

A New History of Christianity in China [Blackwell Guides to Global Christianity]

Daniel H. Bays

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Reviewed by: Kurt Selles

For too long we have lacked an updated first-rate history of Christianity in China. Consequently, Latourette's landmark *A History of Christian Missions in China* (1929) has remained the standard for more than eighty years. His encyclopedic volume, however, is limited in its usefulness for a number of reasons: it ends at a crucial moment in Chinese church history; it primarily relates the history of the missionary movement; and its exhaustive detail makes it largely inaccessible to most readers. Of course, books on Christianity in China have been published since Latourette's but none have the scope that he brought to the subject. Most of these more recent books also have limitations of perspective: too topical, cultural, theological, political, etc. Now, finally, Daniel Bays provides a balanced and readable chronological narrative of the story of Christianity in China.

Bays, who teaches history at Calvin College, has been a student of Chinese Christianity since the 1970s and provided crucial scholarly leadership in his milestone 1986 collection of essays, *The History of Christianity in China from the Eighteenth Century to the Present*. Since this publication, both Western and Chinese scholars have followed Bays' lead in exploring the Chinese side of Christianity in the Middle Kingdom.

While not attempting to provide an extensive treatment of the earliest arrivals of Christianity in China, Bays starts out with

two chapters outlining the history of the Nestorian church in the seventh century and the Roman Catholic missions of the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries. In the remainder of the book (chapters 3-8), Bays tells the story of Chinese Christianity through the important events, figures, and movements that have shaped the church in the last two centuries. While focusing on the church, though, he skillfully paints the broader context, showing the impact of the larger historical landscape (Opium Wars, Taiping Rebellion, the Boxer Uprising, the fall of the Qing Dynasty, the May Fourth Movement, the rise of communism, etc.) on the church. Throughout his treatment, Bays pays due respect to the missionary movement and some of the giants who brought the gospel to China (Robert Morrison, Karl Gutzlaff, Elijah Bridgeman, Hudson Taylor, etc.), but he does not shy away from raising tough questions about missionary complicity in Western imperialism and their failure to relinquish control over the fledgling Chinese church.

Bays tells the missionary story well, but his interest clearly lies in telling the story of the lives and contributions of Chinese Christians. He pays particularly close attention to the indigenous forms of Christianity that developed in the twentieth century, such as the True Jesus Church, the Jesus Family, and Watchman Nee's Little Flock. He also introduces individual Chinese Christians who played a role in making Christianity a Chinese faith, figures such as Liang Fa, John Sung (Song Shangjie), Dora Yu (Yu Cidu), Mary Stone (Shi Meiyu), David Yui (Yu Rizhang), W.T. Wu (Wu Yaozong), Wang Mingdao, and Marcus Ch'eng (Chen Chonggui). In the case of this last figure, Bays artfully charts Chen's life story across the years prior to the Communist Revolution and the years following it, a moving portrayal that adds texture to this crucial period in the history of the country and the church. Although huge gaps exist in the story of Christianity during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), a period when many believed that Christianity had died out again, Bays stresses that it was during this tumultuous period that the faith really took root in Chinese soil and became a Chinese movement. In the final chapter, Bays describes some of the notorious sectarian movements that have plagued Christianity

in recent decades (the “Shouters,” the “Three-grades of Servants,” and the “Eastern Lighting Sect”) and explains the ambiguous role that millenarianism has played not only in these indigenous movements but also Chinese Christianity as a whole. He concludes that the church in China today is truly Chinese—in both positive and dubious ways—and that the long term trends for the development of the church appear to be positive.

Throughout the volume, Bays offers an even-handed, honest account and evaluation of the complex story of Chinese Christianity. While he is not afraid to broach tough topics, he deftly treats sensitive subjects with subtlety. For further study, he notes recent scholarship on a variety of topics and provides endnotes with suggested bibliographies at the end of each chapter. Most recent work on Chinese Christianity deals exclusively with either Protestantism or Catholicism, but Bays treats both in each time period and even includes an appendix on the Russian Orthodox Church. Having spent much time in China over the last thirty years, Bays adds a personal touch to his narrative by sharing some of his own experiences and thoughts on Chinese Christianity.

Bays’ highly readable book will no doubt quickly become a standard introduction for those approaching the subject of Chinese Christianity for the first time. It should also serve as a resource for scholars looking to review the larger story and as a stimulus for the next generation of scholars to explore some of the intriguing questions that he raises along the way.

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