW:** You've already mentioned the *Straits Times* not noticing your novel. One would initially assume that that had something to do with its gay content, but on reflection the political, social justice content seems a more likely catalyst for such neglect.

**AK:** If that's the case then hats off to them for picking it up.

*Glass Cathedral: Gay Novel or Liberation Theology? An Interview with Andrew Koh.* Angus Whitehead.

*Transnational Literature* Vol. 5 no. 2, May 2013.

<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

**AW:** You are keen to stress this is not an autobiographical novel: you are not Colin. But is it possible there are traits of you in other characters, Father Norbert? Sister Acid Tongue, or maybe even James?

**AK:** If I had joined the Jesuits then I would envisage myself in a similar situation with Norbert. Maybe not as noble (laughs) but getting into trouble with the church authorities would be more the case. Sister Acid Tongue, yeah, in terms of my frustration with church organisation. I was pretty involved in the Legion of Mary, and I remember at a Patrician meeting, when we were talking about church history etc and I was challenging certain views, and the Jesuit priest who was there, sort of guiding it, he was very nice and said ‘well, what you said is not bad, but in the wrong hands it might be completely misconstrued.’ And I thought ‘you know, Father, this is a university. If it’s misconstrued is it my problem or is it theirs? That they are not functioning as undergrads? Not my problem. With higher education you are expected to be more responsible. You’ve been given the privilege that most people don’t get. Why should I apologise for your stupidity and your laziness in thinking?’ But I held my tongue and thought, ‘there’s no point arguing, it’s not going to get anywhere’ – so yes it has elements and traits of me.

**AW:** That reminds me of a Filipino delegate at a Singapore university conference once, sensing debate was a little constrained, asking ‘surely we can say what we want in a university classroom?’ On receiving a nervously non-committal answer from Singaporean fellow delegates she said furiously ‘Even under Marcos we could say what we wanted in the university!’

There seems a playful quality to your writing, almost a queering of Singaporean space. In an early passage the narrator after cattily suggesting how National Service ruins, damages young men with regard to any appreciation of literature, Colin reflects on servicemen’s bodies toned, and reminiscent of Michelangelo’s David. Under Colin’s queering lens cars’ exhausts’ become anuses, an NUS storm drain resembles a crotch zipper ...

**AK:** Somebody pointed out something to me about the first passage you mention, where I write: ‘The women [students] of course, had not the privilege of servicing the nation.’ and being asked ‘do you serve the nation or do you service the nation?’ and I couldn’t answer. And I was thinking, I can’t remember, you know, why I wrote that, but I am sure it was deliberate, because I went back and I thought now let’s try and recall did I? And I remembered I did, because I wanted to say it was a prostitution at some level ... and that goes back to the whole idea of work as the *raison d’être* for Singapore life. If that’s not prostitution then what is?

**AW:** That’s one of the aspects of the novel I really enjoyed, perhaps it would be misleading to compare your writing with say someone like Oscar Wilde ...

**AK:** Oh, do compare me to Wilde, flatter me (laughs)

**AW:** But there are these barbed witty, catty comments – fairly rare in other Singaporean prose I’ve encountered – the full significance of which is easily missed by the careless or clueless reader.

**AK:** Well I am a gay man (laughs). Bitchiness is part of our nature ...

*Glass Cathedral: Gay Novel or Liberation Theology? An Interview with Andrew Koh.* Angus Whitehead.

*Transnational Literature* Vol. 5 no. 2, May 2013.

<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

**AW:** But, as we touched on earlier, you also capture vividly Singlish, the democratised everyday speech of this corner of South East Asia, that seems to have sturdily resisted the People's Action's Policies to replace it with 'Good English.'

**AK:** I've said to people back in Sydney 'look at the way the Asians speak, whether its in their own language or whether its in English, if they've not been soiled by education of a colonial bent, they are very graphic. When people say 'ayah, its like my heart is thrown in the drain', that's literally from a Malay expression, from a Chinese expression. How graphic is that compared to a simple 'it hurt me deeply'? (laughs). And that's literature, that's literature because that's what literature does, it uses metaphors, it uses symbols to convey something deeper than what mere words could do. It goes beyond 'Speak Good English' denotation and moves into the realm of connotation and opens up a whole range of interpretation and that was what I was trying to stay close to.

**AW:** You mentioned earlier your anxiousness not to write about gay sex in a sordid way, and how that may have caused you to veer into purple prose as the *New Straits Times* suggested. But I was intrigued by your use of the language of Catholic worship to describe or gesture towards gay sex. There are several instances of gay men on their knees in supplication ... I guess that must have been a conscious strategy?

**AK:** Yes, it was conscious, it was the Agincourt two fingers up at the church, saying 'I'm gonna call your bluff, take your theology to its logical conclusion. And you prove to me what the difference is' ... and that's what I was trying to do.

**AW:** There is also that moment in the novel at a nuptial sermon, and Colin's feeling very uncomfortable because it's the same old sermon going on about a couple getting married primarily to have children and so forth ... and there's a moment where the priest mentions that God told Adam and Eve to 'Go forth and multiply'. You seem to have craftily phrased it to riff off a rawer version of this biblical phrase: 'go fuck yourselves' ...

**AK:** Yes. In another section the nuns are talking about carnal knowledge and another boy was asked to explain and he came up with you know "fucked in the backside"; that's exactly what it means. We have priests in a nuptial blessing, 'Go forth and multiply', go forth and have sex is effectively what he is saying, but we like to couch it in such platitudes that we've managed to distance ourselves from it – and when someone becomes explicit and calls it a spade we suddenly become hysterical and again its calling the church to account, calling its bluff: 'take your theology to its logical conclusion, cut through the spin, what is it about? that you don't dare to admit to yourselves?'

**AW:** It seems ironic when the Bible itself seems so sexually explicit. The Song of Solomon ...

**AK:** Yes, it is replete with sex. It just doesn't read like Harold Robbins to us, only because we've moved on in the way we use language. But for them, that would have been explicit.

**AW:** 'Thy two breasts are like two young roes that are twins, which feed among the lilies.'

*Glass Cathedral: Gay Novel or Liberation Theology? An Interview with Andrew Koh.* Angus Whitehead.

*Transnational Literature* Vol. 5 no. 2, May 2013.

<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

**AK:** Yeah, I mean, how explicit is that! How purple prose is that!

**AW:** You also narrate a character's realisation of his queerness in terms of the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, which I thought very effective.

**AK:** There's nothing more queer than a Catholic church, nothing more camp. And when you see a high mass being celebrated, have you ever seen one?

**AW:** Yes, and Anglo Catholic services, at least in the 1980s, bells and smells, more Roman Catholic than ...

**AK:** More Rome than the Romans!

**AW:** I also recall a lecturer of mine, who was gay and a Catholic, pointing out the eroticism of a half-naked man in his early thirties writhing on a cross, as well as the whole theatricality of the mass ... I think he called it a ballet.

**AK:** Absolutely. But these are perpetuated by straight men! [laughs] that's the irony! I mean, Benedict, loving his ermine and cape and Prada shoes, well ...

**AW:** At the end of the novel James somewhat suddenly gives in to the pressures of the heterosexual Catholic Singaporean norm. Of course the prevalent values of nation and church impinge, but ultimately the prime thing that occasions this seems to be family, doesn't it, or at least his conception of what his family wants?

**AK:** Yes. Because that would be the closest Asian force, the hardest to get away with. My own coming out story is all my friends knew before my family. Not because I treasure my family less, but precisely because they were so close that it was the hardest. I could walk away from friends, or so-called friends and acquaintances who don't accept my sexuality, but how do you walk away from your family? These are blood ties, you know, their bones are my bones if you like, there's a genetic link. You can pretend, you can try and distance yourself, but you can never deny that tie ... and that would be the straw that breaks the camel's back for him.

**AW:** Soon after the publication of *Glass Cathedral* you left Singapore, did you leave the Catholic church at around that time as well?

**AK:** No, not officially. They wouldn't allow me to leave officially anyway (laughs). It looks good for the numbers. But I have, I mean I can't remember the last time I attended a mass. I consider myself nominally Buddhist, but I've always been interested in Buddhist philosophy and Taoism anyway, but don't really get into the whole big practice because I'm wary of institutions again ... that's my experience with the Catholic church. And when I say to you in a flippant way once a Catholic always a Catholic thinking of James Joyce again, it remains true for me, because having thrown myself into all that, having read theological books and the history of the church with the view of wanting to become a religious priest, they all influenced me, they've shaped the way I view the world. When I talk about social justice it's rooted in that.

**AW:** So its not been an unequivocally negative thing?

**AK:** No, no, as I said earlier, anyone who comes to me and says the world is black and white. I'd say you're living in cloud cuckoo land. Nothing's black and white, and it is a constant struggle to try and discern what the shades of grey are, what does it

*Glass Cathedral: Gay Novel or Liberation Theology? An Interview with Andrew Koh.* Angus Whitehead.

*Transnational Literature* Vol. 5 no. 2, May 2013.

<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

mean for me? My whole guilt thing is very Catholic, which my partner constantly reminds me. While I'm spouting all this stuff about engaging with the socially marginalised, I feel guilty because I'm not doing enough! Or anything for that matter – and it just goes round and round – not in a negative sense. Songs of Innocence and of Experience, an innocence that hasn't gone through life experiences is completely useless and yet you can be so driven in a wrong way, if you like, with experience that you can come out a bitter person. But it's about using life experience to come out with an experienced innocence: the tyger rather than the lamb. And the tiger dares to do things. Now that is difficult, and that for me is at the heart of the gospel, so this is where the Catholic comes in, that is the constant message, and that is the constant message of Buddhism, and that is the constant message of Taoism for me, that things are in flux, but as long as you keep trying there is always hope. The day you stop – that's when it's all done and dusted, you no longer progress as a person. And although it sounds bleak at the end of *Glass Cathedral*, and its very easy to read that, just like its so easy to give in to what society wants: have your 3 cs, 5 cs, or however many cs there are now – the point is to constantly work against that – so Norbert and Colin are left open ended, they have a choice, you always have a choice.

**AW:** So the peripheral context may be bleak, but there's also a challenging moment of choice, opportunity that the novel ends on.

**AK:** Yes! Again, we have no control in terms of the weather, but you have a choice at a hot or a humid time to either come out in a jacket, t-shirt, or a singlet. Or to come out in a linen jacket – if you have to wear a jacket – who says you have to try and change the weather with some mystical powers? We accept reality, but we work within that. It's still a choice.

**AW:** The new edition of *Glass Cathedral* looks very nice ...

**AK:** Yeah, the one featuring a cover portrait where I look like I'm on drugs! (laughs).

**AW:** To all intents and purposes this edition is the same as the first edition. You didn't take the opportunity to make any changes to the text?

**AK:** When I reread it I thought 'Oh, I've overused the parenthesis I think' – and I don't know why I did that (laughs) and then I thought oh no, I'll just pretend it's all phenomenology, bracketing experiences – and if anyone asks me, that's what I'm sticking to.

**AW:** So you weren't tempted to revise the text?

**AK:** No. Its not a classic, is it, if you start changing it?

**AW:** Nevertheless, there are minor changes aren't there? Reading the novel in 2011 is going to be a very different experience to reading it in 1995, not just due to the very different world we're living in. The cover's different, there's also Robert Yeo's introduction, which may colour one's reading – is this a campus novel as he suggests?

**AK:** Hmmm, I'm not quite sure that it is ...

**AW:** And you also changed the dedicatee ...

**AK:** I did change the dedicatee. Steve [Hathway] was my first partner, who passed away of a brain tumour in 1996. He was the one I started a long distance relationship

*Glass Cathedral: Gay Novel or Liberation Theology? An Interview with Andrew Koh.* Angus Whitehead.

*Transnational Literature* Vol. 5 no. 2, May 2013.

<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

with, and a Methodist minister. Before he died I said – because one of the things he struggled with, despite being a Methodist minister, was death was it, death was just it. And there's nothing more, and the whole futility of life – you come you go, the spark is gone, nobody notices, you're forgotten. And I said 'no, I will remember you'. So I struggled with that dedication, but at the same time I want to be realistic, I can't live in the past – and there are other ways of remembering him. And I want to acknowledge the living too, I want to acknowledge my current partner who's seen me through many difficulties. We've been through many difficulties, up and down, so ... I want to acknowledge that. We've been together, what, fifteen years? It's quite a journey. Now I want to ... I don't know when another novel is gonna be published so I thought I better dedicate this in case I never get published ever again creatively. But, I don't forget the dead. I'm thinking of Bukit Brown now (laughs).<sup>1</sup> Not that the dead should make way for the living, but there are other ways of remembering my first partner too.

**AW:** In these relatively more enlightened times, has the *Straits Times* contacted you or mentioned you concerning the republication or with regard to your readings, and reviews?

**AK:** No! I wish. I was narcissistic enough to open the paper the next day and the day after and the third day running but no. Déjà vu, eh? (laughs). I was hoping that at least the presence of Robert Yeo would bring them out, but no.

**AW:** You've recently reread your novel. What was it like to read it again after all these years?

**AK:** When I reread it, I took the position of not so much the author – and I mean its fifteen years down the line and fifteen years since I last read it – and so I could assume the position of reader rather than author, reading and revising this work, and it was a case of 'Gosh, I wrote that. Oh my God – implications of this in just that sentence or paragraph – wow!' it was a nice feeling, I felt that there was a lot more to the novel than just a gay man coming to terms with what it means to be such in this society that I had lots of hints pointing to the larger context, pointing to the historical background in which the novel took place, as well as metatextually the time in which it was published, so on both levels because this was meant to be some time in the eighties, the setting, and yet it was published in the nineties, so you have both within the text one context and then the larger context of the publication. I felt 'Wow, that's great!' I liked it.

**AW:** In a nutshell, what does the novel mean to you now?

**AK:** To use what you said earlier, divine providence, because it gives me hope that one, I could write again, that this isn't the end of a creative writing career. As an academic you know that when papers get rejected by quite a few journals you can get really despondent and that's what happened with my manuscript, not this one but the one I currently have, written about ten years ago. And yet not knowing, is it the fault of the manuscript itself.

**AW:** So no feedback?

---

<sup>1</sup> Historic Chinese cemetery currently being exhumed in Singapore to make way for another highway. *Glass Cathedral: Gay Novel or Liberation Theology? An Interview with Andrew Koh.* Angus Whitehead.

*Transnational Literature* Vol. 5 no. 2, May 2013.

<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

**AK:** Interestingly Harvill Press back in the UK's editor responded: 'Very interesting themes, very interesting subject matter, absolutely relevant to our times, unfortunately the company isn't taking on new writers.' So that was the one major publishing house that came back with a very positive response, and that for me was important because it meant that ok maybe rough around the edges in terms of the technical execution, but certainly the subject matter is spot on, and that gives me hope for writing again. And the second bit is that perhaps Singapore is ready for something a little bit more controversial, a little bit more radical, a little bit more progressive, there's hope, a glimmer of hope.

**AW:** Do you think you'll ever return to Singapore permanently? Obviously, as you said at the reading, living here as a gay man presently presents very real problems. But can you envisage moving back?

**AK:** I really couldn't say. Because when I emigrated to England, I didn't think I'd ever leave it. And I never thought I'd be in Australia. James Bond. 'Never say never again'. I couldn't say. And that's why I've not given up my citizenship.

**AW:** Would the repealing of 377A influence your decision?<sup>2</sup>

**AK:** Not at this point in time. In the past maybe. I've moved on from there.

**AW:** Its no longer relevant?

**AK:** In a sense it is irrelevant, not so much irrelevant as I don't give a damn. But I'm saying that because I'm dipping in and out, I'm not actually living here. Might make a difference if I'm living here long term with my partner. I don't know. It's the Damocles sword. And as I said at the reading, the police have every legal right to break in.

**AW:** Even if it's arguably to all intents and purposes a dead law, the fact that those state powers are there, even if not regularly acted upon, carry some psychological impact.

**AK:** Oh yes. Well, if it's a dead law then get rid of it. Otherwise it makes a very bad legal practice, and all lawyers would say that. If you can't enforce it why enact it? Why keep it? Get rid of it!

**AW:** Interesting that a few years ago its 2007 repeal was blocked allegedly due to a Singaporean judge and NUS academic's conservative Christian beliefs.

**AK:** I have no doubt. Do you remember the whole controversy about oral sex? And they changed the law so that heterosexuals can have oral sex, but not homosexuals.

**AW:** To conclude, your writing seems to have finally found an audience in Singapore. Have you had positive feedback from those you've met during your readings and book signings?

**AK:** From Saturday, yes, that reading, its more favourable than I thought it would be. But again I haven't fully grasped the extent of that. Who knows? Maybe three months down the line might get a better picture. You'll be here. You can let me know.

---

<sup>2</sup> Victorian law criminalising sexual acts between men, challenged several times most recently in 2007, and while still very much law in Singapore, is currently being debated.

*Glass Cathedral: Gay Novel or Liberation Theology? An Interview with Andrew Koh.* Angus Whitehead.

*Transnational Literature* Vol. 5 no. 2, May 2013.

<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

*Glass Cathedral: Gay Novel or Liberation Theology? An Interview with Andrew Koh.* Angus Whitehead.  
*Transnational Literature* Vol. 5 no. 2, May 2013.  
<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>