

Christianity's First Arrival in China

Gianni Criveller

New discoveries and a new interpretation of the first arrival of Christianity in China have recently aroused public interest. In Hong Kong the *South China Morning Post* devoted two major feature articles to the subject: *China's Christian Past* (SCMP, Nov. 3, 2000), and *Crossroads of Faith* (Feb. 27, 2001). In Italy the young scholar Matteo Nicolini Zani has made a new translation of the Xi'an Stele, complete with a long introduction and extensive notes and comments (Bose, 2001). Nicolas Standaert, one of the best scholars of the history of the Catholic Church in China, has devoted 110 pages of his *Handbook of Christianity in China, Volume One, 635-1800* (Brill, Leiden Boston, Koln, 2001) to the Christianity of the Tang (618-907) and the Yuan (1277-1368) Dynasties. Martin Palmer, a British scholar and director of the Alliance of Religions and Conservation, offers a remarkable study. His study, entitled *The Jesus Sutras*, begins with the account of the exciting discovery of a more than 1300 year-old pagoda with a Christian past. The pagoda, formerly known as Da Qin, is located near Xi'an, Shaanxi Province in northwestern China, exactly where the Christian adventure began in China in 635 AD.



An important new book

Palmer has written an important book, for historiography of Christianity in China. I am delighted to have had the opportunity to read and to review this book, even before its publication. I am not an expert in the early presence of Christianity in China, however since the beginning of my own research on the history of

Christianity in China, I have felt the need for a book such as *The Jesus Sutras*. Most of the books on Chinese Christianity devote the initial chapter or paragraphs to Nestorianism, including, I have to admit, my own *Preaching Christ in Late Ming China*, (Taipei, 1997). However the widespread identification of early Chinese Christianity with Nestorianism never seems quite right to me.

Two scholars, Yves Raguin SJ and Sergio Ticozzi, PIME were particularly instrumental in bringing home to me the complexity and the attraction of early Chinese Christianity. In our conversations they pointed out that the mutual interaction between Christianity and Buddhism had generally been underestimated and overlooked. Equally overlooked, they maintained, had been the key role of Central Asian countries in propagating the Christian faith in China's vast land. It now appears that the description of the initial presence of Christianity in China as Nestorianism was at best reductive.

Chinese Christianity was not just an appendix of the eastward expansion of Nestorianism, after that it was defeated in the West. Things are much more complex and fascinating, as the author of *The Jesus Sutras* has illustrated. On various occasions I myself have defined the missionaries in China of the Tang dynasty as "Syriac missionaries." Nicolini Zani in the introduction to his translation of the Xi'an stele, proposes the definition of Syriac Oriental church. To his great credit, Palmer has identified the origin of the Chinese Christianity as the "Church of the East." He clarifies the whole notion of the Church of the East. Such a notion should not be reduced to our contemporary common definition which refers either to the ancient Eastern rites in communion with the Roman Catholic Church (such as Maronite, Caldean, Malabar etc...) or, more generally, to the Orthodox Churches.

The Church of the East

Palmer describes the Church of the East in chapter four of his book. The story of that church is related to the rise of the Sasanian Empire in the early 3rd century AD, an empire that stretched from present-day Iraq to Pakistan.

The Sasanians of Zoroastrian faith fiercely persecuted the Christians in their territory (340-450). The Christians were under constant suspicion of political betrayal of their endangered empire

because of their religious ties with the ancient sees of Rome, Constantinople and Antioch. However, the Persian empire was becoming increasingly Christian, until the middle 7th century, when the Arab conquerors introduced Islam. Outstanding Christian communities and schools of theology developed, especially in Edessa, which for political advantage, Emperor Zeno closed in 489. According to the author "from this date onward, the Church of the East was cut off from the Churches of the West." The Church of the West, including those of the Middle East, "dismissively labeled the Church of the East as Nestorian, and therefore heretical and not really a Church."

The Church of the East however continued its life and missionary expansion, with its own characteristics, schools (such as the one in the Persian city of Nisibis) and theologians (such as Barsumas and Narsai). Between the 4th and 8th centuries AD, the Church of the East was very widespread and active among a large range of cultures in Central Asia, India, Sri Lanka and Afghanistan. Important was the impact on the Indo-Greek culture, a mixed of Greek and Buddhist elements, a legacy of Alexander the Great's conquests which reached to present day Afghanistan (326 BC).

These disparate and distant Christian communities were only loosely connected; therefore, the term the "Church of the East" describes a complex and diversified reality rather than a well-organized institution. It was against this background, in the year 635, that the first official and documented arrival of Christianity in China took place. Emperor Taizong (627-649) of the Tang dynasty in Chang'an, the then capital city of China, near the present-day city of Xi'an, received the delegation from Baghdad, headed by a Persian bishop by the Chinese name of Alopen. The mission was well planned and expected. The emperor proclaimed his acceptance and favor toward the new teaching by an imperial edict.

The source and locus of the original missionary enterprise in China was the Persian Church. This Church dates from earliest Christian times, probably within a few decades of Jesus' death. By the 2nd century it was already well established. The Church made extensive use of a popular book, which was a synopsis of the gospel entitled the *Didascalia Apostolorum (The Teaching of the Apostles)*. Titian, (c110-180), the author, wrote his popular booklet long before the definition of the Canon of the New Testament (382). In

fact, in Persia, Tatian's Gospel was more popular than the Four Gospels. It was one of the books brought to China, which was to inspire the writing of *The Jesus Sutras*.

In writing about the apostolic origin of the Church of the East, Palmer says that the Thomastic Christians bore witness to the belief that St. Thomas preached in India and also in China. A book on the lives of the Apostles published in 1713 attests that Thomas preached in Persia, Ethiopia, India, East Indies and China. The author considers these accounts to be mostly legendary, but he also admits that they have developed around historical events. Moreover, "it seems that the oral tradition may be accurate. In fact, more and more details of the "Acts of Thomas" are being proved to be historically true." According to Prof. Xie Bizhen of Teacher's University of Fujian, Fuzhou, the preaching of Thomas in China was dismissed as legend because of a supposed lack of communications routes. In fact, Xie contends, those routes were already in existence in the first century; therefore, the presence of Thomas in China cannot be excluded on the basis of that assumption.

Another interesting topic touched upon by Palmer is the Church in Tibet. It is likely that Christianity arrived in Tibet (which was larger at the time than at present) in around 549 AD. This was the time of the conversion to Christianity of the White Huns, a much feared Central Asian nomadic tribe. Their conversion remains a mystery; however, a bishop was sent to them from Baghdad, and they remained a loyal Christian community for centuries.

Tibet in the 6th to 8th century AD was Shamanic, since "Buddhism only began to enter into Tibet late in the 8th century. For hundreds of years Buddhism in Tibet was limited to the elite classes. ... A strong Church existed in Tibet by the 8th century. Patriarch Timothy I (727-823 AD), head of the Church of the East, wrote from Baghdad in c. 794 of the need to appoint another bishop for the Tibetans, and in an earlier letter of 782 he mentioned the Tibetans as one of the significant Christian communities of the Church. The Church's bishopric is assumed to have been in Lhasa where it is likely to have been active as late as the 13th century, prior to the popular extension of Buddhism." Crosses and Christian inscriptions have been found in an area (Ladakh) that was once part

of Tibet, and this bears testimony to the power and influence of Christianity in that area.

According to Palmer, "the extent, size and diversity of the Church of the East is perhaps one of the best kept secrets of Christianity. Because the West has traditionally dismissed the Church of the East as "Nestorian" and therefore heretical, Western Christians have tended to ignore this once mighty Church. At its peak in the 8th century it far outstripped the Church of the West in size, scale, and range of cultures within which it operated. Unlike many of the missions of the West... the Church of the East was dealing with ancient, highly literate civilized cultures and people. ... It was a remarkably different world to the world of the West and it produced remarkably different churches and forms of Christianity."

The Stone Stele

In 1623 in Zhouzhi, near Xi'an, the capital city of Shaanxi, men digging the foundation for a new construction discovered a magnificent stele. The people could not understand the real meaning of the characters, let alone the mysterious language that turned out to be Syriac. The literate Zhang Gengyu, who 18 years earlier had gotten to know Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) in Beijing, was of the opinion that only the Jesuit missionaries could unveil the secret of that monument. A copy of the inscription was sent to his friend Li Zhizao (1565-1630), one of the three most prominent Christian scholars in China. Doctor Leo Li (as the Jesuits called him) showed the document to Nicholas Trigault (1577-1628), Manoel Dias the Younger (1574-1659) and Giulio Aleni (1582-1649). The last two published the inscription, with explanations, in 1644 in Hangzhou. Giulio Aleni, in his numerous dialogues with Chinese intellectuals, often mentioned the spectacular discovery of the stele of Xi'an as concrete evidence of an ancient presence of Christianity in China. That evidence would testify to the truth of the Christian faith, in a culture where antiquity would support a claim of truth, while novelty would be equated with heterodoxy. With their profound sense of history, many Chinese were not inclined to attribute importance to anything which had no roots in their past; therefore, the teaching of the Jesuit missionaries was dismissed as

having no roots in Chinese history. But now Christianity could claim a remarkable record of 1000 years on Chinese soil.

The text of the Stele (written in 781 AD by the Persian monk Adam Jingjing and engraved by Lu Xiuyan) narrates the story of the arrival of Alopen and his group, and the subsequent development of Christianity in China. The content of the text is quite complex, and presents, besides important historical information, many relevant theological and doctrinal aspects, especially in the first part. We are in the presence of a remarkable and fine work of inculturation in a cultural context so different from the Persian culture, which was influenced by Semitic and Greek-Latin elements. In China the evangelical message was expressed employing terms and concepts taken from Taoism and Buddhism.

The following is the text of the Emperor's decree following his meeting with Alopen.

The Way does not have a common name and the sacred does not have a common form. Proclaim the teachings everywhere for the salvation of the people. Alopen, the man of great virtue from the Da Qin Empire, came from a far land and arrived at the capital to present the teachings and images of his religion. His message is mysterious and wonderful beyond our understanding. The teachings tell us about the origin of things and how they were created and nourished. The message is lucid and clear; the teachings will benefit all; and they shall be practiced throughout the land.

The Christian life is described in the following interesting passage.

To penetrate the mysteries, to bless with a good conscience, to be great and yet empty, to return to stillness and be forgiving, to be compassionate and to deliver all people, to do good deeds and help people reach the other shore—these are the great benefits of our path of cultivation. To calm people in stormy times, to help them understand the nature of things, to maintain purity, to nourish all things, to respect all life, and to answer the needs of those whose belief comes from the heart—these are the services the Religion of Light can offer.

The Jesus sutras

Besides the Xi'an stele, Palmer's book offers the translation of eight other documents found in the past century. The majority of these writings were discovered at the beginning of 20th century in Dunhuang, Gansu Province. We can thank a Frenchman, Paul Pelliot, and a handful of Japanese scholars, especially Yoshiro Saeki, for this. Fearing invasion by Tibetan tribes invasion, some time prior to 1005 AD, the surviving Christians joined the Buddhists and Manicheans in hiding precious texts in caves around the town of Dunhuang.

These documents, together with the Stele of Xi'an, form the so called "*corpus nestorianum sinicum*," a Christian literature in Chinese language, an expression of the Church of the East that had expanded into China at the time of Tang Dynasty (7th to 9th centuries). These documents were composed directly in Chinese, or translated from Syriac or Sogdian, but they were always adapted to the Chinese context of the time. There were certainly more Christian books in Chinese than these few although we do not know whether a plan to translate 35 books in Chinese was ever completed. The Christian missionaries brought more than 530 Christian books into China with them.

The '*corpus*' has been translated in the principal languages. However Palmer was not satisfied with the English translations published in 1930 and 1937. According to him, they were the work of Christian scholars who had little knowledge of the Chinese Classics. He thinks that experts on Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism and Chinese history should have worked together on a new translation which would have done justice to the complexity of the texts.

1. First sutra: *The Sutra of the Teaching of the World Honored One* (translated in 641). This sutra has as its base the Tatian' *Diatessaron*. This document is remarkable as it represents the first known life of Jesus written in Chinese, and not surprisingly, it contains only a few typically Chinese elements.

2. Second sutra: *The Sutra on Cause, Effect and Salvation* (translated in the 640s). According to Palmer this sutra could well be the Indo-Greek Christian version of the Indo-Greek Buddhist sutra called the Milindapanha. *The Sutra on Cause, Effect and Salvation* is an extraordinary document revealing the interaction

between Buddhism and Christianity, not only in China, but first of all in the old Indo-Greek areas of North India and Afghanistan. In this sutra, according to Palmer, "Jesus is rather charmingly described as 'The Visitor', who offers his salvific powers as a way of breaking the cycle of cause and effect. (...) In their dialogue with the Buddhists in the old Indo-Greek kingdoms, the Christians had moved radically in their thinking from classical Western non-reincarnational beliefs to seeing Jesus as the solution to the existential issues of rebirth and karma. ... It is a most extraordinary document...for what it reveals of an early dialogue between Christianity and Buddhism, in lands far from China, Afghanistan and the northern areas of India and Pakistan today."

3. Third sutra: *Sutra on Origins*. For the first time, the translator employs a Taoist terminology, including the notion of *wu-wei* (non-action). It is a simple book, which tries to answer questions, perhaps posed by a critical Emperor.

4. Fourth sutra: *The Sutra of Jesus Christ*. This is a compilation from various texts translated within the first decade of the arrival of the missionaries. It reveals some familiarity with Chinese thought, such as the Confucian virtue of filial piety etc... But what is most striking in that sutra is that it seems to bear Tibetan influence which can be proved by the description of the spirit of God as the Wind. The only theory on the creative force of Winds in human life comes from Tibet (the influence of Bon religion).

The anthology also includes the Ten Commandments: the fourth and fifth command neither harming nor killing not only any human being, but all living creatures. At this point Palmer adds the following reflection. "The Church of the East in China was known for its treatment of men and women as equal, and for not owning slaves. In contrast, Buddhist monasteries in China ran on slave labor. When monasteries were suppressed in the great persecution of 845 in China, over 150,000 slaves, property of the Buddhist monasteries, were released. The Buddhists ran their monasteries on the backs of slavery on a huge scale. As such they were not different from the secular powers which likewise functioned on the back of slaves. But Christians were renowned for the fact that they had no slaves and would not allow slavery. When their monasteries were closed and there thousands of monks were turned out, no

slaves were listed, for they had none. The Church in China was also known for caring for all life and being vegetarian. This is explicitly mentioned in the text of the Stone of the Church of the East.” Palmer speculates about the origin of such strict vegetarian rules, which might be related to contacts with Indian Vaishnavism, which also taught strict vegetarianism. In any case, the China Church was “the only officially vegetarian branch of the Christian Church ever to have existed.”

5. Fifth sutra: *Taking Refuge in the Trinity* was written in 720 AD, only eighty years after the arrival of the Christians. It is the first of the liturgical sutras, and shows a remarkable advance in the understanding and adoption of Chinese culture and language. Palmer comments that “in comparison with the centuries that Buddhism needed to develop a truly indigenous theology and terminology, Christianity’s achievement is remarkable.”

6. Sixth sutra: *Let us Praise* (or *The Sutra on the Dharma Kings and Sacred Sutras*). The sutra, together with the following two sutras is, according to Palmer, almost certainly the work of Qing Qing, a Chinese monk and priest from Da Qin Monastery, mentioned also in the Stone of the Church of the East (Xi’an stele). Together with Alopen he is the most outstanding figure in the life of the Chinese Church. According to Palmer “his ability to interpret the incarnation in a Chinese world is perhaps the highest point of missionary movement of the entire Church of the East.” From the text of this sutra we learn that the majority (530) of the Christian books in China were in Syriac, while there were only 34 Christian books in Chinese.

7. Seventh sutra: *The Sutra on Returning to your Original Nature*. According to Palmer this is the most beautiful among the Jesus sutras, “a fusion of uniquely Christian imagery, Taoist teaching and Buddhist philosophy.” An outstanding example is the “Four Essential Laws of the Dharma.” “The first is no wanting... This is the Law of No Desire. The second is no doing... So walk the Way of No Action. The third is no piousness... This is the Way of No Virtue. The fourth is no absolute... This is No Truth.”

8. Eighth sutra: *Christian Liturgy in Praise of the Three Sacred Powers*. This is either a translation of the hymn *Gloria in Excelsis*, or an original Chinese composition, inspired by that hymn.

The last four sutras “were found carefully hidden and preserved in caves sealed in the 11th century. They seem to have formed a Prayer Book or a Prayer Collection and give us a sense of how these Chinese Christians worshipped.”

The fall of a Christian community

The Christian Church was expanding successfully both in quantity and quality in 7th and 8th century China. A brief persecution occurred in 698, but the following emperors Daozong (713-756), Suzong (756-762) and Daizong (763-779) supported the Church.

In the 9th century, however, things started to go wrong. Christianity, according to Palmer, was caught in the reaction of Confucian bureaucracy and Taoist hierarchy against the growing power of Buddhism, rich in lands, monasteries and shrines, gold, goods, slaves, devoted activists and hundreds of thousands of monks and nuns. From 841 onwards, in order to appropriate its possessions, the imperial court turned against Buddhism, described it as “this insignificant Western religion.” As many as 260,000 monks and nuns were forced to return to normal life, and 4,600 temples and 40,000 shrines were ordered to be destroyed. The 3000 Christian and Zoroastrian monks suffered the same fate. Buddhism was later again allowed to function, but it had suffered a massive blow. According to Palmer, Buddhism never fully recovered its intellectual power. When Matteo Ricci entered China in 1583, Buddhism was still looked down upon by the Confucian class. For the much smaller Christian Church the persecution of 841 was mortal. According to an eyewitness in the late 900s, “Christianity was extinct in China; the native Christians had perished in one way or another; their church had been destroyed.”

However, there is evidence, including the placing of Christian documents in Dunhuang caves that a remnant of the Chinese Church survived during the centuries around the turn of the first millennium. These communities, located along the Silk Road, interacted with Buddhists, Zoroastrians, Manichaens, Taoists, shamans, practitioners of the Bon religion etc... According to Palmer it is here that one of the most extraordinary episodes of religious contamination may have taken place. The Indian male Buddhist Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara of the Lotus Sutra became

Kuan Yin, the Goddess of Mercy, the most widely worshipped deity in China. "This transformation may well be due to the influence of the Christians of the Church of the East and their statues of Mary." The statues of Mary, present in China at the time of such transformation were the only possible source of influence on the otherwise female-less Buddhist cosmology of China.

One more chapter should be written to complete the history of the Church of the East in China: the rise of the Yuan dynasty. The Mongolian conquistador Genghis Khan unified Mongolian tribes, which were Christians or predominantly Christians. His wife, a princess from the Keraites, was also Christian. The Emperor of China, Kublai Khan (1260-1294), grandchild of Ghengis Khan, was the son of a devout Christian princess, Sorkaktani. These circumstances, together with the successful arrival (1294) of the first Roman Catholic missionaries in China, explicitly sent by the Roman Holy See brought a final blow to the Church of the East in China. When the foreign Yuan were driven from the throne of the Dragon, and the Ming (1368-1644) restored a Chinese dynasty, all foreign elements were once again eliminated.

Final reflections

1. Very often scholars compare the assumed failure of Christianity with the success of Buddhism in China. The lack of inculturation is often imputed for this supposed failure. But Christianity, which had achieved a remarkable level of inculturation and adaptation in Tang dynasty, suffered persecution along with Buddhism. I would suggest that sometimes the disappearance of Christian communities might not have been caused by failures of Christianity's own making, but rather by the overwhelming force of persecution. Theologically speaking, we would say by the power of evil. The hostility of the political powers often plays a destructive role within peaceful and remarkable religious experiences. The evil of absolute power and the evil of religious persecution that tragically recur along the course of history can never be minimized.

2. If Christianity during the Tang dynasty was less adapted to the Buddhist and Taoist milieu and its differences from those religions highly evident, could it more likely have survived the persecution and better stood the test of time? It is impossible to answer this question, although history shows how sometimes those

who experience more radical, religious shift are more apt to resist persecution and assimilation.

3. The assumption that Buddhism was inculturated and Christianity was not seems to be inaccurate and misleading. New approaches are needed to understand the development of these religions in China, and Palmer's book offers valuable information and clues.

4. Some have suggested that, since early Chinese Christianity disappeared, the religious experience might not have been sufficiently authentic or genuine, or worthwhile. First of all we have to consider that the development of the Church of the East in China lasted for many centuries, and produced remarkable documents. Second, the disappearance under unfortunate and adverse historical circumstances does not diminish the dignity and the validity of that specific religious and Christian experience. In fact, such a situation is not unusual in the Church. Throughout the two thousand years of its existence, the Church has often experienced the lamentable passage of peoples and nations from the Christian faith to other beliefs. Christian communities founded by Paul himself, some of the Churches of the Fathers or great saints like Augustine, have almost disappeared. Syria was the first and a glorious Christian nation, which sent missionaries to the entire East, and as far as China, but the number of Christians in Syria today is drastically reduced. The diminishing or the disappearance of Christianity in one place does not mean a crisis of Christianity as such, or a crisis of its doctrine, and especially it does not undermine the value and the religious sincerity of those believers.

5. Periodically, we still have to read the accounts of "experts," blinded by ideological prejudices, who claim that Christianity entered China by force in the 19th century. One hopes that the misconceptions about the arrival of Christianity in China will soon come to an end, and that history will be better understood as a complex phenomenon to be understood, rather than something to be judged ideologically according to political correctness.

6. I have great admiration and respect for the work of Martin Palmer, for his scholarship in many different disciplines, including theology. However, as a Catholic theologian I am not satisfied with the description of the Western and Roman Church simply as juridical, nor am I comfortable with the idea that the development

of the hierarchical dimension of the Catholic Church is seen almost as an unfortunate historical development.

It seems to me too simplistic and unjust to impute to Saint Augustine the supposedly pessimistic approach to human life and to the world found in Western philosophy and theology, especially when this is artificially opposed to the positive, harmonious and tolerant vision of Eastern philosophies and religions. Another reservation I have about Palmer's theological approach regards his opinion that any Christological interpretation is valid and acceptable, as long as it is adapted to the Chinese cultural milieu, with little concern for doctrinal contents offered by the New Testament and the tradition of the Church.

But again, these last critical points do not undermine the important contribution made by Martin Palmer to the fascinating story of Christianity in China.

*Merry Christmas
And
A Happy New Year*

From the Staff of the Holy Spirit Study Centre

