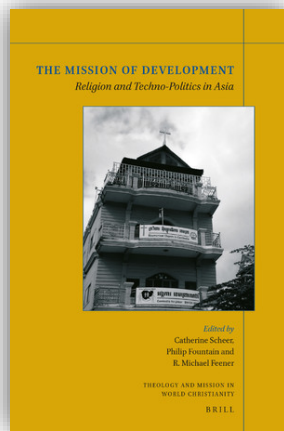


BOOK REVIEW

The Mission of Development: Religion and Techno-Politics in Asia

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This book takes a recent-historical view of relationships between mission and development in Asia. Including the introduction, there are ten chapters by different authors focusing on various parts of the continent. All chapters point, albeit in very different ways, to aspects of Christian influence over supposedly technical and secular development interventions. The term 'religion' is widely used, in my understanding largely as a synonym for Christianity.

The introduction questions whether the separation between religion and development is legitimate: Are religion and development two things, or one? Development is these days seen as salvationist, we are told. This is because Christianity has morphed from saving *souls* to saving *societies*. While the technical has at times displaced what was once overtly religious behaviour, the technical is not distinct from religion.

Hu points us to the 20th century dominance of the social gospel over the 'religious' gospel. She finds that the gospel of intellectual prowess, where belief in science is a kind of humanism, has become widespread. Yet, the fuel that drives science and secularism is faith

in Christ. Vanderbilt tells us how thoughts on *Rethinking Missions* challenged the technical gospel in Japan; instead of missionaries being considered simply the source of wisdom, social science was used to criticise what they were doing.

Erb and Widyawati articulate an about-turn in indigenisation of the Catholic Church in Indonesia. Originally, the church condemned 'traditions,' to bring benefits of modernism. Later, under the threat of massive ecological destruction by mining companies, its role was reversed to one of protecting people *from* modern commerce. Indigenisation of the priesthood contributed to this position. This demonstrates a phenomenal level of flexibility in ways in which the gospel can be applied in practice. Rui traces ways in which the WCC's (World Council of Churches) thinking that development in the light of the gospel should be bottom up translated in practice in much more complex ways into the Indonesian community. Foreign missionaries who endeavoured to be bottom-up, were under pressure from the government to compromise with government-guided top-down orientations. As a result, or perhaps inevitable anyway, church efforts at bringing motivation to rather than control over communities being developed were complicated.

Thailand is presented by Bolotta as a stain on missionary success rates, with very low uptake of the Christian faith. Closer examination however reveals that Thailand has drawn heavily from the Catholic church through translating its operations and teachings into a pro-Buddhist Thai nationalism. At a critical time in Thailand's history, Christian missionaries capitulated, accepting a promotion of Thaification, perhaps over and above Christ. Ironically, more recently, things have swung the other way; now foreign Christians, finding Thai Catholicism too 'unchristian', are attempting to challenge rather than to underwrite it, especially by defying its 'technical' alignments, and re-orienting faith to the poor. Larson takes us back to Indonesia in her description of an elite school that pushes overtly Christian teachings into a context that is very religiously

mixed. This is done on the basis that “universal values . . . are taken from Christianity” (187). This school is attempting to orient Indonesia in a direction that its leaders may not advocate, in which Christianity is the harbinger of good values, a counter to corruption, and assistance for more backward communities.

Kim’s account shows that Korean Christianity has become a flagship for Korean nationalism, so effectively, a means for promoting a Korean brand of successful Asian capitalism, modernism, and prosperity. Church and politics in Korea seem to go hand in hand. In Cambodia, Korean handouts provide the basis for relationships that subsequently translate into church plants. Cambodians are encouraged to imitate Korean ways of life. Mennonite mission in Indonesia, Fountain and Yoder tell us, blurs distinctions between mission and development. Mennonites are determined to be relational, while under pressure to function as technocrats. Peculiar Mennonite orientations arising from their interpretations of Christianity, described by our authors as “quietist techno-politics” (214), have a major impact on how Mennonites actually go about their work.

Finally, Shih introduces us to the evangelical undergirding of anti-trafficking activities in Asia and beyond, including those apparently not religiously grounded. According to this analysis, appearances of secularism may be no more than skin-deep. The motivation that informs the wider field of anti-trafficking is overtly Christian. Markets are re-interpreted as ‘good’, in perhaps misguided ways, as a means of providing income for ex-prostitutes, who are also exposed to mandatory bible study and prayer.

The impression I have after completing this text, is one of overwhelming amazement at ways in which God is at work in supposedly secular, techno-oriented, Buddhist, social-science, capitalist and modern contexts. I find myself metaphorically on my knees in amazement at what Christ has done and is doing *despite* apparent denials rooted in interpretations of secularism that overtly deny him. What our authors report, even if they are not seeking to find it, is fully compatible with the universal Lordship of Christ and the ongoing spread of his Kingdom.

My criticisms of this book include that in some cases there has been insufficient attention to research methodology or focus. The way Christian work is portrayed in this text is in some ways ‘worldly’, concealing Christ’s full revelation behind more visible non-Christian veneers.

I look at this book as being a step forward; from seeing religion as a part of development, to perceiving deep ways in which so-called modern development has arisen and seeks to arise again, from commitment to Jesus. The book puts aside a still all too popular bias in favour of the secular, making ‘religion’ into a kind of

taboo. It points instead to an imminent breaking of nonspiritual hegemony in favour of a global paradigm in which God’s activity amongst his people is recognised.



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