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## CHINESE RELIGION

"New Religions in China" by Paul Farrelly <[j.mp/cAP0bW](http://j.mp/cAP0bW)> — such information is so uncommon that, while this item is neither lengthy nor especially authoritative, it is certainly interesting. Farrelly notes "three groups ... classified by the state as 'evil cults,'" — namely, Falun Gong, "the Protestant [sic] group Eastern Lightning," and an "import" identified here only as "the New Testament Church" (said to have been "founded by a Hong Kong movie star and now based in Taiwan").

Farrelly refers to other New Religious movements in China. "Yiguandao [also known as I-Kuan Tao] is a syncretistic NRM that was once popular in China but following a crackdown in 1951, relocated to Taiwan from where it stabilized and spread around the globe with the Chinese diaspora. At the same time, large Buddhist NRMs such as Dharma Drum Mountain and Foguangshan were founded in Taiwan by Buddhist monks who fled China following the rise to power of the Communist Party. These Buddhist NRMs seek to make Buddhism relevant to modern society."

Farrelly offers the helpful reminder that "it may be more useful to investigate them in the context of the older religion from which they have evolved, instead of attempting to draw comparisons between the NRMs themselves. This is particularly the case with NRMs that have developed in China, where the founder should be viewed beyond notions of charisma, mental illness or entrepreneurship, key terms in the Western academic study of NRMs. The importance of genealogy in Chinese religious biographies suggests that researchers might be well served by examining an NRM and its founder in relation to the NRM's preceding traditions. Care must be taken when using terminology developed in the West to understand concepts originating in a foreign society, such as China. It may be the case that Western terminology does not have an exact translation into Chinese, and vice versa, thereby raising the possibility that one's understanding of a Chinese NRM may not accurately capture the social reality of its adherents and meaning of its scriptures." *eRenlai*, Dec 13 '10, <[www.j.mp/gucnoA](http://www.j.mp/gucnoA)>

Of related interest: *eRenlai's* online collection "Snapshots of Religious Innovation in Asia" at <[www.j.mp/bVBqoO](http://www.j.mp/bVBqoO)>

## CULTURE

"*Lost: Tramping through the Jungle toward the Glow Light*" by Debra Rienstra — reports that "The producers of the just-concluded TV drama series *Lost* certainly delivered the goods in the shocking drama department, but the show offered something beyond typical TV fare: an extended, thoughtful, utterly absorbing treatment of redemption." Another observation is that "One of *Lost's* primary strengths is in deep character study. ...

"*Lost* will continue to sustain a fan base because it balances the holy-cow factor with a philosophical heft unmatched by other character dramas and suspense shows. How many other shows name characters after philosophers, literary figures, and authors (Locke, Hume, Penelope, Charlotte Lewis)? ... Significant allusions to Walker Percy, C.S. Lewis, Madeleine L'Engle, Kierkegaard, and Dostoevsky — along with many instances of obviously Christian visual imagery — make *Lost* perhaps the smartest drama on TV in the category of actual religious thought.

"Whether or not the show offers 'answers' to significant philosophical or theological questions is a matter of debate." Rienstra finds that "by the end of season one, 'diversity' has little to do with gender or ethnicity and everything to do with what we might call worldview. ...

"*Lost* subsumes its concern both with community and with the faith/science debate into a larger thematic obsession with the ways people get trapped by their experiences and choices into self-defeating patterns, and what it takes to break them free."

Rienstra points out that something "seems from the beginning of the *Lost* story to be working on these characters, getting them to endure experiences that force them to face fears, resolve conflicts, get slammed with their own hypocrisies. ...

"*Lost's* treatment of human nature is more realistic and psychologically interesting" (continued on next page)

ing than much of what we witness either in pop culture or — I'm sorry to say this — in many churches. ...

"[T]he show continually, even gleefully, frustrates our expectations that characters will drop neatly into good guy/bad guy, dark side/light side categories." Rienstra finds that "In many ways, *Lost* does present human nature as depraved or entrapped — lost. Most of [its characters] furiously resist the growing sense that they might be 'chosen' and there might be some purpose to their island ordeal. ...

"The fiction stands on its own, and resonances with Christian story and symbol, however prominent, serve the purpose of foregrounding and dramatizing abidingly difficult spiritual issues." Further, "*Lost* presents the redemptive process as both particular to each person and simultaneously communal. ...

"Perhaps all the mysteries and ambiguities of the show add up to a kind of principled humility about ultimate things: the universe is mysterious, right down to the 'glow cave' at the island's heart, and we will never know everything.

"Finally — and this is an insight we could hear more of in church — *Lost* reminds us that genuine transformation hurts. [The characters] have suffered much at the hands of horrendous people, even more because of their own choices; but many of them eventually learn to suffer for purposes and loyalties more important than their own immediate well-being. *Lost* presents a drama of sanctification that takes a long time and involves a great deal of backtracking....

"*Lost* offers a realistic dose of pessimism about human nature and the possibility of self-transformation. ... Nevertheless, Season 6 reveals the hopeful heart of the series, and any doubts that *Lost* intentionally addresses spiritual themes are fully dispelled."

Rienstra notes that Roman Catholic coproducer Carleton Cuse says that "*Lost* is not about advocating a specific religion, but rather exploring issues central to all faiths: Community. Redemption. Damnation. ...

"In the final moments of the *Purgatorio*, Dante sees his life fully and truly; he chokes out his deepest confession before his beloved Beatrice, then she lets him bathe in the healing waters of the river Lethe, where all pain is forgotten. Suffice to say, this is not far off from the way the *Lost* saga concludes. ...

"A key scene earlier in the final episode confirms that moral choices do have consequences in *Lost*: everything is real, everything matters. Yet there are indications

that some benevolent, though fearsome, conscious power guides the process. And as long as people are on the path, there's patience with individual pace. ...

"At the conclusion of the *Lost* saga, plenty of mysteries remain, and the show will continue to generate reflection and lively commentary." *Perspectives*, Oct '10, pp6-11. <[www.j.mp/gEvgSY](http://www.j.mp/gEvgSY)>

**NEW TESTAMENT CRITICISM**

"Could much of the New Testament be a forgery?" So asks an unidentified *Kirkus* reviewer (Jan '11, #2) in response to Bart Ehrman's latest which is due out in the last half of March. The book, *Forged: Writing in the Name of God — Why the Bible's Authors Are Not Who We Think They Are*,<sup>1</sup> "critically examines the authorship of the books of the New Testament, a debate that has continued for the past two centuries. Here the author adds a level of condemnation that past scholars have been loath to use. Calling any epistles written falsely in another's name 'forgeries,' Ehrman steps away from academic niceties and convoluted explanations. The author attacks the conventional wisdom that writing in another's name was accepted and even seen as an honor in the ancient world. He also counters widespread theories used to explain differences in style and word choice, such as that of the use of secretaries. However, he is careful to separate instances of what he terms forgery from other cases in which authorship is in question, such as the four Gospels, in which authorship was ascribed by later readers and not claimed erroneously by the original writer. Ehrman also discusses

elements other than the New Testament, including early letters, gospels and other writings that never made it into the Christian canon. His overarching conclusion is condemning: "There were numerous ways to lie in and through literature in antiquity, and some Christians took advantage of the full panoply in their efforts to promote their view of the faith." Though many of Ehrman's theories are not new, his approach will be controversial. For example, many readers will find it hard to accept the writer of Acts as being 'spectacularly successful' at deception." Indeed, *Kirkus* concludes that, make no mistake, Ehrman has produced a "Gloves-are-off review of New Testament authorship."<sup>2</sup>

Conservative scholars are answering Ehrman's attacks on Scripture through *The Ehrman Project* <[www.ehrmanproject.com](http://www.ehrmanproject.com)>, "a website dedicated to engaging the ideas that Dr. Ehrman is famously expounding in the complex and nuanced realm of Biblical scholarship" and offering responses to "Dr. Ehrman's provocative conclusions."

**SOURCES: Monographs**

*Forged: Writing in the Name of God — Why the Bible's Authors Are Not Who We Think They Are*, by Bart Ehrman (HarperOne, March 2011, hardcover, 320 pages) <[www.j.mp/e2LCQB](http://www.j.mp/e2LCQB)>

**SOURCES: Periodicals**

*Kirkus Reviews*, <[www.kirkusreviews.com](http://www.kirkusreviews.com)>

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