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Editorial



The collection of articles in this number of the International Journal of Asian Christianity (IJAC) presents a diverse range of issues concerning Asian Christian communities.

The first two articles focus on Indonesia. The first article, co-authored by Chammah J Kaunda and Parulihan Sipayung explores the early developments of contextual theology in Indonesia by examining the thoughts and ideas of the highly significant figure, Wismar Saragih (1888–1968), an ordained pastor and theologian belonging to the Simalungun ethnic group. Unfortunately, Saragih's theology has received little scholarly attention. This pioneering article aims to situate Saragih's contribution within the colonial context and shed light on his struggles to challenge the prevalent theology of his times. Additionally, Saragih holds the distinction of being the first local individual to translate the Bible into his native language. His theological contributions to Indonesian postcolonial contextual theology revolve around the church's role in social transformation amidst religious pluralism and the advocacy of justice, gender equality, human freedom, and dignity. The authors also explore the implications of Saragih's theology for contemporary Indonesia.

Christianity in Indonesia often carries the stigma of being a colonial religion associated with the Dutch and is labelled as a foreign faith. This perception stems from the prevailing belief that Christianity received support from the Dutch East Indies government during its expansion. However, in his article, Amos Sukanto argues that the Dutch authorities' religious policies were not conducive to the growth of Christianity in Java. In fact, the development of Christianity, particularly in East Java, was not primarily driven by Dutch missionaries. On the contrary, it was propelled by local entrepreneurs, independent individuals, and subsequently by Javanese people who voluntarily embraced the Christian faith. The author provides illustrative examples to support this argument.

The second set of essays, comprising three articles, focuses on the Indian subcontinent. The history of Jews in India is relatively unknown, particularly

how this community was shaped in the context of Indian culture and tradition. James Ponniah's essay explores the impact of caste, a complex cultural category in India, on the expressions of Judaism and Christianity in the country. It investigates how caste influenced the lives of Jews in Kerala and Andhra. In Kerala, both Syrian Christians and Cochin Jews embraced caste as a social order, allowing them to integrate into the prevailing Hindu cultural milieu and attain a respectable social status. Remarkably different has been the experience of the Christian and Jewish Madiga communities in Andhra, where they adopted their respective religions to gain self-respect. The Madiga communities, both Jewish and Christian, in Andhra rejected caste, aligning themselves more closely with the central messages of equality and fraternity found in Judaism and Christianity, which resulted in a stronger spiritual and religious capital compared to their counterparts in Kerala.

The veneration of the Virgin Mary in South India, especially in Tamilnadu, enjoys widespread popularity, with many Marian shrines dotting the region. One significant factor for the acclaim of Mary is the way the Portuguese went about their mission work during the Padroado period, and especially how some Jesuit missionaries of the Madurai region, like the Italian Joseph Beschi (1680–1747), tried to reconfigure Virgin Mary to align with the traditional village goddesses – the *grama devada* – adopting into the Marian devotion the pattern of myths surrounding the goddess worship. Such an effort of Marian “inculturation” led to interpret the Marian cult not only through the lens of the gentle, maternal, and compassionate Hindu figures of goddesses (‘breast goddesses’) but also the virgin, courageous, and awe-inspiring warrior-goddesses (‘tooth goddesses’) defending life and the village-space when threatened. The fusion of these two dimensions of the female deities found great resonance among Christians and Hindus alike in their veneration of the Virgin Mary. By exploring the Marian devotion in South India across religious boundaries, Patrizia Granziera has made a significant contribution to Marian studies in Asia as well as to feminist studies at large.

Vijayakumar Boratti presents a compelling case of how the Christian faith, in its encounter with local literary traditions, served the mission in Karnataka, India. The article delves into the unique publication of *vacanas*, written by a native Christian convert and catechist of the Basel Mission in colonial Karnataka. It investigates how the catechist employed colonial categories and vernacular expressions to interpret the *vacanas* and assess the religious and philosophical tradition of *Liṅgāyats*. Moreover, the article investigates the contrasting perspectives of native *Liṅgāyat* scholars on *vacana* literature and its significance, providing valuable insights into their reception, subversion, and reconstitution of the constructed understanding in a post-1874 scenario.

In this issue, we have also included a fascinating field study conducted in Singapore. The ordination of women to the episcopate in the Anglican Church is a globally significant milestone that recognizes women's equality and allows them to contribute uniquely to the governance of the Church. While numerous studies have examined the impact of women's ordination in the western world and other regions, this issue has not yet received significant attention from the Asian Churches, which continue to be predominantly led by male bishops. In this context, a micro-study conducted by Teoh, Sofie Jia Ying and Low, Poi Kee has produced results that go beyond the confines of its limited scope, involving semi-structured interviews with a small group of Christians in Singapore. This study is enlightening as its findings appear to reflect the general views and attitudes of Asian Christians, which are shaped and influenced by their respective cultures. One important conclusion drawn from the study is the tendency in Asia to apply different standards when assessing the leadership roles of women in secular and public spheres compared to their positions within the church. While gender equality is evidently considered in the former case, views in the latter case seem to be influenced by specific interpretations of scriptural texts and traditional practices.

In addition, this issue features reviews of seven recent publications that delve into various aspects of Christianity across diverse regions of the Asian continent.

I would like to express my sincere appreciation and thanks to the authors, anonymous peer-reviewers, associate editors, book-review editors, and members of the editorial and advisory boards for their invaluable contributions in shaping this edition of IJAC. Their dedication and expertise have played a crucial role in maintaining the quality and breadth of the articles included in this issue. Furthermore, I am immensely grateful to Ms Nirmal for her diligent efforts, unwavering commitment, and exceptional support in facilitating effective communication with the authors and peer reviewers, as well as her meticulous work in the final editing of the manuscripts.

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