

1200<sup>th</sup> ANNIVERSARY OF THE ERECTION  
OF THE NESTORIAN TABLET

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*Stone Forest In Xian -  
National Museum Where The  
Nestorian Tablet Is  
Exhibited*



*The Author Rev. Peter  
Barry, M.M., Is In Front  
Of The Famous Nestorian  
Tablet.*

This year marks the twelfth centenary of the carving and erection of the Nestorian Tablet in 781. The tablet, as well as the eight Nestorian Scriptures discovered in the 19th century, provide evidence of the earliest introduction of Christianity to China, over 13 centuries ago. (1) The limestone slab was buried about 48 kilometers from Xian in 845, during a period of religious persecution, and then found again in 1625.

In the Ming Dynasty, during the 5th year of the emperor Tianqi (1625), a person building a house in Zhouzhi County (盩厔) near Chang An (長安), Shanxi Province, while excavating the ground, dug up an ancient stone monument. About this time, a scholar named Wang was accompanying Fr. Nicolas Trigault from the capital to Wang's home in order that his family might be baptized and enter the Church. While in Zhouzhi, Father Trigault took this rare occasion to go and view the Nestorian Tablet. However, he did not understand the Syrian language on the tablet, and mistook it for the Kaldon language, that is, Babylonian. After the monument was dug up, it was placed in Chang An's Jin Sheng temple (金勝寺). Today it stands in the Stone Forest (碑林) section of the Shaanxi Provincial Museum in Xian.

At that time, a friend of the famous scholar-turned-Catholic-believer, Li Zhizao (李之藻), Zhang Laiyu (張賡虞) by name, brought the scholar a stone rubbing of the tablet. After reading it, Li could hardly contain his excitement and exclaimed: "I have never heard of the information you have taken from the tablet excavated in Chang An regarding the Luminous Religion. Can it be the same holy doctrine that Matteo Ricci taught? That would be appropriate!" (2) Scholars of modern Chinese history consider the late Ming writings, After Reading the Monument of the Luminous Religion (讀景教碑書後) by Li Zhizao, Explanatory Notes on the Luminous Religion Tablet of the Tang Dynasty (唐景教碑頌正詮) by the Portuguese missionary, Emmanuel Diaz, and the appendix called, "Tablet of the Persian Temple" (大秦寺碑) from the larger work, Western Learning (西學凡) by the Italian missionary Jules Aleni, as all being quite accurate research on the stele. In addition, the Ching Dynasty scholars of inscriptions, Lin Tong (1627-1714) and Qian Daqi (1728-1804) spent much time in doing research on the contents of the tablet.

## THE CONTENTS OF THE TABLET

The tablet describes Christian doctrines and ceremonies, the development of Christianity within the empire, and the support given it by certain emperors of the Tang Dynasty (618-907). Except during the later Han ( 東漢 ) dynasty (25-220), when the Chinese capital moved to Loyang ( 洛陽 ), Xian ( 西安 ) served continuously as the empire's capital for almost 1,000 years.

The dark colored stone, measuring about ten feet in height, three and one-half feet wide and one foot thick, contains 1,756 Chinese characters and some 70 Syriac words to expound a doctrine that could be largely accepted by all Christians today. The contents are three-fold: doctrinal, historical and eulogistic. The main doctrinal tenets expounded are: 1. The existence of a personal God, Himself uncaused but who is the cause of all that exists, Who is unchangeable and is Three in One; 2. the creation of the world and the formation of man, who has dominion over earth and all creatures; 3. the fall of the first man and the influence this had on his posterity (hopelessness); 4. God intervened and entered the world as the Messiah, born of a virgin in Dachin (the present day Middle East). The birth was proclaimed by the angels and made known to the Persians, who came bearing gifts. The Messiah conquered the wiles of the devil, and then ascended to his true place. He left behind twenty-seven books (the New Testament).

Then follows a brief description of the monastic life led by the Nestorian monks. The monks shave their heads, have no slaves, treat all men as equals, and do not amass wealth. They worship seven times a day, and once every seven days have a great religious service.

The heresy ascribed to Nestorius evidently had to do with the two natures in Christ; for he was said to have denied that Mary was the Mother of God, but only of the human nature of Christ. The heresy was condemned at the Council of Ephesus in 431. Adherents of the doctrine, however, later separated themselves from Byzantine Christianity, centered their church in Persia and spread their message eastward.

Then beginning with the arrival of the monk Alopen in

Chang An ("Lasting Peace," now called Xian ( 西安 ), or "Western Peace") in 635, the tablet describes the historical development of the "Luminous Religion" ( 景教 ) in the area. Alopen was favorably received by the emperor Tang Tai Tsung ( 唐太宗 ), and the scriptures he brought were translated in the imperial library. An imperial rescript, dated 638, permitted the preaching of the religion in the empire. Soon thereafter permission was also given for a monastery to be built in the I-Ning district ( 義寧坊 ) of the capital to house 21 ordained priests.

The tablet then praises certain Tang dynasty emperors, most notably Gaozong ( 高宗 ) (628-683) and Xuanzong ( 玄宗 ) (712-755), for the support they gave to the religion. The period between the two above mentioned emperors is hardly referred to. This was the period when the Empress Wu Zitian ( 武則天 ), a devotee of Buddhism, held power, and a persecution of the Nestorian believers took place.

The two sides of the carving contain a list of priests' names, altogether 68 in number, in both Chinese and Syriac.

To protect the monument, the Christians buried it during a persecution of Buddhism and other religions by the emperor Wuzong ( 武宗 ) in 845. It is reported that 265,000 Buddhist monks and nuns were expelled from 44,600 monasteries at this time. Three thousand Nestorian monks are also said to have been turned out.(3) The monument remained buried until discovered again in 1625.

#### CHINESE TRANSLATIONS OF THE SCRIPTURES OF THE LUMINOUS RELIGION

From the discovery of the monument up to the present day, it has aroused the interest of many scholars studying the spread of early Christianity in China and central Asia. It has also attracted many foreign archeologists to carry out excavations in northwest China, especially in Shanxi, Gansu and Xinjiang. Chinese and foreign scholars, using both lawful and unlawful means, have studiously worked often to promote their own advantage. For instance, M.A. Stein and Paul Pelliot extracted ancient Nestorian materials, such as the Nestorian Scriptures, from the Dunhuang ( 敦煌 ) caves, and these are now stored in

the Paris National Museum. Some of these scriptures made their way to Japan, and are now in the hands of Japanese scholars.(4)

Reputable scholars from modern intellectual circles have verified the genuineness of Chinese Nestorian scriptures and prayers. Altogether there are eight texts and these are listed below:

1. Xu Ting Mi Shi Suo Jing, #1 ( 序聽迷詩所經 ), otherwise called "The Scriptures of Visu Mishiya" ( 移鼠迷詩訶經 ) or "The Sutra of Jesus the Messiah." The manuscript, from the Dunhuang caves, fell into the hands of the Japanese scholar, Konan Jun Ziro. "Yisu" ( 移鼠 ) is the translation of Jesus, and "Mi Shi Suo" ( 迷詩所 ) is Messiah. The scripture is divided into two parts: the first part contains doctrine, and the second part describes the activities of Jesus.(5)
2. Yi Shen Lun ( 一神論 ), or "The Doctrine of the One God." It is the most ancient Nestorian scripture, and is made up of three parts: "Yi Tian Lun" ( 一天論 ), "Yu" ( 喻 ) and "Shi Zun Bu Shi Lun" ( 世尊布施論 ), or "The Messiah's Discourse on Charity." Originally it was in the possession of a lecturer at Japan's Tokyo University, named Tomioka Kenzo. The contents tell of the creation of the world by God, and of the doctrine of the one God. "Shi Zun Bu Shi Lun" is the sermon on the Mount from the Gospels.(6)
3. DaChin Jingjiao Sanwei Mengduzan ( 大秦景教三威蒙度讚 ), "The Hymn to the Holy Trinity." A hand-written manuscript, it is now stored in the Paris National Museum. The content of the whole text is the "Gloria" from today's Catholic Mass. (7)
4. Zun Jing ( 尊經 ), or "The Book of the Honoured Ones." A handwritten copy, it is now preserved in the Paris National Museum. A prayer book, it contains ceremonies for worshipping the Triune God, honoring the saints and the 35 Scriptures. Regarding the list of names in the book, the authoritative Japanese scholar of the Luminous Religion, Prof. Saeki Yoshio, after examining the language in which it is written, proved that they were the names of the saints, prophets and holy men venerated by the Nestorians.(8)
5. Zhi Xuan An Le Jing ( 志玄安樂經 ), or "The Sutra of

Mysterious Peace and Joy." A handwritten manuscript, it was originally preserved by the Chinese scholar, Li Shengduo ( 李盛鐸 ). The text shows that the Nestorian religion absorbed much Chinese religious thought. Originally written in Chinese, it is a catechetical book, and is overflowing with "Pure Land" sect ( 淨土宗 ) Buddhism.

6. Xuan Yuan Ben Jing ( 宣元本經 ), a fragment also originally preserved by Li Shengduo. It contained only eleven lines of text and the remainder is lost. After Mr. Li died, no one knows what became of the fragment.
7. DaChin Jingjiao Xuan Yuan Zhi Ben Jing ( 大秦景教宣元至本經 ), or "The Sutra Proclaiming the Origin and Root of the Holy Religion." It is a fragment only, of which the first part is missing. Some regard it as the continuation of Xuan Yuan Ben Jing (the previous book). However, contemporary Christian scholars, like Gong Tianmin, after examining the contents, consider it to be different from Xuan Yuan Ben Jing. (9).
8. Da Sheng Tong Jin Gui Fa Zan ( 大聖通真歸法讚 ), or "The Hymn of Eternal Salvation." It is a handwritten manuscript originally kept by Li Shengduo. The Japanese scholar, Kozima Yasushi, after studying the work, lost it. He considered the work to be a liturgical book, used by the Christians of the time in their worship services. It contains prayers and passages from the Bible, including the psalms of King David and the Gospels.(10)

#### RELATIONS WITH BUDDHISM AND TAOISM

From a reading of the Nestorian Tablet and the above mentioned scriptures, we discover that many Buddhist terms are used. Words like "mystical body," "compassionate voyage," "solitude," "monk," "abbot," "temple," "virtue," "benefactor," "universal salvation," "salvation for all," "the almighty one," etc., abound throughout the texts. At the same time, carved on top of the monument is the Lotus - a symbol which in the eyes of Buddhists mean "radiating brightness," and "quiet, pure and rare treasure," and "inconceivable mystery" - and on top of the

Lotus, the Christian symbol - the Cross.

The Luminous Religion was not only rich in Buddhist flavor, absorbed much Buddhist thought and borrowed much Buddhist terminology, but also there were Taoist elements mingled within it. Modern scholars consider the Xuan Yuan Ben Jing to be full of Taoist flavor. The words are mysterious and hard to understand. The explanation is this: It is said that when the Nestorian missionaries first came from Persia to China, they studied Chinese religion, culture, customs and language. Using whatever material was to hand, they wrote scripture books which were heavily laden with the flavor of other religions. Another explanation is that the doctrine they spoke was written down by Chinese as they understood it, with their own cultural background. Is it any wonder, then, that their scriptures are full of Buddhist thought and Buddhist terminology? That era, during the Tang dynasty, was the golden age of Buddhism, and many Tang dynasty scholars did considerable research into Buddhism.(11)

#### THE REASONS FOR THE DECLINE OF THE LUMINOUS RELIGION

During the Yuan ( 元 ) dynasty, the Nestorian religion was active only for a short time on China's northwest border. Then it disappeared around the year 1555, after which time we have no news of it.(12)

Upon investigation, possible reasons for its demise are: when the Nestorian religion came east, preached by the Persian missionaries, the Tang dynasty was very prosperous. Chang An was the cultural center of the whole world. Buddhism and Taoism had important positions in Chinese society. How could the Chinese, who possessed a sense of cultural superiority, respect the Persians and their religion, since the cultural standard of the Persians was lower than their own? At the same time, the Nestorian missionaries, in their effort to obtain a place for themselves in Chinese society, strove to absorb the native culture, even to the point of not caring whether they used Buddhist and Taoist terms to express their doctrine. Thus in the eyes of the Chinese, the Luminous Religion was neither fish nor fowl. It was a religion which could not express its

own beliefs clearly. No wonder people said: "It looks like the Luminous Religion, but isn't," or, "it looks like Buddhism, but isn't!" It was only able to spread in northwest China, where the minority races lived. In the southeast, where the influence of the Han people was strongest, not many people were converted. (13)

Also, since the Nestorian missionaries were determined to evangelize, they chose a means which has been willingly used by many missionaries throughout history - to establish ties with political leaders. When the Nestorian bishop, Alopen, came to Chang An, the emperor, Tang Taizong, ordered the prime minister to receive him on the outskirts of the city. Alopen was welcomed at the palace and in its library preached his doctrine. The emperors of the Tang dynasty especially respected the Nestorian religion. Maybe for this reason, the more the missionaries became a privileged class, the more they separated themselves from the masses. Therefore, as dynasties and policies changed, so the future of Nestorianism itself became uncertain. Actually from the first day this religion entered China, its foundation did not appear to be steady. Thus, most likely, it could not cope with the challenge of wars, disturbances, the change of dynasties and religious policies, and entered into a period of decline.

## CONCLUSION

From this short investigation of the Nestorian tablet and of the Nestorian scriptures, the authors have the following questions which they would like to share with their fellow workers:

1. The Nestorian bishop of that time, Alopen, like Matteo Ricci in the Ming dynasty, used political persuasion and friendship with officials to influence the emperor, and gain advantage for missionary work. Is this a correct method of preaching the gospel? If one uses political influence, it is certainly very convenient for the missionary. However, does not such close a connection to politics and too deep a relationship with politicians hamper the freedom of a prophetic church



to cry out in the wilderness?

2. The reason for the decline of the Luminous religion in China came from the mistakes it made in the process of indigenization. It loaded itself down with so much Buddhist and Taoist baggage that it lost its own religious essence. Therefore, when a religion seeks to indigenize in a certain culture, it must ask itself what is its essence or special character that it cannot do without, or exchange with other things. As for the Catholic Church, on the one hand it wants to indigenize and establish the local church, but at the same time it wants to preserve its "one, holy, catholic and apostolic" character. How can we strike an intelligent and wise balance in trying to fulfill these two requirements?

NOTES:-

1. KUNG TIEN MIN, *Christianity in the Tang Dynasty*. The Council on Christian Literature for Overseas Chinese, Hong Kong 1960, P.23
2. WANG CHIN HSIN, *History of Christianity in China*. The Council on Christian Literature for Overseas Chinese, Hong Kong, 1959, P.32  
馮承鈞著；「景教碑考」，商務印書館發行，一九三六年上海，第十二頁。
3. JAMES LEGGE, *The Nestorian Monument of Hsi-An-Fu in Shen-Hsi-China*, the Chinese Text of the Inscription and Translation and Notes and A Lecture on the Monument. (London Thubner and Co. 1888) P.49
4. Kung, op. cit., P.23
5. 方豪著「中西交通史」第二冊，台灣中華文化出版事業社，一九五三年第二一七頁。
6. Kung, op. cit., P.24-29
7. Fang Hao....., Ibid. No. 5
8. Kung, op. cit., P.34-39
9. Ibid., P.43
10. Ibid., P.41
11. Ibid., P.88
12. Wang, op. cit.
13. Kung, op. cit., P.90