

Mission Complexities in Asia

From the East: The History of the Latter-Day Saints in Asia, 1851-1996. By R. Lanier Britsch (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book, 1998), 631 pp.

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AS A MISSIONARY IN TAIWAN many years ago, I often reflected on the historical significance of our work. President Hyer humbly reminded us that we were only the most recent phase of an historical process which began centuries ago with the efforts of the first Christian missionaries to Asia. As we reaped what they had sown, we helped to fulfill the selfless labors of all Christian missionaries who had gone before us. I wondered if someone would ever attempt to write the history of the LDS missionary involvement with Asia. The task would be huge, given the geographical vastness and ethnic diversity of the region. R. Lanier Britsch, a professor of Asian history at Brigham Young University, has made an admirable attempt to write such a history.

The title *From the East* refers to the prophecy in Matthew 8:11 that many from both the east and west would eventually be numbered among the children of Abraham. The melding of Asian tradition with the message of the restoration is reflected artistically on the book's jacket, which features a gold-embossed pattern in a curiously Asian design with a trumpet-blowing angel Moroni placed at the center. At a hefty 631 pages, the book is packed with useful and well-documented details. It provides many helpful features for the

reader interested in the complex history of LDS missions in Asia, including maps, extensive bibliographies, and a schematic timeline showing how the many current missions evolved from the earliest entities. The bibliographies deserve particular praise since they indicate the diverse types of sources necessary to make a work of this scope as thorough as possible. Cited sources include booklets, pamphlets, and a wealth of unpublished sources such as manuscript collections, letters, journals, oral histories and interviews, and personal correspondence.

The first attempt to cover LDS involvement in Asia comprehensively and the product of nearly three decades of thought and writing, *From the East* succeeds rather well as a whole, though with a few shortcomings. LDS missionary work in Asia began during the 1850s with abortive early missions to India, Burma, Siam (Thailand), and China. Serious, sustained missionary efforts began in Japan in the period after 1901. Britsch describes the discouraging results of the nineteenth-century missions and suggests factors to account for their failures. He then, through several chapters, traces how missionary work in other parts of Asia grew out of the foundation established in Japan in the twentieth century. His account continues through 1996, covering the following geographical areas: Japan, Korea, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Philippines, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam, Singapore and Malaysia, Indonesia, India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and Mongolia. Many of these regions receive less than a chapter of attention, since missionary work there is of more recent date. Japan receives five chapters, the Chinese "realm" (Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the

People's Republic of China) three chapters altogether, and Korea and the Philippines two chapters each.

One may wonder why such disproportionate emphasis on Japan. Britsch explains that in the wake of a gargantuan Chinese civil war in the second half of the nineteenth century and the failure of the India mission, Japan seemed the most promising area for the church to gain a foothold in Asia because it seemed most open to Western influence. It is curious, however, that to an LDS author of the time, Japan's success in a war against China in 1894-95 was proof of its "strides . . . in the arts of civilization."¹ This author apparently considered war to be among the civilized arts. Or perhaps he thought that Japan's adopting Western technology, joining the race for colonies, and oppressing less-developed peoples for gain indicated that it deserved a place among the established civilizations.

The great achievement of *From the East* is to provide a unified historical context for missionary activity in East and South Asia as a whole. The comprehensive scope of the book, however, is both a strength and a weakness, for some areas are not explored to a satisfying depth. The preface shows that the author has thought carefully about the inherent problems as well as some of the potential criticisms of this project. (He apologizes for giving Taiwan a particularly deficient treatment [xiii]). It is to be hoped that more specialized histories of LDS involvement in each country in Asia will one day be written.

A principal strength of the book, which compensates for other limitations, is the author's extensive use of a wide range of primary sources. Britsch

also draws upon first-hand anecdotes, refers to his mission to Hawaii (568), includes a photograph of himself introducing a BYU performing group to Indira Gandhi, and shows a deep cultural sensitivity and respect for Asian cultures. Such personal details greatly improve the credibility of the book. His style is easy, making the book a pleasant read, though sometimes too informal for a work of scholarship. (In his recent *Nothing More Heroic: The Compelling Story of the First Latter-day Saint Missionaries in India* [Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book Co., 1999], Britsch chose to write not from the third-person perspective of the historian, but from the imagined perspective of one of the missionaries.)

Britsch makes an important critical observation regarding LDS missionary methodology, which I affirm from my own experience. The unified system for teaching the gospel, useful elsewhere, is mostly ineffective in Asia (he calls it a "help and a hindrance" [5]). I recall memorizing the discussions in Chinese with meticulous accuracy in the MTC, only to discard or modify major portions of them to suit the particular cultural needs of Chinese in Taiwan. Simply translating one "universal template" directly into another language ignores the particulars of a specific culture. Britsch refers to a missionary lesson plan designed by H. Grant Heaton specifically for the Chinese people (239), but does not explain why it was never adopted.

A vivid example is provided to portray the difficulties involved in direct translation of expressions and concepts between very different cultures. The wife of a mission president taught LDS

1. "A Future Mission Field," *The Contributor*, October 1895, 764-65; qtd. from 44. Britsch does not give the author's name.

Korean husbands that they should tell their wives at least weekly that they love them, a very unusual thing for a Korean man to do. One brother heard this advice six times before resolving to follow it. He determined a specific day when he would tell his wife that he loved her, but when the opportunity came, all he could say was "When I look at you, you remind me of spring" (195). Such culturally revealing anecdotes are liberally distributed throughout the book.

The Introduction contains a thoughtful discussion of the philosophical underpinnings of the concept of conversion, especially in relation to LDS missionary efforts. Some Christian groups consider that "conversion" presupposes arrogance on the part of the missionary, assuming that his viewpoint is superior. But I ask: what kind of Christian does not feel that his life is better with his faith and does not desire to proclaim and share that message? Britsch treats this issue sensitively.

There are significant weaknesses marring the book, however, of three general types. First, the book suffers throughout from poor proofreading and editing.² Second, and more seriously, there is a confusion about audience.

Does Britsch intend to address insiders (i.e., LDS church members) or outsiders? At times he refers to "our" this and "our" that in a manner to suggest an inclusive "we," for example, in phrases such as "our beloved prophet" (566) and "our missionaries" (543). Many other passages, however, in which he explains rudimentary doctrines and practices of the church in a very basic way in the third person, clearly are intended for a non-Mormon audience. This apparent schizophrenia is unsettling to a reader.³

Finally, and most seriously, Britsch brushes over the pre-LDS history of Asian nations in a manner which may give the sense that events in this period, especially early Christian missionary efforts, do not matter. This viewpoint is typically LDS, it seems to me: at best to treat lightly, at worst to ignore pre-Restoration Christianity. In reality, the efforts of the early Catholic missionaries as well as those of subsequent proselytizers were Christian seeds that eventually yielded LDS fruit. Britsch offers an unconvincing disclaimer regarding the pre-LDS period in the preface, but these matters simply require more attention. He does acknowledge that the governments of several Asian countries pro-

2. Listing such shortcomings is distasteful, even tiresome, but necessary. The following examples reflect the type of ambiguities, errors of detail, and typographical indiscretions which occur ubiquitously. On 73, does the phrase "Indians of Hawaii" refer to people of South Asian origin or to the native Hawaiian "Lamanites"? On 413, August 1997 is referred to as "this date," which is inconsistent both with other references to the present (1996) and with the fact that the book identifies its account as ending in 1996. On 452, *singa pur*, "City of the Lion," is said to be the Sanskrit term from which the name of the modern nation Singapore is derived. The Sanskrit would be *simhapuri*; the form used derives from a descendant language. On 478, "populous" is a misprint for "populace." On 555, Nepal is mentioned when clearly Sri Lanka is meant. In the discussion of Indonesia, no mention is made of the Arabic elements in the translated title of the church or of the Book of Mormon (484-85)—an inconsistency, since Britsch refers to such particulars of language when writing about other nations.

3. This confusion regarding audience is evident in other ways, such as when Britsch describes an event as occurring "in an almost remarkable way" (503) or writes, "The founding of the church in Bangalore is instructive" (537). Remarkable (or not) for whom? Instructive for whom or for what purpose?

hibit proselytizing among non-Christians. Particularly in those nations, then, LDS missionary efforts owe a very great deal to the work of the Christian missionaries who preceded them, selflessly devoted to the cause of Christ. Even a page or two discussing earlier Christianity in Asia would significantly improve the book.⁴

Eventually, I hope to see an LDS historical treatment of each country which fully acknowledges other religious efforts as well as shows the classic LDS paradigm that the restored gospel is, or ought to be, the fulfillment of all to which their own traditions aspire. Belief in the restoration may entail the belief that the gospel dropped out of the sky (literally), but it is still a part of historical processes that a responsible and honest treatment ignores to its peril. This is especially the case when writing of non-western cultures, for which familiar western historical traditions cannot be assumed.⁵

Notwithstanding these serious criticisms, I emphasize that the positive contribution of this book is much greater than its defects, which largely could be rectified by short revisions and more responsible editing in a second edition. *From the East* represents a much needed historical treatment. It vividly depicts the church's evolving understanding of and concern for Asia, as reflected in its greater specialization of missions over time and its gradual shift from viewing Asia as one undifferentiated Oriental mass to conceiving of it as a complex region of widely-varied countries and peoples, some rarely in the news. It is my hope that eventually someone will write a history of the church's dealings in the Middle East, Central Asia, and Africa that is as well-done as this one. An ambitious historical work, with or without revisions, this book is likely to remain useful for a long time.

4. For an example of the cursory treatment of the pre-LDS period, see 171, where Britsch refers to a book written by a Jesuit missionary to Korea in 1631 but fails to note the title of the book, the name of the author, or the circumstances of the mission. Such an important detail ought to be included as a matter of course.

5. An adequate discussion of such historical and cultural processes requires greater detail and attention to nuance than is sometimes the case in the present book. For example, Britsch states categorically that it is easier to convert an English-speaking Christian to the LDS faith than a Chinese-speaking Buddhist or Taoist, but does not explain why (325). My Chinese mission experience was much the opposite, however. Britsch also often treats relations between Islam and Christianity in a cursory or misleading manner. On pages 493-94, for example, in discussion of Muslim complaints against Christian missionary efforts, he makes no mention of the fact that Islam, like the LDS faith, believes itself to be the one true religion. In a later account of Christians converted from Islam, Britsch mentions the *shari'a* laws for offenses against Islam but does not explain that the term *shari'a* refers to Islamic religious law in its entirety. The *shari'a* covers and regulates every aspect of Muslim believers' lives, not unlike the LDS gospel. Without these necessary explanations, such accounts are confusing, and, at times suffer from the sort of sensationalism too common in Western representations of Islam. Moreover, the clichéd claim that the West is "the home of the concept of religious toleration and religious freedom" (508) fails to acknowledge scholarly arguments that the origins of religious tolerance lie in medieval Islam, if not earlier. Nearly any history of Islam describes this; see, for example, Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), I: 242-43.