

INDIA-CHINA CULTURAL DIALOGUE - A SYMPOSIUM

University of Madras, August 7-9, 2007

CHRISTIANITY IN CHINA - A CASE OF MISSED OPPORTUNITIES?

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Introductory Remarks

1. The title of my contribution might sound rather negative, but I would like to draw your attention to the concept of "*opportunities*"¹ which - even if I am of the opinion that they were sadly missed - still points to the positive developments which could have been realised, if they had been handled differently. My intention, therefore, is not to hanker after what has been missed, but rather to draw lessons for the present and future encounters of Christianity with China. The scope of my paper begins with the first encounter of Nestorian Christians with the religious, social and political realities of China during the Tang dynasty (618-907), followed by the short-lived Franciscan missionary effort during the Mongol reign (1279-1368), continued with the Jesuit experiment of accommodation with its ending in the fiasco of the Rites Controversy (1645-1742), and finally discussing the period of Catholic and Protestant missionary efforts during the period of Western colonial and imperialistic endeavours during the 19th and 20th century. At the end I intend to describe the present situation and the fascinating prospects it holds.

The program thus described might sound overly ambitious given the allotted time frame of just 25 minutes for the presentation. To put you at rest, my intention is not in any way to enter into the details of this vast historical panorama. What I intend to do, is much more modest, namely, to focus on the central issues in the encounter of Christianity with the religious and cultural traditions of China, on which I want to reflect more in general by taking into account the intellectual, philosophical and theological presuppositions available at the time, in order to draw lessons for our present situation and for the future.

One might ask, what is so special about China and why in Christian mission history

¹ It was Renée Laurentin who used the term „missed opportunities“ (occasions manquées) for the first

China has occupied such a special place. Often it is said that "*China is a test case for the Christian mission*"², because in China we find all the central themes of the encounter of Christianity with other cultures, religions and ideologies, such as the problem of Christian identity, of implanting the Christian faith in other cultures, of interreligious encounter as well as the ecumenical issue of a divided Christianity, the problem of modernisation, the challenge of Marxism, and of globalisation.

To position myself: I am a Catholic theologian, a mission scholar and self-made mission historian, who even if I've lived for several years in Japan and visited China on several occasions, looks at the historical data from a Western perspective and makes use mostly of material written in Western languages, that is, not taking into account the material written by Chinese scholars who are presenting "the other side" of the story, respectively, history.

My modest interest is to explore the possibilities which can be detected in the encounter of Christianity with the cultural and religious traditions of China.

- What was the impact Christianity has made on Chinese values and ideas?
- What influence did the encounter with the Chinese cultural and religious world have on Christianity?
- What has been achieved - and what could have been achieved?

Christianity's First Encounter with China: Nestorian Monks bring the "Religion of Light" to China

2. The sources regarding the history of the so-called Nestorian Church in China are scarce³. Mostly we have to rely on the text on the famous stele of Xian, a slab of stone, dated to have been produced in 781, on which the basic Christian doctrines were inscribed in Chinese with a few lines in Syriac. This famous documentary evidence of the existence of a Christian community in China during the Tang dynasty (618-907) was found buried in the ground by Jesuit missionaries in 1625. Only much later at the beginning of the 20th century further documentary proof of Christian life

time. Cf. R. Laurentin, *Chine et Christianisme, après les occasions manquées*, (Paris 1977).

² Cf. Roman Malek (ed.), "*Fallbeispiel China*". *Ökumenische Beiträge zu Religion, Theologie und Kirche im chinesischen Kontext*, (Nettetal 1996). In this publication China is described as „test case” for the Christian mission.

³ Yves Raguin, *China's First Evangelization by the 7th and 8th Century Eastern Syrian Monks*, in: Roman Malek (ed.), *The Chinese Face of Jesus Christ*, Vol. I, <Monumenta Serica Monograph Series: 50>, (Nettetal 2002), 159-179. Steve Eskilden, *Christology and Soteriology in the Chinese Nestorian Texts*, in: Roman Malek (ed.), *The Chinese Face of Jesus Christ*, Vol. I, (Monumenta Serica

on Chinese soil during the Tang period was detected in manuscripts found in the caves in Dunhuang in North-West China. According to the text on the stele of Xian, the first encounter of Christianity with China occurred in 635, when a group of Nestorian monks led by the monk and bishop Alopen (=Abraham), coming from Persia arrived in Changan, now Xian, then the capital of the China under the rule of Emperor Taizong (627-649), the second emperor of the Tang dynasty. The Nestorian monks, correctly speaking they belonged to the Eastern Syriac rite of the Christian Church in Persia, were welcomed by the emperor who after having examined their sacred writings and doctrines gave them a property to build a monastery. For two hundred years the “*Religion of Light*”, as Christianity was called at the time, continued to grow and flourish under the Tang dynasty with monasteries and churches throughout the empire. The meagre historical sources we possess, do not allow to make more than estimates of how big or small the community of Nestorian Christians ever has been during this period. Did it have a following among the indigenous Chinese people, or was it basically restricted to the foreign merchants and diplomats then residing in China? That the Nestorian Christians made efforts to spread the Christian message, can be seen from the fact that the Nestorian monks translated the basic Christian texts and doctrines into Chinese by making use of Buddhist and Daoist concepts and ideas. The manuscripts which we possess seem to indicate that in presenting the basic Christian teachings of christology and soteriology the Nestorian monks went very far in accommodating the Christian beliefs to Buddhist, Daoist and other Chinese religious ideas.

The peaceful existence of the Nestorian Church came to a sudden end, when in 845 Emperor Wuzong started to persecute in the first place the Buddhists, but, in the process of restricting the influence of religions, also prohibited all foreign cults, including the Christians, in his land. Only in the North of China some remnants of Nestorian Christianity remained, as the Franciscan missionaries found out in the 13th century, when they started their mission in Khanbalik, now Beijing, during the Mongol dynasty.

3. What is the legacy of the Nestorian Christian?

- a) It has to be admitted that the first implantation of Christianity on Chinese soil lapsed into oblivion in Christian tradition, as well also in Chinese historiography, to the extent that the authenticity of the Xian stele was doubted when it was detected in the 17th century.
- b) The attempt by the Nestorian Christians to accommodate the Christian message to Buddhist and Daoist concepts seems to have weakened rather than strengthened the presentation and reception of the Christian faith and doctrine.
- c) Whereas Buddhism, persecuted at the same with the Christians, survived and, in spite of its foreign origin, was recognised as an indigenous Chinese religion, Christianity remained a foreign religion which did not succeed in planting lasting roots in China.

The Franciscan Intermezzo in China during the Mongol Period

4. The missionary efforts of Franciscan friars during the 13th and 14th century⁴ were a reaction against the invasion of the Mongols who under the Great Khans had made vast inroads into Western Europe and threatened the existence of Christianity. Under the Great Kublai Khan (1215-1291) the Mongols had succeeded in building a vast territory in Central Asia and managed to conquer the whole of China, establishing their own imperial rule, the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368) in the capital Khanbalik, today Beijing. In 1286 Kublai Khan sent a letter to Pope Nicholas IV, ironically transmitted by the Nestorian bishop Bar Sauma, in which he requested the pope to send Catholic missionaries to his court in Khanbalik. The Franciscan friar John of Montecorvino (1248-1328) was chosen to lead a small delegation which after a five-year journey reached the capital Khanbalik in 1294. Since Kublai Khan had died by that time, John of Montecorvino presented his credentials to his successor Timurleng (1294-1307) who turned out to be friendly to the Christian missionaries as well. Against obstacles put by Nestorian Christians, John of Montecorvino succeeded in building two churches in Khanbalik, converting around six thousand people, mostly Mongols, to the Christian faith and translating the New Testaments and the Psalms

⁴ Jean Charbonnier, *Histoire Des Chrétiens De China*, (Paris 1992), 43-79.

into Mongolian language. He kept however Latin as liturgical language and was very proud of the choir of 150 boys whom he had trained in singing Latin hymns and other liturgical songs, much appreciated by the Emperor. When the pope learned of the successful mission, he appointed John of Montecorvino as the first archbishop of the newly erected archdiocese of Khanbalik and sent a delegation of seven Franciscan monks, all ordained as bishops, to Khanbalik. Only three of them survived the journey, and John of Montecorvino was rightfully installed as archbishop of Khanbalik with jurisdiction over yet not existing suffragan dioceses. Only several years later another new diocese was established in Zaiton, today Quanzhou, and the Franciscan friar Gerardus of Perugia was named as its first bishop. After the death of John of Montecorvino in 1328 the see of Khanbalik remained vacant for many years. Only in 1342 Pope Benedict XII sent a delegation under the leadership of John Marignolli which was received with great pomp by the Mongol emperor. Unfortunately for the Christian mission the Mongol Yuan dynasty was defeated in 1368 by Zhu Yuanzhang who established the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644). The overturn of the Yuan dynasty also marked the end of the Franciscan mission and led to the demise of the small Christian community in Khanbalik and Zaiton.

5. What is the legacy of the episode of Franciscan mission in China?

- a) The Franciscan mission remained restricted to the cultural and religious world of the Mongols, never reaching the Han Chinese community to a greater extent. The policy of the Mongol Khans was determined by a pragmatic pluralism which treated all religions equally and used them for political, religious and also magical purposes.
- b) The Franciscan mission suffered from a lack of personnel, which made the development of a missionary method responding to the challenges of the time practically impossible. Thus the missionary efforts were restricted to a modest endeavour in translating some basic Christian texts – and in keeping Latin as the sole liturgical language.

Jesuit Accommodation Policy and the Rites Controversy (1645-1742)

6. I am treating the Jesuit mission and its experiment of using accommodation as its

missionary method more at length, because I consider the so-called Rites Controversy as the most crucial incident in the history of the Christian mission towards China. The controversy which began in the early 17th century and lasted for nearly 200 years, has undoubtedly been responsible for the difficulties - or should we say: the failure - which the Christian mission experienced in China, and also in Japan, Korea and Vietnam. Given the restrictions of time, I shall not deal with the Malabar Rites Controversy in India concerning the missionary method employed by Roberto de Nobili (1577-1656) and his confreres, though it would be of high interest in this conference which intends to explore cultural and religious communalities between China and India. When we take a fresh look at the history of the Rites Controversy, our aim again is not to recount in detail the complicated historical facts nor the discussions and quarrels surrounding the Chinese Rites. We would rather like to concentrate on the ecclesiological and theological implications which the negative decision given by the Roman authorities has had, when they ruled that the newly won Chinese, Japanese, Korean and Vietnamese converts to Christianity were not allowed to continue practicing the rites customarily held in honour of ancestors and of the great sage Confucius⁵. When all the smoke of the heated debates has cleared, the Rites Controversy remains to be of interest to us today, because it can be seen as a (negative) paradigm of the encounter of Christianity with East Asia (China) and its cultural and religious heritage⁶. At the same time it should serve as a warning for the Churches in Asia and the central authorities in Rome not to repeat the mistakes of the past today.

7. The missionary method of the Jesuit mission to China, which started with Matteo Ricci (1552-1610), is an early example of a missionary approach which was considerate of the values encountered in the other religious, philosophical and cultural traditions. The first Jesuit missionaries to China tried to present the Christian message as a teaching which was principally consonant with the basic philosophical and ethical ideas of Confucianism and thus could be understood as their fulfilment.

⁵ Cf. G. Minamiki, *The Chinese Rites Controversy from its Beginning to Modern Times*, Chicago 1985; *The Chinese Rites Controversy, its History and its Meaning*, D.E. Mugello (ed.), Nettetal 1994.

⁶ „From a missiological point of view the importance of the Rites Controversy as the most dramatic chapter in the early Chinese missionary history is obvious. It cannot be doubted that the outcome of the events that make up the last phase of that centenarian dispute... sealed the fate of the early missionary effort in China”. Cf. E. Zürcher, *Jesuit Accommodation and the Chinese Cultural Imperative*, in: D.E. Mugello (ed.), *The Chinese Rites Controversy*, Nettetal 1994, 31-60, p. 31.

The fact, however, that Ricci and his fellow Jesuits took position against Buddhist and Daoist traditions in one-sidedly opting for classic Confucianism, became one of the weak spots in their missionary approach. The missionary method developed by the Jesuits in China, as well as in India, consisted in an *adaptation* or *accommodation* of the Christian message to the customary world of religious ideas found in the other religions and cultures, motivated by the missionary motif of converting these people to Christianity. It implied a thorough knowledge of the Chinese language by the missionaries, the study of the cultural, philosophical and religious heritage of China and adapting the presentation of Christian doctrines to thought patterns found in Chinese tradition, further to show respect for Chinese customs, philosophy and way of living. The other religious and cultural traditions were used as mere starting points for achieving this aim. This missionary approach stressed the continuity and congruity of the Gospel and the Christian ethical teachings with Chinese ways of thinking and anthropology. The Christian message was presented to the potential catechumens as fulfilment of the insights and teachings of the Chinese sages, especially of Confucius, and therefore, conversion was presented as a step which did not necessitate a complete break with the past, but as spiritual development, basically in accordance with the ancestral teachings. The Jesuits held that the original Confucian writings contained these insights in integrity while later Confucian scholars distorted them. Therefore, if these deviations were corrected, the fundamental congruity of the Christian message with these ancient insights would become apparent, thus opening the way for Chinese to accept Christianity as fulfilment rather than a challenge to Chinese traditions.

8. The group of Jesuits, known as "Figurists"⁷, based their search to find traces of an original revelation which they tried to detect in the writings of Confucius, on these presuppositions. With this kind of reasoning the Jesuit missionaries succeeded in converting some of the leading scholars and high officials of the time⁸. To some extent the Jesuit missionaries to China took into account the Chinese rejection of the

⁷ Claudia von Collani, *P. Joachim Bouvet S.J. Sein Leben und sein Werk* <Monumenta Serica Monograph Series XVII>, (Nettetal 1985).

⁸ The most well-known among them is Xu Guangqi (1562-1633) and Yang Tingyun (1562-1627). The former was more active in politics, since he functioned as high official, equivalent in rank to what would be called today the office of prime minister. The latter was more of a scholar who presented deep-searching ideas on the relationship between Confucian and Christian ideas.

historical character of salvation by concentrating on philosophical reasoning about the concept of God and his attributes, rather than presenting a christology which might have stressed the historical Jesus and his apparent failure in dying on the cross. Confucianism as a “*natural religion*” [*xing jiao*] which in contrast to Buddhism did not indulge in idolatry and superstition, but relied on reason and philosophical ideas to give answers to the problems of humankind’s destiny and purpose in this world. The use of the term “*natural religion*” by the Jesuits was intended to refer to the stage of “*primal revelation*”, which in its Chinese rendering as *xing jiao*, was understood in the Confucian thought pattern to refer to the concept of the innate goodness of the human person and of attaining sanctity without the assistance of divine grace and without accepting the teaching on original sin⁹. Christian converts from Confucianism, therefore, understood their conversion more in the line of a basic confirmation of their former convictions than a rejection of false beliefs and practices¹⁰. The Jesuits presented a form of Christianity which was respecting the *Chinese Cultural Imperative* – an expression coined by Erik Zürcher - to describe the fact that any marginal religion in China had to prove its basic compatibility with Confucian teachings in order to be accepted among the “*orthodox*” religions¹¹. Confucianism represented orthodoxy in a religious, ritual, social and political sense and any other religion had to measure up to the Confucian standard in order to avoid being branded as heterodox, and consequently being treated as a subversive sect. This applied not only to Christianity but also to the small group of Jews as well as to Islam¹².

9. The Jesuit missionaries never doubted that the Gospel of Jesus Christ had to be presented to all peoples and cultures. They were convinced that God’s universal will of salvation is fulfilled in the incarnation of Jesus Christ who is the only saviour of all humankind. Whatever religious and cultural values might be found in other traditions and cultures, they all find their fulfilment in Christianity, which alone can bring forth the inherent positive qualities possibly contained in them. The revelation contained in

⁹ E. Zürcher calls this a “far-going re-interpretation, reduction, and, indeed, distortion of the Christian message”, cf. E. Zürcher, *Jesuit, Accommodation and the Chinese Cultural Imperative*, in: D.E. Mugello (ed.), *The Chinese Rites Controversy, its History and Meaning*, Nettetal 1994, 31-64, p. 49.

¹⁰ This can be seen in a brief characteristic of the essence of Christianity attributed to Paul Xu Guangqi, the famous convert of Matteo Ricci, who described Christianity in four Chinese characters *qu fo, bu ru*, that is: *it rejects Buddhism and propagates Confucianism*. Cf. J. Charbonnier, *Histoire de Chrétiens de Chine*, (Paris 1992) p. 139s.

¹¹ Cf. E. Zürcher, op.cit. 31-64.

the Old and New Testament is superior to all other Holy Scriptures within other religious traditions, because only the Bible is inspired by the Holy Spirit. When confronted with this exclusivist and absolute attitude from the part of the Christian missionaries, many Chinese, especially from among the literati, responded negatively and questioned the underlying assumptions. After all, the Chinese were convinced that the Middle Kingdom was situated not only geographically in the centre of the world, but also, due to its high cultural, ethical and religious standards, constituted the apex of human achievement in the cultural, ethical, political and economic fields¹³.

The Crux of the Matter: Ancestor Veneration Disputed

10. The central point in the Rites Controversy was the rather practical question, whether Chinese converts to the Christian faith should be allowed to continue observing the traditional rites to the ancestors and to partake in the veneration of Confucius, the great sage of the Chinese people, or whether such practices should be declared to be incompatible with the Christian faith and Church law. The real issues at stake however were much greater, because the veneration of the ancestors was central to the Chinese concept of human relationships between the generations and in family life, and especially between ruler and subject, central in Chinese culture. The question of whether Christian converts were allowed to continue to take part in ceremonies honouring Confucius was not only an intra-ecclesial matter, but had implications for the position Chinese Christians in society and state. The social fabric of Chinese culture was built on the right understanding and practice of the five relationships: 1. *emperor-subject*, 2. *elder son-younger son*, 3. *husband-wife*, 4. *father-son*, and 5. *friend- friend*. The five relationships assigned everybody “his or her place” in the vertical framework of Chinese society. In China the centre of social life has always been the family. It is within the understanding of the role of the family that ancestor veneration had, and to a great extent still has, such an eminent significance. Ancestor veneration is the highest expression of filial piety and ranks above the loyalty due to

¹² Cf. J.E. Wills, *Muslims in China, A Study in Cultural Confrontation*, (London-Malmö 1978).

¹³ „To accept Jesus as the most universal human being does not constitute any problem for Chinese thinkers, because they are used to think in universal dimensions. The real problem, however, is the person of Jesus of Nazareth, that is the fact that God’s decisive salvific action happened in a person who is not a Chinese. To accept this is against the pride of Chinese intellectuals”. L. Gutheinz, *China im Wandel, Das chinesische Denken im Umbruch seit dem 19. Jahrhundert*, (München 1985), p. 131.

the emperor, while at the same time sustaining it.

It is therefore, understandable that in the mission history of the Catholic Church in China, but then also in Japan, Korea and Vietnam, the practice of ancestor worship/veneration played such a decisive role. In the eyes of the Chinese emperors, or the Shogun in Japan and the kings of Korea and Vietnam, the Christian missionaries were undermining the stability of their realms by denouncing ancestor worship as an idolatrous practice, in which the new converts to Christianity were no longer allowed to participate. The widespread practice among new converts to destroy the tablets erected in the honour of the ancestors, was not only seen as a break with the age-old practices of showing gratitude and acknowledgement to the life-work of previous generations, but was interpreted also as an attack against central customs within the traditional society as well. The refusal of the Christian converts to continue the age-old practices of ancestor veneration and to pay respect to Confucius constituted in the eyes of their compatriots a threat to the historical continuity of Chinese, Japanese, Korean and Vietnamese cultures. The negative attitude of the Christian converts who considered these practices as having no religious or cultural value, and even considered them as idolatrous and sinful, was unacceptable for the authorities who considered this position to constitute an act of civil disobedience. In the eyes of their fellow country men Christian converts were no longer seen as patriotic fellow citizens, but rather as traitors to their own homelands, who were obeying the commands of foreign missionaries.

The Jesuits in their majority were in favour of allowing Chinese converts to continue practising these rites¹⁴. They sided with the argumentation proposed by many Chinese scholars and even the Chinese Emperor Kangxi (1661-1722) himself, that the ancestral rites and the tribute paid to Confucius were merely civil ceremonies and therefore should not be considered to be religious acts of worship. The Jesuit position to allow the Christian converts to continue with the observance of these old practices, however, was unacceptable for the Franciscans, because they considered these practices to be acts of idolatry and therefore incompatible with Catholic doctrine. The differences in the attitudes towards the Chinese rites between the opposing parties

¹⁴ The terminology one uses is of great importance in this case, because if the term “*ancestor worship*” is used, such practices would have to be seen as “*acts of idolatry*” and therefore considered to be incompatible with the Christian faith. If one speaks, on the other side of “*ancestor veneration*” such acts would then fall within the ethical behaviour of honouring one’s ancestors, that means as acts which in themselves do not call for any religious and theological qualifications.

were partly due to the differences of the experiences they had made in their respective contacts with the actual practices of ancestors veneration in the different parts of China. The Jesuits for their part were more in contact with the Chinese literati and their more refined practices and interpretations, whereas the Dominican and Franciscan missionaries were relying on their experiences of living among the simple peasants and fishermen in the provinces who followed the practices of popular religiosity current in the country side which were full of idolatrous customs and interpretations.

Reaction by the Chinese Authorities: Christianity becomes a subversive religion

11. The discussion which followed divided not only the Christians in China and the missionary orders working there, but brought also the displeasure of the Chinese Court and the Chinese Emperor himself on the Christian missionaries, their Chinese converts and Christianity as a whole. The mission e.g. of the Papal Legate de Tournon in the years 1705-1706 to the court of the Emperor Kangxi (1661-1722) resulted in a head-on confrontation, because the Legate insisted that Confucius' teachings were full of errors and incompatible with Christian faith tenets¹⁵. When the Emperor had the scrolls with the teachings of Confucius brought and challenged the Papal Legate to prove his case from the Chinese scriptures of Confucius, de Tournon was not even able to hold the scrolls in the right position, because he was totally ignorant of the Chinese language. This Western arrogance displayed by the Papal Legate in the 18th century has stayed in the memory of many Chinese as a symbol of European arrogance in disparaging Chinese tradition and culture from a Western position and holding Christianity and Western culture superior to the Chinese, in spite of the fact that this judgement was based on complete ignorance of the real contents of Chinese, and for that matter Asian, cultures. Without going into the details of the intricacies of the history of the Rites Controversy, which ended with the Vatican siding with the Franciscan position and condemning the Jesuit one as heretical in 1704, it is enough to state that the Rites Controversy marks the end of a period in mission history which could have led to a real encounter between the Gospel and Chinese cultural and

¹⁵ Cf. Edward Malatesta, *A Fatal Clash of Wills: The Condemnation of the Chinese Rites by the Papal Delegate Carlo Tomaso Maillard de Tournon*, in: D.E. Mugello, *The Chinese Rites Controversy*, op.cit. 211-239.

religious traditions.

In the eyes of the Chinese authorities and the Chinese people, Christianity appeared as a religion which threatened central elements of the existing social order and therefore posed a danger for peace and harmony in society. In addition the Christian converts followed a foreign religion which was directed by a central authority outside of China which interfered in the internal affairs of the country. This foreign authority even dared ordering Chinese Christians to disobey the local Chinese authorities and even the Emperor, when their civil laws were in contrast with God's law whom to obey, it was said, was the first duty for every human being. The Chinese Christians were faced with the dilemma, that to disobey the order of Rome was tantamount to committing the sin of idolatry, and to follow the Roman regulations meant that they were disloyal to their ancestors as well as to the authorities of the state. In our times, Aloysius Jin Luxian SJ, the bishop of Shanghai, summed up the implications which the policy of the Vatican had for the inculturation of the Christian message in China, by asking the following question: „*How could it have been possible that a religion which demands from its followers to give up their own culture and own customs, could have taken roots and developed in the country?*“

The Rites Controversy and the Asian Churches Today

12. On October 24th, 2001, John Paul II made an astonishing statement which some have called “*the most significant China-speech of his papacy*”, in which he admitted that in the mission history in China great errors have been committed. The speech was delivered in the context of an international conference remembering the 400th anniversary of Matteo Ricci's coming to Beijing in 1601. The pope said in this speech: “*History, however, reminds us of the unfortunate fact that the work of members of the Church in China was not always without error, the bitter fruit of their personal limitations and of the limits of their action. Moreover, their action was often conditioned by difficult situations connected with complex historical events and conflicting political interests. Nor were theological disputes lacking, which caused bad feelings and created serious difficulties in preaching the Gospel. In certain periods of modern history, a kind of “protection” on the part of European political powers not infrequently resulted in limitations on the Church's very freedom of action*

and had negative repercussions for the Church in China...

I feel deep sadness for these errors and limits of the past, and I regret that in many people these failings may have given the impression of a lack of respect and esteem for the Chinese people on the part of the Catholic Church, making them feel that the Church was motivated by feelings of hostility towards China. For all of this I ask the forgiveness and understanding of those who may have felt hurt in some way by such actions on the part of Christians.”

These are clear words which in many ways could help to heal the memory of the wounds the centuries long period of the “*Rites Controversy*” has caused.

13. What is the legacy of the Rites Controversy?

a) Why was it theologically orthodox that Christianity let itself be influenced by Greek philosophy, by Roman juristic thought and even by customs of the Germanic peoples? Why was the same liberty not granted in the attempted accommodation of Christian doctrine in its encounter with the cultures and traditions of China and of other Asian countries?

b) Accommodation as missionary method could have opened new ways for the Christian mission not only in China but in other East Asian countries such as Japan, Korea and Vietnam as well.

c) The negative decision by the Roman authorities in the rites controversy prompted the Chinese government to stop Christian mission and to declare Christianity a subversive religion.

d) The many cases of martyrdom in China – and also in Japan, Korea and Vietnam – need a new evaluation¹⁶. In Christian eyes they are the pride of the Asian Churches by obeying God rather than men. Seen from the point of view of Chinese authorities, however, suppression and punishment of Christians who refused to obey the laws of the land, were necessary measures to ensure social and political stability.

¹⁶ G. Evers, *The Problem of Martyrdom in Missionary Countries*, Concilium 2003/1, 87-95.

**The encounter of Christianity and China during 19th-20th century - tarnished
by its connection with Western Colonialism**

14. The encounter of Christianity and China during the 19th-20th century is characterised by the fact that the missionary efforts of Catholic and Protestant missionaries were seen in China to be closely connected with the colonialist aggression by Western nations. China, the once so powerful empire, had lost much of its power in the interior of the country and even more with regard to its international standing. Making use of this political, social and cultural weakness the Western powers vied with one another to secure spheres of influence in the Middle Kingdom. In a series of international agreements which the Chinese rightly called “unequal treaties”, the foreign Western powers forced China to open its ports for trading and even to import opium. In the eyes of most Chinese the Christian missionaries were making use of the "unequal treaties" to expand their missionary activities into the interior regions of China. When the often aggressive Christian mission met with resistance by local political or religious institutions and when missionaries were attacked, the Western powers used these "missionary incidents" to enlarge their spheres of influence using as pretext that they were protecting the missionaries. The extension of the privilege of extra-territoriality, accorded to foreign missionaries, to Chinese converts to Christianity, who after having received baptism were exempted from Chinese jurisdiction, underlined the foreign character of Christianity in China which relied so heavily on the colonial powers. The saying among Chinese current at the time in referring to baptisms of Chinese converts: "*One more Christian - one Chinese less*", expressed the conviction that in becoming Christian the convert ceased to be a patriotic Chinese citizen. The explosion of hatred against Christianity and the missionary enterprise in the so-called Boxer Rising (1900-1902) showed how strong the aversion against a Christianity had become which relied so heavily on the colonial powers for its protection and advancement. On the part of the Christian foreign missionaries to China there is a noticeable difference in their way of looking at China and Chinese cultural, social and religious traditions when compared with missionaries of the 17th and 18th century. In their eyes the once so respected Middle Kingdom had deteriorated and no longer was the great civilization on equal or even superior

standing with European culture.

Another characteristic of the work of Christian missionaries during this period was the emphasis they put on social activities in alleviating the widespread poverty and famine among the Chinese population. The noble aim of helping the poor out of Christian charity often became obscured by using mixing it with missionary activities for gaining new converts. Potential converts were lured to undergo instruction in the Christian faith with the promise of receiving free food at mission stations, a practice which led to the phenomenon of the so-called “rice Christians”.

The strong sense of European superiority widespread among foreign Christian missionaries was responsible for the fact that indigenous Chinese priests were barred from becoming bishops for a long time. In the Catholic Church the first 6 Chinese bishops were consecrated as late as 1926, when Pope Pius XI consecrated them in Rome, still against opposition by foreign missionaries in China. It is interesting to note that modest signals of respecting Chinese culture and customs were coming from the Roman centre during this period. Celso Costantini (1875-1958), the first Apostolic Delegate to China, was strongly in favour of demolishing, what he called “*the Latin Wall*”, that is to end the age-old practice of using Latin as liturgical language and to replace it by Chinese.

15. What is the legacy of Christian-China encounter during the 18th-19th century?

- a) The connection of the Christian missionary enterprise with the colonial powers compromised its religious and spiritual mission.
- b) The sense of superiority, Eurocentrism and nationalism on the part of the foreign missionaries made a fruitful encounter with Chinese culture, religions and traditions nearly impossible.
- c) The reluctance to transmit the leadership of the Church into the hands of the local clergy obstructed the development of the local Church.

China and Christianity in the People’s Republic of China

16. During the Chinese Civil War (1946-1949) between the Guongmingdang government of Jiang Jieshi (Chiang Kaishek) and the Communists under Mao Zedong, Chinese Catholics and Protestants supported the cause of the nationalist

government. In the eyes of the Chinese Christians the Communist ideology was unacceptable because of its aggressive atheist position. The Chinese Communists from their side considered the Chinese Christians as enemies, because of their support of the Guomindang government and because of their lack of patriotism due to their foreign connections. In accordance with Marxist criticism of religions, Chinese intellectuals¹⁷ and later the Chinese Communist considered Christianity together with Confucianism and all other Chinese religious traditions to be expression of superstition. In the early years the Chinese Communists were convinced that all religions would disappear automatically as soon as the envisaged socialist state would have been erected. Then the religions would have fulfilled their temporary role to be the *opiate of the people*, that is a kind of medicine to help people to survive in the face of adverse societal situations¹⁸. In its religious policy the Communist government distinguished between “*feudal superstitious practices*”, found in popular religions, and “*religious activities considered legitimate for the time being*” in the major religions recognised by the government. Chinese Christianity was divided in its attitude towards the Communist government. Most Catholics and many Protestants were reluctant to cooperate with the atheist regime and tried to survive as underground religious groups not recognised by the government. Smaller groups of Protestants and Catholics joined the Patriotic Organisations respectively of the Protestant-Three-Self-Movement and the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association. In the chaos caused by the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) efforts were made to eradicate all forms of religious life in public and actively to propagate atheism in their place. The reform policy of Deng Xiaoping led to a new religious policy as well. Article 36 of the 1982 constitution guarantees religious freedom to every citizen¹⁹. In

¹⁷ The movement for a New China, characterised by the May-Fourth-Movement of students in Beijing after the First World War (Demonstrations starting on May 4, 1919 against the Treaty of Versailles), rejected Confucianism (*Dadao Kongjia! Smash the shop of Confucius!*) and welcomed “*Mr. Science*” and “*Mr. Democracy*” as the two Western ideas which could help China on its way to modernisation. Western religious ideas such as Christianity were not considered to be helpful in realising the aim of modernising China.

¹⁸ Cf. Zhuo Xiping, *Theorien über Religion im heutigen China*, in: R. Malek (ed), „*Fallbeispiel China. Ökumenische Beiträge zu Religion, Theologie und Kirche im chinesischen Kontext* (Nettetal 1996. 417-426.

¹⁹ Art. 36 of the Chinese constitution of 1982 „Citizens of the People’s Republic of China enjoy freedom of religious belief. No organ of state, mass organisation, or person is allowed to force any citizen to believe or not to believe in religion. It is impermissible to discriminate against any citizen who believes or does not believe in religion. The state protects legitimate religious activities. No person is permitted to use religion to conduct counterrevolutionary activities or activities which disrupt social order, harm people’s health, or obstruct the educational system of the country. Religion is not subject to the control of foreign countries.”

the following years religious life gained in strength, in spite of repeated repressive acts by government organs directed against all forms of religious activities not recognised by the government. The Catholic Church in China experienced an interior division with regard to its relation with the pope and his right to appoint bishops. The recent letter by Pope Benedict XVI²⁰ to the Catholics in China is an attempt to restore unity among the Catholics in China and to open the way for diplomatic relations between Vatican and the Chinese government. In the letter the pope acknowledges that progress has been made in the field of religious freedom and that the religions, including Christianity, have the possibility to play an ever important role in the PR China today. Another, somewhat ironical, sign of religious revival and growing influence of religions in society, are the repeated admonitions by the leadership of the Communist Party of China that party members are not allowed to take part in religious activities and especially are not allowed to join religious organisations²¹. On the other hand the Chinese government has started a campaign for a “harmonious society” which only can be achieved, if all groups in society, and not in the least, the religions are working together for this goal. Already in the past Communist leaders have more or less grudgingly admitted that the religions can positively contribute to social advancement and moral life in society. In a restricted way medical, educational and social activities of Christian organisations²² are allowed by the government.

In the academic field too, we find a new approach to the phenomenon and the role of religions. The Institute of World Religions within the Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing – its present director Zhuo Xinping is among the contributors to this conference – and other institutes at universities in different parts of the country are presenting fresh studies on the history, the problems and function of religions for present-day China. Quite a few of these studies and international conferences are dealing with Christianity in general and with regard to its role in the PR China. The influence of these academic studies on Christian topics is at present more influential than the rather modest contributions of Protestant and Catholic theologians in Church

²⁰ Pope Benedict XVI, *To the Bishops, Priests, Consecrated Persons and Lay Faithful in the People's Republic of China*, Vatican City, June 29, 2007.

²¹ One gets the impression that Communist Party Members are barred from making full use of the religious freedom guaranteed in the constitution, because they are only allowed to opt “for not adhering to a religion”, but not “to believe in a religion”.

²² *Amity Foundation* is the best known Protestant organisation. In the Catholic Church several dioceses have set up social service centres. Here the best known is *Jinde Charity* in Shijiazhuang in Hebei Province...

institutions.

Cultural Christians in the PR China

17. The movement of the so-called "Cultural Christians"²³ originated in the PR China in the late 1980s when in the aftermath of the Tiananmen massacre the ideological crisis of the Communist Party became apparent. Chinese intellectuals looking for alternative ideas to advance the project of modernising China began to study Christian philosophical and theological ideas and started a huge translation project of the classical works. For centuries Chinese intellectuals have distanced themselves from the vulgar religious ideas and practices of the common people. For many years Chinese intellectuals who as social group were ostracised during the Cultural Revolution as enemies of the people, have been searching for a replacement or alternative for the Marxist-Communist doctrine²⁴. The central figures in this rather small but influential group were Liu Xiaofeng²⁵, Liu Xiaobo and He Guanghu. The representatives of this loosely structured group of Chinese intellectuals have in common that they appreciate central Christian ideas and values, propagate their writings and contribute their own reflection in how far these ideas might be helpful to enlighten the current debate of advancing Chinese society and culture. The appreciation of Christianity, however, remains in the strictly intellectual field and does not include joining the practice of Christian belief by receiving baptism. As the name given to this group indicates they understand themselves to be "cultural Christians" who remain outside the gates of the churches. The movement of the "cultural Christians" can thus be seen as a new and original expression of the age-old encounter between Christianity and China. The question no longer is either to join the Christian faith and by doing so to step outside of Chinese traditions but it is rather an attitude of making use of the good and useful elements in the Christian tradition and to bring them into an interplay with current social, political and philosophical developments in today's China.

²³ Some of these intellectuals prefer to be called "Scholars in Mainland China Studying Christianity".

²⁴ Cf. E. Tang, *The Second Chinese Enlightenment :Intellectuals and Christianity Today*, in: W.Ustorf/T. Murayama (eds.), *Identity and Marginality, Rethinking Christianity in North East Asia*, Frankfurt 2000, 55-70.

²⁵ Liu Xiaofeng, *The Form of Faith of Chinese Intellectuals in the Context of Modernisation*, in: *China Study Journal* 7 (1992), 4-8. A. Sprenger, *A New Vision for China. The case of Liu Xiaofeng*, in: *Inter-Religio* 19 (1991), 2-20.

Conclusion

18. The *tour de force* through several centuries of encounter between Christianity and China which I've attempted, gives a broad idea of the many difficulties entailed in this meeting of different cultural, religious and anthropological ideas, of the misunderstandings and human failures, but also of the opportunities and challenges.

In the Rites Controversy the Chinese cultural and religious self-understanding to be at the peak of cultural development, clashed with the claim of Christianity to be the only true world-religion. The Christian mission in modern times suffered from its connection with the colonialist powers and its lack of understanding of and respect for Chinese traditions and thus failed to penetrate deeply into China. In the height of the Cultural Revolution foreign China watchers even were speaking of the end of Christian life in China. The experience of the revival of Christian life – and for that matter of religious life in general - , in our days, is a kind of miracle, often overlooked by focussing too much on the violations of religious freedom which also still occur. The forced isolation from the missionary centres abroad and the persecution during the Cultural Revolution have led to the emergence of a truly Chinese Christianity which is becoming a religious and spiritual factor in the search of the many people looking for orientation in modern China facing the challenges of globalisation and modernisation.

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