

# Book Reviews and Notes

## Reviews

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### **A History of Christianity in Asia, Vol. I: Beginnings to 1500**

Samuel Hugh Moffett

San Francisco: Harper, 1992. US\$45.00

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*Reviewed by Scott W. Sunquist,  
Trinity Theological College, Singapore*

THE STORY OF Christianity in the West has often been told, but the history of Christianity in the East is not as well known." So begins this first-time attempt at a complete narrative of Christianity in Asia. This book, the first of two volumes by the former missionary to Korea and professor of ecumenics and mission at Princeton Seminary, bridges many gaps. Although a former missionary from a family of missionaries, Samuel Moffett writes like some of the best missionary scholars, with his heart in Asia and his mind in a library at Princeton; thus he bridges a cultural gap.

This work comes, one might guess, as one of the last great books about Asia not written by an Asian. Local histories of such places as the Philippines, Indonesia, Korea, and India are coming out rapidly; most are written by local scholars and church leaders. Moffett must depend on some of these Asian scholars for the best information about, for example, the Indian church (Father Mundadan); thus the book bridges an evolutionary gap in scholarship. Finally, this book bridges the gap in scholarship covering survey or Asia-wide scholarship in general. It is much easier to study a

specific tribe or city, but the survey work is needed also to give a clearer ecumenical picture of Christianity. Besides, most seminaries and Bible colleges in Asia offer such survey courses, but until now without a single volume to use for reading. It is helpful to have that gap filled now.

In terms of style, Moffett writes with the faint echo of his mentor K. S. Latourette speaking across the pages. First, there is thoroughness in research. The 29-page bibliography is not exhaustive, but it is an excellent place to begin research about theological as well as social issues related to early Asian Christianity. Secondly, he writes while looking through the telescope with one eye and the microscope with the other. Details of Mongol marriages and Persian purity rites as well as grand summary statements of the Asian church are found. For example, in summarizing the sudden collapse of the East Syrian Christian enterprise in China, he concludes: "Thus the first wave of Christian advance to the Far East came in with one change of the political tide and was washed away by the next." This leads to a third reminder of Latourette: the relationship between Christian advance and its social climate or, in contemporary terms, the text and context interplay. Almost to the point of being "scientific" about his church history, Moffett explains the political climate that nourishes or neutralizes the church. This reminds one of Latourette's "effect of Christianity upon the environment," and "the effect of the environ-

ment upon Christianity." This is not a bad style to imitate at all.

This first volume (the second to be published next year) is divided into three parts. The first part, From the Apostles to Muhammed, has four sections: 1. First 200 years; 2. The early Sassanid period; 3. The later Sassanid period (400-651); 4. Christianity in South Asia (Indian and Arab). Part two covers the outreach of the church while its center is under Islam. Part three is entitled Pax Mongolica: from Genghis Khan to Tamerlane. The story is well-told by Moffett, but as a story it is rather tragic. The first volume accurately portrays the Asian church entering the sixteenth century with little internal strength or reason for optimism. The second volume, a more difficult work by far because of the availability of sources, will record many of the reverses of this tragedy.

Regarding the details of this volume, Moffett has provided us with six helpful maps, lucid endnotes and a good index. There are minor, though at times humorous, problems in the index and footnotes (Timer the Great, see Timberlane), and recent scholarship from Asia is missing at some points. For a survey of this nature it would have been helpful to know both Arabic and Syriac in the original and to have a working knowledge of the contemporary Chinese scholarship (especially in China) regarding the early Christian communities under the Tang Dynasty. All of this would really require the resources and training of more than one person, and this raises an important question. Should such a volume or work even be attempted by one person today? Especially in volume two, there will be great limitations of language (Portuguese, Spanish, Indonesian, Hindi, Tamale, Burmese, Japanese, et cetera); should one person even attempt such a clearly limited work? This reviewer would say, yes. Once acknowledging the limitations, the worth of having one historian-sto-

ryteller weave a single tapestry of the church in Asia must be admitted.

As I have traveled to seminaries in South Asia and East Asia, I have found much interest in this book coming from those who struggle every year to teach the story of Christianity in Asia. I think too of the great value to the church that Neill's *History of Christian Mission*, and Latourette's *History of the Expansion of Christianity* have been. If Moffett's volume comes out in paper (or printed in India), it will be equally as valuable for Asia.

One brief and final note: Moffett is very conservative and cautious in his historical analysis. This is a welcome discovery in an age when polemics often rule the day even in historical study. Because of this caution, Moffett's seven-page conclusion at the end of this volume (503-507) must be carefully weighed.

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### **The Japanese and the Jesuits: Alessandro Valignano in Sixteenth-century Japan**

J. F. Moran,  
New York: Routledge, 1933.

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*Reviewed by Scott W. Sunquist,  
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EARLY JESUIT missionaries in the East include names that seem almost larger than life: Francis Xavier, Matteo Ricci, Roberto de Nobili, and Alessandro Valignano. Of these, Valignano may be the least well-known outside Japan, but had rulers looked a little bit more favorably upon his work (or simply looked less upon the work), Japan could very well have become the second Christian nation in Asia. By the year 1601 there were over 300,000 Christians (mostly on the southern island of Kyushu) with only 103 Jesuits tending the flock. For all of the ambiguities and compromises, the work estab-