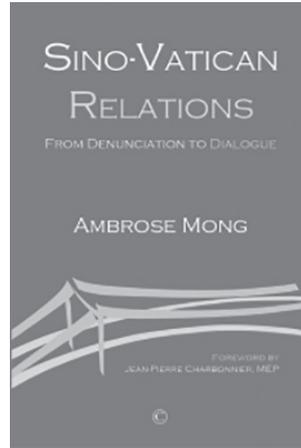


Book Review by Patrick Taverne

Ambrose Mong, *Sino-Vatican Relations: From Denunciation to Dialogue*. James Clarke & Co., Cambridge, 2019. 169 pages.



Although this book received praise from George Yeo, former foreign minister of Singapore, and Fathers Jean-Pierre Charbonnier for its “very broad and accurate inquiry” and Jeroom Heyndrickx for its “critical but objective evaluation”, the topic “Sino-Vatican Relations” itself remains very complex and controversial. Nonetheless Singaporean Fr Ambrose Mong’s well-informed and documented book reads easily. For those readers not very familiar with the topic, it offers a wealth of information and insights. The author Ambrose Mong, PhD, is assistant parish priest at St Andrew’s Church, Hong Kong, and part-time lecturer and research associate at The Chinese University of Hong Kong.

Contents

In view of the Provisional Agreement between the Holy See and the People's Republic of China (PRC) on the appointment of Bishops of 22 September 2018, Mong’s

work attempts to trace the tortuous history of Sino-Vatican relations, from denunciation of communism by the Church in the 19th and early 20th centuries, to the efforts by recent Popes John Paul II, Benedict XVI and Francis to seek dialogue with the Chinese government.

The monograph is divided into seven chapters:

Chapter 1 outlines a rudimentary history of Catholic missions in China, emphasizing their failure to recruit native clergy.

Chapter 2 traces the evolution of religious policy in mainland China in the 1980s and 1990s.

Chapter 3 highlights the conflicts in Sino-Vatican relations with the creation of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association.

Chapter 4 focuses on Pope Benedict XVI's 2007 letter to the bishops, priests, consecrated persons and lay faithful of the Catholic Church in the PRC.

Chapter 5 discusses the variety of ways in which a bishop can be selected when a See is vacant.

Chapter 6 examines the Church's relations with communist regimes in the Eastern European Bloc under Soviet domination, with a focus on Poland and Hungary.

Chapter 7 features the types of bishops still existing in China, a question complicated by the fact that the Catholic Church is torn by a so-called "official face" (the Three-Self Patriotic movement) and "clandestine face" (the underground

movement loyal to the Pope). The split is symbolized by the lives of two Shanghainese bishops: Ignatius Cardinal Kung Pin-Mei (Gong Pinmei 龔品梅) and Aloysius Jin Luxian (金魯賢).

The Epilogue lists several reactions concerning the Provisional Agreement from Western scholars and Chinese clerics and officials.

Appendices:

Communiqué concerning the signing of a Provisional Agreement between the Holy See and the PRC on the appointment of Bishops

Briefing Note about the Catholic Church in China (on the re-admittance to full ecclesial communion of the remaining ‘official’ Bishops, ordained without Pontifical Mandate) and Glossary of Bishops’s Names in Chinese

Reflections

In Chapter One the author concludes: “the failure to train and appoint enough local priests and bishops to take over leadership in the church, was, in this author’s opinion, the most serious mistake, and one which had far-reaching negative consequences” [*Sino-Vatican Relations*, 18]. Fr Ambrose Mong is not the first Catholic clergyman to point out this crucial shortcoming in the Church’s evangelization efforts.

In 1907, Canon Léon Joly, who never left Europe but published an incisive analysis of defects in Catholic

missions of the Far East, in which he put the question: Why after hundreds of years of missions have so few Chinese converted to Christianity? Joly's answer was simple: the mission has failed because Christianity was seen as "the foreign religion." In the estimation of Joly, despite the huge investment made in those missions in terms of personnel and finances, the missions in Asia, particularly in Japan, India and China, were not successful because of the obvious absence of a local clergy. This was particularly noticeable on the occasions when local authorities either expelled or killed the foreign missionaries.

His two-volume work deeply influenced not only Vincentian missionaries Frs Frédéric-Vincent Lebbe (雷鳴遠) and Antoine Cotta (湯作霖) in China, but also Cardinal Secretary of State Pietro Gasparri in Rome. Among several other factors, it resulted in the promulgation of *Maximum illud* by Pope Benedict XV and its implementation in China by Celso Costantini (剛恆毅) (whose name is often misspelled Constantini as in Mong's book). Perhaps one could say: too little, too late. Still the missionary reforms introduced by Pope Benedict XV and his successors were impressive and, in the opinion of Valentine U. Iheanacho and Andrzej Miotk, *Maximum illud* had a far-reaching impact on the indigenization of the universal church.¹

1 See Valentine U. Iheanacho, 'Benedict XV and the Rethinking of Catholic Missionary Strategy,' *Tripod* 183 (Winter 2016): 78-94; Andrzej Miotk, SVD, 'Historical Significance and Prophetic Resonance of Maximum illud,' *Verbum SVD* 60, 1-2 (2019): 11-41.

One important event Ambrose Mong should have mentioned in his short overview of Catholic missions in China, in my opinion, is the first significant anti-Christian incident (*jiao'an* 教案) of 1616-17 in Nanjing which too had far-reaching consequences for the indigenous development of the Catholic Church and hierarchy in China.

- Some contemporary Western reports explain this incident as having been caused mainly by Buddhist opposition to Christianity, and this interpretation has been taken over by a number of modern scholars. However, already during the 1930s Zhang Weihua (張維華) and Chen Shouyi (陳受頤) pointed out that opposition to the introduction of Western science was at the heart of the matter.
- A detailed analysis of the list of causes of the persecution as given in Western reports shows that several other causes played a role as well (such as opposition against a reform of the calendar by way of Western methods). Still the authors of these reports failed to recognize that the persecution was not directed to the mere presence of missionaries and converts, but against two fundamental roles that Christianity had come to play: another faction of literati, another subversive popular movement. Both of these roles threatened the security of the state.

- Adrian Dudink has argued that this anti-Christian incident therefore should not be viewed as an attempt to expel Christianity from China, but to bring it under control of the government and state orthodoxy, just as Buddhism and Taoism had been, and keep the missionaries away from the two capitals, where they had begun to influence officialdom with their unorthodox ideas.²

Today this “top-down control and collectivist spirit” of imperial governments towards all religions in China has not changed, but was only remodeled by orthodox Marxist-Leninist plus Mao Zedong thought after 1949. In her recent article ‘China’s Religious Policy,’ Katherina Wenzel-Teuber quotes Richard Madsen as arguing “China state policy towards religion is in transition. One might say that the form is still Leninist-Stalinist but the spirit is imperial.” And Madsen predicted that depending on, which imperial model Xi Jinping’s vision of State-Church relations is based on, Catholicism and other forms of Christianity may not fare as well as religions based on Buddhism and Taoism.³

In Chapter Six Ambrose Mong explores the changing relationship between the Church and Communism. Within this context, he discusses the Vatican’s *Ostpolitik*, the

2 Nicolas Standaert, ed. *Handbook of Christianity in China*, vol.1, 510-11.

3 Katherina Wenzel-Teuber, “China’s Religious Policy,” *SEDOS Bulletin* 52, 5-6 (May-June 2020): 33.

“Eastern Policy,” in particular the cases of Poland and Hungary. Actually this Policy started in the early 1960s with John XXIII and then was more widely developed by Paul VI in the 1960s and 70s. Some scholars do agree with Mong that there are several analogies with the China case, but some ask themselves the question: what influence did the *Ostpolitik* have on the relations between the Holy See and the PRC which led to the Agreement of 2018?

Agostino Giovagnoli, for example, believes that this influence was not decisive and initially it was stronger but gradually diminished. He argues that it can no longer be disputed that John Paul II sought the Agreement with China. But would John Paul II have pursued a different type of Agreement, and not have approved the contents of the one signed in 2018? In reality, the hypothesis that with regard to China Pope Francis followed the “Eastern Policy” that John Paul II had rejected takes for granted many premises that are far from obvious.⁴

Of course, we do not know the contents of this Provisional Agreement, since it is secret. In the view of Fr Antonio Spadaro, editor-in-chief of the Jesuit-affiliated journal *La Civiltà Cattolica*, “Francis has trodden the same path as Saint John Paul II and Benedict XVI. The text of the

4 Agostino Giovagnoli, “Accordo tra Santa Sede e Cina e Missione in Cina (Agreement between the Holy See and China and Mission in China),” *SEDOS Bulletin* 52, 5-6 (May-June 2020): 4-8.

Agreement signed today differs minimally from that drawn up in the time of Benedict XVI, which was “not, therefore, a political document (*Declaration*, 30 June 2007).”⁵ Cardinal Giovanni Battista Re commented on this Agreement in a *Letter* to the Sacred College of Cardinals on 26 February 2020 stating that, “... in their approach to the situation of the Catholic Church in China, there has [been] profound harmony of thought and action of the last three Pontificates, which out of respect for the truth, have favored dialogue between the two Parties, not opposition. In particular, they have had in mind the delicate and important question of the nomination of Bishops.”⁶

As regards the aims of *Ostpolitik*, Andrea Riccardi, an Italian historian and founder of the community of Sant’Egidio, observed that “John XXIII’s pastoral ambition was: to re-establish contact with a part of the world closed to communication with the Church of Rome, to alleviate the situation of many Catholics, especially that of prisoners (among whom were numerous bishops), to encourage the resumption of communications between the Holy See and the Catholic Churches, to involve the Eastern Bishops in Vatican

5 Antonio Spadaro, SJ, “Le sfide della Chiesa in Cina oggi (The Challenges Facing the Church in China Today),” *SEDOS Bulletin* 52, 5-6 (May-June 2020): 17-18.

6 Cardinal Giovanni Battista Re, “Letter to the Sacred College of Cardinals,” February 26, 2020, http://lettera-cardinale-re-1_0.pdf. English version translated by AsiaNews, <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Card.Re-against-Card.-Zen:-There-is-a-profound-harmony-between-Benedict-XVI-and-Francis-on-China-49452.html>, retrieved on August 10, 2020.

II, to build positive relationships with the Patriarchates of Moscow and the Slav Orthodox Churches.” The debate on John XXIII’s motivation was welded to that of the overall finality of the Vatican’s *Ostpolitik*. In this regard the French Soviet expert H el ene Carr ere d’Encausse, n ee Zourabichvili, held that the main objective of this *Ostpolitik* was not to establish diplomatic relations with the communist countries, but to use diplomatic relations to “stop the process of weakening the [Catholic] Churches in these States.” The Holy See’s main priorities were: recognition of the Pope’s authority over the Catholics in the communist countries, re-establishment of the hierarchy, and the free communication of the bishops with Rome. In fact, the reason for these direct contacts between Vatican officials and the representatives of communist Governments regarded: the appointment of bishops to vacant sees, the normalization of diocesan situations, the reopening of churches and so on, thus allowing the Church to function.⁷ Be that as it may, the case of Cardinal J ozsef Mindszenty in Hungary, as Mong notes, still shows that capable and strong leaders, who refused to compromise with the regime, had to be removed so that relations between government and Church could advance [Mong, 98; 114-116].

“The problem of the overall applicability of these schemata to China’s case may come as a surprise,” argues Giovagnoli, “since the PRC was undoubtedly inspired by

7 Giovagnoli, “Accordo tra Santa Sede e Cina e Missione in Cina,” 5-7.

the Soviet model and referred to communist ideology in its religious policy. But after 1949, something different and deeper happened in the Catholic Church in China than in the European communist countries. The effect was much more serious, now shown in the problematic and dramatic division of the Chinese Church into “patriotic” and “clandestine,” following the illicit ordinations that began in 1957.”⁸ According to Giovagnoli, in no other Communist country has there been such a division, in Mong’s opinion, however, there is some analogy with Hungary and Czechoslovakia, i.e. the establishment of the patriotic association of “Priests for Peace” or *Pacem in Terris* “Peace on Earth” [Mong, 103-104; 113]. Still, at the grassroots level, China does not have the Christian heritage and healthy dissent of the Eastern European Bloc under Communist rule.

In the Epilogue Ambrose Mong reviews the reactions from some scholars and clerics in and outside China concerning the Provisional Agreement. There seems to be a consensus on the importance of dialogue between the two Parties with a spirit of compromise and tolerance, but skepticism remains among the critics of this “secret agreement” as to its positive outcome for the Church in China.

Besides the different comments Mong mentions, Sister Beatrice Leung concluded that “the agreement did not serve

8 Giovagnoli, “Accordo tra Santa Sede e Cina e Missione in Cina,” 7.

much of the Catholic purpose, but assisted Xi Jinping's policy of Sinicization of religion." Many others deplore the secrecy of the accord giving rise to abuse by some Chinese officials and feelings of betrayal among Chinese faithful loyal to the Pope. The author views the agreement as "breaking the impasse and moving forward towards normalization of Sino-Vatican relations in spite of obstacles, misgivings and uncertainties" [Mong, xxii].

New promulgated regulations of Beijing, according to Fr Jerom Heyndrickx, have created a feeling in and outside China that the situation of the Church in China today is worse now than before the agreement was signed. Unless true dialogue between the two Parties is intensified and internal tensions are resolved, the author's positive assessment of the provisional agreement may indeed be premature.