

Three Symposiums on Christianity in China

By Gianni Criveller

There is tremendous interest all over the world today in Christian mission in China. More and more scholars, fascinated by the topic, are increasingly engaged in researching new aspects of its history. This interest is also reflected in the number of international symposiums held in recent years on the subject.

In this paper I will report on three such conferences, held in 1998, and in which I participated.

I will briefly point out some trends that emerge from the symposiums, held in Belgium, China and Hong Kong.

- These studies are no longer the exclusive interest and monopoly of missionary societies and Church related institutions. The participants today include a large number of young researchers of different backgrounds from inside and outside of China, and from various universities around the world.
- Themes related to Christian mission in China are also discussed within the People's Republic of China, and many Chinese scholars are seeking an objective assessment of the Christian mission.
- Researchers, both inside and outside of China, are increasingly making use of primary sources which often help to reveal incomplete and even unfounded generalizations about the Christian mission.
- More attention is being given to the Chinese reaction to Christianity, especially at popular levels. In this respect, scholars are beginning to consider the complex and important intercultural and theological issues involved.
- The religious specificity of the missionary enterprise is now highly valued, and proper attention is, at last, being given to the incredibly large number of catechetical booklets, sometimes dismissed as second class literature. These writings reveal the enormous effort made by missionaries and devoted converts to formulate Christian doctrines in Chinese terms.

The abundant and diligent research of these various groups of scholars will help ordinary people, intellectuals, and those in authority to come to a fairer understanding of Christianity in China.

1. A report on the VIth International Symposium of the Verbiest Foundation on Christianity and China Leuven, Belgium, 1-4 September 1998

The Leuven (Belgium)-based Ferdinand Verbiest Foundation is well known in the academic world for its series of international symposiums on the history of Christianity in China. These symposiums assemble important researchers in the field from several countries in the world, as well as scholars from Mainland China who are especially encouraged to take an active role in this mission study. The published proceedings that usually follow the symposiums are remarkable for their scholarly caliber.

The Belgian missionary Philippe Couplet S.J. (1623-1693) was the subject of the first conference held in September 1986. Other symposiums followed every two-three years, whose themes were Ferdinand Verbiest (1988), Mission in China in Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries (1990), Mongolian Mission (1993), Low Countries and China (1995), and Christian Mission in the Qing Dynasty (1998).

About 50 scholars from 13 countries gathered for the VIth symposium, at the Jesuit residence of Leuven-Heverlee. The program included more than 30 lectures. The wide range of topics at this symposium makes it difficult to identify a single theme.

Father Jean Charbonnier, in his report in *Zhonglian* (October 1998), commented on the quality, honesty and objectivity of the papers offered by some Chinese scholars, especially when they work with original sources. Han Qi (Chinese Academy of Sciences, Institute of History of Natural Sciences) investigated the role played by Chinese Christian astronomers at the Astronomical Bureau, in defending and propagating Christianity in China. Han Qi's wife Wu Min (researcher in Paris) described the grassroots reaction to the prohibition of the Chinese rites.

Michael Mi Chengfeng (People's University of China) described an anti-Christian reaction in the post-Boxer period in Inner Mongolia. Xu Haisong (Hangzhou) pointed out some reactions to the

work of Verbiest, and argued against the widely held assumption that the Jesuits' influence on Chinese literati ceased in early and middle Qing. Gianni Criveller (Holy Spirit Study Center, Hong Kong) spoke of Aleni's dialogues with the Chinese and the reasons for the long estrangement between Christianity and China. R.G. Tiedemann (London) gave a sociological profile of Chinese Christians in North China in late Qing. Nicolas Standaert (Dean of the Department of Sinology at Leuven University), with his usual scholarship, was once again able to offer new valuable perspectives. He dismissed the critical widely accepted opinion that the Jesuits' mission was limited to the Chinese elite, and demonstrated that simple, poor and illiterate people were, by far, the largest group of Christians. Veteran China Church historians Claudia Von Collani (Würzburg University, Germany) and John W. Witek (Georgetown University, USA) spoke on the question of marriage in the China mission and Verbiest's booklet on sacramental penance (Gaoji yuanyi).

The papers on Chinese Christians are also worth mentioning. Miguel San Roman (Taiwan) explained Gregory Luo Wenzao, O.P.'s unique role as the very first Chinese bishop (17th century). Jessie G. Lutz presented a profile of Chinese Protestant evangelists in the mid-nineteenth century.

A number of papers explored the spread of Christianity in specific local situations, as in Inner Mongolia (Francoise Aubin), Taiwan (Shih Li-lan, Ku Wei-ying and An M.F. Heylen), Henan (A. Lazzarotto on Bishop Joseph Tacconi, 1883-1942), Gansu (Koen De Ridder), Yunan (Zhang Zaiyun), among the Hakka people (Jean Paul Wiest).

Fr. Jerome Heyndrickx, the founder and director of the Verbiest Foundation, expressed satisfaction with the outcome of the conference. He mentioned that the presence of so many scholars of different backgrounds, and the large attendance of young researchers, augured favorably for the future of China Christian mission studies.

Fr. Heyndrickx mentioned that future symposiums would focus on the religious, theological and missiological aspects of the history of Christianity in China. He added that the Verbiest Foundation plans to republish *Four Centuries of Catechetics in China* by Johannes Jennes, CICM, a valuable historical survey of the catechetical work in the China Catholic mission, from the 16th century to 1940. This book will be the thematic reference-point for the next symposium, planned for the year 2001.

International Symposium on Chinese and Western Cultural Communication (1500-1840)

Hangzhou, China, 25-28 November 1998

Organized by

Department of History, Zhejiang University

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About 50 Chinese scholars from several provinces of China, as well as six foreign scholars from the United States, Germany, France, Holland and Italy participated in an International Symposium on Chinese and Western Cultural Communication (1500-1840), in Hangzhou, 25-28 November 1998. Two-thirds of the papers presented dealt with Christian mission, especially the Catholic mission.

In recent years, Christian studies have developed significantly in China and a number of universities and academic institutions there have established Christianity Research Centers. These centers are publishing several periodicals and scholarly books, devoted to Christian themes. These publications have met with relative success, as evidenced by *Religion and Culture* edited by the Christianity Research Center of Zhejiang University and published by the Beijing Oriental Publishing House. The series, *Christian Classics*, translated by the Institute of Sino-Christian Studies in Hong Kong, caters to a segment of the Chinese intellectual community. The translated version of *Being Christian* by Hans Küng sold 10,000 copies within six months.

The Hangzhou symposium, although not directly connected with these centers, reveals the importance of the subject of Christian mission. It also demonstrates that Chinese and foreign scholars have to work together, in an interdisciplinary way, in order to have a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics involved in the Catholic Mission of Late Ming and Qing. Western scholars are moving away from a merely apologetic approach, and giving more and more attention to the Chinese reaction to Christianity. In the same way, Chinese scholars are starting to consider the importance

of a thorough knowledge of the specific scientific, cultural, religious, philosophical and theological background of the missionaries.

Hangzhou's symposium offered foreign scholars considerable material for understanding the Christian mission from a Chinese point of view. The collaboration of Chinese scholars is essential for assessing the impact of Christianity on late Ming and Qing China and for understanding: how Christian thought interacted with Chinese imperial culture and other practical aspects of the political situation; how Christian missionaries and converts interacted with the cultural and religious environment, the co-existence of several different currents such as Neo-Confucianism, Taoism, various schools of Buddhism, and popular and traditional religiosity; and the reception of Christianity at the grassroots level. These matters, found on the agenda of recent studies on Christian mission, can only be addressed by looking at Chinese and Western sources, in partnership with scholars from different backgrounds and expertise, who share the same spirit of collaboration and desire for truth.

Chinese scholars openly recognized, at the conclusion of the symposium, how important it is for them to understand the theological mentality of the missionaries and their spirituality, their specific humanistic and scientific training in European colleges, and their almost exclusive role in introducing China to the West. They also acknowledged that the missionaries, since the very first years of the Jesuits' mission, worked not only with the imperial elite, but also and especially among ordinary Chinese in the provinces.

A specific problem emerges concerning the sources, especially the incredibly huge amount of writing by the missionaries, converts and opponents of Christianity. In order to avoid the repetition of commonplace beliefs, often denied by recent discoveries and studies, and the manipulation of the historical events, scholars must have access to the original sources. This simple task may be difficult for a number of reasons. Zhang Xiping, who presented a fine paper on the important but almost unknown *Doctrina Christiana* (*Tianzhujiao yaoli* 1605) by Matteo Ricci, went as far as Rome to collect the material he needed.

The Hangzhou International Symposium was not the first one of its kind to be held in China, and hopefully, it will not be the last. Other such occasions can help the intellectual world in and

outside China to benefit from today's fascinating research on the encounter between China and Christianity.

3. Report on Confucian-Christian Dialogue's Conference Hong Kong, 21-23 December 1998

Recent developments on Confucian-Christian dialogue

During the Cultural Revolution, Confucianism was rejected as feudalistic thought. In the early seventies, criticizing Confucius was a recurrent theme in political campaigns (although the real political target, behind the name of Confucius, was Zhou Enlai).

However, Confucianism has made a strong come back in the last 20 years in Mainland China. Mainland scholars are giving particular attention to Confucianism in relation to the Modernization of China. To achieve its modernization, China has to interact successfully with the Western world and culture.

In Hong Kong, Taiwan and the Chinese Diaspora, the dialogue between Confucianism and Christianity has been on-going. Not surprisingly, Confucian-Christian dialogue has developed significantly and in particular, theologically, in Hong Kong in the last decades. (Cf. the role of the Chinese University of Hong Kong.) The review *Ching Feng* plays a pivotal role by publishing a large number of studies on the subject. Peter K.H. Lee, among others, seems to be a leading figure in offering theological reflections on this dialogue. The Holy Spirit Study Centre's review *Tripod* also often features articles and recently devoted whole issues on the subject (March-April 1995, May-June 1998).

From a theological point of view, the dialogue between Confucian scholars and Christian theologians focuses mainly on: (1) the theory of human nature as good and the doctrine of original sin, (2) immanence and transcendence, (3) Confucian Heaven and Christian God, (3) Jesus as Savior and salvation by one's own efforts (the question of self-realization), (4) Jesus and Confucius, (5) Confucian concept of *Ren* and the Christian concept of Love, (6) the relationship between morality and religion, (7) the inculturation of Christianity in China.

In Confucian-Christian dialogue, the question whether Confucianism is a religion is central and often debated. The current trend in Confucian studies affirms the religious dimension of

Confucianism, although the meaning of Confucian religiosity is still not well defined. Liu Shu-hsien affirms that Confucianism is humanism which opens to a religious dimension (immanent transcendence). Julia Ching defines Confucianism as religious humanism.

Humanity and Civilization in the 21st Century

A series of important international symposiums, wherein the leading scholars in the field gather to exchange and explore new perspectives, has advanced the study of Confucian thought and Christian theology. The First International Confucian-Christian Conference was held in Hong Kong from 8 to 18 June 1988. The Second and Third Conferences were held in the United States, Berkeley, California and Boston, Massachusetts (1994). The Fourth International Conference on "Confucian-Christian Dialogue" took place in Hong Kong, at the Chinese University, on 21-23 December 1998. It was organized by the Centre for the Study of Religion and Chinese Society, Chung Chi College and co-sponsored by other Institutions within the same university. The Institute of Missiology (Missio), Germany, provided financial support.

The symposium entitled "Humanity and Civilization in the 21st Century" included some 30 speeches and considerable time for discussion. The participation reached its peak on the first day with about 60 attendees. The large groups of Mainland scholars, who gave several lectures (6) and often intervened during the discussions, made this symposium considerably different from previous ones. Putonghua and not English was the principal language used. This symposium illustrates Hong Kong's privileged place as an intellectual bridge to and from China.

A Confucian-Christian agenda for the 21st century

The title of this symposium was both interesting and challenging. Some papers, especially in the first part of the symposium, in focusing on traditional issues in Confucian-Christian dialogue, or on specific episodes of comparative Confucian-Christian studies, failed to address the question of future perspectives for the New Millenium, as required by the theme. Nevertheless, the abundant material offered during the three days of intensive work provides an agenda for a future dialogue.

1. The promotion of a holistic person cultivation, which includes the spiritual dimension. Christian and Confucian humanism have much to share and to offer to humanity in a holistic vision of human life. Several papers on the theme of humanism (Li Tu) and anthropology (Kwok Hung-biu), on the concept of personhood (Edwin C.W. Hui) and human nature (Yang Shi), and also on the relation between individual and community (Tang Sui-kong), are arguably major topics to be confronted by Asian and Western traditions. Lauren Pfister fascinatingly reconsidered the significance of Confucius's "knowing the heavenly decree" and Jesus' "beatitudes" as a topic for "inter-religious" dialogue between Confucian and Christian traditions for the 21st century. Speakers such as Wan Tai-wai, Archie C.C. Lee and Peter K.H. Lee, who presented a paper on Jesus as Wisdom with Chinese features, explored the spiritual ground of a holistic Confucian-Christian vision of the human being.

2. In the same line, on the necessity of holistic person cultivation, special attention was given to the promotion of a culture of equal rights and partnership between women and men. The feminist and gender issue, not typical in a Confucian discussion, was treated by Man Kit-wah and Anne W.I. Ng Greer. The first stressed the notion of eco-feminism, which is the idea that the liberation of women cannot be achieved in isolation from the larger struggle for the preservation of life on this planet. Ecology, as we will see below, is high on the agenda of the development of Confucian thought for the next millenium. Anne Ng's stimulating theological paper pointed out that gender justice is still far from being achieved in both Christianity and Confucianism.

3. One issue in which Christianity and Confucianism can work together is to attempt the definition of a suitable global ethic (Liu Shu-hian). This project, pursued by several world institutes and intellectuals (including the theologian Hans Küng), has several implications, including political, economical, ethic, religious and theological.

4. The promotion of a culture of non-violence, respect for life and respect for the environment are some of the major implications of a Confucian-Christian global ethic agenda. A new consciousness of the shared destiny of nature and humanity (Choong Chee-pang) suggests themes as moral ecology (Chen Lai) and ecological theology (Lai Pan-chiu). Western scholars usually refer to

Taoist and Buddhist thought when looking for Chinese intellectual sources for environmental issues. Before the contemporary Chinese economical development and its heavy environmental-ethical cost, Confucian thought is being challenged to offer an adequate response (Zhu Fa-zhen).



Foreign and Chinese scholars at the International Symposium on Chinese and Western Cultural Communications (1500-1840), held at Zhejiang University, Hangzhou, China.