

Histoire des Chrétiens de Chine

By Jean Charbonnier

Coédition Declée/Bégédie, Paris, 1992, pp. 426.

Reviewed by Betty Ann Maheu, M.M.

The history of Christianity in China is ordinarily written from the perspective of Christian missions and China missionaries. Father Charbonnier's comprehensive work *Histoire des Chrétiens de Chine* focuses, not so much on those who brought the Gospel tidings to China as on those who heard the message. In the introduction to this remarkable book there is a touching story which underlies much of the empathy with which this book is written. Through a chance meeting with a young Chinese sailor in Singapore, the author discovers how the Church in China survived in spite of years of persecution and without the benefit of churches, clergy or sacraments. The clue to the lasting vitality of the faith, the author maintains, lies in the Chinese psyche, a people capable of great suffering and astonishing fidelity; a people rooted in a culture and tradition that value both wisdom and filial piety. These characteristics have enabled many Chinese Christians to risk all for their faith and to transmit that faith to their children. This book is about these exceptional people, their faith witness and their contribution to the Universal Church.

"Histoire des Chrétiens de Chine" is composed of five parts: Part I introduces the reader to traces of Christianity in China dating back to the VII century. The author invites the reader to visit the stele of Xian, the oldest Christian monument in China, discovered near a Taoist temple in 1623, to glance at the contents of the *Sutra of Jesus the Messiah* (635 A.D.), to read the beautiful *Discourse of the Master on Almsgiving* (641 A.D.), the manuscripts of *Dunhuang*, (868 A.D.) and to marvel at the successful integration of the Muslims into Chinese culture, a feat not so successfully achieved by Christians.

Part II discusses the encounter of Christianity with Confucianism during the XVI and XVII centuries, when many Confucian intellectuals favorably received the doctrine as preached by the Jesuits. This receptivity opened China's door to more foreign missionaries.

Part III covers the development of the Church in China during the XVIII and XIX centuries. In this part readers are

introduced to many notable Christian converts and intellectuals such as Feng Yingjing, Xu Guangqi, Li Zhicao, Yang Tingyun, Candida Xu, the "female apostle," and Joseph Wong, a young eunuch responsible for the conversion of many other eunuchs and court ladies.

With the arrival of the Franciscan and Dominican missionaries evangelization in China took on a new direction. While the Jesuits had busied themselves in scholarly endeavors and cultivating the elite, the new missionaries went out to the provinces and preached the Gospel to the poor.

This same period is not without turmoil. The clash between Chinese and Western Christian culture culminates in the debate: Can the Confucian tradition absorb the new religion from the West? The answer to this question eventually reaches a tragic end in the Rites Controversy. The result of this was that Christians were effectively prohibited from practicing their ancient Confucian rites.

With the death of Emperor Kangxi in 1722, and the ascent of Emperor Yongzheng to the throne, most missionaries are expelled. The Chinese themselves now become the evangelizers of their own people. Persecution soon follows and many Chinese priests, catechists and consecrated virgins shed their blood for their faith. The author recounts the little known but fascinating stories of some of these martyrs, such as Petronilla Teing, Lin Zhao, Yi Meizhen, Fan Hui, Fu Guilin and others.

Part IV, which spans from 1840-1949, is a study of the colonial era with its Opium Wars, the downfall of the Manchu Dynasty and the inevitable increasing anti-foreign feelings. Whatever progress the Church had made in the 19th century is for the most part ruined with the Boxer Rebellion of 1900.

During the first half of the XX century China is polarized by its political options. The victorious Communist forces are quick to brand Christians, associated with the anti-Communist nationalists, as traitors and "running dogs of the foreign imperialists".

In Part V entitled *Death and Resurrection* the author explores the Communists' victory and the progressive effort to destroy all religions in China by transforming them into an instrument for social reconstruction.

The history of Chinese Christians comes to a dramatic climax in 1966 when revolutionary activism culminates in the Cultural Revolution with its systematic religious persecution.

When, in late 1978 China began to open its doors to the outside world, it also provided for a certain liberalization of religion: churches, seminaries and novitiates began to reopen but under the control of the Party's United Front. Since then, Christians all over the world have been rallying to the support of their Christian brothers and sisters in China who constitute a powerful leaven to raise up a "spiritual civilization" in China.

This book is extremely important and deserves wide circulation. It should find a place in the homes and libraries of all who are interested in China and its history. It should be made available in school, university and public libraries. While *Histoire des Chrétiens de Chine* is not a critical history, it is nonetheless a valuable reference and resource, built on accurate and reliable secondary sources. Basically, the book is extremely informative and enjoyable reading.

Presently, negotiations are in progress for the English translation. *Tripod* will inform its readers when and where the English translation is available.

Errata:

In July-August, 1992 issue: P.43: Last line should read, "arrived in 1872" not 1972; picture, p. 44: These instruments were located in the Beijing Observatory.
