

Some Eschatological Thoughts in Matteo Ricci's : The True Idea of God



by Maria Goretti Lau

1. THE TRUE IDEA OF GOD: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK ITSELF

The True Idea of God is Matteo Ricci's earliest work. It was written in classical Chinese in the form of a dialogue and its purpose was to explain Catholic doctrine. Along with his later work, Euclid's Geometry -- a sample of the kind of Western learning he introduced into China -- The True Idea of God has had a great influence on Chinese science and philosophy. This article will focus on the theological teaching found in The True Idea of God, more specifically on its eschatology.

It was during the year 1594, Ricci was forty-three, that he began work on The True Idea of God. Its original title was Tianxue Shiyi (天學實義) which was probably circulated first in manuscript form among confreres and friends. In 1597, a Latin translation was presented to the Bishop of Macao and Alessandro Valignano, Ricci's Society Superior, for their approval. Valignano asked the Jesuit Superior in Macao, Edouard de Sande, to review the work, but, unfortunately, he died before giving final approval to the text. In 1601, Feng Yingjing (馮應京), an imperial historiographer read the book, found it inspiring, and offered to write a preface, urging Ricci to have it published. The Bishop of India at the same time approved it and the book was finally published in 1603. Nine years in preparation, The True Idea of God, when finally published, opened the way for an encounter between Catholicism and Chinese culture.

In his Brief Introduction to The True Idea of God, Wang Bingyan (黃炳炎) states that the theological treatise drew a wide audience not only from the religious but also the intellectual class as well, and that

it influenced many of the literati during the closing years of the Ming Dynasty in their decision to become Catholics. Xu Guangqi (徐光啓) and Feng Yingjing were two of the more prominent, who, because of their friendship with Ricci and the influence of his book, became converts. Nor was its influence limited to that specific period. After the fall of the Ming, its popularity continued on into the Qing Dynasty. The Kangxi Emperor liked the book so much that it was his constant companion for over a sixth month period, after which he gave permission to the missionaries to resume preaching the Gospel at the Imperial Court. Later, as Professor Wang points out, it became the prime target for those opposed to the Catholic mission in China, but it remains today as an undeniably valuable historical source.

1. The Nature of the Book

The True Idea of God is an explanation of Catholic doctrine written in an apologetic style. Preaching the Gospel in the Ming period, a society heavily influenced by Confucian, Taoist and Buddhist thought, Ricci had to underline and draw attention to the uniqueness of Christianity. The form of the book followed the ancient Greek practise of dialogue between scholars. While simple in nature, the dialogue did have rigid rules. The questions were pointed and there was no room for free discussion. Socrates had perfected the method in discussing philosophical problems with disciples and friends, developing latent ideas and eliciting admissions by questions and answers. In his own work, Ricci identifies himself with the Western Scholar. The Chinese Scholar represents the school of Confucius. In order to convince the Chinese Scholar of the truths of Catholic doctrine, the Western Scholar uses a three-fold strategy. First, he sides with the Confucianists in opposition to Taoism and Buddhism; then, he makes use of traditional Confucianism to attack the Neo-Confucian school of that time; finally, he attempts to purify and elevate Confucianism in light of the truths of the Gospel. This method of approach is clearly outlined in the first part of his book.

2. The Structure of the Book

The True Idea of God is divided into two parts, each having four chapters. The language is the classical Chinese of the Ming Dynasty. The chapters are divided as follows: 1) creation and the providence of God; 2) false teaching about the true God (this chapter is principally an attack on all three schools, Buddhism, Taoism and Neo-Confucianism); 3) the immortality of the soul; 4) the distinction between the Christian God and other Dieties; 5) an exposition of the errors of Buddhism,

specifically the teaching of the transmigration of souls and the prohibition against killing living creatures; 6) the existence of heaven and hell, and the free choice of the human will; 7) the cultivation of virtue; 8) on Western customs, with special reference to the question of celibacy and the demands of filial piety.

Our purpose in this article is to discuss Ricci's eschatology and, therefore, we will concentrate on chapters 5 and 6.

II. RICCI'S ESCHATOLOGY

Ricci's apologia reaches its peak in his discussion of the problem of eternity, and the existence of heaven and hell. Ricci begins by refuting the Buddhist concepts of the transmigration of souls and the three stages of human existence. He then moves on to the heart of Confucian ethical philosophy using the Confucian concept of 'the upright heart and sincere will' (正心誠意) to establish the relationship between the will as motivated by good intention and the free human act. Finally, the Western Scholar convinces the Chinese Scholar of the basic Catholic teaching--the existence of heaven and hell as the proper reward for good and the necessary punishment for evil. In this way, Ricci widens the Confucian vision by the introduction of his eschatology. The Chinese Scholar, hitherto an agnostic-humanist, now becomes a theistic-humanist. Let us examine this progression in more detail.

1. Siding With Confucianism Against Buddhism

Ricci bases his rejection of Buddhist transmigration on three arguments: first, the immortality of the human soul; second, the scholastic distinction between the three kinds of souls; and, third, the ethics of Confucianism. While the arguments offered for the first two are both derived from the scholastic philosophy of the Middle Ages, the second, in my opinion, is the weaker. Both the Buddha and Ricci shared a belief in the immortality of the soul, Ricci's concept, based as it was on the teaching of St. Thomas Aquinas, is quite different from that of the Buddhists. Following St. Augustine, Aquinas attributes to the soul three faculties--understanding (reason), memory (emotion), and love (will). Because the soul is immortal, these three faculties will not perish. Drawing upon this argument, Ricci uses the faculty of memory to refute the Buddhist teaching of transmigration. The Western Scholar remarks: "There exists in the theory of transmigration many contradictions. One of them is that the soul, no matter where or within whom it be infused, should be able to remember the circumstances of its previous existence;

yet, no one has been able to reveal the things that happened in a former life; therefore, this former life never existed at all." This same argument is also used to reject the Buddhist teaching of the three stages of existence.

Elaborating on the above, Ricci then explains the scholastic teaching of the three kinds of souls as a final refutation of transmigration. Aquinas taught the distinction between the vegetable soul, the animal soul, and the human soul. Of the three, the human soul is the noblest, for not only does it share the properties of the other two, but it is also capable of reasoning and decision making. Buddhism, on the other hand, distinguishes between only the vegetable and the human soul. Furthermore, the distinction between the human soul and the animal soul is left ambiguous, and tends to reduce man to the level of an animal. Thus, Buddhist teaching violates our common understanding of the distinction between animals and men. There are no grounds for assuming that man can be reincarnated into the form of an animal, and, therefore, arguments in favour of transmigration are neither convincing nor tenable.

2. Ricci Employs Traditional Confucianism Against the Neo-Confucist Position

After his repudiation of the Buddhist teaching on the transmigration of souls, Ricci introduces his own eschatology. He draws upon traditional Confucian ethics to support his argument to convince the Neo-Confucianist of an after-life in which the good are rewarded and the evil punished. Man's will, his intention, is the determining factor in judging the moral goodness or evil of a human act, and paradise and hell are the final reward or punishment for good or bad behaviour. Ricci bases all his explanations on the importance of following one's conscience, of directing the will to its proper object, the good, and of one's intention as the source of moral good and evil, on the Confucian concept of 'the upright heart and the sincere will' (正心誠意). It is at this point that Ricci introduces his eschatology.

Ricci uses the Confucian Concept of 'Goodness and Righteousness' to explain the doctrine of heaven and hell, demonstrating that good and bad behaviour are closely related to the positive and negative exercise of free will. He realized, however, that while the Confucianists held 'Goodness and Righteousness' in high esteem, they also had contempt for all forms of utilitarianism. His teaching would find no acceptance if he tried to convince Chinese scholars of the Catholic doctrine of the Final Judgement by use of utilitarian arguments, i.e. to do good only for the

sake of an eternal reward, or to avoid evil out of fear of eternal punishment. Confucianism taught that the Superior Man pursued the good for the good itself, not for the benefit of receiving a reward of eternal paradise; and he rejected evil because it was evil, not out of fear of incurring the punishment of hell. In his dialogue, with the Chinese Scholar, the Western Scholar distinguishes between two kinds of advantage or benefit. One is self-centered and, therefore, to be rejected. The other however, is other-centered, and worthy of pursuit. The latter, Ricci contends, belongs to the category of 'Goodness and Righteousness' because the promise of an eternal reward is helpful and encouraging not only for the cultivation of personal virtue but also for the well ordering of families and the state as well. "In the pursuit of a reward in the next life," the Western Scholar states, "one is able to discard the self-centered seeking for advantage and benefit that belong to this world. I have never heard of one who holds worldly benefit and advantage in contempt to turn a murderous eye upon his father or his king, or engage in robbery and theft, or show disrespect for his parents and elders. People who seek an eternal reward in heaven pose no difficulty for the well ordering of the state."

Finally, Ricci posits three kinds of motivation for doing good; 1) fear of punishment; 2) in response to the generosity of God; 3) to carry out the will of God in one's life. The first is done out of fear, the second out of a conditional love, and the third out of a love for God that knows no conditions. It is the third kind of motivation that marks the Superior Man, for it is the highest of all three. The Western Scholar remarks; "The Inferior Man avoids evil because it brings forth punishment. The Superior Man, however, hates evil because it is opposed to Goodness and Righteousness. Therefore, the Superior Man is motivated by Goodness and Righteousness."

For those who have been blinded by inordinate desire and passion, the promise of heaven's reward and the punishment of hell serve as restraints on evil behaviour. In learning to abandon their selfishness, they are raised to a higher level of motivation. In the end, they, too, may be able to achieve a love for God that is unconditional. For Ricci, heaven is the place where the virtuous dwell in perfect happiness. And while the virtuous man's motivation for doing good is not the reward itself but the unconditional love of God, heaven is God's gift to the virtuous.

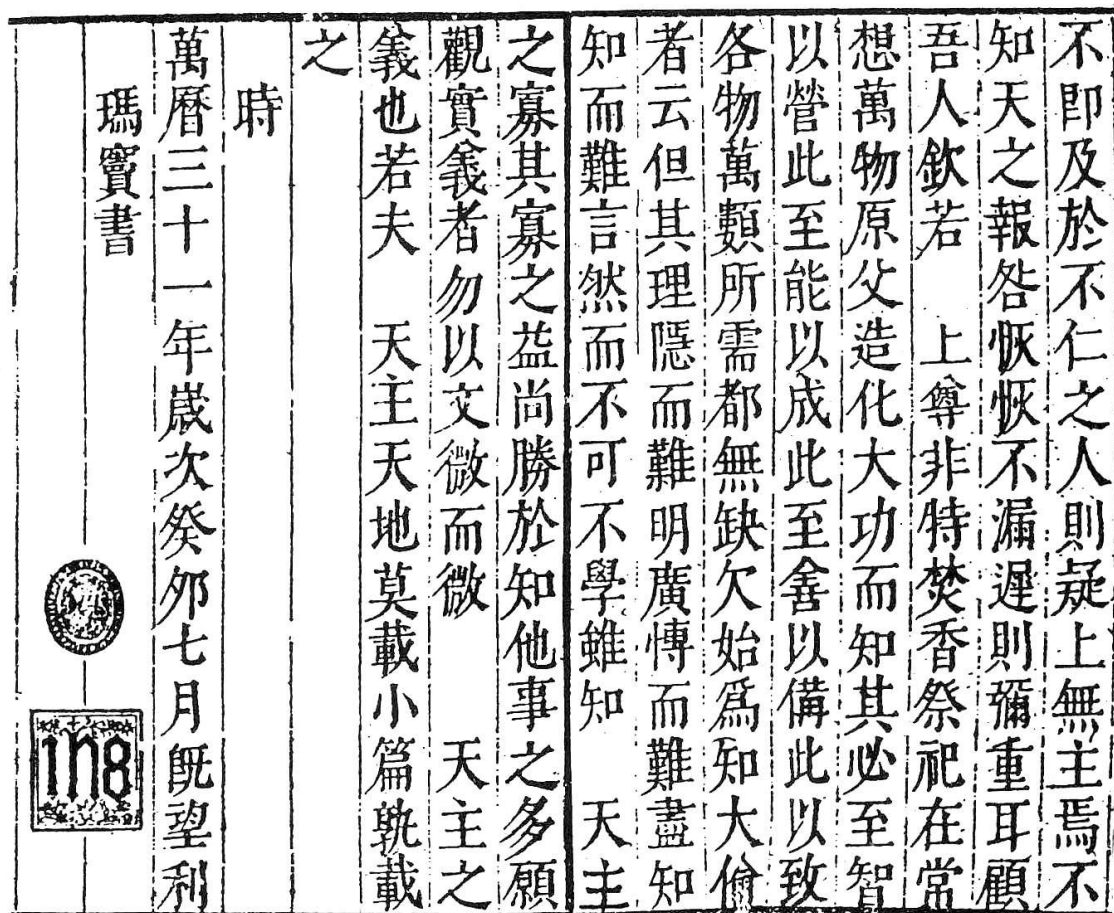
3. The Purification and Elevation of Confucianism in Light of Revelation

The Confucian humanist, in all questions that dealt with an after-life and eternity, took an agnostic position. Ricci uses a variety of arguments to demonstrate the existence of an eternal home for man, and, thereby, widening the Confucian vision of man and his universe. Ricci uses the analogy of life as a drama to serve as a corrective to the Confucian pre-occupation with this world. He is, in effect, introducing into that humanistic world a transcendental dimension. He broadens the base of Confucian morality by injecting a spirit of renunciation. To illustrate the limitations of Confucian morality, Ricci points to man's desire for happiness, beauty and goodness, a desire imbedded deeply in the human heart and having an unlimited and boundless nature, one not satisfied by merely an earthly goodness and the happiness found only in this life. Ricci argues that the highest good for which all men, not only the Confucian, seek transcends the limitations of this life. As a final argument for his eschatology, Ricci considers the fate of evil-doers. He, following Aquinas, defines evil as a privation of proper good. Hell is a place where the evil suffer because it is a place totally lacking in any kind of happiness or goodness. While Ricci and the Buddhists both refer to the evils of hell, Ricci's explanation is quite different. He refutes the teaching of the transmigration of souls, and demonstrates the eternal nature of hell's punishment. It is the fate of the wicked from which there is no escape.

III. SOME REFLECTIONS AND CRITICISM

As Ricci develops his eschatology to criticise the three spiritual traditions of Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism, he does so in a style that is very apologetical, very argumentative. His eschatology is also lacking in some important areas. He fails to touch upon the Second Coming of Christ, the resurrection of the dead, the theological implications of Christian death, and, as for purgatory, he mentions it in passing but fails to elaborate on it. Ricci's eschatology, as expounded in The True Idea of God, reflects a Scholasticism of the later Middle Ages which tended to look upon life as having two distinct phases, the two connected by the moment of death. There is no mention of penetration and transformation of our life in this world by eternal life. Ricci's descriptions of eternity remain on a very physical and material level. Paradise is a place outside of time, the passing of days, the changes of seasons. Here there is neither sorrow nor suffering, only eternal youth and 'long life', the greatest happiness. Hell on the other hand, is the privation of all good things, a place of spiritual torment and physical pain.

Ricci's eschatology, however, made a definite contribution to Chinese thought. Up to the time of Ricci, Confucianism dominated China's



The final page of Ricci's catechism "Tianzhu Shiyi"

intellectual climate. With personal relationships as its base, it stressed life in this world; it was a philosophy with strong ethical overtones. It took an agnostic position towards several crucial life problems, such as human suffering, death and the afterlife. Because of this Confucian cultural vacuum, the philosophy of Buddhism was able to find acceptance among the Chinese; while of Indian origin, Buddhism filled this vacuum with ready responses to vital questions. By the Sixteenth century, Chinese society was being influenced simultaneously by all three traditions, Confucian, Taoist, and Buddhist. Ricci, in order to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ, challenged all three spiritual traditions. However, while Ricci showed a deep sympathy for Confucianism, his attitude towards Buddhism and Taoist was quite negative and pessimistic. He brought with

him the theological perspectives of 16th and 17th century Western Christianity, a theology neither sensitive to nor explicitly aware of the spiritual truths and the possibilities of salvation that are to be found in Non-Christian religions. Therefore, he repudiated both Buddhism and Taoism, in the hope that he might fill the Confucian cultural vacuum with a Catholic eschatology... one that proposed solutions to crucial life questions.

In light of modern times, Ricci's arguments seem dated. His attack on transmigration through his explanation of the three kinds of souls lacks the force of, say, the arguments that modern evolutionists might use against Buddhism. Yet one cannot fault him for not using a scientific theory that was still centuries away in the future. What must be recognized, however, is that Ricci, through his religious and scientific writings, brought a whole new life-view and a wider concept of the universe to the people of China. And he provided the opportunity for an encounter between Eastern philosophies and Western sciences, both philosophical and theological, on the ultimate meaning of life and the world in which we live.

When we compare Ricci's eschatology with modern theological approaches, we see the progression of Christian theological thinking after four hundred years of development. Today, modern theology prefers to discuss eschatological events in Scriptural Context, explaining them in terms of personal relationships rather than drawing on the concepts of scholastic philosophy. The greatest happiness is to enjoy the presence of the ever-loving God, source of all beauty and goodness. The most unbearable suffering is alienating oneself from that source of perfect love and absolute goodness. Nor does modern theology view life as being divided into two successive periods. It emphasizes the Kingdom of God as a reality already begun in this world and moving towards its completion in the next. A new heaven and a new earth will be fully actualized by the Second Coming of Christ.

How do we see Ricci's efforts at adapting to the Chinese culture of his time? During his thirty years in China, there is no doubt that he made a most successful adaptation. Today, however, the Church speaks of indigenization and contextualization as mission ideals. Both of these concepts go beyond adaptation, although adaptation is necessary and first step in the process. To adapt is to use the ideas and concepts of a culture to explain the reality of the Christian faith and to use the customs of that culture in the expression of that faith. While adaptation requires a deep respect for the culture and its value systems, it

does not necessarily imply the recognition of the Holy Spirit as already at work within the context of that culture nor does it imply an affirmation of the seeds of the Gospel already growing there. Indigenization and contextualization, on the other hand, recognize and affirm these realities, and the process of evangelization demands all three elements, that the truth of that culture may be revealed and promoted.

The modern movement for the evangelization of cultures, with its proper stress on indigenization and contextualization, has been given a special urgency by the Second Vatican Council. While always a necessary part of the Church's mission to evangelize, its conscious and emphatic articulation is quite recent. It is more an underscoring of the task that lies ahead rather than a criticism of the past work of Ricci to raise this issue at all. That Ricci and his companions were able to have made such a successful adaptation to the Chinese culture of 400 years ago must continue to stand as a remarkable achievement indeed, and one that opens the way to the challenge of modern times.

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