

BOOK REVIEW

Preaching Christ in Late Ming China: The Jesuits' Presentation of Christ from Matteo Ricci to Giulio Aleni.

By Gianni Criveller, PIME. Ricci Institute for Chinese Studies, Variétés Sinologiques, New Series 86, Taipei, Taiwan, 1997. Fondazione Civiltà Bresciana, 440 pp. paper
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In the second century, some non-Christian in Rome sketched a picture on a wall showing a man on his knees before a crucifix. A man with a donkey's head hangs on the cross. The caption reads: "Cornelius worships his god." That graffiti was buried under debris and unearthed in recent times, but it was not the only expression of ridicule of the crucified Son of God. To survive in a hostile Roman Empire, the early church, like other illegal or semi-legal mystery religions, did not preach its entire doctrine to any casual inquirer, but only gradually revealed the saving mysteries to catechumens. Some secrets were not explained until after Baptism. The Roman liturgy retained this memory until Vatican II. The first part, through the sermon, was called the Mass of the Catechumens, because only the baptized had originally been allowed to remain for the Mass of the Faithful. Before Christianity became legal with the Edict of Milan in 313, Christian art employed cryptic and non-offensive symbols such as the fish, pelican and anchor – not the bare cross, let alone a realistic crucifix.

Gianni Criveller begins his study (originally his Ph.D. dissertation for the Pontificia Facoltà Teologica dell'Italia Meridionale) in the year 1492, a good starting point for the beginning of the European conquest of much of the world. The Jesuits, founded in 1537, were shaped both by the Christ-centered spirituality of the Counter-Reformation and by the humanism and science of the Renaissance. Francis Xavier failed to enter Ming China in 1552. Michele Ruggieri and Matteo Ricci succeeded in 1583 dressed as Buddhist monks and able to read Chinese. They soon switched to the robes of Confucian scholars, who also had a humanistic outlook on life and a tradition of self-cultivation. The Jesuits found much in the Confucian texts and morality that could be harmonized with the

Gospel. But they soon saw Buddhism as the most serious rival of Catholicism. Trained in Neo-Scholastic logic and unfamiliar with negative theology, no early missionary (pp. 171, 433), ever came to any accommodation with Buddhism or Daoism. Perhaps a Christian mystic who found God in the silence beyond words and concepts would have understood those worldviews.

Ricci and his successors attracted attention with European mathematics, astronomy, maps, clocks and painting. But the missionaries ultimately made converts through personal contacts. "Two cultures met through the bond of friendship thanks to a few humanistic men. In the beginning this may have come as a surprise to the Jesuits, but then they must simply have felt at home, in a world so distant and yet so close to them" (p. 66). It is good for a historian to say that missionaries came to enjoy being on the other side of the world, a common enough situation in today's global village, but a novelty 400 years ago.

Criveller covers the question of translating Catholic terms into Chinese and the emerging quarrel between Jesuits and Dominicans, a harsh "fight beyond the limits of charity," (p. 19) that led to the long Rites Controversy. These points have been well explained many times before. What is new in this book is a careful exposition of how the Jesuits presented the Catholic faith and in what stages. Fortunately printing presses have long been common in China, and a sizable corpus of Chinese pamphlets and books illustrated with woodcuts are stored in various archives and libraries. Criveller translates sections of these texts, arranging the material in chronological order. Since Giulio Aleni (1582-1649) was the most prolific writer of the China mission, two-thirds of *Preaching Christ in Late Ming China* deals with Aleni, his converts in Fujian, and his enemies. Thus Criveller brings to life a relatively unknown missionary, his Christology and flourishing local Catholic congregations, the dialogue between Ming China and the European Renaissance, "two of the most celebrated civilizations of all time," (p. 438) and the initial inculturation of the Gospel.

Since the first half of the 17th century, accusations have circulated that the Jesuits preached a watered-down faith to the Chinese in order to win converts more easily, specifically, that they hid the Crucifixion "in order not to hurt Chinese sensitivities" (p. xxiii). True, Ricci had a bad experience en route to Beijing in 1600 when an official searched his luggage, found a gory crucifix, and

instantly concluded that it was some kind of voodoo doll to use against the emperor. True, the Jesuits, unlike the Dominicans, did not court persecution by walking through the streets with an uplifted crucifix, shaking it threateningly at the local authorities. Yet, when all the sermons, poems, and woodcuts are examined

...it clearly appears that the person of Jesus Christ was the center of the formation that the Jesuit missionaries offered to the Chinese....Jesus is presented as the Savior of the world and the redeemer of man's sins through the sufferings of His Passion. As a matter of fact, the Passion of Christ is presented as the central event of His life and the purpose of the Incarnation itself. The event of Salvation is almost exclusively centered on the Passion and death of Jesus, while little emphasis is given to the Resurrection and to the glorious Christ. The conclusion is that Christ, and Christ Crucified, was not only not marginalized in the China mission of late Ming, but was at the very core of the spiritual formation of catechumens and Christians. (p. 437)

This conclusion is no longer surprising once we recognize that the Jesuits spoke and wrote to two different audiences. When dialoguing with literati, the initial topics included science, the existence of God, friendship, the moral law, and ways of self-cultivation by examination of conscience and study. Such discussions easily shifted to a *catechism* where Christ is introduced as God incarnate, a miracle worker and great teacher. Often those who heard the missionary were only mildly curious. But for those who expressed sincere interest, the topic would shift to something more profound, the *doctrina Christiana*, a thorough presentation of the Biblical story of sin and redemption, the necessity of conversion and baptism, living according to the Ten Commandments, being nourished by the Eucharist, going to Confession, and being aware of the Four Last Things: death, judgment, heaven and hell. Aleni and his converts strove to adapt this Catholic spiritual formation to the Chinese world view by incorporating stories of miracles and the pains of hell, which have parallels in Chinese folk religion, and by using Chinese faces and stylistic elements when reproducing woodcuts of the life of Christ.

Writing to obtain his Ph.D., Criveller sprinkles his text with theological terms, many in Latin, which are over the head of the average reader. Computer software problems and insufficient time

for editing led to an annoying number of typographical errors in the book. The non-specialist can skip the minor missionaries (ch. 11). As preachers do, Aleni repeated himself over the years, so there is redundancy in chapters. 13-19. But the most interesting chapters deal with the Chinese response to the Gospel, from inquiring Chinese (ch. 20-22), converts (ch. 23) and from those who strongly denounced the “foreign” religion (ch. 24). I used these objections to redemptive suffering by a crucified criminal when I preached on Good Friday this year. The scandal of the cross was not lost on the missionaries’ opponents, while both skeptics and converts raised some unexpected questions about the faith which we “old Catholics” often take for granted.

Did the early Jesuits fit the definition of humanists? Admittedly they had more respect for both European and Chinese secular culture than did the Dominicans, but did their contemporaries see them as humanists? Criveller cites neither words of praise from Catholics, nor grudging admission from Protestant humanists of that period. For all their respect for Confucianism, the Jesuits could not bring themselves to say “Confucius is probably in heaven,” and their Chinese opponents seized on this. Yet Ming intellectuals were puzzled, even appalled, at the limitations of the Jesuit admiration for the Chinese tradition.

This work needs an index and a chronology, but a map would not be necessary. One picture is worth a thousand words, and Criveller’s article in issue 102 of *Tripod* shows how an illustrated second edition of his book would be an improvement. Are there any surviving woodcuts of Aleni, his antagonists, or prominent Fujian Catholics?

(Further information on Father Criveller’s book can be obtained from the Ricci Institute for Chinese Studies, Hsin Hai Road, Sect.1, No.22,3Fl. Taipei 100, Taiwan
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