

BOOK REVIEW

Remembrance, Emulation, Imagination: The Chinese and Chinese American Catholic Ancestor Memorial Service

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Hundreds of volumes have been written on the Chinese Rites Controversy, which shaped the lives of previous generations of missionaries and their Chinese Catholic converts. But Beverly Butcher is the first to write at length in any language about what has happened since 1939, continuing “to trace the Catholic Church’s understanding of and changing attitude toward the Chinese folk tradition of ancestor veneration and the ramifications it had especially for Catholic individuals of Chinese ancestry on the mainland, in Taiwan and in the United States,” (p. 1) into the 1990’s. Her 27-page bibliography lists 10 Chinese prime sources, but these are all brief texts of memorial liturgies, at most five pages each (Appendix III). Palinkas wrote a short article, “Tradition and Change in an Immigrant Chinese Church in California,” which does not seem to focus on Catholics and the deceased. The German original of Luis Gutheinz’ article, “Ancestor Veneration in China?” is only five pages long. This article is “crucial” to Butcher’s dissertation as it “describes in detail the very first ancestor memorial service which was conducted by a member of the Catholic clergy” (p. 12) in 1971. She lists a number of contacts in Taiwan, the U.S. and Hong Kong, none of whom referred her to any long works in any language. I know many of these people, and they know the literature. So *Remembrance* breaks new ground. (For various reasons, nothing has been done to develop such a rite in mainland China (p. 445), and there was little enthusiasm in Hong Kong for this (pp. 451-452), although the Diocesan Liturgical Commission has recently begun to promote this rite for Hong Kong.)

China and the Catholic Church are both blessed and cursed with long histories, so half of this thesis (Chapters 2-6) looks back to the “confrontation of the Western missionary with the native Chinese

on Chinese soil, to the Chinese fear and misunderstanding...of the meaning of Christianity...to the Catholic ambivalence as to how, exactly, to interpret the significance and function of the ancestral and Confucian rituals in Chinese life,” with Butcher taking a special interest in the interaction of “two radically different mindsets, or worldviews”. (p. 1) She brackets this with an opening chapter on the Nestorians in China, and a few pages (Chapter 7) on the period from 1842, the end of the First Opium War, to 1939, when the strict ban against the Chinese Rites was lifted. Most readers of *Tripod* are already familiar with this story, but for those who are not, the first three-fifths of *Remembrance* is a good survey.

Remembrance is worth reading for its last three chapters. Here Butcher puts her training in folklore and folklife to use, interviewing church personnel and people in the pews, as well as attending and taping a number of Catholic ancestor memorial services. She had attended a traditional Chinese funeral in Taiwan years earlier, asking her local friend what all the words and symbols meant. (Appendix IV) It is not enough to gather a few pamphlets and have them translated into English. Even a non-Christian native Chinese had trouble translating an article despite being also fluent in English. (p.13) Words on paper can be ambiguous, even misleading, or, as Jesse Jackson says: “A text without a context is a pretext.” Hence the need to supplement survey letters mailed to the pastors of Chinese American parishes across the U.S. with interviews of some of the estimated 65,000 Chinese and Chinese American Catholics in the States, (Appendices I and II) and with less formal conversations.

But it also took time for the Catholic Church to situate ancestor veneration within a changing society and a changing theology. The rationale given by Propaganda Fide in 1939 for rescinding the prohibitions of 1742 was that ancestral rites in Japan and China had become secular and merely civil, no longer religious. (p. 288) Yet Chapter 8 begins with a Sister reporting that she arrived in Taiwan in 1952 and never heard about the church’s changed position; while converts took it for granted that people worshipped their ancestors, so of course the wooden ancestor tablets and all other non-Christian religious goods had to be tossed out before a catechumen could be baptized. (pp. 289-290) A decade later, other missionaries let the catechumen keep the tablet if they papered over

the two Chinese characters *shen wei*, “place of the spirit”, but incense was still forbidden. (p. 292) Then the Second Vatican Council, 1962-65, led the Church to reevaluate herself as a world church, more willing to welcome the good points of non-Western cultures. In Taiwan, where concern for preserving the Chinese tradition was greatest, this led Cardinal Yu Pin on January 27, 1971, to celebrate the first Catholic ritual incorporating classical Chinese elements in honor of the dead. A table with food and drink, candles and incense, tablets above the table, an invitation and bows - all of these have been part of the celebration of Lunar New Year for millennia, but now this bond between the living and the dead has been reinterpreted in accord with the Catholic teaching on the Communion of the Saints and thanksgiving to God the Creator. Slightly different rites have been adopted since 1971. The symbolism is rich enough, and the danger of misinterpretation real enough, to justify the length of this chapter.

Chapter 9 reports various celebrations of the rite, with slight variations, in Chinese American parishes across the U.S. It has proven attractive to recent immigrants and to American born Chinese. Some of the younger generation are not fluent in Chinese, nor familiar with the symbolism, so the priest and/or the commentator off to the side have to explain the rite. This turns it into an opportunity for preaching, which was never part of the traditional rite, but also draws some non-Chinese who appreciate the message.

Chapter 10, “Conclusion: A Sacred and Universal Ceremony?” admits that the Catholic ancestor ceremony is not universal throughout the Chinese world. As of September 1996, this rite has still not been adopted by the church in China, in part because it might be confused with “feudal superstition” which has made a big comeback among the masses. But in Taiwan, the U.S., and now in Hong Kong it is becoming a regular feature of liturgical life for Chinese Catholics, and even for some Catholics of other ethnic backgrounds. This is possible because “Chinese” family values do not appeal exclusively to Chinese. Butcher is correct in seeing this as a successful example of inculturation, using Catholic liturgy and prayers which are sensitive to Chinese culture and appeal to the Chinese imagination, and which also speak to people of any nation. A universal ceremony? Yes, given some explanation beforehand in the parish bulletin and during the ceremony with good preaching and

reverential celebration. But I am afraid, having read Yang Ni's somewhat bemused "Chinese Ancestor Worship in the USA," (*Tripod*, No. 92, March-April, 1996, pp. 5-12) that mainland Chinese, or anyone else who grew up in a thoroughly secularized culture, may need more than the Chinese Catholic ancestor memorial service to appreciate the solemnity and the continuity between the living and the dead.

The thesis has an index and a sketch of the memorial tablet. If the author ever publishes *Remembrance* as a book, she should put Chinese characters with the Romanization throughout, not just on pp. 392-394, tighten the focus of her conclusion, include a few photos of the tablets and ceremony, list the sequence of events in a "generic" ceremony in Appendix III, and put the results of her survey of thirty-one churches with the questionnaire in Appendix II rather than burying the results on p. 450. Then her work would be even more worth reading. □

