

# BOOK REVIEW

## CONFUCIUS, THE BUDDHA AND CHRIST: A HISTORY OF THE GOSPEL IN CHINESE

by RALPH COVELL, Orbis Books, New York, 1986, 285 pp.

This is the eleventh book to be published by Orbis Books in the American Society of Missiology series. Ralph Covell, a professor of world missions and editor of Missiology magazine, served as a missionary in China and Taiwan for sixteen years. He has produced a scholarly work of great value, both for students of the history of Christianity and other religions in Asia, and for missionaries preparing to serve there.

This is not just a history of Christian missions in China and their relationship to the indigenous religions and culture, although it has excellent summaries of both these topics. It is a history of the Christian gospel in China, not the institutional church. In the words of the author, "This book does not deal primarily with the sociology, religions and cultures of China, even though these are closely intertwined with the proclamation of the Christian faith... The focus is on the shape and nature of the message that has been preached in China - the gospel in Chinese (p. xv)."

Given that stated purpose, the title is misleading, for there is very little on Confucianism and only one short, but informative, chapter on Buddhism in China - "the contextualization of a foreign faith." Readers will have to look elsewhere for a more thorough treatment of the history of religions in China.

However, this was not the author's intention. His book traces the planting and flowering of the Christian faith, the gospel itself, in

China from the earliest Nestorians to the church in China today. It is more than a history of the gospel in Chinese, although that is the central theme; this is a historical and scholarly recounting of the interaction of Christianity in its several varieties with China - its people, culture, politics and religions.

The gospel, by one dictionary definition, is "the good news concerning Christ, the kingdom of God, and salvation." We find in this volume descriptions of the methods used at various stages to plant the gospel, the problems encountered, the attempts at adaptation, and samples of the gospel as it was proclaimed by the Nestorians, Jesuits, early Protestant missionaries, and, in the twentieth century, by Chinese theologians and preachers.

The imbalance in this book between Protestant and Catholic references is a reflection, in part, of the imbalance of source materials available. It's a fact that Protestants in China, both missionaries and Chinese, were more prolific in articulating their faith, for publication at least, than the Catholics. Yet there are numerous Catholic sources that could have been cited, both contemporary and pre-modern, such as the Digest of the Synodal Commission, Collectanea Commissionis Synodalis, and the publications of the five or six Catholic publishers in China. The list of publications of the Jesuit Press at Zicawei in 1930, for example, has over sixty titles, including a number of "Tracts de Propagande". It would be fascinating to know how the "gospel in Chinese" was presented in these and earlier tracts, or in the various editions of the Catholic catechism taught to all converts prior to baptism.

The writings of the early Jesuits, and particularly of Matteo Ricci, are brilliantly summarized by Dr. Covell. But after the early Jesuits, the book deals primarily with Protestant forms of proclamation and attempts to contextualize the faith. Chapter 5, for example, "East Meets West - Chinese Natural Theology and Western Common Sense", describes the Protestant Bible controversy, Protestant mission literature, the gospel according to Chinese Protestant converts, and the ancestral rites and the gospel - a total of thirty-six pages, with only one page devoted to the Catholics.

Chapter 6, "The Dao and the Logos", has excellent accounts of the attempts by three Protestant missionaries, Timothy Richard, W.A.P. Martin and Karl Reichelt, to find points of convergence between Christianity and Buddhism, with no reference to Catholic attitudes toward Buddhism.

In Chapter 9 the theological evolution and writings of four Chinese Protestant theologians are lucidly summarized under the heading, "The Gospel of Confucian Activism." By this the author means "a radical involvement in social concern, social action, and finally social and political revolution." The four theologians, well-known during their time, are Cheng Jingyi, Zhao Zichen (T.C. Chao), Wu Yaozong (Y.T. Wu), and Wu Leizhuan.



No Catholics are mentioned, although Catholics did seek to come to terms with rapid social change and the rising tide of nationalism, particularly in the twentieth century. Fr. Vincent Lebbe, a Belgian Vincentian (1877-1940), was a determined advocate of indigenization of the gospel. During his forty years in China he lobbied continually for more Chinese clergy, Chinese bishops and a Chinese church and hierarchy. He founded the Catholic Action movement, the first Catholic newspaper, The Social Welfare, and two religious orders for Chinese, the Little Brothers of St. John the Baptist and the Little Sisters of St. Theresa of the Child Jesus. Through these and other channels he recruited over twenty thousand stretcher-bearers and medical aid personnel to care for the wounded and bury the dead during the Anti-Japanese War. He died of illness contracted in the northeast war zone in 1940.

In the final section of Chapter 9, "The Gospel of Daoist Mysticism", the author correlates the subjective pietism of several popular Chinese sectarian preachers with Daoist mysticism - a Procrustean effort that strains the analogy. Here we find an excellent overview of the life, writings and theology of Ni Duosheng (Watchman Nee), the founder of the Assembly Hall churches, an independent sect that spread widely both inside and outside China. The "gospel in Chinese" of Wang Mingdao, well-known pastor of the independent Christian Tabernacle in Beijing, is also described. Finally, in a single page (out of a total of twenty-three), there is brief reference to only one Catholic thinker and writer, Bishop (later Cardinal) Paul Yubin.

Yet even the extensive theological writings of Protestants were deprecated by Zhao Zichen, himself the leading Chinese theologian. Writing in 1950, he said:

For the last forty years there is nothing in the Chinese Christian theology which is worthy of being recalled. In cultural exchange, education, medicine, social and welfare exercises, the Church has contributed significantly... But in the theological areas of exegetical and Christian theology, let alone apologetics, there is hardly a single case which deserves our attention. The so-called Chinese theology is nothing more than Western-imported theology, spelled out by Western missionaries and completely digested by Chinese Christians. There has been no contribution by the Chinese on their own (p.191).

But he went on to predict that a Chinese theology would emerge in the foreseeable future:

Forty years from today, the Chinese Church will be narrowed in scope; with its abundant experience and yeast-like effect, it will certainly draw many to the cross of Jesus Christ. I am sure that it will provide the standard of truth for which people will want to search: the moral (ethical) foundations, security of values, selfhood, meaning of life and sense of belonging to which we are drawn (p.192).

That forecast is proving true, as we are seeing in the writings and sermons emerging from the Chinese church today, primarily from Protestants. The sermons, delivered in parish churches and collected for publication, are quite conventional, characteristic of the Protestant tradition in China. But others, given by church leaders at home or while traveling abroad, represent a new wave of theological construction as dedicated Christians seek to relate their faith to the new China. One of the earliest is the sermon delivered by Bishop K.H. Ting to the students of Nanjing Theological Seminary in June, 1957, "Christian Theism: A Theology of Society." As we know from his other writings, Bishop Ting believes that there is no necessary conflict between Christianity and socialism, or between loyalty to one's faith and to one's country. Yet he never blurs the distinction between Christian faith and political ideology. In this sermon he said:

We must ever remember that what we preach is the Gospel, is Christ, something in nature entirely different from an

ideology, something which moves in a different orbit from any system of thought, and then we will have a clear understanding from which to perceive that all talk of comparison of Christianity with Communism, or likenesses or differences, is beside the point and superfluous (p.232).

Twenty-five years later, in an address called "Evangelism As the Chinese See It," Bishop Ting countered those outside China who were claiming that a secular salvation had rendered Christianity superfluous in China:

From our situation we have to say that socio-political liberation is not a good enough description of our theology. The message we have received from God and have to transmit centers on reconciliation in Jesus Christ between God and man (p.218).

Bishop Ting has said on other occasions that "liberation theology" as perceived by Latin American theologians is not applicable in China today. "China has had its liberation," meaning liberation from the social and economic inequities so prevalent in Latin American countries.

Dr. Covell includes extensive excerpts from three of Bishop Ting's sermons and addresses. Like Rev. Shen Yifan's message at the Montreal conference in 1981 (not mentioned here), these excerpts focus on the theme of an incarnate gospel - a church and message identified with the Chinese people. He contrasts the church today with the former Chinese church which, in many ways, was a "ghetto church", a place of retreat from the real world:

More and more Christians are realizing that the transcendent is encountered not so much 'out there' as within the interpersonal relationships of finite beings. We really open ourselves to the holy and to the sacred and to meeting God himself as we plunge ourselves into the depths of human relations, no matter how secular they seem. God being love, it is only in love that we come into touch with the uttermost reality of the universe and get ourselves attuned to the character of God (p. 238).

Judging by the growth of "house meetings", now numbering in the tens of thousands, Chinese Christians are, indeed, incarnating the gospel at the grass roots, spreading out from the traditional churches into the neighborhoods and countryside. Dr. Covell speaks of this as "the gospel of spiritual power", a faith-in-practice that includes exorcism, healing

and miracles to meet human needs. This "gospel of action that promises healing and freedom from evil spirits" evidently appeals to the rural people of China. But other reasons for the growth of house meetings, as well as the growth of town and city churches, are suggested. These include: a family-centered gospel; strong lay leadership; the power of prayer; the sense of community, mutual care and love; and the gospel of shared suffering. Dr. Covell concludes:

Whether in the open churches or in the free meeting places, the gospel is being contextualized in China. It is speaking to universal and transcendent human needs of sin, alienation, guilt, meaning, and hope. Less institutional than in the past ... it is relating well to Chinese culture by being diffused throughout society, by identifying with the people, by submitting [patriotically] to the government, and by participating in the task of modernization and nationbuilding... This is a Chinese gospel, with no taint of direct missionary influence and control. No longer can it be called foreign - a yang jiao with no claim on the allegiance of the Chinese people (p.247).

We would like to know more about this "gospel of spiritual power" among the house meeting Christians, as well as the motivation that is bringing thousands of new believers of all ages and social classes to Christianity. What is it in the gospel message that draws them to the churches? Finally, again we raise the question of the Catholic gospel, for there is only a half page in the final two chapters devoted to the Catholic church, and this speaks only of the conflict over the role and authority of the Vatican in the Chinese church today, not of the Christian message as it is preached and taught to Chinese Catholics. We can find answers to some of these questions in such sources as Zhongguo Tianzhu Jiao (The Catholic Church in China), the Chinese Theological Journal, and the various periodicals and newsletters which report on the church in China. Others require first-hand experience among the Chinese Christians themselves.

Reviewed by Donald MacInnis