

Christian Circulations: Global Christianity and the Local Church in Penang and Singapore, 1819–2000. By Jean DeBernardi.
Singapore: NUS Press, 2020. 472 pp. \$38 SGD, paperback.

This encyclopedic work is without question the final word on the large, diverse, and politically influential Christian Brethren movement in peninsular Southeast Asia. Focusing especially on Penang and Singapore, the book draws on the author's decades of experience within the region and an expansive network of contacts reaching back to the late 1970s. Combining remarkable depth of access and an anthropologist's eye for human relations, Jean DeBernardi has produced a history that is sweeping in its global scope, but is always grounded in local realities and the human lives of its many actors.

The content of this massive book covers four main sections. The first traces the Brethren to its origins as a nondenominational group of British and Irish Protestants in the 1820s, and subsequently to the evangelistic movement that brought one wing of the group to Asia. The second and third sections introduce the formation of Brethren missions in Southeast Asia and in China, as well as the circulation of personnel and ideas throughout the region. The fourth traces the internal evolution of the movement in Penang and Singapore, across the political and religious milestones of the twentieth century.

One of the book's recurring themes is schism. We see numerous internal ruptures within the movement: in 1835 when the Church Missionary Society broke with the Tinnevely mission, in 1848 when the Brethren divided into open and exclusive branches, disagreements over indigenization in the early and mid-twentieth century, and subsequent splits within the Singaporean church over Pentecostalism and charismatic healing. Emphasizing the idea that schism within a religious movement is followed by a period of "mutual forgetting" and reorganization, the book repeatedly divides the Brethren into threads, and then follows only the one thread that leads to present-day Penang and Singapore. While certainly an appropriate representation of the painful scars of institutional division, this very specific narrative path did occasionally prove difficult to follow.


DeBernardi successfully integrates religious and political events into a single timeline. Alongside the rise of revivalism or Pentecostalism, we have global economic crisis, the Boxer Rebellion in China, Japanese occupation, and Malayan Emergency. The book effectively shows how political and religious events shaped each other, especially so after the missionaries had departed, and the churches interacted on new terms with multi-religious states in postcolonial Singapore and Malaysia. Disagreements over practice are treated with the sympathetic eye of the insider, as are day-to-day practical challenges in the life of an evangelistic mission: bridging multiple languages, maintaining physical equipment and property, facing disputes with students and neighbors. The book was particularly effective at working outside of the binary of home country and mission field, as well as ideas such as indigenization that logically derive from it. I especially appreciated DeBernardi's ability to integrate political and theological developments in China, and to take seriously mid-century theological writings in Chinese. Doing so effectively highlights both the decentralized nature of the Brethren mission itself, and the profound role of language in defining the Straits Chinese communities.

The amount of detail can also be a shortcoming, at least for the casual reader. The book introduces a large number of actors, most of whom are allowed to drift in and out.

We hear of arrivals, marriages, departures, and deaths, but the number of people is simply too large to get to know any of them well. The effect is to give the book an epic quality that makes the movement greater than any of its leaders, and is a conscious decision by the author, who quotes Georg Simmel to define a movement as “individuals connected by interaction” (358). While this style of organization is arguably the best way to approach a movement that eschewed centralized institutions, it occasionally left me feeling unclear as to who among these many people was actually important to the book’s narrative.

This remarkable study will be especially prized as a book of record—a history of the movement in the straightforward sense. While the book avoids the hagiographic tone that afflicts many religious histories, the reliance on insider sources and accounts inevitably means that DeBernardi is recounting the movement’s own story in its own words. Since the structure is one that departs at the point of disagreement, the book necessarily replicates the same “mutual forgetting” of roads not taken, and more significantly, of how the movement is perceived from the outside, notably by its detractors and competitors.

That said, I return to the author’s remarkable access. With her four decades of observation and interviews, as well as access to family libraries and personal memorabilia, DeBernardi presents us with an unmatched account of a movement, including a significant portion of which she witnessed firsthand.

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***The Gates of Hell: An Untold Story of Faith and Perseverance in the Early Soviet Union.* By Matthew Heise. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2022. 496 pp. \$14.39 Kindle; \$26.39 hardcover.**

In the fall of 1929, Bishop Arthur Malmgren, the head of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Russia, wrote to one of the main sponsors of the Church abroad, in this case John Morehead, the head of the Lutheran World Convention, founded in the German city of Eisenach in 1923, and the National Lutheran Council in the United States. Malmgren thanked Morehead for the financial aid sent for Lutheran Churches in the Soviet Union but reminded him that since clergy could not legally enter, much less purchase goods in, state-run grocery stores, they had to pay much for food at the small number of grocery stores that were not state run. He also mentioned rumors that, beginning October 1, the Red Army would start blocking access to the cities from the countryside. As the 1920s came to an end, the Soviet Union stood on the precipice of Stalin’s revolution from above, which would sweep away the limited economic and religious freedoms of the New Economic Policy (NEP) over the next five years and exact a horrible toll on the Soviet population. Among those who bore some of the highest tolls were the USSR’s religious believers, of which the Communist regime’s Lutheran population, not only because of their faith in an