

THE GOSPEL AND CHINESE CULTURE: Parallels from Four Centuries Ago

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“Theological Construction” (or “reconstruction”) is today a top priority in the China Christian Council of the People’s Republic of China, which has an estimated 20 million Protestant Christians in 55 thousand churches and meeting points, as compared to only 700,000 Christians in 1949. Theological construction is the task of Chinese Christians in finding, manifesting, and expressing Christ within the millennial God-given values of their own culture (albeit updated) and the present social realities of a modernizing socialist China that has unabashedly embraced the global capitalist economy with all its rapaciousness. How has such a task been pursued? Are there historical precedents, external to China, that can serve as possible lessons? This essay suggests that there are. Coming from the outside, the Roman Catholic presence in China, largely in the Ming dynasty through the work of the Jesuit missionaries, especially in their posture, approach, and labor in evangelization, four centuries ago were experiencing the people and culture of China with Christian mind and heart.

Possessing a Singleness of Purpose

Founded in 1540 by Ignatius Loyola (1491-1556), the Society of Jesus was an integral part of the counter-reformation to restore the authority of the Roman Catholic hierarchy and its pope amid the breakup of the corpus Christianum by the Protestant revolution, initiated by Martin Luther (1483-1546). The Jesuits were to go anywhere in the world in spreading the gospel of God in Jesus Christ by any means possible *ad majorem Dei gloriam*, “to the greater glory of God.”

In China the Jesuits came into close contact with a culture so different from theirs, yet had so much that was similar, intriguing, and even challenging. There was so much courtesy and seemingly innate goodness in the Chinese people, yet they, to the missionaries, “did not know Christ.” It was Francis Xavier (1506-1552), the Jesuit missionary who worked in India and also Japan, who was convinced that Japan would never be converted to Christianity unless China, the cultural center of East Asia, was first brought into the Christian faith. Xavier’s forte for evangelization was the method of accommodating to the cultural traditions of the land where Jesuits were sent. This method was adopted by Alexandro Valignano (1538-1606), the Jesuit Visitor to the Far East, and implemented in exemplary fashion by Matteo Ricci (1551-1610) in China under a Confucian social order.

Acting with Political Astuteness

From the very beginning the Jesuits realized that religion and politics are inseparable (*zhengjiao bufen*, 政教不分) in China, and it is only by gaining the acceptance and confidence of the highest governing authorities of the land that they could avoid the whim and arbitrary rule of local magistrates, who often acted capriciously with approval or rejection of foreigners in their territory. Hence, working with the emperor and the elite literati officials in the Chinese bureaucracy in Peking, of which they have become so well known, and regrettably, fixed in the annals of history as being wedded to officialdom in a Chinese

Constantinianism of religion and political power. Working on the level of the authoritative imperium, these Jesuits risked being judged by their peers in other Catholic orders including some in their own (and by history) as representatives of a ðamedö religion which was beholden to power, privilege, and status. Such accusation is no less true in the church in China today, where Christians in the Three-Self Patriotic Movement liaison with government in the Party-state are seen as being and acting under its hegemony, dictates, and manipulation.

Historically, the Jesuits have been stereotypically seen as the intellectual giants who worked in high places of the Imperial court, impressing emperors and officials for several generations with their superior knowledge of Western science (especially astronomy) and technology (including manufacture of cannons and clock-making). The Chinese literati were intrigued by the science brought by the Jesuits. However, from the latter they *selectively* borrowed what they felt was needed and useful to China,öto amalgamate European methods within the traditional system,ö which could potentiate but not harm Chinese culture (Elman, p. 157).

A common understanding of Christian mission in China has it that while other Roman Catholic missionaries (perhaps less academically inclined) such as the Franciscans, Dominicans, and Augustinians labored with rural Chinese masses on the rice-roots level, the Jesuits worked with the literati of officialdom. Not true. Like *all* mission groups in China, members of the Society of Jesus were no less there with the primary purpose to introduce the gospel of God in Jesus Christ, and the authority of the Roman Catholic Church with its head, the pope, wherever they could gain access. Jesuits such as Italian Matteo Ricci, Belgian Ferdinand Verbiest (1623-1688), and German Johann Adam von Bell (1592-1666) became famous names because of their high visibility with Chinese officialdom. But they were there in Peking intentionally as a strategy to insure the legitimacy and protection of their fellow priests (including those not of the Society of Jesus) so that they could work freely in the different locales of China without fear of suppression or expulsion. Likewise, in the Communist era beginning in 1949, Christian leaders who supported the revolution and new social order enabled Christianity in both urban and rural rice-roots China to survive and flourish with remarkable achievement.

Crossing Geographical Borders

Because of the head start of Iberian imperialism based on maritime superiority, most of the early Jesuits were Portuguese, supported by the king of Portugal, their patron. Their story is an inspiring one of commitment, sacrifice, and rigor, both physical as well as intellectual. Their sea voyage alone was itself a major hurdle to their mission in China. From Lisbon around the Cape of Good Hope, to Portuguese enclaves of Indiaö Goa, then to Chinaö Macau, both staging points of the Society for mission in Asia. The treacherous journey was fraught with dangers of which as many as half of their group would not survive, but die aboard ship. Their long voyage of six months to a year was one in primitive vessels with months of boredom in cramped unsanitary quarters, foul air, and scanty diets, often with many contracting diseases, such as scurvy. Even under such extreme conditions the Jesuits were mandated by their superiors not only to take care of their own health, but to uphold personal comportment of piety. Aboard ship they heard confessions and celebrated mass regularly, set a

high moral tone and Christian example by engaging all the ship's crew and attendants, and other passengers of merchants, soldiers and sailors in group activities of sacred dimensions. For these servants of God the social setting on ship was indeed more than challenging amid the propensity of many to gamble, engage in brawls which often led to murder. Thus, the sea voyage for the Jesuit was indeed a great lesson in a cauldron of human emotions where they even witnessed hunger, death, and disease among their own confreres (Brockey, p. 211). Horror stories of Christians and others suffering during the many sporadic campaigns of the Mao Zedong era up to the Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) are well known and publicized within the last quarter century, albeit with different degrees of accuracy. Many Christians had to straddle, if not actually cross ideological borders for the sake of the gospel and a changing China. True to the incarnational nature of the gospel, they identified with their people and shared their suffering, thus making Christianity, once regarded as a foreign religion, a legitimate candidate for incorporation into the dynamics of socialist China, now turning capitalist amid changing times. Perhaps in not too distant future, theological construction after preoccupation with correcting the flaws of doctrinal fundamentalism inherited from missionaries in past centuries and engaging Christians in the contemporary modernizing process, will again address China's cultural past, and like the Jesuits from without see its millennial wisdom again as if for the first time.

Being Sensitive to Tradition

In China the Jesuits spent years in language and cultural studies, beginning with the Four Books (*The Great Learning, Analects, Mencius, and Maintaining Perfect Balance*) of Confucius. They sought a thorough grounding in the language and culture of the people and were patient in the discipline of doing so. In engaging Chinese traditions, they began thinking in terms of centuries, rather than years or decades. In practice, they worked without too much fanfare in their evangelization effort, always remaining rather low-key, away from the limelight, difficult for foreigners to do in China. Chinese Christians by the fact that they are Chinese, will by nature express their faith in Christ through the best in their God-given cultural tradition. The gospel of God brought by the Jesuits initiated a long process of enlivening an ossified Confucianism, which continues to the present day. Through the lens of these Roman Catholic and later some Protestant missionaries,* Chinese Christians are challenged to look again at their own taken for granted cultural tradition as also God-given.

During the time of the Jesuit presence in China in the Ming and Qing dynasties, Neo-Confucianism was well established as state orthodoxy. The Four Books and some commentaries of Zhu Xi (1130-1200), the systematic educator from the Song, were the bases for the imperial examination. Every man, child, and possibly woman, who was schooled from the 13th century until 1905 (when the examination system was abolished) would have been exposed to this core curriculum. Central to Neo-Confucian education is the notion of self-cultivation toward perfection through human effort. Such a symbolic solution to the human predicament has little need for revelatory religion or speculative philosophy. This human-centric view is in diametric opposition to Christian soteriology which is based on dependence on God. Whether acknowledged or not, all thinking Chinese Christians seem to

hold this tension between human centricity and theocentricity in their persons. For them, interfaith dialogue is embodied in a perennial inner dialogue of intercultural interaction.

Multiplying Themselves and Their Effort

Compared to the hundreds and thousands of Protestant missionaries who came some three centuries later, the Jesuits of 16th and 17th centuries were miniscule. At some of their outlying stations in the provinces there would be as little as only one European priest, or at most two, and never more than a hundred Jesuits in all of China at any one time. How could so few achieve so much? They multiplied themselves and their effort by the training of Chinese Catholics and forming myriad of organizations in confraternities of piety and service of good works to their neighbors. The Jesuits shared power with lay Catholics who assumed responsibilities for baptizing, catechizing new converts and other religious activities of caring and sharing in holding Christian communities together and expanding them. All these were reinforced by the periodic visits of the limited number of Jesuit priests who would hear confessions and celebrate the mass.

Protestant Christianity in China in the last quarter century has been one of the fastest growing faiths in Asia. This achievement even under a scarcity of ordained clergy is all the more remarkable, made possible by ordinary Christians who have been zealous in sharing the gospel with their neighbors and service to their communities. Clearly, the dynamism of Christian witness has been manifested in the rice-roots, especially in rural China. This phenomenon, short of being miraculous, took even established church leaders by surprise. The latter could only respond appropriately by providing programs and establishing training centers to equip lay Christians as church workers, lest traditional popular religious sentiments lead to new heterodoxies. Thus, in doing so, church leaders in today's China have been able to multiply themselves and their effort as informed servants of the church, as did the Jesuits of 17th century China.

Withstanding Conflict and Rejection

The slow process of Jesuits steeping themselves thoroughly into the culture of China, however, soon led to conflict and controversy with their Catholic peers of other religious orders such as the Franciscans, Dominicans, and Augustinians who were more anxious to proclaim the gospel in an urgently take-it-or-leave-it fashion. These latter groups felt that the Jesuits had compromised the purity of the gospel by having gone "native," in the syncretism of Christianity with Chinese "idolatry."

Despite their concerted effort to understand, appreciate, and respect Chinese Confucian culture, the Jesuits were not free from attacks by conservative Chinese. With a restrictive view of what constitute Chinese culture, such people can be seen in the notorious Yang Guangxian (1597-1669) who wrote scathing tracts against the Jesuits, or Shen Que (1565-1624), vice-minister of the Ministry of Rites, who headed a series of Nanjing affairs (1616-1623) accusing the Society of Jesus of heterodox teachings that were harmful to China. Fortunately, because of Catholic converts and friends in high places such as Paul Xu Guangqi

(1562-1633), Leo Li Zhizao (1565-1630), and Yang Tingyun (1557-1627), who interceded for the Jesuits, such attacks were successfully squelched.

Vigilance in cultivating friends in power remained as a permanent necessity, but soon the Jesuits became more bold and overt in displaying their Christian symbols in architecture. They began to build large churches in long-lasting structures of European style with sculptures of saints and a huge cross, visible for all to see. More importantly, the Jesuits continued to be politically astute in making good use of Chinese officialdom to assure legitimacy and protection of the Christian faith. The Eastern Church in Peking included a gold-lettered panel over the main door reading "Gift of the Emperor" (Manchurian Shunzhi, who reigned from 1644-1661) to Jesuits Gabriel de Magalhaes and Lodovico Buglio in 1655). Today this and other church structures still stand as symbols of a living Roman Catholic Church in China with an estimate of ten to fifteen million adherents.

The conflict between Jesuits and other Catholic missionaries in their different approaches to evangelization eventually found its way to Rome, becoming the infamous "Rites Controversy," which lasted more than a century and a half as a major theological issue. That controversy led to Rome with the pope suppressing the Society of Jesus in the year 1704, followed by the Emperor Kangxi (1662-1722) of Qing China calling a halt to the further promulgation of Christianity, which he perceived as being disrespectful of Chinese cultural tradition. Although the Society of Jesus was later restored, and Christianity again was permitted in China, it took another century before these could fully recover from the death blows from Rome and the Manchurian emperor.

Some millennial cultural tradition never die. In a culture where religion and politics have always been intertwined in a continuum, state orthodoxy (however interpreted) must guard against all heterodox teachings that might threaten the prevailing Chinese ideology. Even today all religions in China (Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Catholicism and Protestantism) must be on good terms with the highest authorities of the land, the Chinese Communist Party, through the State Administration of Religious Affairs (SARA) if they are to be recognized and to exist with legitimation and protection. Christians who are the liaison between government and church will inevitably come into conflict and rejection in the church.

Having a Correct Approach

The Rites controversy, however, ended in the mid-1930s when Catholics in the Japanese puppet state of Manchukuo (formerly Manchuria) asked if it was proper to pay homage (Confucian and Shinto style) to their emperor. By extension, the same question was applied to the Son of heaven in Japan. Under Pope Pius XII, Rome in diplomatic expediency because of entanglements with the Axis powers, ruled that such ceremonial acts were only expressions of civil and social piety and not religious or pagan in nature. Thus, what began with a bang of life-and-death theological issue ended only in a whimper of officially declared inconsequence.

Given the zeitgeist of the counter-reformation, it is not surprising that Rome ruled against the Jesuits accommodating to "heathen" culture. However, in recent decades Matteo Ricci has been praised as the bridge-builder par excellence between Christian faith and Chinese culture. On the occasion of the Fourth centenary of the Arrival of Matteo Ricci in

China of the International Ricci Studies Congress on October 25, 1982, Pontifical Gregorian University, Rome, Pope John Paul II declared that "to accept Christian faith did not at all imply abandoning one's own culture, nor did it imply a diminished loyalty to one's country and its traditions, but rather that the faith allowed [Chinese] to offer a richer and more qualified service to their homeland."

From these parallels with the Jesuits of almost half a millennium ago, we can see that in a rapidly changing China today, Christians on all levels of society in their own way are finding and manifesting Christ within their present-day realities of "socialism with Chinese characteristics." The gospel of Christ enabled the Jesuits to see the essence of goodness in an encrusted Confucianism of Ming and Qing China. Today that same gospel steadies, purifies, and empowers the Chinese people to witness and serve through their God-given culture, which awaits their reappropriation and reinterpretation to meet the challenges of the times. Chinese Christians are the virtual leaven, light and salt of their land. They integrate, illumine, and give taste respectively to human life in socialist China, albeit turning capitalist. Amid the debilitating forces of changing politics and ideology, the growing economy and its imbalance between rich and poor, and the rampant consumerism and rapaciousness, not to mention environment degradation through unbridled modernization and progress, in the name of Christ, they are enabled to "offer a richer and more qualified service to their homeland."

This cannot be achieved, however, without a critical revisiting of their cultural past and, potentiated by the purifying catalyst of the gospel of Christ, reclaiming its legacy of wisdom in theological construction that affirms that a life of righteousness *yi* 義 far exceeds any seeking after profit *li* 利 (*The Great Learning* 10.22).

*Among the Protestant missionaries who went to China in the 19th and early 20th centuries, only a handful of them were genuinely appreciative and actually studied Chinese classical traditions, Congregationalist James Legge (1815-1897) of Scotland being the most outstanding exception. The Protestant *Three-Self Principle* (with the watchwords of "self-support," "self-government," and "self-propagation") was a missionary concept and goal of establishing a church on foreign soil *anywhere* in the world. It was promulgated by both the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM, founded in 1810 with headquarters in Boston) and the Church Missionary Society of Britain under Henry Venn. Rufus Anderson was the secretary of the ABCFM who dominated the board for more than three decades (1832-1866). Anderson's goal of mission was essentially altruistic, albeit a cloning one, *the creation among heathen tribes and nations of a highly improved state of society, such as we ourselves enjoy*. Unfortunately, in practice *self-support* inadvertently became the sole criterion for determining whether or not a native church has reached maturity. In economies of scarcity (such as China) early Christian converts did not have the wherewithal to "pay the bills" in support of the many institutions that their missionaries had built. Consequently, the Chinese church was forever a child, dependent upon its parental church in the West. The Communist revolution (1949), however, reversed the order of the Three-Self Principle, making *self-government* "the ability to decide and to have one's own Chinese agenda" the primary criterion of true selfhood, independence, and coming of age. Thus, in theological construction in the Church in China today, the *Three-Self Principle* is providing the ontological foundation for the cultural particularity of a people, as well as the biblical basis for the world church with "each part is working properly, makes bodily growth and upbuilds itself in love" (Ephesians 4: 16).

References:

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