

# *Three International Symposiums on China and Christianity*

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*Gianni Criveller*

**M**acao, Taiwan and Hong Kong recently hosted three important international symposiums on Christianity and China.

## **1. Macao: Symposium on Religion and Culture**

On November 28-29, 2002, the newly established (2001) Macao Ricci Institute, in collaboration with the Instituto do Oriente, held an international symposium entitled *Religion and Culture: Past Approaches, Present Globalization, Future Challenges*, to commemorate the 450<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of Saint Francis Xavier (1506-1552) in China, on Shangchuan Island (Guangdong Province).

More than 100 scholars and participants, from a dozen countries, attended this symposium, whose purpose was more to assess the impact of the Christian religion on Asian and particularly on Chinese cultures than an inquiry into the life of Francis Xavier. Twenty-eight scholars presented and discussed their research on the historical encounter between the European Renaissance and Asia, and the impact of religious traditions (including Islam, Buddhism, Taoism and Christianity) on modern China.

## ***China modernization and Christian humanism***

The debate on the contribution of Chinese intellectuals on Christian thought and Christian studies within the context of China's modernization and the government's proposed plan for a civic morality was particularly animated. Various scholars contributed to the reflection on this emotionally charged topic: You Xilin from Xi'an's Shaanxi Teachers University, Chan Chihou from Taiwan National Normal University, Kung Lapyan from Chinese University of Hong Kong, Zhang Kaiyuan of Central China Normal University, Liu Ping from Shanghai's Fudan University and Wang

Xiaochao from Beijing's Tsinghua University. The respondents for the discussion were Yu Sanle (Beijing Administrative College), Luis Sequeira (Director of Macao Ricci Institute), and Gianni Criveller (Hong Kong Holy Spirit Study Centre).

You Xilin successfully made a vivid comparison between the Late Ming moral crisis, caused by the secularization of traditional Chinese humanism, and noted by Wang Yangming, and the present-day moral and spiritual crisis noted by many intellectuals. In the Late Ming, patriotic and Confucian intellectuals such as Xu Guangqi, Yang Tingyun, Li Zhizao and Wang Zheng saw in Christian teaching a moral and spiritual resource to supplement traditional Confucian thought for facing new national challenges. In the same way, in these critical times of profound transformation, and convulsed modernization, Christian thought has an historical and unique chance to introduce anew much needed modern spiritual and ethical values.

The discussion that followed touched upon the theme of Christian humanism, which was at the intellectual heart of the European Renaissance as well as the heart of the Jesuit enterprise in Late Ming. This is perhaps the single most important contribution that Christian thought could make to contemporary China. It was also pointed out that reducing Christianity to a moral norm, or to a mere teaching for moralizing purposes, should be avoided.

### ***Moving pilgrimage to Shangchuan Island***

The Macao symposium ended with a memorable visit-pilgrimage to Shangchuan Island. On this little island on the night of December 3, 1552, abandoned, sick and betrayed, Francis Xavier died at the young age of 46. A beautiful white, small, recently restored church marks the place where the first missionary hero of the modern era died without realizing his dream of evangelizing China. Because of Francis Xavier and subsequent events that took place there, Shangchuan has become one of the important landmarks in the history of the Catholic Church in China.

In 1869, the Bishop of Canton, Bishop M. Guillemain, MEP (Foreign Missions of Paris,) with a large group of pilgrims, inaugurated a missionary compound there. Buildings were later de-

stroyed and rebuilt, according to the various vicissitudes of Catholicism in China.

In 1927, in that church, Maryknoller James E. Walsh was consecrated as the first bishop of the newly established diocese of Jiangmen. In 1952, he was incarcerated by the Communist government and released only in 1970. In December 1941, the Japanese cruelly killed the pastor of Shangchuan, Maryknoller Father Robert J. Cairns and his faithful catechist, Qing Nan.

On November 30 and December 1, 2002, two hundred people, from more than a dozen countries, took part in this visit, approved by the local Religious Affairs Bureau. Upon approaching the Church, Indian Jesuit Jose Kalapura and American Jesuit Thomas Michel explained the missionary activities of Francis Xavier in Goa (India), the Maluccas and Japan. The Jesuit superior in Macao, Fr. Luis Sequeira, presided at a moving Eucharistic Celebration, concelebrated by Fr. Liang of Jiangmen and other priests present. Songs were sung in English, Portuguese, Chinese and the local dialect of Goa. The hymn devoted to St. Francis Xavier was particularly touching and created an atmosphere of universality, appreciated especially by the numerous non-Catholics present.

Much credit and congratulations go to the Macao Jesuits, and in particular to Fr. Luis Sequeira, for having organized this successful symposium and pilgrimage as a wonderful tribute to Francis Xavier.

## **2. Taiwan: The International Symposium on the History of Sino-Vatican Diplomatic Relations**

About 200 people, including scholars, diplomats, clergy, religious and Church workers from Taiwan, Hong Kong and Rome took part in an International Symposium on Sino-Vatican relations, in Taipei on December 5-6, 2002. The symposium was organized by Fujen Catholic University, and sponsored by the Taiwan Foreign Ministry. The symposium was organized to celebrate the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of diplomatic relations between Taiwan and the Holy See.

While the symposium received considerable publicity in Taiwan, the Holy See seems to have kept it to a rather low profile outside the island.

### ***Perspectives on diplomatic relations***

There were approximately 18 presentations on various historical and political aspects of Sino-Holy See relations. Cardinal Paul Shan of Kaohsiung, President of Taiwan Bishops Conference, in his keynote address mentioned two points concerning how the Taiwan Church will deal with Holy See-China discussions. First, Taiwan will not interfere in the China-Holy See dialogue for the good of fellow Catholics in China, and second, the process should not frighten the Catholics in Taiwan. Fr. Jeroom Heyndrickx expressed some pessimism regarding the Chinese government's loosening of control over the Church.

Hong Kong's Sister Beatrice Leung spoke on "Sino-Vatican Relations on the Threshold of the Twenty-first Century." She noted that while the Holy See aims to enhance the development of the Church in China, China's government aims to further isolate Taiwan from the international arena. However, she considers that China's internal need for spiritual vitality, and the desire for a better international image might bring about a change of attitude towards the issue of normalization.

The Holy Spirit Study Centre senior researcher, Anthony Lam, presented a paper in which he analyzed the differences between two published versions of the same article by Mainland Catholic leaders in 1990. These differences hint at a negative shift in the attitude of China's government toward establishing relations with the Holy See. According to Lam, a letter of Communist leader Chen Yun to Jiang Zemin in the same year caused the shift. Chen stressed his anxiety over the role of religion in undermining the leadership of the Party, and denounced "our class enemies, both within and outside the country, for using religion to snatch away our youth."

### ***The thorny question of Manchukuo***

MEP father Jean Charbonnier presented an interesting paper on the thorny question of whether the Vatican actually established diplomatic relations with Manchukuo. China watchers are well aware that this issue is frequently mentioned by Chinese authorities as one of the Holy See's gravest errors and offences toward the Chinese Nation. Charbonnier's paper based on the per-

sonal memoirs of Bishop Charles Lemaire, a witness of the events, concludes that there was no formal diplomatic recognition by the Holy See. In fact the Holy See, entrusting Jilin's Bishop Gaspais with the temporary task of representing the Holy See and the Catholic Mission to the Manchukuo government, explicitly rejected Gaspais's request for a delegate from Rome, and Japanese pressure for a formal recognition. Charbonnier also noted that the missionaries were almost totally in sympathy with the Catholic population that rejected the Japanese invaders.

That the Holy See had to compromise and "cave in" regarding some sort of "representation" is understandable in view of protecting the missionaries and Catholics of Manchuria, who were totally isolated from the rest of China. The Church, observed Charbonnier, should be exonerated from a heavy historical burden, and its general positive attitude toward the Chinese nation should be confirmed in this tragic circumstance.

### **3. Hong Kong: The International Young Scholars' Symposium on "Christianity and Chinese Culture and Society"**

On December 10-14, 2002, the Centre for the Study of Religion and Chinese Society of the Chinese University of Hong Kong and The Ricci Institute for Chinese-Western Cultural History co-organized a valuable symposium where 30 young researchers from China, Hong Kong and Taiwan presented papers on Christian studies. This was probably the first time that young scholars, mostly from China's Universities, have been given an international forum to present and debate their research.

#### ***The promising enthusiasm of young scholars***

The idea of gathering a number of young scholars, and giving them the opportunity of knowing each other, of exchanging views and projects, of receiving encouragement and advice from senior and well known scholars is very praiseworthy. Senior Scholars present included Prof. Ng Tze Ming, Dr. Wu Xiaoxin, Prof. Lo Lung Kwong, Prof. Zhuo Xinping, Prof. Daniel Bays and Prof. Nicolas Standaert.

We were encouraged by the enthusiasm, good will and diligence of these young scholars. They are a sign that Christian Stud-

ies in Chinese academic institutions is not a passing fad, but rather a well-grounded enterprise.

### ***Three public lectures***

The papers that the young scholars presented covered a broad thematic range: theological issues; episodes of the history of Christianity in China; theological and cultural issues related to the encounter of Christian thought and Chinese culture; and the impact of Christianity in contemporary Chinese culture and society.

The symposium included three public lectures by noted scholars of Christianity and China. In the first lecture, December 10, 2002, Prof. Zhuo Xinping, Director of the Institute of World Religions of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, spoke about "Studies of Christianity by Chinese Scholars in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and their Influence in the Future." Prof. Zhuo, who is perhaps the most prolific Mainland author on Christianity, gave an extensive description of the ambivalent reception of Christianity by Chinese intellectuals in a century of radical transformation.

The second public lecture, "Chinese Christianity in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Historical and Global Perspectives," was offered by Prof. Daniel Bays, of the History Department of Calvin College, Michigan (USA).

On the third day, December 12, 2002, Nicolas Standaert, Professor of Sinology at the Catholic University of Leuven (Belgium), delivered a powerful and well researched paper on "Methodology in View of Contact Between Cultures: The China Case in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century." The enthusiastic response of the young scholars confirmed Prof. Standaert's most profound knowledge, of both Chinese and Western sources, in the field of Chinese Christianity in Late Ming and Early Qing.