

## Book Review

### **Kiem-Kiok Kwa and Samuel Ka-Chieng Law, eds., *Missions in Southeast Asia: Diversity and Unity in God's Design***

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Kwa, Kiem-Kiok and Law, Samuel Ka-Chieng, eds., *Missions in Southeast Asia: Diversity and Unity in God's Design*. Langham Global Library, 330 pp., £21.99 paperback, ISBN: 9781839734366.

The two editors of this book are Kiem-Kiok Kwa, who teaches missions at Singapore's Biblical Graduate School of Theology, and Samuel K. Law, Vice Principal of Academic Affairs at Singapore Bible College. Due to a paucity of Christian literature on Southeast Asian missions, this book is indeed timely and will become essential reading material for all scholars and practitioners interested to understand Christian missions in Southeast Asia. Noteworthy is that the book written mostly by national leading missiologists familiar with the local context—which is often complicated, convoluted, and incomprehensible to outsiders.

Strategically located between the Middle East and Pacific region, Southeast Asia is increasingly becoming one of the most pivotal regions in the world. With a population of 650 million spanning over 4.5 million square kilometers, followers of all major religions in the world can be found here. Southeast Asia is thus fertile ground for contextualizing and theologizing Christian mission practices in ways that can be most useful for the global church to learn and apply on emerging missional challenges it may face in the twenty-first century. The multifaceted interaction between gospel and people in these diverse nations—all with their very own unique geographical, social, religious, economic, and political context—have resulted in a type of Christianity that can be flourishing in Philippines or floundering in Cambodia. By narrating the history of mission work done initially by Roman Catholic missionaries in the sixteenth century and then followed by Protestant missionaries in the early nineteenth century in collaboration with parachurch organizations, the fruit of the gospel can be easily seen and clearly understood. Where there have been weaknesses and gaps, reflections and adjustment to strategy have been tweaked for the gospel to have a wider and deeper impact locally. In any event, God's hand and presence can be unequivocally discerned in this vital mass of land where churches founded were largely contextually appropriate and culturally sensitive. These traits are an absolute imperative for the longevity of the church in a region where Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism and Folk religions are already deeply entrenched.

This book has 16 chapters and is divided into two parts. Part I contains nine chapters, each written by different authors narrating the national church histories of the eight major Southeast Asian countries of Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam; Laos and Timor-Leste have been omitted for some unknown reason. The historical overview of each country's mission work and subsequent progression of Christianity is presented in a succinct and readable manner, thus appealing to both research scholars and lay Christians alike. In no way are these chapters exhaustive and complete accounts of all that has transpired. They are written with the big picture in mind to interest the readers and whet their appetites for more detailed reading elsewhere.

Samuel K. Law has contributed the piece on Cambodia, where historical material on the church is lacking. Thus, he conducted field-researched interviews and surveys. The genocide of two million people under the Pol Pot regime from 1975 to 1979 stands out, with the near

annihilation of all Cambodian Christians. Out of the ashes, a new brand of Christianity in Cambodia is now emerging from the impact of globalization forces on the local context, a so-called “glocalization” phenomenon. This fourth wave of Christianity is in some ways similar to the first wave brought about by the Nestorians, second wave by the Roman Catholics, and third wave by the Protestant missionaries, where strong dependence on foreign support is prevalent. The 2017 census showed that Christians form less than 2 percent of the population (17).

The chapter on the fourth most populous country in the world, Indonesia, is written by Benjamin F. Intan. While Indonesia has the world’s largest Muslim population, surprisingly Christians formed 9.9 percent of the country’s population according to the 2010 census. The history of Christianity follows a similar pattern with other Southeast Asian countries: first wave by the Eastern Orthodox Church, second wave by Roman Catholic Church, and third wave by the Dutch Reformed Church. Indonesia’s foundational five-fold state ideology, *Pancasila*, plays an important role in protecting religious freedom and practices. Nevertheless, the majority religion, Islam, with 87 percent of the population is increasingly assuming a dominant role in politics and social life. Christians are forced to navigate this complex, interwoven web of state and religion cautiously for the sake of the church’s future.

Malaysia is another Muslim majority country with 61 percent adherents, while Christians form 9.2 percent of the population. This chapter’s author, Tan Sooi Ling, notes that the first wave of Christianity came in 1511 via Franciscan and Dominican monks who accompanied the Portuguese conquerors of Melaka. In 1818, the Protestant missionary William Milne of the London Missionary Society settled at the same place. Towards the second half of the nineteenth century, migrant workers from India and China seeking greener pastures brought in Christianity of various Protestant denominations into Malaysia. Methodist missionaries from America started schools in many towns from 1885 onwards. In 1963, Malaysia became an independent secular nation, with Malays, Chinese, and Indians as the primary groups. While Malaysia is constitutionally secular, Islam is the “official religion” and is gaining dominance, eroding the religious freedom of minority groups. The *Alkitab* (Bible in the Malay language) and the word *Allah* (Malay word for “God”) was at one time prohibited from use by Christians in the 1980s. Nation-building in a pluralistic society is fraught with racial and religious tensions. Increasingly, Christians are conscious of their God-given role as peacemakers.

The vast majority, 88 percent, of people in Myanmar are Buddhists while 6 percent, mainly tribal people, are Christians. Christianity, according to the author, Peter Thein Nyunt, came through the Portuguese soldiers. The Catholic priests that came after 1720 were more successful so that by 1990 there were over 300,000 Roman Catholic Christians in the country. It was Adoniram Judson from the American Baptist Mission that made a significant impact on converting Burmese Buddhists after he arrived in 1813. He also translated the whole Bible into Burmese. From 1962, the military dictatorship expelled all foreign missionaries and national leadership were forced to take over. In spite of the limited resources and training, Christianity is enjoying steady growth from the solid foundation established by the earlier missionaries.

Philippines is a Christian majority nation, with 80 percent of the 102 million people being Christian. Narry F. Santos narrates the history by going back to the sixteenth century with the arrival of Spanish missionaries through the colonial forces. Roman Catholicism flourished with three centuries of Spanish dominance. It was only after the defeat of the Spanish by Americans in 1898 that Protestantism entered Philippines. Only 10.8 percent of the population are Protestants. After gaining independence in 1946, an indigenous form of Christianity has been gaining momentum. Since the 1970s, Charismatic Christianity has experienced tremendous growth. Evangelical megachurches in the urban areas are the fastest growing religious groups,

attracting young, educated, middle-class adults. The challenge now is to create a truly indigenous and contextualized Christianity without the trappings of Western foreign expressions.

Located at the tip of the Malaya Peninsula, Singapore was established as a free port by Stamford Raffles of the British East India company in 1819. Andrew Peh writes that the first Protestant missionaries were from the London Missionary Society, who have set their sights on China which was then closed. Other mission organizations came as well but left after China opened its doors in 1843. The second wave started with the arrival of the American Methodist Episcopal Church in 1885. They established English-speaking, Tamil-speaking, and Chinese-speaking churches, along with schools and a printing press. Other denominations followed suit. The third wave were migrants from China due to the Boxer Rebellion; a number of them were Christians and missionaries. John Sung's ministry to churches in Singapore and Southeast Asia from 1928 to 1939 has provided a lasting legacy to the Chinese churches, inspiring many to godly service. (109) The Charismatic movement and revival in the 1970s united the Christians together with an emphasis on evangelism, culminating in the Billy Graham Crusade which attracted 337,000 people. By 2015 the Christian population had grown to 18.8 percent. Megachurches are popular among the middle-class. Singapore is among the highest missionary sending countries today.

Roman Catholic priests brought Christianity into Thailand in 1511 through the Portuguese diplomatic mission. Their impact on local converts was not significant. It was only in 1828 that the first resident Protestant missionaries, Karl Gutzlaff and Jacob Tomlin, arrived and translated the Gospels into Siamese. Daniel Beach Bradley, who distinguished himself in medicine and printing, was probably the most famous missionary, wrote Karl Dahlfred. The Laos Mission under McGilvary were also successful in the Northern Thai states, such as Chiangmai. Revival took place during John Sung's ministry, with hundreds of conversions and commitments among nominal Christians (130). Today, only 2.3 percent of the population are Christians, with Protestants forming the largest sector at 469,000.

Vietnam's first encounter with Christianity was through the Syrian or Nestorian missionaries, writes KimSon Nguyen. But it was the Jesuit priests in the seventeenth century that started to establish churches. The people were largely Buddhist, Daoist, or Confucianist. The 2009 census classified Christianity as the six largest religions, at 8.2 percent of population. Protestant churches that did not receive legal status are called Vietnamese House Churches. Generally they are a very diverse group, with many associated with Pentecostalism and consisting of Christian returnees from other parts of Asia. Churches are becoming indigenized to facilitate church growth.

Part II, which has seven chapters, is dedicated to examining the unity of the interweaving themes found in Southeast Asia's multireligious contexts, each with its own unique tapestry of cultural frameworks and worldviews. Complex system research methods, glocalization, self-theologizing, holistic mission, and cultural integration are discussed. The case studies and exercises provided are helpful heuristic tools for self-discovery of the topics explored. Samuel Law found that the use of traditional Westernized linear and reductionist approaches was inadequate and outdated for missiological research and pedagogy in this region, particularly with the increasing globalization, urbanization, and technological advances. In order to address the traditional approaches' various shortcomings, Law has proposed applying a complex systems science approach to study more accurately these fluid realities that are integrally interconnected across multiple cultures and context (172). Globalization trends have been found to impact and influence the myriad local contexts in Southeast Asia through a process called glocalization, thus opening up opportunities and challenges for Christian mission.

Modernization, human migration, and global networks interact with local processes to alter our perception and affect people's experiences in different parts of the globalized world. John Cheong's use of Kentucky Fried Chicken as an example of glocalization is helpful for understanding the complex interactions of global and local factors, leading to a new global synthesis. Time-space distancing becomes real when distant things appear near if they are online and nearby things seem far away when they are not connected. Apart from the nation-state, multinational corporations and non-governmental organizations will increasingly play a more important role in a glocalised world. For example, international megachurches or mission organizations have a global influence in a borderless world. The explosive growth of the internet has reordered space-time configurations in human interactions in many aspects (200). Christians have important roles to play in shaping and harnessing the internet for the fulfilment of the Great Commission.

Looking back at Christianity in Southeast Asia, Andrew Peh notes that the history dates back to 1000 BC with its Indic culture and Hindu religion. It was only in the late fifteenth century onwards that Christianity came through European maritime colonial expansion. The Portuguese were the first to come to the East, which included India and Southeast Asia. They captured the strategic port of Malacca in 1511 and controlled all trade plying through the Straits of Malacca. They then ventured into the Moluccas archipelago which were rich in spices. The Spanish on the other hand took control of (and renamed) the Philippines and colonized it. Both Portuguese and Spanish colonizers not only brought in commerce but also missionaries. The Augustians, Dominicans, and Jesuits of the Roman Catholic Church introduced Christianity to Malaya, Indonesia, Thailand, Philippines, Burma, and Vietnam. The Portuguese power was supplanted by the French in Indochina and the Dutch in Malacca. Subsequently, the English took over from the Dutch. By the nineteenth century, Protestant missions entered the fray and were actively at work in most parts of Southeast Asia. They Baptists, Presbyterians, Congregationalist, Lutherans, Anglicans, Methodists, and Seventh-Day Adventists. In the first half of the twentieth century, Christian mission was more holistic and included education, medicine, and social welfare work. Unfortunately, this missionary work has been closely associated with Western imperialism that exploited and subjugated local populations. Aspirations for "God, gold, and glory" gave missionaries a bad reputation and stigma (222).

The Japanese occupation from 1942 to 1945 was a bleak period for Christianity in Southeast Asia as the small Christian population were decimated and church properties destroyed. Most foreign missionaries were interned or forced to leave. This adversity forced national leadership to take over, and they survived without any Western support. The next transition that took place was political independence from colonial powers: Indonesia in 1945, Philippines in 1946, Burma in 1948, Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam in 1954, and Malaysia in 1963. National churches with indigenous leadership took control and weighed in on their nation's social, political, and religious matters. The arrivals of parachurch organisation like Overseas Missionary Fellowship, Campus Crusade for Christ (CRU), and International Fellowship of Evangelical Students (IFES) were instrumental in revitalising Christianity (220). The Pentecostal movement also contributed significantly to conversions and church planting. Among the eleven nations in Southeast Asia, the interaction of gospel and people's cultures have produced a rich religious diversity that is highly variegated, frequently conflicted, and intensely dynamic. Two nations, Philippines and Timor-Leste, have Christian majority population exceeding 90 percent; all the other nine have less than 10 percent Christians, with affluent Singapore the only exception at 18 percent.

Robert Solomon writes about the importance of seminaries that, with freedom from colonial powers, have been using systematic theology texts written by Westerners to change into a

theology that is actually rooted in the Southeast Asian context (243). For example, the supernatural spirit world is often dismissed by Western theologians as mere superstitions. However, in Asian cultures the activity of spirits is a reality in people's daily lives. This situation needs to be addressed scripturally by Asian theologians in their own context. Doing so means developing a form of Asian Christianity that "sees the face of God in the faces of people" and that matches their local religious experience and cultural expectations. Asians are called to think critically and confidently in crafting their own theologies that are coherent with their context and rooted in the scriptures.

In chapter 14, Kiem-Kiok comments that the prevailing Christian worldview that missions is centered primarily on evangelism and saving souls is a narrow one. A paradigm shift towards embracing a holistic response to social injustices as an integral part of missions is imperative. This holistic approach should be grounded in the theology that reflects the fullness of God's character in prioritizing not only a right relationship with God but also human community and physical surroundings. Missions should be transformational and involved in nation-building, especially so in a pluralistic society as found in this region. Contextualization that is appropriate is vital and entails both a deep understanding of the culture and a close study of Scriptures without being shackled by Western Enlightenment approaches—yet recognizes its rich legacy by not "throwing the baby out with the bathwater." Creation care can be a vital part of missions, too.

In summary, this book is a good resource for those serious about studying the history and future of Christianity in this most diverse and complex region of Southeast Asia. It provides a succinct overview of the various challenges and opportunities found in doing mission within a context that is multiracial, multicultural, multilingual, and multireligious. The multifaceted interaction of the gospel with the people grants the reader deeper insight and better understanding of the unique identities of indigenous Christianity that has evolved in each country over each era. There are also common themes that unite all these diverse nations. Lessons gleaned will be useful for the global Christian community at large to reflect on the practice of doing God's mission for God's glory.