Felix Wilfred (ed.)


The *Oxford Handbook of Christianity in Asia* is a welcome contribution to the emerging literature on world Christianity. Given that there are already collections focused on specific areas within the continent, the editor of this volume advances that a Handbook on Christianity’s development in Asia as a whole is now warranted.

The volume’s overall goal is to give a “comprehensive mapping of the state of Christianity in Asia” (p. 3). It has 37 chapters neatly divided into five broad sections on (a) the state of Asian Christianity, (b) pan-Asian movements, (c) sociopolitical and cultural processes, (d) interactions with other religious traditions, and (e) the future of Christianity in the region. The book’s flow is easily comprehensible. The first part is about the sociopolitical and historical contexts of Christianity in different parts of Asia. The book ends with some projections and questions on the future of Christian identity, worship, spirituality, and even historiography.

The collection has two key strengths. First, it has assembled scholars who come from different disciplines such as theology, history, political science, anthropology, and sociology. Many of them are established in their respective fields, with diverse regional specializations. Other texts that attempt such a wide coverage tend to be dominated by scholars who are preoccupied with only one region such as East Asia or by theologians who give emphasis only to the debates and development of theological thought among, say, Catholic bishops based in Asia. While several chapters do touch on theological matters, only one has fully devoted itself to mapping Asian theological trends (Chapter 6, Michael Amaladoss) and another to missiological concerns (Chapter 9, Sebastian Kim). But interestingly, disciplinary boundaries do not define the chapters. Instead, the volume demonstrates the richness of emerging literature on Christianity in Asia amongst interdisciplinary scholars who engage each other.

The rest of the chapters gives considerable attention to other aspects of Christianity and this, I believe, is the volume’s second strength. Many chapters are informed by empirical research and careful analysis in relation to social and political contexts that vary from country to country. Julius Bautista’s piece, for example, looks into the uneasy relationship between Christianity and nationalism in Southeast Asia (Chapter 14). In East Asia, Huang Po Ho admits that Western discourse on democracy and Christian discussions of human freedom tend to be closely aligned. But she argues that Christian churches have
become local advocates, making their message more acceptable in pushing for grassroots-based democratization, in this case in Taiwan (Chapter 17). Other contributions focus on Christianity’s engagements with other religious traditions in terms of the perceptions of Muslims (Chapter 24, Ataullah Siddiqui) and Buddhists (Chapter 26, Dennis Hirota). Some chapters also identify the challenges Christianity needs to confront with Jews in West Asia (Chapter 23, David Mark Neuhaus) and Hindus (Chapter 25, Ananta Kumar Giri).

The Handbook is careful in avoiding essentialisms, asserting that Christianity is “not anything homogeneous” (p. 4). This assertion is important in light of journalistic and some academic assertions that Christianity here, as in the rest of the global South, is thoroughly conservative. Throughout the edited volume, authors emphasize the interreligious character of Christian thought (Chapter 30, George Gispert-Sauch), practices (Chapter 33, Swee Hong Lim), and spirituality (Chapter 32, Peter Phan).

Although still a minority in the region, Christianity has seen recent and exciting developments that could potentially re-shape the character of this religion in the world today. This volume documents these developments and has come up with relevant analyses that will influence future research. Indeed, I think the main benefit of the trends identified and broad ideas foregrounded in this volume is in informing comparative studies and future studies. And so chapters in this book have deliberately avoided country-based assessments in favor of broad issues. Comparative studies then should test the relevance of salient themes identified by Felix Wilfred in his introduction such as indigenization, the growth of independent churches, and contextual theologies. I must admit though that amongst scholars of Christianity in Asia, these themes are already being given attention.

On a critical note, much of the recent developments in the region are driven by strife that are not easily addressed by interfaith dialogue, for example, and have therefore not been well covered in the volume. Conflict is an Asian reality today. In some cases, it is deeply religious in view of the rise of extremism. In other cases, conflict takes shape amongst Christians themselves. The battle over public morality is also deeply religious. Conflict also takes shape on a much larger scale. The lingering hold of authoritarian regimes and systematic attack on religious freedom for example have left Christians (and other minority religious groups) vulnerable to greater suffering. These are questions that should inform future scholarship on the state of Christianity in Asia.

Overall, this Handbook will be helpful to a wide range of scholars and observers interested in the fortunes of Christianity in the region. It will be helpful in particular to those who are intrigued by the possibilities ahead, especially in relation to governance, theology, interreligious dialogue, and local