

## Book Reviews

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### **The Beginning of Heaven and Earth: The Sacred Book of Japan's Hidden Christians**

Translated and Annotated by Christal Whelan

Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1996, xii+135pp.

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*Reviewed by Margaret L. Cloherty,  
Washington, D.C.*

The first two chapters of *The Beginning of Heaven and Earth* (*Tenchi hajimari no koto*) relate the creation, the fall and entry of original sin into the world, the spread of evil and the flood, albeit with some syncretism and Japanese folk material. In the creation myth, some of the heavens are derived from Buddhist cosmology. In addition God creates the elements for several religions—earth, water, fire and wind (Buddhism); salt (Shinto and Christianity) and oil (Christianity). Whelan points out that the story of the flood is reminiscent of Japanese legend. God sends a *tsunami* to destroy the sinful people. Pope-Martyr (Noah) escapes with six of his children in a canoe but has to leave behind a lame son. A lion-dog miraculously delivers the seventh son.

The remaining 13 chapters relate lives of the Virgin Mary and Jesus that are structured around the rosary. In contrast to scripture, which offers limited information about Mary, *Tenchi's* Mary is a well-developed character, thanks in part to embellishments from European legends. After deciding to remain a virgin, Mary rejects the marriage proposal and treasure of the King of Luzon, with a prayer that is answered by a miracle. Snow falls in the heat of summer (Italian

legend of Our Lady of the Snows) and a flower wagon takes her to heaven, where she is crowned. Mary consents to return to earth to bear the savior, and in rapid succession the story moves through the annunciation, visitation, nativity and finding in the temple. *Tenchi* has no knowledge of Joseph; Mary raises Jesus herself.

The content of the Jesus story is also eclectic and the events are out of sequence. After his birth in a cold stable, the infant Jesus is warmed by the breath of cows and horses (from the Apocryphal Infancy Gospel of Matthew). Jesus is baptized by his cousin John. Jesus sees God face-to-face on Mt. Tabor (presumably the Transfiguration), is ordained and goes into the forest to study under Sacrament (SIC), who has descended from heaven to serve as His tutor. When Jesus is twelve years old Mary finds him in the temple debating with a Buddhist teacher, whom he bests, converts and baptizes along with twelve disciples. The Galilean ministry is missing and Jesus' teaching ministry is limited to mention of his travel to Rome to build and teach about salvation at the glittering church of St. Ecclesia. Meanwhile King Herod, who decades before had 44,444 infants killed in an unsuccessful attempt to kill Jesus, at last pays Judas to betray Jesus. The agony begins when Deusu sends Jesus an oracle saying that he must suffer and die lest the souls of the murdered infants forfeit the opportunity to go to paradise (possibly an allusion to the souls of unbaptized infants in Limbo). At Herod's behest, Pontius and Pilate join a crowd that goes to capture Jesus. The scourging, crown of thorns, carrying of the cross (with the Veronica legend) and crucifixion beside the good and bad thieves ensue. Jesus is laid in the coffin,

rises from the dead, and on the third day ascends to heaven. The resurrection appearance is only for the purpose of instructing Peter. Mary is assumed into heaven. All ends well as Jesus brings the murdered infants and other good people to heaven, where the various saints are assigned duties; the end of the world is foretold; and purgatory is explained.

"In the beginning Deusu was worshiped as Lord of Heaven and Earth, and Parent of humankind and all creation. Deusu has 200 ranks and 42 forms, divided the light that was originally one and made the Sun Heaven and twelve other heavens. The names of these heavens are Benbo or Hell, Manbo, Oribeten, Shidai, Godai, Pappa, Oroha, Konsutanchi, Hora, Koroteru, and a hundred thousand Paraiso and Gokuraku." So begins Christal Whelan's English translation of this sacred text expressing the beliefs and faith practices of rural, mostly illiterate Hidden Christians (*Kakure Kirishitan*) in a region northwest of Nagasaki during the suppression of Christianity from 1614 until 1858. Christal Whelan's book contributes to scholarship on *Tenchi* by making the text available to readers beyond a small group of scholars and by providing the extensive notes and commentary necessary to interpret it. The notes and commentary are more than twice the length of the text of *Tenchi*.

Whelan has translated the Japanese edition of the text of Ebisawa Arimichi, which in turn is a reconstruction of the Zen (Shimomura Zenzaburo, dated 1818-1830) and Hatakeda (dated 1827) manuscripts. Both manuscripts are characterized by their graceful style and calligraphy. In her translation, Ms. Whelan has used short, simple sentences and dropped the Japanese honorifics. Even so, the first time through *Tenchi* is difficult reading due to its eclectic content—a blend of diverse and often obscure or confused Christian, Buddhist, Japanese legends, folk wisdom and other material. The reader also must stop fre-

quently to flip to notes in the back of the book due to the rendering of Portuguese and Latin words in their Japanese phoneticized spellings. For example, San Jiwan refers to John the Baptist, San Maruya to Mary, and Jusukiri to Lucifer. These renderings do achieve the translator's purpose of retaining the flavor of the language the Hidden Christians used to express their faith but at some cost in ease of comprehension. This reader suggests that any future edition add a glossary of these words in Japanese, Portuguese, Latin and English.

Whelan's Introduction summarizes the familiar history of Japan's early encounter with Christianity, the events that led to its suppression, and the origins and the use of *Tenchi*. Space permits us to touch on only a few points related to the latter two subjects. *Tenchi* originally may have been a pleasant story or chant. Due to the lack of other Christian materials, over time it became central to preserving and giving structure to the religion of the Hidden Christians. The text was made more formal in tone and recorded in manuscripts that were accorded the status of sacred writings. Its precise role in community worship remains obscure. Whelan suggests it may have been used during prayer gatherings, possibly involving the rosary; the joyful, sorrowful and glorious mysteries of the rosary are part of its warp and woof.

The highlight of the Introduction is Whelan's research findings from eleven months of fieldwork among *Kakure Kirishitan* in the Goto Islands during 1991-1992. Her research suggests that many contemporary *Kakure Kirishitan* appreciate the *Tenchi* for the role it played in keeping Christianity alive and for the tie it gives them to their past. Nevertheless, they do not regard it as sacred scripture. It is not possible here to do justice to Whelan's discussion of the reasons for *Tenchi's* decline and it is well worth looking up in her book. In short, the decline began with the return of the missionaries

and deepened as contact with outsiders exposed the Hidden Christians to richer and more authoritative Christian and Buddhist teachings, resources and opportunities for worship.

Whelan's extensive annotations represent prodigious research in several fields and are essential to interpreting the text. They delve into *Tenchi's* multilingual lexicon and trace the likely origin of much obscure material in the text that comes from diverse religious traditions and folk practices over many centuries. The cumulative effect of the notes is to persuade the reader that *Tenchi* is a primarily Christian document despite the inclusion of much extraneous material. For example, the notes show that based on *Tenchi*, we can tell that the Portuguese Catholic missionaries taught the Japanese Christians not only the sacraments, Latin prayers and Bible stories but also meditations on the rosary, stations of the cross, anecdotes from apocryphal works, such as the Book of James, and pious ancient and medieval legends.

Whelan's Introduction and notes helpfully point out areas where *Tenchi's* theology is confused. A key point of confusion that is worth noting is the Trinity. The unity of the Trinity is sacrificed when Deusu divides in half for the Incarnation. After the resurrection of Jesus and the Assumption of Mary, a Trinitarian formula explains that Deusu, who had originally been one, has become three bodies. Deusu is the Father, Jesus is the Son, and Mary is the Holy Spirit. Notwithstanding this statement, this author is less convinced than Whelan that Mary "becomes one of the persons of the Trinity" (31), at least not in the sense of the Roman Catholic Church's teaching about the Trinity. The *Tenchi* specifies that in heaven Deusu is the Father, the Son is the Savior, and Mary's role is Mediator—her traditional role. The sanctifying function of the Holy Spirit appears to be unknown in *Tenchi*; the descent of the Holy Spirit at

Pentecost does not occur. Mary appears to have no divine power in her own right; for example, the miracle she shows the King of Luzon comes in response to her prayers.

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### **The Recovery of Mission: Beyond the Pluralist Paradigm**

Vinoth Ramachandra

Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans

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This is an outstanding book and I hope that many, many people will read and study it with the care that it deserves. The strength of this work lies in how the author, Sri Lankan evangelical Vinoth Ramachandra, seeks a missiological approach to the issue of religious pluralism. As Ramachandra points out in the preface, he is *not* trying to produce another "Asian theology" (x). Rather, as the title indicates, the attempt is to retrieve a proper sense of mission that emerges out of the life and ministry of Jesus; a perspective that all too often has been blunted by modern theological attempts to deal with the allegedly new issue of religious pluralism. Ramachandra draws positively on his own non-Western, Asian background here to point out that the newness of pluralism is only in relation to a Western Christendom that only recently has entered into meaningful interaction with other faiths, especially since the 1960s. Because theological provincialism insists on asking, "Can anything good emerge beyond Europe and North America?", the fact that the author is not a Westerner will unfortunately keep some readers from taking this book seriously—especially those who most need to heed his message! Ramachandra's object is to interact with the worldwide Christian discussion on religious pluralism, which he does in a way