

RICCI'S CONTRIBUTION TO CHINA

A REFLECTION ON THE INSIGHTS OF TWO MODERN CHINESE SCHOLARS

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Within Catholic circles there are several well-known Chinese books written about Matteo Ricci's life and writings. For example, Life of Matteo Ricci (利瑪竇傳) by Luo Guang (羅光), The Wise Man From the West (西泰子來華記) by Vincent Cronin, translated by Si Quo (思果), Fang Hao's (方豪) History of Interrelation Between China and the Western World (中西交通史) and Important Figures in the History of the Chinese Catholic Church (中國天主教史人物傳). There are also some books on the history of Catholic activities in China.¹ These books and articles all praise Ricci's missionary zeal, the good results of his efforts and the great contribution made by the introduction of Western learning into China. What is the evaluation outside Catholic circles, especially that of modern non-Christian Chinese scholars regarding Ricci's introduction of Western knowledge to China? Investigation of this interesting point will enable us not only to broaden our vision but also to deepen our reflection. Due to limited time and ability, I have chosen only two contemporary Chinese scholars for commentary: Qian Mu (錢穆), a historian residing in Taiwan, and Hou Wailu (侯外廬), a philosopher living in Mainland China.

A. QIAN MU'S COMMENTS ON THE WESTERN LEARNING BROUGHT BY RICCI:

In his book Introduction to the History of Chinese Culture (中國文化史導論) Qian speaks of the meeting and renewal of Eastern and Western cultures. His comments on Matteo Ricci's introduction of Western knowledge into China are presented in this way:

When Ricci and his confreres first came to China they were filled only with an earnest desire to preach the Gospel. But within the structure of traditional Chinese culture, religion never had an important place. Christianity tended to be based on externals, unlike Buddhism which, by emphasizing the personal cultivation of virtue, was closer to the Chinese disposi-

tion. Therefore, it was unavoidable that the Chinese of the Ming Dynasty looked down on the Western missionaries.

Matteo Ricci and his companions wanted to promote the doctrines of their religion by putting before the Chinese the wealth of western knowledge - Astronomy, Geography, Calendar Studies, Mathematics, etc. But from the Chinese point of view, while the westerners' knowledge of Astronomy, Geography, etc. was worthy of admiration, their religion was not so worthy of belief. Ricci and his confreres wanted to lead the Chinese people through these natural sciences to religion. But the Chinese people, doubting the religion they presented, were also lukewarm towards the western knowledge connected with it.

Because preaching the Gospel in China was difficult in the beginning, Ricci and his companions took a tolerant attitude towards Chinese customs. They allowed Christians to take part in Confucian rites and ancestor worship. The Jesuits of that time found this an inevitable policy. But it should be remarked that the Church in the West still rejected such a policy. Therefore, such a policy led up to the order of the Kang Xi Emperor (康熙帝) that no missionaries could remain in China except the followers of Ricci.

On the whole, we can say that within the last three hundred years of East-West contacts, the first half of that period was greatly influenced by western missionaries. But it did not yield many good results.²

Here are some reflections on Qian's criticism.

1. Though Christians believe in a transcendental Creator, yet this transcendental God at the same time is present in creation. Through each person's conscience God guides man's moral actions. Every Christian firmly believes that man must act according to the direction of his conscience. Only by living according to the moral laws of his God-given conscience, can man be a true master of himself and uplift himself.

The True Idea of God (天主實義) was one of the Chinese books written by Matteo Ricci. It explained fundamental Catholic doctrines through the form of a dialogue between a Chinese intellectual and a Western scholar. Chapter VII of that book was dedicated to Catholic spirituality and had a paragraph as follows.

The Chinese intellectual: "If it is true, self-perfection is for God, not for oneself, then isn't it an external learning only?"
The Western scholar: "Is there any self-perfection which is not for oneself? Who acts for God, acts for his own perfection. When Confucius preached charity, he meant loving others by it. I should say that a charitable man is someone who loves God and loves men at the same time. That is to say he is someone who respectfully loves his root without neglecting the branches. Thus, how can we call such virtue an external learning only? Compared with the relationship between God and man, even the intimate relationship between a parent and his/her child can be regarded as an external only. As God is within all beings, He should never be considered as an outsider. For him who has a higher aim in life, more noble will be his learning. If an intellectual confines the aim of his life within himself, how can his life reach a higher meaning? To act for God is of supreme nobility. How can we say it is of little value? Desire for self-perfection is embedded in our human nature. It is the desire which God carves in our hearts. Therefore, it cannot be destroyed. It is close to the Confucian morality in your Chinese classics."³

The words of this paragraph sufficiently reveal that Ricci highly esteemed the cultivation of personal virtue. Therefore, Qian misunderstands Christianity promulgated by Ricci as a religion "that emphasizes the external only". He also neglects the Christian emphasis on the importance of the subjective nature of morality.

Moreover, the "faith" of Christianity, though related to, is not the same as the "theology" of Christianity. The purpose of theology is to constantly search and try to re-explain more deeply the content of faith, pointing out the meaning of faith for believers existentially at different times and places. Faith, then, is beyond time and place while theology is influenced by the thinking of different times and places. It cannot be denied that Western Christian theology has been heavily influenced by Greek philosophical thought. Thus it has emphasized doctrinal distinctions that have mistakenly given people an impression that there is

a gulf between God and man. If God is regarded to be separated from man, then God is beyond man, and man must search for God outside himself. But in the Chinese religious experience this relation lies in the opposite direction. It emphasizes wholeness and unity. Within the negative there is a positive element and vice-versa. In other words, "The way of heaven is in man's heart" (天理自在人心). So God is not outside and beyond man but rather within man. Man needs only to live according to his inner light with sincerity and he can attain all this. Thus Qian's criticism does have positive value. It challenges us to reflect upon such questions as: What are the biases and weaknesses in Western Christian theology? How can one purify them? What is the contribution of the Chinese religious experience to Christian faith? How can we understand and absorb it?

2. Qian says, "Ricci and his companions wanted to lead the Chinese people from these natural sciences to religion, but the Chinese people, doubting their religion, were also lukewarm towards the Western knowledge related to it." These remarks give an impression of generalizing from the particular. In fact, there were three different reactions to the western knowledge introduced by Ricci and his confreres. One reaction was to accept both the scientific knowledge and the religion preached by the missionaries. These persons became fervent converts and protectors of the Catholic faith. Paul Xu Guangqi (徐光啓) and Li Zhizao (李之藻) are examples. Another group of people strongly opposed all that the missionaries offered, both their scientific and their religious knowledge. They termed the western knowledge introduced by Ricci and his followers "falsehood and heresy". Examples of this can be found in the commentaries of Wang Chuanshan (王船山) and the Si-ku-quan-shu (四庫全書). A third group acknowledged and accepted the great value of the scientific knowledge of the missionaries, but they objected to the religion introduced by them. Examples of this group are: Li Zhui (李贄), Fang Yizhi (方以智) and others.

Guo Tingyi (郭廷以) in his recent book Outline of Modern Chinese History (近代中國史綱) analyzes and reflects on the attitudes opposed to Western learning. He says:

The Western world is changing constantly, but Chinese society is confined, limited and turned in on itself. The viewpoints of these two societies are very far apart, and the conflict becomes inevitably acute. The main reason is the lack of understanding of each other.⁴

Here it is indicated that the reason for some people's reaction

against the Western knowledge introduced by Ricci and his confreres was not due to an acceptance or rejection of the missionaries' religion, but rather to individual conservatism and national self-respect.

3. Lastly, Qian considers that Ricci was forced to tolerate Chinese customs. This would mean that Ricci made neither mistakes nor contributions to the Chinese culture. In other words, from a negative point of view Ricci did not make the mistake of forcing the standards and customs of the Western Church upon the Chinese Church. From a positive point of view, Ricci had neither the intention nor the ability to make the Christian faith truly indigenous to China. I think Qian's comments confused the task of missionaries with that of local Christians. The task of missionaries, aside from preaching the Gospel and giving witness to the faith, is to train the faithful to be leaders of their own Church. It is impossible for missionaries to have the same mentality as local Christians. They need only to respect and understand the people's philosophy of life, world-view and customs. Instead of uniformity, dialogue should be developed between missionaries and local people. Through dialogue, the two parties could learn from each other, and the two cultures could be enriched. Therefore, the task of missionaries is to help local Christians to build up their own Church because only the local Christians can accomplish such a task. Reviewing the life-long missionary endeavours of Matteo Ricci, we find that not only was his faith-view clear, but also, he opened himself to an understanding of Chinese culture and tried to adjust himself to Chinese customs as much as he could. When Qian considers Ricci's respect for Chinese culture as an inevitable policy of missionary work, he is actually using a standard to measure the effort of this missionary which can rightly be applied only in judging the efforts of the local Christians.

B. HOU WAILU'S COMMENTS ON THE WESTERN LEARNING INTRODUCED BY RICCI

In The General History of Chinese Thinking (中國思想通史) the author Hou Wailu, in Chapter 27, part two of Volume IV, dedicated one hundred pages to discussing the Western learning introduced by Matteo Ricci.⁵ The whole chapter includes four sections: first, the introduction of theology and scholastic philosophy with their historical implications; second, the debate between the Catholic Doctrine and traditional Chinese philosophy; third, the methodology of thinking and natural philosophy introduced by the Catholic Church to China; and fourth, the Western learning brought by the Jesuits, viewed from a scientific angle.

In this last section, Hou presents clearly and systematically the trend of his criticism. After a description of the technology and sci-

ence brought into China by the missionaries, Hou uses F. Engels' Dialectics of Nature as a criterion to criticize the methodology of Catholic scholastic philosophy in the Middle Ages, especially that of Thomas Aquinas. He states:

One of the basic requirements for the birth of science in the contemporary age is a scientific way of thinking which is practical (different from the intuition of the ancient Greeks) and systematic (different from the fragmented experience of the Arabs in the Middle Ages). The method of scholastic philosophy is just the opposite of the above. Primarily, by applying the "right of exception" scholastic philosophy produces many exceptional theses. Secondary, with the "right of monopoly" it paralyzes the logic of Aristotle. Aquinas insisted that there were two sources of human knowledge; one was faith, the other the doctrine of Plato and Aristotle.⁶

Hou continues by pointing out that the western learning introduced by Matteo Ricci was nothing but the scholastic philosophy of the Middle Ages, backward western natural science and some unimportant new technologies offered for the purpose of serving theology. His method of thinking not only gave no help to science, but also hindered the development of science.

In recent times, there is the struggle of trends between materialistic philosophy which was allied with natural science, and Catholic scholastic philosophy which debased science as its servant. While Matteo Ricci, Adam Schall, Verbiest, etc. applied orthodox scholastic philosophy to verify natural science in China, Bacon, Descartes, Galileo, Newton, etc. tried to revolutionize scholastic philosophy through scientific methods in the West.⁷

In the end, Hou feels that Matteo Ricci and the Jesuit missionaries would be separated from Paul Xu Guangqi and the open-minded intellectuals who first came into contact with them. Between these two groups of people there were different historical backgrounds and each group had different ways of thinking.

The basic difference is one of direction between contem- _____

porary natural philosophy and medieval scholastic philosophy, to a certain degree, is the difference between the western missionaries and the Chinese scientists who were learning from the West. These Chinese, through the stimulation of new concepts, searched for new science and envisioned a new civilization. Such a situation was similar to the praise of Greece and Rome given by the progressive figures in the Renaissance Period. As these progressive figures in the Renaissance Period did not hold the doctrine of "back to the ancients", similarly, the Chinese masters of this time were not worshippers of the West. While the missionaries opposed science through scholastic philosophy, the Chinese scientists opposed the Chinese scholastic philosophy through science. If we could examine the points of divergence between the Chinese scholars and the missionaries through the concrete historical background, we might come to know that both of them were fighting to defend their own bastions.⁸

It is true that there are many points in the above criticism worth further discussion. Here I would like to focus my reflections on the questions related to Thomas Aquinas, Matteo Ricci and Xu Guangqi.

1. If we understand the background of the age of Thomas Aquinas and the object to which scholastic philosophy was geared, we would refuse to say that the way of thinking in scholastic philosophy and science were in opposing camps. We should remember that from the first century to the thirteenth century Christian doctrine based on faith had been an important element in aiding the development of Western civilization. In the beginning of the thirteenth century the West was challenged by Aristotle's scientific thinking based on reason which was introduced by two Arabian scholars, Avicenna and Averroes, and two Jewish philosophers, Avicbron and Maimonides. At that time the first reaction from people was that there was no compromise between faith and reason. Facing this grave and unsolved problem many conservative scholars preferred to have harm caused to human reason rather than abandon their faith. Therefore they regarded Aristotle and those who followed him or accepted his philosophy as criminals or dissidents. Criticisms and condemnations came from all directions, often to the point of involving the judiciary, in order to make the conservatives accept natural science and to acknowledge it as the gift of God, Thomas Aquinas tried to synthesize biblical tradition, the revival of Aristotelian philosophy, Jewish philosophy and Islamic philosophy into a systematic entity. By making such an ef-

fort, he tried to convince people that there is common ground between faith and reason. Therefore Thomas Aquinas' scholastic philosophy was not as simple as described by Hou. It aimed not to stand in opposition to a scientific way of thinking, rather it sought to convince people to accept science.⁹

2. After comparing the new discoveries of Bacon, Descartes, Galileo and Newton, Hou comments that the natural science introduced by Ricci was backward and unimportant. On the one hand, we can agree with Hou's criticism that Matteo Ricci was not a scientist and could not be compared with Bacon, etc. In fact, if Ricci was really a professional scientist, he would have stayed in his own country to engage in scientific research instead of coming to the East. On the other hand, we cannot agree with Hou's reckoning that the Western learning introduced by Ricci did not benefit the development of science in China. Although Ricci was neither a scientist nor did he introduce "new science" in the strict sense, yet the sciences introduced by him enabled the Chinese to build up "a scientific attitude" and to promote a more scientific way of thinking. Therefore, Liang Qiqiao (梁啟超), in his work The History of Chinese Learning in the Recent Three Hundred Years (中國近三百年學術史) wrote:

Through Buddhism in the Jin and Tang dynasties the Chinese learning began to meet the Western learning. Then, by the end of the Ming dynasty the two learnings met again through the study of mathematics and the revision of calendar. From this new environment changes took place in an academic atmosphere. Consequently, scholars of the Qing dynasty were greatly interested not only in the calculation of the calendar and mathematics, but also in practical learning. All these may have been influenced to a great extent by Matteo Ricci and Xu Guangqi.¹⁰

Hu Shi (胡適) in discussing Origins of Methodology of Textual Research (考證學方法的來歷) wrote:

1. The great founder of Chinese Textual Research, Gu Tinglin (顧亭林) did five volumes of research on ancient phonetics. Yan Ruoqu (閻若璩) did a research book annotating Gu-wen-shang-shu (古文尚書). Their research methodologies were totally influenced by Matteo Ricci.
2. Textual researchers and their methods were influenced by Western mathematics and calendar studies.¹¹

3. Hou maintains that the historical background and ways of thinking of Ricci and the other missionaries were different from those of Xu Guangqi and the Chinese scholars. I personally believe that this is not the true situation; it is only Hou's own conjecture. The most obvious proof can be found in Xu Guangqi's work of geometry called Ji-he-yuan-ben (幾何原本). In its preface Xu said:

The knowledge of Matteo Ricci can be divided into three categories: the more important one is to serve Heaven and cultivate oneself; the less important one is to investigate things and their principles; the least important are the applied sciences such as mathematics and astronomy. All of them are concise and true, leaving no room for doubt. His way of explanation is so precise and clear that no one can doubt it. I earnestly wish to transmit the less important knowledge because it is easier to find acceptance. I asked someone to translate it into Chinese, with the hope of helping others to understand its meaning and to accept Ricci's learning free of doubt.¹²

From this paragraph of Xu's work, one can understand that Ricci as a missionary never forgot his responsibility to spread the teaching of self-cultivation and service to Heaven. Xu, an outstanding scientist at the end of the Ming dynasty, not only confessed that he was Ricci's student, but also humbly admitted that he transmitted Ricci's less important knowledge, i.e. the investigation of things and their principles, in order to assist Ricci to transmit his more important learning. Xu also in his work Epilogue of the Twenty Five Theses (跋二十五言) expressed himself more clearly along this line:

Matteo Ricci was very well known to every one in the country. All the scholars and gentry earnestly desired to meet him. Once they heard him speak, all felt satisfied and acknowledged that they never heard anyone like him before...for his learning is all-embracing and its most important element is conversion to the true God, and to serve him in true piety.¹³

Here we can see that Xu had great respect for Ricci, especially for his religious piety. Xu and Ricci not only had no serious disagreements between themselves, but also became close friends for the rest of their lives.

It would be worthwhile to investigate further the question of why Xu,

who was imbued with the scientific spirit, would want to believe in the religion preached by Matteo Ricci. Surely this question cannot be answered by Engels' Dialectics of Nature because Engels' explanations remain only on the level of technology. They neglect to consider that complicated human activities which can lead to the transformation of the world include intellectual, emotional and affectional elements.

FOOTNOTES SEE pp. 34-35.

