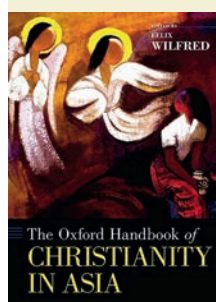


Return to origins: Christianity and Asia

At the Catholic School I attended in Long Island in New York, Jesus was always milky-white. I can still see the full-size version of him hanging on the cross, a streak of bright red blood where the nails pierced that whiteness. I think I also believed he spoke English. Church history seemed to revolve mostly around Europeans, whether decreeing, conquering, or heroically witnessing to their faith. The Church was Europe (and increasingly, America, though the Vatican did not always seem to realize this). Subconsciously, I probably thought Jesus was an English-speaking Milanese or Venetian based on art museum exhibits. When I was in a Catholic Church in San Francisco years later I did a double take at the statues of a noticeably Confucius-like Jesus. Thus, began a slow, but steady reappraisal and fascination with what can be called global Christianity, liberation theology, and intercultural theology – leading to my ongoing work today in interfaith theology.

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Felix Wilfred (ed.). 2014.
The Oxford Handbook of Christianity in Asia
Oxford: Oxford University Press
ISBN: 9780199329069

JESUS, OF COURSE, did not speak English and was not Italian. Fortunately, the Jewishness of Jesus, born and reared in the Middle East, has been stressed with greater appreciation since the moral failures and horrors of the Holocaust. Yet, the idea of Jesus as Asian or highlighting the Early Church's deep Asian (and North African) roots still remain an underdeveloped and often misunderstood foundation among many Christians (and non-Christians). The future of Christianity, though, is a return in many ways to its original past in Asia, with its billions of (mostly non-Christian) peoples – and a diversity of cultures that would seem to render any book on Christianity in Asia an impossible task.

For those familiar with the Oxford Handbooks, they are generally comprehensive, wide-ranging, and interdisciplinary. They also demand a reader's commitment with their length and girth, averaging around 750 pages per volume. The *Oxford Handbook of Christianity in Asia* (684 pages) is ably edited and structured by Felix Wilfred, a preeminent Catholic Indian theologian and Editor of the important Catholic journal *Concilium*. Wilfred was also capably assisted by a Who's Who of academics involved in research and publication in

Christianity and Asian studies, including Francis X. Clooney, Edmund Tang, and Wong Wai Ching Angela. Wilfred, in particular, is one of those theologians who has his pulse on the global scene of Christianity, and in Asia in particular. The work is a noteworthy and valuable contribution to the Oxford Handbook series and to Asian studies, more broadly. The wide-range of authors manage to be nuanced and localized, but still reflect on the broader geographical, linguistic, and cultural diversity in Asia, and in turn, such repercussions for our globalized world. The handbook is structured into five main parts which each include introductory essays written by key scholars to render the volume of interest for the general reader, too.

What makes Christianity in Asia so fascinating and challenging (from a European or North American perspective) is its generally minority status (outside, principally, the Philippines and South Korea); the deep ongoing structural injustice and poverty in vast parts of the continent; and the rich interfaith cultures and ways of life still extant, even as such have been challenged by various ethnic, cultural, and religious ideologies from Communist China and Vietnam, to Sinhalese Buddhism in Sri Lanka, Hindutva ideology in India, and growing, wide-spread Islamism. While Christians look to a poor, itinerant miracle worker and preacher as their Divine source, Christendom, bulwarked by political and military power (and boots on the ground and people in the pews) generally betrayed its source and foundations. But when Christians are the minority, the themes, language, and theology inevitably shift—there is need for more dialogue, give-and-take interactions, and mutual learning. There is also no hiding poverty in many parts of Asia – and so (as with liberation theology in South America) it demands some kind of response. The reality of deep religious pluralism and more cases of multi-religious belonging can all help to humble and keep Christianity in perspective – for it is a humble Christianity that is the most potent and valuable, morally, spiritually, and theologically.

In this regard, Christianity in Asia is often linked (with Africa) to the future of Christianity. Of crucial import is the role and claimed uniqueness of Jesus, an issue of paramount importance in much of the West, but playing a more expansive and open possibility in Asia, as Michael Amaladoss writes in his interesting and solid contribution, "Asian Theological Trends." The handbook, in fact, produced two

particularly 'wow' passages, one of them by Amaladoss, who ends his essay: "Finally, harmony and nonviolence will find their support and inspiration in an experience of reality that is relational and non-dual, having its roots in the *advaita* of India, the *Dao* with its *yin* and *yang* of China, the 'inter-being' or mutual interdependence of Buddhism, and the Trinity of Christianity (cf. John 17:21-23)" (p. 116). Such a quote is representative of the fruit and limitless potential of Christianity immersed in its roots and future in Asia, one of deep interreligious learning and partnership without sacrificing core principles and identity. There is confluence and overlap but also distinction.

Peter Phan hits a similarly high and deeply laudable passage: "Moreover, because of its intrinsically plural character, Christian spirituality is fundamentally open and receptive to other spiritualities, learning from their distinct emphasis on the divine (e.g., in Hinduism), or on the human (e.g., in Confucianism and Buddhism), or on the cosmos (e.g., Taoism)" (p. 512). Other highlighted works include Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid's careful analysis of the historical and contemporary plight of Christians in Syria, Iraq, Palestine, and Lebanon, while David Mark Neuhaus helpfully examines the history, developments, setbacks, and key themes of Jewish-Christian dialogue in West Asia. Such a context, as he reminds scholars like me, is different than the one happening in Europe and the United States – or in the Arab-Muslim world. He challenges scholars to broaden their conception of Jewish-Christian dialogue in predominantly Buddhist, Hindu and "other Asian religious milieus" (p. 376).

Finally, I also want to highlight Gudrun Löwner's fascinating piece on Christian art and architecture in Asia, which had me seeking out monographs specifically examining the theme. While not every essay will appeal to every reader, the strength of collections like this is to get a sample of the diversity and range of material in various related fields and themes examining Christianity in Asia (such as worship, music, spirituality, migration, evangelizing, gender, peace and conflict, and other interfaith contexts involving, for example, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Confucianism) to begin to form a more nuanced and holistic picture while providing opportunities and material for deeper, more focused study or research.

In this regard, the handbook continues my ongoing learning and awareness of global Christianity and interfaith dialogue, perhaps first sparked in that Catholic Church in San Francisco a few decades ago. The Confucian Jesus does not replace the milky-white one in my mind, as they subsist together, sometimes harmoniously, but more importantly, side by side with other images and conceptions. How such multifaceted or interfaith reflections and realities bear on faith journeys, beliefs, and identities remain a key question moving forward. So-called traditional faith may be diminishing or adapting in many parts of the West, but beliefs and a need for believing and belonging endure. Examining *Christianity in Asia* won't give all the answers, but it will provide many of the key questions, which in some contexts, is as important.

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Also online at newbooks.asia/review/christianity-asia

conducted by the author. In Part One of the book, Foster takes readers on a journey through the world of *yōkai*, before providing, in Part Two, a broad sampling of its manifestations. Part One outlines the 'cultural history of *yōkai* folklore and *yōkai* studies'. As well as introducing readers to the world of monsters and spirits, and the nature of the tradition of *yōkai* folktales, Foster introduces the influential writers who have inducted succeeding generations of Japanese into its mysteries. Part Two, a 'Yōkai codex', provides a sampling of some of the ghostly characters and the literary genres in which they appear. Readers are invited to approach the book in any way they choose, and many will no doubt want to begin with Part Two, to find out about the wide variety of good and bad monsters, before moving back to Part One when ready to gain a wider appreciation of the genre's cultural context. A special enticement to do so is provided by the addition of original illustrations by Shinonome Kijin which, even in their small, pencilled format, provide a rich accompaniment to text.

What does the reader learn about *yōkai*? Foster avoids providing too simplistic a definition because as we come to learn, their identities 'are not set in stone: they are contingent on the perspectives of the humans interacting with them' (p. 21). Rather, he prefers to describe the context in which such monsters and spirits are brought to life, their nature, and the scholarly tradition that has further defined and refined the genre over time, as well as sustaining it across generations.

In Chapters 2 and 3 of Part One, Foster examines the contribution of the Japanese *yōkai* scholars and the sources of the tradition since classical times. In large part, the

contemporary popularity of *yōkai* is due to the publications of early 20th century writers, Inoue Enryō (1858–1919) and Englishman Lafcadio Hearn (1850–1904) ('one of the most important foreign-language interpreters of Japanese culture' (p. 55)), and more recently, the post-war 'revivalists' Mizuki Shigeru (b. 1922), Miyata Noboru (1936–2000) and Komatsu Kazuhiko (b. 1947). While the latter can be credited for retheorising the *yōkai* tradition for a postwar generation, it was particularly through the work of novelist Kyogoku Natsuhiko (b. 1936), that, according to Foster, *yōkai* has achieved its current popularity, and arguably, influenced the more recent development of the Pokémon boom.

In Chapter 3 of Part One, Foster moves beyond the theory and history of *yōkai*, to focus on its everyday meaning, both in terms of everyday practice and local relevance. This discussion also addresses the question of the commercialisation and (the corruption of) 'authenticity' that has accompanied the popularisation of *yōkai* in Japan. Although Foster is not inclined to use the term 'heritage', in making a case for recognizing *yōkai* as 'a permanent (though ever changing) feature of the cultural landscape [in Japan]' (p. 74), he presents what in another context would amount to a cogent argument for recognizing this story-telling tradition as integral to Japan's intangible cultural heritage, and as such, a heritage to be safeguarded. Foster's response to the current commercialisation of the genre is to argue that 'commercial production is one way in which *yōkai* stay relevant and viable and ever changing' (p. 79), a conclusion that may well be relevant to a consideration of the significance of Pokémon currently.

Apart from avoiding simplistic definitions, throughout the book, Foster also warns against any essentialist or orientalist interpretation of *yōkai*'s cultural significance. In concluding Part One, Foster reiterates the point that Japanese *yōkai* should be regarded as part of a much larger global folkloric tradition, a phenomena that has its counterpart in the folk cultures of many other countries. Inevitably, however, it remains the case that "the particular shapes [that *yōkai*] monsters and spirits assume are anything but universal. They are sculpted by the distinct cultures and societies

in which they emerge, evolving through specific historical moments and with the changing desires and challenges of the people who tell their tales" (p. 33).

Readers will be fascinated (as well as teased) by the kaleidoscope of creatures, malignant and benign, briefly described in Part Two. Many of these are 'humanoid'. They range from figures such as *ono*, a human figure with clawed hands and protruding fangs, the unfortunate *kuchi-sake-ona* (the slit-mouthed woman), the 'example of modern urban-suburban monster', or *mōryō*, the child-like monster that eats body parts, to the more benign human-like creatures associated with good fortune, such as *Azuki-araim* the 'bean-washer', *Ningyo*, a 'real' mermaid, or *Kijimuna*, the unreliable trickster, and traditionally imagined as ugly but now often imagined as 'cute'. Others take on animal or spirit forms, such as *kodama*, the tree spirit or *kappa*, a water spirit, or even manifest themselves as 'an animated rectangular wall', in the case of *nurikabe*.

Readers, whose appetites are whetted by these descriptions and illustrations in Foster's book may wish to continue their hunt for *yōkai* via the 'yōkai finder' provided by yokai.com or they might want to consult the colourful collection of paintings in Miyata Noboru's book, *Yōkai no minzokugaku: Nihonno mienai kukan* (Folklore of monsters: Japan's invisible space) (Iwanami Shoten, 1990).

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