

## *Response to: Chinese Culture and Christianity*

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(The following response to Fr. Masson's presentation was made at the National Catholic China Conference, sponsored by the United States Catholic China Bureau, at Maryknoll, New York, in November 1991).

It is a pleasure for me to respond to Father Masson's thought provoking and challenging presentation on Chinese culture and Christianity. He begins his paper with a review of Christian evangelism in China. He then proceeds to the examination of the writings of Chinese intellectuals, and he concludes with a Christian-Confucian dialogue and speculation on the future of Chinese culture. As an administrator of a university library, I usually find it easy to critique articles and opinions. But to critique Fr. Masson's philosophical and literary presentation is not an easy task for me. Nevertheless, I will undertake the task, and since the study of culture requires "the native's point of view," I will state my ideas and make my observations as a Chinese.

China has not been converted to Christianity. A cultural perspective is needed to understand the nature of the defeat experienced by thousands of missionaries in China. Father Masson's contribution highlights the cultural dimension of proselytism.

Contrary to the opinion shared by Christian missionaries, I submit that Chinese culture has been receptive to various religions and ideologies. Chinese culture has manifested its ability to reconcile different and opposing principles and practices by syncretising elements of Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, anarchism, individualism, libertarianism, authoritarianism, socialism, and communism.

### **Christian Missionary Efforts**

The first missionary effort in China was that of Nestorian Christianity during the T'ang dynasty (A.D. 618-907). Consid-

ered as heretics by Rome, the Nestorians found religious tolerance for their beliefs in China. During the thirteenth century, Christian missionaries again went to China whose Mongol ruler extended his warm welcome and urged Rome to send more evangelists. But, with the disintegration of Mongol power and the insensibility of the Papacy, China was not converted.

Matteo Ricci arrived in China in 1582 and the Jesuit teaching of Christianity appealed to the Chinese gentry. Unfortunately, the rivalries of missionary orders and the Pope's ruling over the Rites Controversy in 1742 diminished further the prospect of a Christian China.

Robert Morrison went to Canton in 1807. But his major achievement was the sinification of Christianity through language studies and translations. More missionaries went to China in the 1840s following the opening of treaty ports. Christianity grew slowly in Confucian China which had to face humiliations from without and turmoils from within. The messianic fervor of the Taiping rebellion of 1851-64 did not enhance the image of Christianity, but contributed to its rejection by the Chinese gentry.

Nineteenth-century Protestant Christianity was marked by self-confidence and a conviction of Western superiority. This attitude was supported by gunboat diplomacy. Under the protection of unequal treaties signed with China, foreign missionaries enjoyed privileges and became complacent. Griffith John, for example, in his speech to the 1877 conference of Protestant missionaries in China said, "We are here . . . to do battle with the powers of darkness, to save men from sin, and conquer China for Christ." Christianity had become a menace that threatened the Chinese establishment as a civilization and insulted the Chinese as a race. The Chinese ethnocentric mentality, which persists even today on mainland China, could only lead to the denunciation of Christian missions as a cultural arm of Western imperialism.

The temporary triumph of communism in China does not mean the ultimate failure of Christian missions in China. During the process of great transformation and national salvation, China, when founding a republic in 1911, chose nationalism as an alternative and in 1949, accepted a socialist form of government. The adaptive Chinese culture has already sinicized Marxism-Leninism and may even abandon communism in the

foreseeable future. The collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and Russia left an ideological vacuum that is analogous to the demise of Confucianism as a state ideology in China. The dynamic Chinese culture will bring China to a new era.

### **Cultural Modernization vs. Cultural Enrichment**

Like some contemporary Chinese writers, Father Masson seems to have perceived Chinese culture as a static entity "unable to create and stimulate modernization" and, therefore, suggested "cultural modernization" several times in the presentation of his paper. I would humbly propose that cultural enrichment or assimilation be substituted for "cultural modernization". From the socio-anthropological point of view, culture is a set of shared values, beliefs, assumptions, and norms of behavior that knit a community together. Culture by definition cannot be modernized to make it functionally superior to what it is. Chinese writers like Liu Xiaofeng stated that "theological works are intellectually relevant to the cultural modernization of China." Others like Huang Kejian and Jin Guantao found the essence of modernity in the works of Max Weber. The intriguing theme of crime and punishment in terms of "the journey of life" made another writer speak of "the quintessence and soul of Western culture and its superiority over the East." It is a dire mistake for such Chinese writers to assume that the Christian sinner spends his life "working out his salvation". Do these writers care that Christ is the only salvation and that justification is achieved by faith and not by deeds? They should have found more sources for inspiration, not just the Scriptures and religious works. Buddhism enriched Chinese culture and became an integral part of the Chinese mind. But Christianity remains a "cultural fable" or a "minority culture" because the focus has been placed on the "intellectual respectability" of Christianity. We have to keep in mind that what Chinese intellectuals seek is China's national salvation in the name of modernization. What Christians pray to achieve is the salvation of individual Chinese in the name of Christ.

### **Culture and Cosmological Thinking**

Christian culture and Chinese culture are both great but they

are different. Although Judaeo-Christian values are constitutive elements of the prophetic writings and the Gospel, the teachings of Christianity are also compatible with those of Confucianism, Taoism, and Mahayana Buddhism. Many Christian missionaries assume that all people throughout the world have the same cosmological thinking, and consequently, cannot understand the Chinese world view.

The Chinese mind sees a spontaneously self-generating cosmos in which all the parts interact with the organic whole. This cosmic function of grand harmony serves as the equivalent of God, called Tian, Heaven or Nature. Because nothing in a cosmos must be out of harmony in infinite space and time, the Chinese cannot take original sin seriously and cannot accept divinely revealed laws as commanded by God. The family and society oriented Chinese ethical philosophy postulates that authority rests in humanity under the cosmic order. Being human is humanity. Virtue is its own reward. On the will of Heaven, Mencius said, "He who exerted his mind knows his nature. Knowing his nature, he knows heaven." The way to serve heaven, according to him, is to hold fast what human beings have from Heaven, to nourish his nature, to wait for his heavenly appointment while continually cultivating his character and virtue. The Chinese mind seeks to respect heaven; to imitate the cosmic morality of nature; to be in harmony with the universe and other human beings. What is the great commandment in the Bible? "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength, and love your neighbor as you love yourself" (Mark 12:30-31).

Understanding the common divine messages of the two great traditions, Christian pioneers like Ricci and Morrison long before us attempted to sinicize Christianity. In their use of vocabulary and terminology and in the interpretation of Christian Scriptures, the former employed Confucianism, the latter, Taoism and Buddhism. Indian Buddhism came to China in the first century and was indigenised. It became Mahayana Buddhism and eventually expanded to Korea, Japan, and Southeast Asia. If the Buddhist seed could be planted in the Chinese soil, why can't the seed of Christianity also be sown? Unless the Christian grain falls into the Chinese ground and dies, it remains no more than a single Christian grain. If it does die, it produces

many Chinese Christian grains. Father Masson's notion of the "local church" in the Chinese context fascinated me exceedingly. "We don't know the times or dates that God the Father has fixed by his own authority. When the Holy Spirit comes upon us, we shall be witnesses for Christ in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the very ends of the earth" (Acts 1:7-8). To the Chinese concept of time and space, it is well understood that "a thousand years in God's sight are as yesterday" (Psalm 90:4).

Like many Western sinologists, Father Masson has been concerned with the development of Confucian scholarship. Just as the Old Testament, the Four Gospels and the Epistles will continue to serve as God's revelation to people, so the Confucian classics, Taoist works, and the Chinese Tripitaka will remain to testify to the quintessence of humanistic Chinese culture. Both Christianity and Chinese culture are divine gifts to God's people, one is prophetic in spirit and the other secular in form. Christian theologians and the hermeneuts of Confucian-Taoist texts are all God's co-workers. They will draw new meanings out of the old texts. In the age of easily accessible information, rapid telecommunication and easy transportation, our world has become a global village. Indeed, we can kneel before God and pray together "Thy kingdom come and Thy will be done."

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## *News Update*

### *Arrests*

Fr. Charles Guo Bole, 57, Jesuit and member of the underground church in Shanghai, was arrested on July 11, 1992. According to sources in Hong Kong, Fr. Guo Bole is being detained in Jiangsu province. Fr. Guo Bole was ordained on July 31, 1982 and has already spent several years in prison.

In June 1992, Fr. Wang Danian and two religious Sisters were also detained in Jiangsu. The Sisters were released in August but Fr. Wang is reportedly still being detained.