

Review

The Oxford Handbook of Christianity in Asia, edited by Felix Wilfred. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. xxi + 657 pp., \$150.00 (hb). ISBN 978-0-19-932906-9 (hb).

Reviewed by: Arun W. Jones, Emory University, Atlanta, GA, USA.
arun.w.jones@emory.edu

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Those looking for yet another atlas or dictionary of Christianity in Asia will not find it in this rich and provocative volume. The essays collected in this Handbook are thematic rather than encyclopedic, exploratory rather than definitional, hermeneutical rather than simply informational. The work is divided into five parts, which follow an instructive General Introduction to the whole volume by the editor, Felix Wilfred. Part I, 'Mapping Asian Christianity', provides general overviews of West, Central, South, Southeast and East Asia. 'Cross-Cultural Flows and Pan-Asian Movements of Asian Christianity' takes a look at various phenomena such as Pentecostalism, Charismatic Christianity, and the ecumenical and feminist movements that are not confined to one region of the continent or to one expression of the faith. 'Asian Christianities and the Social-Cultural Processes' examines the interaction of various incarnations of Christianity within their political and cultural milieus. 'Asian Christianity in Interaction with Asian Religious Traditions' investigates inter-religious encounters of various sorts. Finally, 'Some Future Trajectories of Asian Christianity' delves into an eclectic set of topics such as Christian identity, spirituality, worship, and music, and the ways Christians are engaging their religious, cultural and political contexts. Each of the five parts begins with a helpful introductory essay that summarizes the main arguments and themes of each of the essays in that part. The final essay in the Handbook by Francis X. Clooney provides closing reflections on the whole volume, which then ends with an informative statistical table on religious adherents in mid-2010 in each country of Asia, a bibliography and an index.

One of the many advantages of the volume is the general clarity of all the essays. Each chapter is lucidly written, with numerous well-marked sections. This allows readers to jump to sections that may particularly interest them, without having to read a complete essay in order to make sense of the

information or argument in a specific section. Nonetheless, readers who have the time (or make the time) for reading complete essays will, in general, be richly rewarded for their patience and efforts. Another great advantage of this volume, which Felix points out in his General Introduction, is that the view of Christianity here is not meant simply for Christians. 'A Muslim and a Hindu, a Buddhist and a Confucian, a humanist and an atheist will be able to gain a fair knowledge of Asian Christianity' (p. 4).

One of the questions that bedevils the volume as a whole, probably because it bedevils Christianity in Asia as a whole, is the question of the religion's association with Western imperialism (p. 8). To what extent does imperialism (in many places, such as South Asia, called colonialism) define the character of Christianity? Does Christianity in Asia 'belong' to western missionaries and imperial powers (pp. 216–17)? Or does it 'belong' to the Asians who became and are Christian, and therefore interpret the religion in their own ways (p. 494)? The answer to this question lies in whether one sees Christianity as typified principally by its propagators or by its adopters, whether one lays emphasis on mission history or on reception history. However, while binaries of 'eastern' and 'western', of 'missionary' and 'convert' may be heuristically useful for understanding certain historical situations and contemporary contexts, such binaries can also be dangerous and misleading. For they push us away from a view in which Christianity in different parts of Asia emerges over time as a dialogical, negotiated religion, involving multiple interlocutors and agents from various places in the world, with various degrees of social, political and religious power and authority. Moreover, any one expression of Christianity, as seen in its liturgy, theology, and religious and social practices, is open to multiple interpretations. The same religion can mean many different things to different people in the same context.

Overall, the essays in the Handbook are of an excellent quality, being both informative and intellectually provocative. They cover huge geographic, cultural and time spans with care and thoughtfulness. The authors are well aware of the immensity of the religious tradition they are investigating, along with the immensity of the other religious traditions with which Christianity interacts in Asia (pp. 444–45). Yet from their knowledgeable and well-reasoned positions they advance engaging and compelling arguments. The editorial board of the Handbook is to be commended on its fine work. But perhaps the greatest virtue of the volume is that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. The cumulative effect of the individual essays is to make us understand and reflect much more deeply than before upon Christianity in Asia as a religious tradition, as they reinforce, question and even challenge each other. For such understanding and reflection we are all in debt to the authors and editors of this Handbook.