

REVIEW ESSAY

Abundant Harvest: Stories of Asian Lutherans. Edited by Edmond Yee and Paul Rajashekar. Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2013. 395 pp.

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This book is long overdue and much needed. It deals with the history of Asian Lutherans, both in their home countries and in the United States. The editors are both professors at Lutheran seminaries in the United States.

Rajashekar's Introduction (3-17) makes clear that one of the main purposes is to tell the story of Lutherans in Asia through the eyes of Asian leaders past and present. At several points he charges that the missionary pioneers failed to properly recognize local catechists, pastors, and Bible women. "The voices of the natives or the indigenous people are seldom heard, unless they brought credit to the missionaries" (6). This claim seems ironic, particularly in view of the fact that most footnotes in this book cite Western or missionary sources to document the stories about early Asian leaders. Nevertheless, this book has done world Lutheranism an important service in uplifting the contributions of so many little-known local witnesses. Andrew Walls and Lamin Sanneh, missiologists and church historians, have long urged the preservation of documents and the efforts of local Christians to research them to explore dimensions of the story of today's world Christianity unavailable to outsiders. The Introduction also remarks that the Lutheran tradition in Asia exists as something of an historical accident, because of where Lutheran missionaries chanced to have landed, and is more of a sociological label than a theological or confessional stance. This perspective has multiple implications. One

is the question of whether the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) and historic Lutheran mission agencies are continuing to prop up a confessional position that has no real foundation in some of the Asian settings.

In fourteen chapters, Part I provides an overview of Lutheran churches in Asia. Three chapters offer a brief history of Lutheranism by region: South Asia (Chapter 1), Southeast Asia (Chapter 5) and East Asia (Chapter 9). These chapters give brief straightforward historical narratives which provide a basic framework and also spell out the undergirding point of view. Each introductory chapter is followed by chapters that speak to each regional context and describe the Lutheran churches by highlighting the stories of indigenous leaders past and present. These stories often demonstrate the impact and power of the gospel. Since the book intends to present history through stories, Part II, "Biographies," completes this process.

A close examination of the South Asian section (Chapters 1-4) demonstrates the book's contributions and questions. In nine pages in Chapter 1, Paul Rajashekar traces the history of Lutheranism as it emerged with considerable strength in India, a much smaller presence in Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka, and minimal or no presence in Nepal, Bhutan, Afghanistan, and Maldives. Three chapters by Indian authors deal with the Indian context, add helpful stories about remarkable indigenous leaders, and examine present and future challenges. Chapter 2 contains accounts of the people who from the earliest times extensively used local Indian cultural forms of poetry, folk music, and oratory to express Christian worship and piety. In both the Tamil and Telugu languages hundreds of hymns were written, many still in use. Here are more than 35 stories about Indian leaders during the first 300 years of South Indian Lutheranism. Chapter 3 opens up the story of Lutherans in North India, primarily among various tribal groups in Bihar, Bengal, Northeast India, and later Bangladesh. Further future reflection is needed on what makes tribal Christians unique in India, and what Lutherans of tribal background in North India might have in common with tribal Baptist and Presbyterian churches of Nagaland, Manipur, and Mizoram—three Indian states in which Christians are in the majority. The gem of the book is Chapter 4, "Builders of the Church: Stories and Songs

of South Indian Women.” B. E. Bharathi Nuthalapati, far more than other contributors, goes directly to original sources. She gives a vivid picture of the actual daily Christian life and mission in South Indian villages by examining Tamil and Telugu songs and examples of vernacular missionary proclamation. Nuthalapati brings to life the work of those selfless Bible women and catechists, often quite uneducated, who worked in local villages among people of all castes. All this important material, much of it oral, will soon be lost unless recovered by Indian researchers.

These four chapters open up topics for many books and academic theses that can only be done by local writers deeply rooted in Indian culture, in the congregational spirituality of actual worshipping congregations, and with knowledge of the inner dynamics of the church polity. No outsider can do it. Questions abound: What were the “non-theological factors” that caused both southern and northern Lutheran churches in India to stay out of the Church of South India and the Church of North India? More difficult to address, what are the internal factors that led to the recent and sometimes prolonged paralysis of so many of India’s thirteen Lutheran churches—decades of inner conflict that led to a permanent split in the Gossner Evangelical Lutheran Church, the dysfunctional recent years of the South Andhra Lutheran Church, the Tamil Evangelical Lutheran Church, the Indian Evangelical Lutheran Church, and the roots of difficult and even violent conflict in the Andhra Evangelical Lutheran Church? Again, is Lutheran identity important to Asian Lutherans, or only to the LWF and sponsoring missions? Or, as minority churches among the larger minority Christian communities of India, how important is the unity question? The public witness question asks how Lutherans speak to Indian culture through confrontational Dalit themes while reconciling that theology with the more accepting themes of dialogue and the wider ecumenism. Finally, in common with the Batak churches of Indonesia, will the Indian and other Asian Lutheran churches grow beyond or stay within the narrower tribal and caste communities of their origin? These crucial issues in South Asian churches—some hinted at by authors here—are sensitive issues deeply discussed locally.

Part II contains 99 short (2 pages or less) biographies of Asian Christian leaders, both men and women. Leaders from China (17), Hong Kong (2), India (27), Indonesia (13), Japan (8), Kuwait (1), Malaysia (3), Philippines (5), Singapore (2), Taiwan (5), Thailand (5), and the United States (9) are included. Most were born between 1920 and 1960, with only 23 before 1920. The two earliest were born in India (1698 and 1774). The latest three were born in the 1960s. They are listed by place of birth rather than place of work. If numbered according to main place of work, the numbers for China and India change significantly: All but two are removed from China to Hong Kong, Taiwan, Malaysia and the United States and seven are transferred from India to the United States. Among the 99 are some who moved to ecumenical or academic positions in the West, Rajashekar and Yee among them. Several have made considerable contributions as officers or staff of the World Council of Churches and the LWF. The biographers are Asians, often colleagues of those about whom they write. A small proportion, however, such as Rajashekar and Yee, have lived much if not all of their lives in the West and done graduate studies there, bringing a perspective that differs from those who lived only in Asia. The sources are mainly Asian vernacular documents—including oral reports, memories, church records, and resumé. The biographies often do not directly state the church or mission agency with which each person was associated. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) and the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod are the main bodies involved. The affiliation does affect the tone of the presentation somewhat. Generally, the biographies of earlier figures give more attention to the experience of faith and its guiding role in life. The more contemporary biographies, especially in the American setting, reflect a primary commitment to multiculturalism. While recognizing this shift from description through stories to promoting an institutional agenda, nevertheless, the biographies are well worth reading.

A key underlying assumption is that missionary endeavors were significantly shaped by colonialism and often compromised by disparaging attitudes toward native peoples. The contemporary commitment is to transcend these biases. The present structural

dynamics of the ELCA are seen to enable Asians to address white-colored racism, the gender gap, and the issue of gay civil rights through implementing multiculturalism. This approach entails high level education, giving persons of color responsible positions, and implementation of the quota system, in order to give voice, presence and power to Asians within the ELCA. At the same time, this approach yields a diaspora problem within the American context, as discussed especially in chapter 14, the Epilogue, and Edmond Yee's biography (422-426), with many Asian congregations on the periphery, unaffected and even unsympathetic to these changes.

Some matters related to China and the Chinese diaspora illustrate these concerns. Yee notes that Chinese congregations within the ELCA are on the periphery or almost invisible. A big divide seems to exist between the people of color who play a leadership role in the ELCA structures and the lives of many congregations. While mentioning the diaspora, Yee himself participates in maintaining invisibility for that part of the diaspora that does not buy into the ELCA's particular style of multiculturalism. For example, no mention is made of the strong and dynamic Chinese Lutheran Church of Honolulu pastored since its earliest years by Simon Lee. Yet in the biography of Thomas Chen, we learn that the Center for Chinese Ministry (CCM), a ministry of the ELCA, helped the Nanguan Church in Xinyang, Henan, China, replace its original church ruined during the Cultural Revolution. Dedicated in November, 2006, the centenary of the first church built in 1906, it is a seven-story structure accommodating two to three thousand worshippers. Not mentioned is that Simon Lee invited the CCM to donate a modest amount while Simon's own church funded most of a \$120,000 gift so that Nanguan could complete its construction. Indeed, Simon communicated with the Division of Global Mission (ELCA) and Paul Martinson communicated independently with Presiding Bishop Hanson, inviting them to send a representative to the dedication, but they both showed no interest. China Service Ventures, a pan-Lutheran agency, led a group of 30, including Simon Lee, to participate in the celebration. Numerous examples such as this could be shared, indicating how multiculturalism has contributed to a uniculturalism that treats not a few Chinese churches in the

ELCA as peripheral. Ironically, it seems that, the voice of the Chinese believers within the congregations of the diaspora “are seldom heard, unless they bring credit” to the multicultural leaders within the ELCA (see the quotation from p. 6, above).

The biographies depend on information which may not be easily verified. One example is the presentation by Edmond Yee about “a blind orphan adopted by a woman missionary.” She was a talented pianist, two informants stated, and after study in America returned to Xinyang, Henan, and became “a church pianist and choir director” (150). The name given is Wang MengEn and Yee refers to her as “her” and “she.” This biography is partly based on misinformation. I (Paul Martinson) was in Xinyang studying in the school for missionary children in 1947-48, just before the liberation of 1949. A blind man who never studied overseas was the musician at the church in Xinyang and played not a piano, but a pump organ. We worshipped there every Sunday. We met this elderly saint again in 2004 in Xinyang. The Nanguan church confirmed his name was Wang MengEn (MengEn, his personal name, means “recipient of grace”). He was raised in the mission orphanage and no doubt locally trained. Known as a humble man full of grace, he died not long after we met with him.

This book provides many rich testimonies of the experiences of individual grass roots Christians. The following testimony conveys what the *Abundant Harvest* is all about. A local Christian, Pacliwan in the Philippines, began “several congregations in remote villages. . . . He would hike four to eight hours to teach and conduct Bible studies. His favorite expression was: ‘We have been sacrificing animals and chickens to many spirits, but God has sacrificed once, and that is through His Son Jesus Christ’” (27f). But at the same time, Lutheran Christians can also face challenges and ridicule. In Thailand, non-Christians, believing in *karma*, can be heard to say, “Jesus must have committed terrible sins in his previous life that caused him to die like a criminal on the cross” (117). Here we discover the secret that, yes, he died like a criminal, but it was not his but our self-referencing, greed, guilt, and unbelief that criminalized Jesus and brought us into his abundant harvest. That is why a book about such a harvest can and should be written.

One correction: The earliest Lutheran presence in Myanmar was not from 1978. It began with the migration of Lutherans from the Tamil and Telugu areas of South India to Burma as laborers or small businessmen in the nineteenth century. One of these historic congregations remains in Yangon. Most Indians were expelled from the old Burma in 1966 by the military government.

Abundant Harvest has provided a starting point for serious study. This is urgently needed, particularly in light of the reality of a truly global church within which Asian Christianity begs to be understood as well as applauded.



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