

## *Confucian-Catholic Dialogue in Historical Perspective*

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The Confucian-Catholic dialogue has been going on for a long time, four hundred years to be exact. Like all long term relationships, this one also tends to follow seasonal patterns: a spring-time of new discoveries, followed by a long summer of quiet growth, followed by autumn's inevitable decline and the slide into a winter of discontent. There is, however, reason to believe that we are on the verge of another spring.



Down through the centuries, scholars from both East and West, working either alone or in consort, have produced many comparative studies on Confucian and Christian thought. Most of them have sought to find some common ground on which to build a fruitful dialogue. In recent years a notable addition to this literature has been *Christianity and Chinese Religions*, the work of Hans Küng and Julia Ching ( 秦家懿 ), both well-known scholars in their respective fields. The book covers a wide range of Chinese religions and Christian responses, and I mention it in passing because its section on Confucianism, entitled *Confucianism: Ethical Humanism as Religion?* offers readers an insightful summary of Confucian perspectives followed by a Christian theological response.<sup>1</sup> It is not my intention here to repeat the authors' comments, but rather to shift the emphasis away from the philosophical and theological and offer a more historical approach to the dialogue.

What is often overlooked in discussions about the Confucian-Christian dialogue is the interplay of important social factors which not only provided the background for the dialogue but influenced the choice of the direction it took at certain points in its history. Such underlying factors not only include China's

constantly changing social and political situation, but also changes in how the Church in China saw itself, as its own self-understanding was modified by events down through the centuries. A clearer conception of what happened in three key periods of that history might be able to shed light on the possible direction the dialogue will take in the immediate future.

### **The Late Ming and Early Qing: The Jesuit Mission to China**

From the Han dynasty, dating back to the year 200 B.C., to the fall of the Qing in 1911, all Chinese emperors took an active interest in regulating religion, differing only in the mode and degree of their tolerance. During the Qing dynasty, state concern for religious affairs took a legal form with the *Da Qing Lu Li* ( 大清律例 , "Principles of the Constitution of the Qing Dynasty") which delegated supervisory authority over all religions to the Board of Rites, one of six boards in the Qing central administration. The Ming and Qing emperors generally placed religions into three categories: the orthodox and legal, such as Confucianism, which the government favoured; the unorthodox but legal, such as Buddhism, Taoism and Islam, which the government tolerated; and the heretical and illegal, such as the sects and secret societies, which the government not only disapproved of but actively sought to suppress.<sup>2</sup>

Such was the religious policy of the Chinese government when Michele Ruggieri, S.J. reached Guangzhou in 1583 to inaugurate a new chapter in the missionary history of the Catholic Church in China. Ruggieri's companion, Matteo Ricci, was perhaps not the first European missionary to come to China, but he was the first to live there for any great length of time with formal permission from the emperor, and he was the first to adapt himself successfully to its language, culture and legal structures. Ricci was profoundly aware that if the Church was to take root in China, it must find a place in, if not among those in the first, then at least those in the second, of the government's religious categories. If government approval might be too much to hope for, Ricci would settle for the government's tolerance. It was his plan after obtaining a legal status for Christianity to move on to the direct evangelization of the Chinese literati and members of the imperial family. Having mastered the Chinese

language and committing the Confucian classics to memory (his memory was prodigious) he began his journey north, moving first to Nanchang in 1595 and then to Nanjing in 1599 before finally reaching Beijing in 1601. There he won immediate favour with the emperor with the gift of a chiming clock and was granted permission to reside in the capital. He soon made many friends among the literati, who were attracted by his virtuous life and intelligent grasp of Confucian ideas. Among them was Xu Guangqi, a government official and scholar who converted to Christianity, and who wrote of his friend: "I met Li Madou (Ricci's Chinese name) in Nanjing by chance, and after a short conversation realized he is a most learned man. Amidst difficulties and adversities, in informal gatherings or formal banquets, it is not possible to find a single word spoken by him in disloyalty to the emperor or against the sacred principles of filial piety. He speaks words that bring only peace to the mind and a strengthening of moral principles."<sup>3</sup> Ricci and the court literati opened their dialogue with a common concern for the advancement of virtue and a shared interest in moral perfection. But did their exchanges also touch upon higher matters of a religious and theological nature?

It was Ricci's firm belief that acceptance of the Catholic faith in no way compromised Chinese culture, but on the contrary it could enrich it. In 1601 he published his first important book in the Chinese language: *Tian Zhu Shi Yi*, ( 天主實義 *The True Idea of God*).<sup>4</sup> It took the classical form of a dialogue between a Christian scholar from the West and a Confucianist of the Chinese literati. As the title suggests, Ricci explains that *Tian Zhu* ("the Lord of Heaven" or God) is indeed Lord of heaven and earth and the truth about God is neither vain nor empty, but substantial. From this, Ricci's argument proceeds along three lines of inference. 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 truths of the Gospel. His treatise ends with a demonstration of Catholic teaching concerning suffering, death, and the afterlife, which was an effort to fill the void created by the traditional Confucian tendency to limit its focus to personal morality and this life, with only little or no thought for the next.

We can see from his initial work that, from the very beginning, Ricci raised the dialogue from the level of ethical morality to that of religious belief. In his approach, he was both accommodating and apologetic. He showed how his ability to adapt to the new culture could keep pace with his rapid assimilation of its strengths and values. He laid aside the robes of a Buddhist priest to don those of the Confucian scholar and, thus garbed, enters into the mainstream of Chinese social and intellectual life. He came to recognize its values and to accept the finer points of traditional Chinese culture. He was also able to distinguish among its many religious and social elements, making allowance for the Confucian rite of ancestor worship which he saw as merely the traditional expression of a deep-seated filial piety. While accommodating himself to the culture, nonetheless, he took an apologetic approach when it came to safeguarding the content of Catholic orthodoxy. What he had hoped for was to pass beyond a discussion of Western science and social ritual to introduce the Good News of the Gospel. He would remove the outer garment, so to speak, to reveal the inner garment of divine revelation and Christian faith. Ricci continually assured the Chinese scholars and officials of his time that accepting Christianity did not mean the rejection of Chinese culture nor any disloyalty to the traditions of their nation, but rather Christianity had much to offer in furthering their advancement.

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Despite the efforts of Ricci and his Jesuit companions, there remained a vast gulf separating them from their Confucian friends, most notably in the area of religious belief. Some have called the Confucian-Christian dialogue of those days "a dialogue of misunderstandings". The scholars continued to hold strongly to their Neo-Confucian worldview, and the missionaries struggled to find proper Chinese words to convey Christian theological concepts. Their language limitations also proved to be a barrier to a deeper understanding of Neo-Confucian philosophy.<sup>5</sup> It is no wonder that well-known Chinese scholars such

as Tang Junyi and Mou Zongsan fault Ricci and his contemporaries for overlooking in Neo-Confucian thought its rich layer of spirituality. Recently Dr. Julia Ching has also pointed out that Neo-Confucianism cannot be separated from traditional Confucianism. Any effort to do so is a denial of the concrete reality of the situation existing in those times.<sup>6</sup>

Even a cursory glance through the writings of Ricci and his companions gives ample evidence of a genuine dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Neo-Confucianists during the later Ming and early Qing dynasties, and the dialogue was more than just a superficial exchange of ideas. The missionaries did achieve a remarkable breakthrough not only in their ability to express their own points of view, but to do so while respecting Chinese culture and coming to terms with Confucian values and concepts. As a whole, they were men of erudition and quite open to adapting their message to the rituals, mores and morality of the Chinese people. We should not measure them against the standards we might expect from native Chinese in their efforts to accommodate Christianity to Chinese culture. The missionaries had a different role. Their purpose was to proclaim the gospel by the witness of their lives, while nurturing the faith of their converts until they could manage on their own. It was to be the task of the Chinese Christians, born and raised in the culture, to integrate faith and culture into a harmonious whole.

### **Chinese Catholics Abroad: The 1950's and 1960's**

It is important to understand from the outset that Imperial China and Confucianism represented mutually supportive systems, and both were strongly biased towards a this-world-only point of view. In contrast, traditional Catholic thought tended to separate the spiritual from the temporal, seeing the spiritual kingdom as the higher realm. This sharp difference in religious faith served to distance Confucian from Christian thinking and, looking at it from the Chinese perspective, it also threatened China's political and social order during the period now under discussion. As Jacques Gernet has written: "Being on the outside and having a different nature, Christianity tended to destroy the actual basis of a society and a state grounded on respect for a total order which ignored the antithesis between the spiritual and temporal realms."<sup>7</sup>



It was not long after Matteo Ricci had died that Yang Guangxian ( 楊光先 ), a high government official, submitted a memorial to the imperial throne listing his complaints against the Catholic Church. Some years later, the Kangxi, Yongzheng and Qianlong emperors issued proclamations prohibiting Christianity in response to Rome's refusal to allow Chinese Christians to engage in religious rites honouring Confucius and venerating ancestors. This drove the Catholic Church underground, and in effect put an end to the Confucian-Christian dialogue.

It was only after the conclusion of the Opium Wars (1839-1856) with England that large numbers of missionaries returned to China. By 1939, *Propaganda Fide* had revoked the ban on Chinese Rites, but any thought of resuming the dialogue was laid aside with the outbreak of the Second World War. After the war, there was little felt need on the part of the Church in China, which was receiving converts in large numbers, to address itself to the problems of inculturation or deepening the ecclesial life of its Chinese Christians. It was only after the establishment of the Communist government and the end of the civil war on the mainland in 1949, that some Christian writers and theologians began to take a second look at the possibilities of resuming a dialogue with Confucianism.

During a symposium in Hong Kong in 1979, Fr. Aloysius Chang ( 張春申 ), Professor of Theology at Fujen University, recalled that several articles on Confucianism had appeared in the Catholic magazine *Xin Duo Sheng* ( 新鐸聲 ) during the mid-50's. The magazine was edited by Msgr. Stanislaus Lokuang ( 羅光 ) the former chancellor of Fujen University, and published in Singapore from 1955 to 1962. It resumed publication again later, in Taiwan, but under a different name, *Duo Sheng* (Vox Cleri). Fr. Chang refers to this as the era of the *Xin Duo Sheng*. Not only did it signal an interest in the Confucian-Christian dialogue, but it also carried many articles from overseas Chinese scholars concerned with the development of a Chinese theology, notable among them was Fr. Wang Changzhi. ( 王昌祉 )<sup>8</sup>

Wang had written his doctoral thesis as a student at the Catholic University of Paris on the moral philosophy of Wang Yangming ( 王陽明 ). After his return to China in 1937, he continued to write and lecture extensively on a wide range of philosophical and theological subjects. He was an admirer of St.

Thomas Aquinas, and during the years that followed he produced three ambitious works: *Resolving the Problems of the Present Day*, *A Review of Catholic Doctrine*, and *Catholic Life*, which invited comparison with Aquinas' *Summa Contra Gentes* and *Summa Theologica*. During this same period, Msgr. Stanislaus Lokuang was writing not in China but in Rome. His two most notable works published at that time were *The Doctrine of the Catholic Church* and *An Outline of Chinese Philosophy*.<sup>9</sup> Neither of these men had deliberately set out to break new ground for Chinese philosophy or Christian theology *per se*. However, because both had been schooled in the Western Christian intellectual tradition, and both were also well-versed in their own Chinese cultural philosophies, especially Confucianism, their writings quite naturally reveal something of the inner dialogue that was taking place between their Catholic faith and Confucian thought.

At the time Lokuang was on the faculty of the Urban Pontifical University in Rome, the student body included a number of Chinese priests and seminarians. Under his guidance, his students took up the challenge and pursued the Confucian-Christian dialogue with much vigour. Among them was Tian Liang (田良). His ambition was to become the "Chinese Aquinas", hoping to accomplish the same kind of synthesis of Chinese and Christian thought as Aquinas had achieved with Hellenistic philosophy in his *Summa Theologica*. In an article entitled "A Proposed Outline for Chinese Catholic Culture" which appeared in *Xin Duo Sheng* in 1959, Tian offered the outline of a Chinese theological system based on the Confucian concept of filial piety (*xiao*). After first expounding on the meaning of *xiao* in traditional Chinese culture, he moved on to give his own interpretation and its possible uses as a conceptual foundation for a systematic synthesis of Chinese and Western thought. He applied *xiao* to such traditionally Christian concepts as salvation history, creation, redemption and even the seven sacraments. It was Tian's conviction that a theological system based on filial piety would be more attractive and accessible to the Chinese people.<sup>10</sup>

Most of the Chinese scholars mentioned above worked overseas at the time China was being radically transformed at home under the Communists. They were acutely aware of the dangers and sensitive to the sufferings of their compatriots on

the mainland, which only served to deepen consciousness of their own Chinese identity. They made use of the columns of *Xin Duo Sheng* to carry on the work of integrating traditional Chinese culture with their Christian faith. However, while it can be said that they had a much better grasp of Confucian thought than their foreign missionary predecessors of the Ming and Qing periods, they lacked the critical tools to ply their trade and were a long way from home. They remained isolated in academic worlds far removed from the concrete situation of their homeland, and this often gave to their writing a tone of being out of touch with China's changing social realities. While they devised methodologies for harmonizing their faith with Confucianism, they did so without engaging in any actual dialogue with contemporary Confucian scholars. As Aloysius Chang pointed out, they tended to view the Neo-Confucianists of the twentieth century as secular humanists whose minds were closed to a consideration of alternatives, and so they dismissed them as being unlikely candidates for a proper dialogue.<sup>11</sup> As a result, the Confucian-Christian dialogue during the 50's and 60's merely continued along the same path followed by the earlier missionaries and provided no new breakthroughs.

### **Post Vatican II: The Promotion of Dialogue in Taiwan and Hong Kong**

Vatican II's spirit of openness gave new impetus to the determination of the Church to enter into a dialogue with peoples of all faiths. This movement received strong support from two of the Council's documents: *The Decree of Ecumenism* and *The Declaration on Non-Christian Religions*. The faith-dialogue was to be founded on mutual respect and acknowledgment of the values and insights to be found in all faiths. Acrimonious debate and stubborn intransigency were to be avoided. It goes without saying that no authentic inter-faith dialogue would demand the renunciation of one's own beliefs; on the contrary, such a dialogue begins with the assumption that no one particular religion has a monopoly on all truth.

Within the context of this new atmosphere created by the Second Vatican Council, the Chinese Catholic Church in Taiwan has made some notable progress in the Confucian-Christian dialogue. The Philosophical and Theological Society based at



Fujen University has achieved much success and continues to turn out significant work in this area. The University's Schools of Philosophy and Theology, while not neglecting Buddhism, Taoism and Mozi's thought, tend to lean toward Confucianism as a more ready partner for dialogue. While academically they are Neo-Thomistic, firmly rooted in the philosophical and theological tradition of Aristotle, Augustine and Aquinas, they also maintain an active interest in phenomenology, existentialism, hermeneutics and analytical philosophy. Under the leadership of Archbishop Stanislaus Lokuang, Msgr. Gabriel Ly (李震) and Father Mark Fang (房志榮), they emphasize the vitality and sanctity of human life in the context of today's materialistic society. A fundamental concept in their approach is the delineation of human life as an ascent upwards through various levels: from *homo faber* (the craftsman) to *homo sapiens* (the thinker), to *homo honestatis* (the man of virtue), finally culminating in *homo sanctus* (the saint). A cosmic understanding of God as the Creator and origin of the universe and designer of its destiny, who fashions human nature in beauty giving it meaning and purpose as it moves to the full realization of its potential, attains to what in Confucian thought is expressed as "the unity of Heaven and earth"--the fulfillment of created humanity and all aspects of human life. In this way, these thinkers can offer a new harmony of Confucian thought and the Catholic faith.

There are in Taiwan a number of other Catholic intellectuals outside the Fujen group who are highly proficient and more than competent partners in the Confucian-Christian dialogue. For example, Professor Peter Wu (鄔昆如) of Taiwan's National University works to relate Catholic philosophy to human life with particular attention to Confucian social philosophy. He contends that there exists no radical differences between Western and Chinese philosophy. Both spring from a common origin, which is the desire to improve the condition of society in order to better relations among its members. Professor Wu sees the origin of philosophy in the necessity of humanity to confront its existential problems, and its mission is to serve as a saving agent for humanity in stressful times.<sup>12</sup>

Professor Thaddeus Hang (項退結) of Zhengzhi University is also very much concerned with the condition of society, but he focuses more attention on the individual within society. He enjoins philosophers to keep their fingers on the pulse of the

present situation and attuned to the problems arising from both capitalistic individualism and socialistic collectivism. He sees that the central issue facing the world today is how to resolve the delicate problem of the relationship between society and the individual. We cannot overemphasize the individual at society's expense, nor can we exaggerate the importance of society while denying the right of the individual to his or her independent existence. He affirms the importance of national identity, but argues for the integration of the dignity of the individual into a cosmic unity. Proceeding in this manner, he works to achieve a systematic synthesis of Chinese (including Confucian) and Catholic philosophy.<sup>13</sup>

From the Church in Taiwan, we now turn to Hong Kong and the impressive efforts being made there by the Hong Kong Diocesan Commission for Non-Christian Religions in furthering a dialogue not only with Hong Kong Confucianists but with representatives of other non-Christian religions as well. The Commission was established in 1972 and has as its main purpose fostering and maintaining friendly relations with all non-Christian groups within the territory. It hosts two symposiums each year, which bring together members of Hong Kong's six main organized religions: Confucianists, Taoists, Buddhists, Muslims, Protestants and, of course, Catholics. Topics are chosen from a wide variety of religious subjects and concerns, ranging from personal prayer to the cultivation of a spiritual social environment, and in addressing the topic each group is invited to share the particular insights of its respective beliefs. These open discussions have done much to promote mutual respect among the religions and a new appreciation for the rich diversity of religious thought they represent.

Subsequently, in 1978, a leadership conference committee was set up by these six main religions to allow their high officials to come together twice a year to discuss common problems and address various social issues, such as care for the elderly, youth, and the homeless, following the specific area of social concern selected annually by the United Nations. The committee has also influenced the government to include courses on morality and ethics in all school curricula. Another result of the growing influence of collective leadership in the countdown to 1997 has been the government's appointment of one representative from each of the six religions to the Advisory Commission

on the Basic Law for the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region.

By way of summary, the Confucian-Catholic dialogue through the centuries has had many ups and downs, but for Catholics the process has resulted in a gradual but ever deepening understanding of their own identity and their role in the dialogue. The early Jesuit missionaries saw this role as one of planting the seeds of Christianity; during the 1950's and 60's overseas Chinese Catholic scholars worked to establish an integration of Chinese culture and Christian faith that would facilitate the formation of a unified and harmonious identity among Chinese Catholics. In the years after Vatican II, the Church in Taiwan and Hong Kong has sought to build on this foundation by enlarging that identity to include not only a "Chinese" and "Christian" consciousness but one that is also truly "Catholic" in the original sense of the word--cosmic, a consciousness of a cosmic identity as members of the human family and the family of God. The theology of Vatican II speaks of Christ the incarnate Son of God as the Alpha and Omega of the universe. He came into the world that through Him the world might be lifted up, and guided towards the achievement of its ultimate destiny. Christians are to take this world seriously, and Chinese Christians are to take it more seriously than they have been taught to do by their Confucian tradition for they are to announce and convey to others their eager enthusiasm for a world hastening towards its fulfillment in Christ.

I have concerned myself here primarily with what is taking place in Taiwan and Hong Kong, but what about the present situation of the Confucian-Catholic dialogue in Mainland China? Certainly there is great potential in that vast and populous country. But much depends on the attitude of the government there. If its current religious policy will allow religious personnel more space in which to move, have more contact with the outside world, and work to facilitate such exchanges, then the dialogue between Confucianists on the mainland and the Chinese Catholic Church will be able to advance to a higher level with bright prospects for the future. We wait in eager expectation for this to take place.

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*(For Endnotes, see the original Chinese article, in this issue of Tripod).*