

A Theological Reflection on Mission and Culture

by Peter Fleming, S.J.

(The following is the final chapter of Fr. Peter Fleming's 1987 dissertation, *Chosen for China: The California Province Jesuits in China, 1928-1957: A Case Study in Mission and Culture*. It is reprinted here with permission.)

In 1970 the dean of American China historians, Harvard University's John King Fairbank, stated in his presidential address before the membership of the American Historical Association that the missionary was the "invisible man of China."¹ Fairbank did not mean that academe lacked works on the missions, but that it lacked critical mission studies, those studies which were not either hagiographical or promotional. Before 1970 and even after 1970 there were and have been few critical China mission studies. Scholars of the Protestant China mission have done the most.² Few studies have come from scholars on the Roman Catholic missions.³ I have attempted to give the heretofore Roman Catholic invisible China missionary a little more visibility by making the California Jesuits critically visible and thus credible within their historical context.



From an historical point of view, I have concluded that although the California Province Jesuits were in China for only twenty-nine years (1928-1957), they barely had an opportunity to begin their mission due to the inevitable violent historical changes which China underwent during the same period. Put another way, inevitable historical changes in China shaped the course of Christian missions. There was very little the California Jesuits did, or could have done, which would have prevented those changes in ways which might have been more favorable to the continuation of their mission. What happened to the Californians also happened to every other Christian mission group.

Perhaps only those missionaries who served in China during those years have realized the massive consequences of those historical changes. Chinese Christians and the Chinese clergy have had to live with the consequences of those changes. I do not suggest that the Californians could have done anything different in order to maintain their mission, for example, by cooperating with the Chinese Communist regime; nor do I suggest that the Chinese Communist regime would have done anything different than it did, the destruction of the missions. The missionaries and the Communists had reached an impasse which only an exercise of brute power on the part of the Chinese Communists resolved. I do suggest, however, that a less strident attitude toward China and a more flexible negotiating stance on the part of the West, particularly by the United States, could have significantly altered China's treatment of the Christian missionaries.

Given the foregoing historical conclusions, I now raise issues germane to mission and culture, issues which have been central to the California Jesuits in China as a case study in mission and culture. These issues are seven: the presence and action of God in history and in Chinese culture; the already heavily Western-cultured gospel message which the missionaries brought to China along with the assumption that the West was a "Christian culture"; the failure on the part of the missionaries to adapt to Chinese culture; the Roman Catholic Church's ecclesiastical bureaucracy provided little flexibility by which the missionaries might have adapted to the Chinese culture; failure to adapt to the Chinese culture contributed to the missionaries own inevitable loss of their missions; the loss of the heavily Western-cultured missions have provided an impetus for the growth of a Chinese Church; and although the California Jesuits in China were few in number and their mission was a brief venture, their presence took on a significant historical symbolism which they could not have foreseen and at the same time did nothing to reduce the measure of their failures as well as their achievements.

In making the California Jesuits historically visible, I realize that history can be a "notorious relativizer of absolute values, authorities and our often cherished myths and idealizations. History is a locus of inconsistencies and compromises as often as logical coherency. To get to history is to run the risk of

uncovering unpleasant facts or the equally chilling risk of debunking criticism."⁴ The history of the California Jesuits in China has proved to be no exception to the risks of historical inquiry. The Californians enlisted their service to a cause which brought them much hardship, offered them a modicum of comfort, demanded a commitment which more often than not yielded meager results, and which entailed a loneliness not experienced by their colleagues in the United States. Good-willed and educated, they daily met resistance to their good will and education. The Californians lived life styles far better than most of the Chinese. They had privileged positions and received special favors (until the Communists took over) because they were both foreigners and priests. Most of the Californians were ordinary men, a very few were brilliant, some were holy and ordinary, a few were both holy and brilliant. Some identified their egos with their mission. Some simply had their heads locked in cement. Most of them worked together, while others cultivated the loner posture. On the whole, the Californians were cautious men. All were indisputably decent men of good will and possessed impressive personal integrity. Such is the matrix of history. One might also speculate that mission depends upon the personality of the missionary unadorned by either ascetical training or sacerdotal education.

The question of God's presence in history and His direction of history toward a final end, divine providence, must be addressed because without a belief in divine providence mission is meaningless. I take Hamlet's theological view of history. For Hamlet, history is the locus of divine providence, as when he says in Act V, scene two, to his philosopher-friend Horatio: "Sir, in my heart there was a kind of fighting that would not let me sleep. Methought I lay worse than the mutinies in the bilboes. Rashly, and praised be rashness for it, let us know, our indiscretions sometime serve us well when our deep plots do pall. And that should learn us there's a divinity that shapes our ends, roughhew them how we will."

That is Hamlet the historian and theologian speaking, to which Horatio the philosopher responds in agreement: "That is most certain." California China missionary James E. Thornton came to the same kind of insight when he was interned at Yangzhou by the Japanese during World War II and then again imprisoned by the Chinese Communists for ten months in

Yangzhou and in Shanghai from July of 1951 until May of 1952. He told me in an interview that prison was bad enough, its physical hardships and continual questioning, but what he struggled with was God's very existence and God's care for the entire historical mission enterprise for which he and thousands of other missionaries had given their lives. Thornton, himself a bit like Hamlet--brilliant insight, sharp wit, and a clear articulator of the shadow side of human existence--knew well Hamlet's struggle and Hamlet's resolution. The Chinese Church has taken on a new, struggling but vital growth today. Throughout the history of anti-Christian persecutions, Chinese Christians continued to believe and believe to this day. There now exists what might look to some outsiders as a very roughhewn Church which neither history, ideology, nor the roughhewn ways of missionaries have been able to squelch. Providence continues to reopen the parentheses of history.⁵

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If God in His providence was at work in Chinese history during the time the California Jesuits were in China, that presence was not immediately apparent. The missionaries attempted to make empirical God's presence in their obsession for statistics, especially regarding the numbers of conversions. Few, if any, could make sense, however, of those chaotic years between 1928 and 1949, and perhaps even more so after 1949. Some groups tried to make sense of the times by reshaping Chinese history according to their own images; the Chinese Nationalists, the Chinese Communists, and Christian missionaries, the business people, and the politicians. The Chinese Communists succeeded in shaping Chinese history according to their image, but their view of history was strikingly similar at times to the historical view of the missionaries. Like all mis-

sionaries of that era, the Californians viewed Chinese life and history in terms of the forces of good against the power of evil. The power of evil had many forms, China's historical resistance to Christianity (never more than one percent of China was Christian), its poverty, war, ignorance, natural disasters, conflicting ideologies, ethnocentrism, political intrigue, overpopulation, chaos, underemployment, and its bureaucracy. Thus the California Jesuits who went to China took with them a spirituality and a theology of combat.

As missionary soldiers of Christ, they saw themselves engaged in a great *psychomachia* or "soul-struggle, which they forced first hand. This soul-struggle had been characteristic of the Church Militant for centuries and would continue until the Second Coming. The struggle between God and the devil existed in the soul of the "Chinese pagan" in apocalyptic proportions. The Californians, moreover, had been chosen for China in order to overturn local Chinese gods which the Church had judged alien. As missionaries, the Californians had been sent to replace these local gods with the Christian God and to implant the Church. In their attempts to overturn the local gods, however, what the missionaries did was an attempt to overturn the religious legitimization of Chinese culture and society, and this the Chinese resisted because it looked like a foreign takeover. To this task the missionaries never admitted and thus they were never forthright in the articulation of their cultural and political mission. They saw their mission as a "spiritual" one, but many Chinese saw the Christian mission otherwise, especially when the missionaries received aid from foreign governments, when they resisted learning Chinese, and when they lived life styles estranged from those of the Chinese people. The missionaries never questioned a fundamental flaw in their worldview, the dichotomy between body and spirit inherent in their philosophy and theology.

The Californians seldom reflected upon the cultural and political aspects of their mission. They presumed a naive indefectibility as to the rightness and perdurance of their cause. What was Catholic and Western was good; what was not Catholic was either suspect or evil. Although Benedict XV, Pius XI, and Pius XII sought to establish a Church with a Chinese face and a Chinese spirit, as well as to correct past political and ecclesiastical systemic failures in China, their reforms came

slowly or too late. The Californians resisted the discovery of Christ already in China and thus, like their French Jesuit colleagues, repudiated the mission theology and practice of Matteo Ricci.

The California Jesuits did not, as Michele Ruggieri, S.J., advised become Chinese in order to win the Chinese to Christ. As a group they did not learn the Chinese language and thus did not become students of Chinese culture. Failure to learn the language resulted in ignorance, arrogance, estrangement, and misplaced ministries. Their ministry to American servicemen in China, their use of American gunboats for travel, their frequent association with American Catholic families in Shanghai, the English language program, the "Shanghai Catholic Hour", and the English language monthly, the *Catholic Review*, were all peripheral to their mission. There was little cross-cultural exchange; the Chinese had to come to them where English was the medium of communication. Resistance to acculturation severely curtailed the California China mission.

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For most of their time in China, a sentimental parent-child relationship characterized the attitude of the Californians toward the Chinese. That attitude gradually changed. The Californians projected an image of being always happy in their work. The pictures in *The China Letter* and in *Jesuit Mission* show them smiling as though they were part of some great romantic adventure. They were shown surrounded by babies, smiling young boys or young men. Seldom were they photographed with adults and hardly ever with women. Photographs also pictured the Californians as helpers, always in charge. The Chinese were always needy; and indeed the Chinese were in need, but they were portrayed as waifs who had lost their way and who needed rescue. The Chinese people were portrayed as either

curious or strange, and totally most of the time inscrutable, unreachable "others." The cultural category of difference was seen as something which demanded behavioral modification. What there was of China's greatness came through in photographs which portrayed the great buildings constructed by missionaries. Having given lip-service to China's great culture, civilization, and history, the missionaries proceeded to rebuild China according to the image of the West, if not by France, then by the United States. When the Communists began to take over China, only then did the missionaries change their attitudes toward the Chinese Christians. Only when the Chinese suffered because of their faith and for their faith did the Californians begin to see them as adults, and the longer the Californians suffered as the Chinese suffered, or the Californians saw the Chinese suffering more than they did, only then did the Californians begin to identify with the Chinese as human beings. Mutual suffering eradicated the mystique of the inscrutable, unreachable Chinese other.

The chaos of the times, those misguided aspects of the California mission in China, and the Communist takeover have not curtailed the significant legacies which the Californians left to China, legacies which today have great promise for China's modernization. George H. Dunne, who brilliantly articulated the missiology of Matteo Ricci adapted for contemporary China, left the most important legacy of vision. Francis A. Rouleau left the legacy of scholarship, a legacy which already has begun to expand into other areas at the Institute for Chinese-Western Cultural History at the University of San Francisco. Philip L. Bourret, while only in China for a short time, left the legacy of a need for science and the mass media. Louis J. Dowd left the legacy of working with young people. Charles D. Simons left the legacies of holiness and ministry for farmers, eighty percent of China's population, especially with his adult lay leadership programs.

In addition to these legacies of education, James E. Finnegan and Thomas L. Phillips left the legacy of adapting to Chinese culture with grace and dignity. Edward J. Murphy and Robert H. Dailey left the legacy of close friendship with Chinese students and clergy. Eugene E. Fahy left the legacy of creative leadership; very early Fahy believed that foreign leadership in China must be confined to secondary roles. William

D. Ryan, James E. Thornton, Eugene E. Fahy, Thomas L. Phillips, John W. Clifford, John A. Houle, and Charles J. McCarthy left the legacy of suffering for their religious convictions and thus most closely identified themselves with the Chinese people. George B. Wong, now residing in the United States, for 43 years suffered through many derailments and continued to witness to the legacy of suffering which is now being transformed into hope. With these legacies there is no reason to believe that the California Jesuits once chosen *for* China could not now be chosen *by* China as contemporary China strives to become a modern nation. Those choices will be subject to dialogue and negotiation. With the completion of this study, *Chosen for China*, the California Jesuits possess a usable past upon which to construct a usable future. The indiscretions of the past might well better serve a future mission to China when the deep plots of all have all palled.

Endnotes

1. John King Fairbank, "Assignment for the '70s," *The American Historical Review*, 74 (February 1979), 861-879.
2. cf. publisher M.E. Sharpe's forthcoming (1987) one thousand page volume, *Christianity in China: A Scholar's Guide to Resources in the Libraries and Archives of the United States*.
3. cf. Thomas A. Breslin, *China, American Catholicism, and the Missionary*, University Park and London, 1980, 295. Sue Bradshaw, "Catholic Sisters in China: An Effort to Raise the Status of Women," *Historical Reflections*, 8, (1981), 201-213. Sue Bradshaw, "Religious Women in China: An Understanding of Indigenization," *Catholic Historical Review*, 68 (January, 1982), 28-45. Joan Chatfield, *First Choice: Mission, the Maryknoll Sisters, 1912-1975*, Ph.D. Dissertation 1983, Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, California. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, Volume 44/10, 3089. Robert Carbonneau, C.P., "The Passionists in China, 1921-1929: An Essay in Mission Experience," *Catholic Historical Review*, 66 (July 1980), 393-416. Jacques Langlais, *Les Jesuites du Quebec en Chine (1918-1955)* (Quebec, 1979), 379 pp. Jean-Paul Wiest, "Catholic Mission Theory and Practice: Lessons from the Work of the Paris Foreign Mission Society and Maryknoll in Guangdong and Guangxi Provinces." *Missiology*, 10 (April 1982), 171-184. Cf. Jean-Paul Wiest's study, *The History of Maryknoll in China, 1918-1952*, Armonk, New York, M.E. Sharpe Inc.
4. John A. Coleman, S.J., "Development of Church Social Teaching", Charles E. Curran and Richard A. McCormick, S.J., eds. *Moral Theology No. 5* (New York 1987), 169.
5. cf. Peter Fleming, S.J. and Ismael Zuloaga, S.J. "The Church in China; A New Chapter," *Religion in Communist Lands*, 14 Summer 1986), 124-133.