Book Reviews


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This book was published just as a pandemic was fanning out from Asia to the rest of the world in the early part of 2020. Asia seemed to the locus of global attention as the effects of the pandemic rippled across the globe. Interestingly, this part of the world is undoubtedly one of the geopolitical centers of the “clash of civilisations,” where the rise of China has become the catalyst for the possible escalations of economic, political, and theological changes in this decade.

East and Southeast Asia cover about a tenth of the land area of the world but are home to almost one third of the world’s population. This is a region in which more than 1,800 languages are spoken; in which the world’s richest and poorest countries are located; and in which the majority of the adherents of world religions (Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, and Christianity) live side by side. The effort of chronicling the history of so vast a region seemed an insurmountable endeavor. Yet the editors of this volume were precise in their question: “How does one present the many facets of Christianity in a diverse expanse of ethnicities, histories, cultures and sensitivities?”

The result is the presentation of Christianity through four angles, the first of which is demographic. Employing the methodology of the highly successful Atlas of Global Christianity (Edinburgh University Press, 2009), statistical information about East and Southeast Asia is attractively

presented in a series of maps and charts. The introduction lays out the premise that Christianity has had a long history in East and Southeast Asia and, through the process of inculturation and the varied response to it, continues to influence the lives of many in the region.

The second distinctive angle is the presentation of the histories of Christianity in the different countries/territories through the lens of various indigenous scholars. They present an emic or “critical insider perspective” in their respective summaries and analyses of the advent and impact of and the challenges to the Christian movement.

A third angle is the examination of the origins and current strengths of the Christian ecclesial traditions that have contributed to the growth of Christianity in the region. Understandably, the Anglican and Roman Catholic traditions are featured (possibly due to their predominance in the regions’ colonial history) as well as the Orthodox tradition. The other denominational traditions are featured in other essays and classified under broad categories of “Independents,” “Protestants,” “Evangelicals,” and “Pentecostals and Charismatics.” Such classifications seem somewhat arbitrary and unsatisfactory in view of the significant contribution of Methodist missions in Malaysia and Singapore as well as the influence of Presbyterian missions in Korea and Thailand.

The fourth angle is a critique of various “key themes” that assesses the trajectory of the Christian faith in East and Southeast Asia that includes faith and culture, worship and spirituality, theology, social and political context, mission and evangelism, gender, religious freedom and interreligious relations. The editorial team has also included two other themes of particular significance for this part of the world, namely, migration and colonial and post-colonial contexts. The collection of the articles in this section is engaging and provides an excellent cornucopia for further studies. For example, in the article on Migration, Maruja Asis specifically highlights the issue of migration of workers in the labor markets (among the more developed economies of Asia and Southeast Asia, especially in regions such as Hong Kong, Japan, Singapore, and Taiwan); the migration-religion nexus is indeed fertile ground for further research. Curiously, the contextual features that have given rise to a wide spectrum of folk Christianity, whether through Roman Catholicism, mainline Protestant denominations or Pentecostal movements, whether in San Pablo, Sapporo,
Shanghai, Singapore, Suai or Surabaya, have largely been omitted. Such grassroots movements especially in the Asian context need to be accounted for as they are representative of the complex diversities of this region.

Nonetheless, this is undoubtedly an exceptionally well-researched volume. The deliberate inclusion of the perspectives of academics of various disciplines as well as the indigenous scholars is demonstrative of the intent of the editors. This is, in turn, well represented in the choice of He Qi’s drawing of The Magi as the front cover of the volume, where “the different hues in the tapestry take on a myriad of tones, tints and shades. Each viewpoint reveals a subtly different art piece” (x). This is indicative of the complexities of “Christianities in Asia,”2 where the region is indeed a living laboratory of cultural and religious diversity as well as the arena for economic and political jousting for the emergent superpowers of the twenty-first century. This volume is more than just a reference work; it is an excellent introduction to Christianity in this part of the world

About Reviewer
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