

China: Past and Present

The Rev. John Ross

Religion

From the dawn of history to the introduction of Buddhism, the people of China had no idols. Of those missionaries who have paid the greatest attention to the history of China, most have concluded that the numerous references of service to and dependence upon the "Supreme Ruler" can be understood only by supposing this term to designate the Eternal Being. The conviction is driven in upon the careful student that for that long period the religion of the Chinese was monotheistic, and the more hoary the classic the more frequent are the references to the Supreme. But before Buddhism instituted images, China was a land where the spirits of the mountain and the river, though always subordinated to the Supreme, were worshipped much as in ancient Greece.

Perhaps the most interesting custom in China is one which has been transmitted from time immemorial in connection with monotheism. The reigning emperor of China, as great high priest, offers at every winter solstice a whole bullock "without blemish" as a burnt offering on the glazed brick altar at the temple of heaven. The heavens form the only covering over this magnificent white marble temple, and the emperor bows in lowly reverence where no image is visible. This sacrifice is offered to "Heaven," or the "Supreme Ruler."

The moral system named after Confucius, a contemporary of Socrates, emerged out of the period in which this monotheistic idea still lived, though its life had ceased to be particularly vigorous. There are in Confucianism sentiments which to me are meaningless if they do not refer to the Being whom we ourselves not infrequently name "Heaven." In the beginning of the eleventh century, a scholar enunciated atheistical opinions before the emperor. Though these were at first objected to as "heretical," in that period of literary activity, one able philosopher annotating and commenting on Confucianism, explained all references to heaven in a materialistic sense. Since his time the literary class of China, with few exceptions has been materialistic, or, more properly speaking to use the term which the humility of modern scholars has adopted, Chinese scholars have been and are "agnostic."

Taoism, traced to a contemporary of Confucius, has long degenerated into a system of magical incantations and a searching after the elixir of perpetual life. Some of its offshoots have experiences similar to our spiritualists.

Simultaneous with the decay of the monotheistic idea was the growth of Buddhism, which went from India by way of Thibet. Though originally atheistic, it soon became what it still is, polytheistic. It appears to have rushed into Chinese minds as air into what had been a vacuum. Generals forsook their armies, and ministers their yamens, all betaking themselves to monasticism in the mountains to such an extent that a special decree had to be promulgated to put a stop to this phase of the movement, and to recall officials to the service of their country. This decree was not directed against the religion, which was as fervently believed in at court as elsewhere. Indeed the emperor had images made of solid gold for some temples. The more materialistic grew Confucianism, or literature, the more thoroughly did Buddhism penetrate all

classes for though there is much that is absurd, much that is gross, much that is outrageously false, there was and is in Buddhism an attempt at a reply to the deep, heart-questionings, and to meet the spiritual yearnings of man, which no agnosticism can satisfy. Whatever there is of earnestness is attracted towards some one of the numerous sects of Buddhism which opens its arms to, though it never pacifies, the mental restlessness, nor gratifies the inner cravings which are found among the Chinese as among ourselves. It need scarcely be said that here is the most hopeful soil in which to propagate Christianity.

In 1705, the able Jesuit Le Compte considered the Mahomedan element in China of so little consequence that he passed it by as undeserving of special consideration, because its votaries were so "few" He was certainly unacquainted with certain provinces which did then, and for centuries before, contain a very large admixture of Mahomedans. We know that at present they are very numerous in all the provinces. Even in Mookden, the capital of Manchuria, we have 20,000 of them grouped in one suburb, and there is not a single city or market town where they are not to be found in scores, hundreds, or thousands. That they have considerably increased is unquestionable, but not by aggressive propagandism, for they make no effort to convert an idolatrous people whom they treat with disdain. Towards Christianity they adopt an attitude of friendliness, demanding to be regarded as brethren, because they worship the same God.

That the Apostle Thomas preached the Gospel in India is thought to be established. Whether the scanty mention of China as one of the countries in which he preached, is or is not accurate, is of little practical importance, as there was no lasting impression made there. But it is beyond doubt that the Syrian church sent missionaries in the seventh century who were very successful, both in the capital and the provinces. Of this the stone tablet, disinterred in 1625, and erected in A.D. 781, is an unimpeachable witness. They possessed not only the protection but the active support and public acclamation of several succeeding emperors. But they had departed so far from the true

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simplicity of Christian monotheism that, by the end of the tenth century, there was apparently no vestige of them in China.

In 1250 the Polos reached the capital of the Mongol dynasty of China, and were Cordially received. Through the interest aroused by them. Rome sent out her first missionaries. Kublai Khan declared there were four great prophets in the world whom he held in equal honour, Jesus Christ, Mahomet, Moses, and Shakia muni. John de Monte Corvine was an able and an earnest missionary, and, before his death, in the beginning of the fourteenth century, had a considerable number of converts. The destruction of the short-lived Mongol dynasty by the Buddhist monk who founded the Ming dynasty, annihilated this mission.

These missions were conducted by men who had travelled over Central Asia, and need not necessarily have gone on board any other vessel than a river ferry-boat. But subsequent missions went by sea. As Xavier found the Japanese would have nothing to do with a religion which the learned Chinese had not received, he left Japan to convert the Chinese first. He never reached the mainland. He died and was buried on a small island off the south coast of China. If, however, his life and death had no influence directly on China, he moved the heart of Europe, and his enthusiastic example kindled a flame of zeal.

Portugal was then a flourishing kingdom, and the fortunate monopolist of all trade to the far east. Her trade with China was centred in the still existing town of Macao. Priests, doubtless, there ministered to the spiritual wants of Europeans. But one, Father Roger, began in 1579 to work among the Chinese, on whom he made a favourable impression. Other missionaries for China located themselves in Macao, whence they made various unsuccessful attempts to enter China proper. The first missionary to exert a powerful influence upon the Chinese was the Italian Jesuit, Father Ricci, a man of considerable learning, of marked ability, of fearless devotedness. Though he began his work among the Chinese in Macao, he gradually won his way, by his force of character, and mild though firm disposition, farther and farther into the interior, till, under the Emperor Wanli, he entered Peking. By a judicious use of rich presents, with which he was well-furnished, he made himself friends among the higher officials. Before the year 1600 this remarkable man was firmly seated in Peking. The emperor greatly admired, honoured, and utilised the mathematical and astronomical knowledge of Ricci and his associates. Missionaries spread over many provinces of the empire, and large numbers of all classes, especially of the higher and officials, became converts. Indeed it is stated by the Roman Catholic historians that one empress and several princes were baptised. So popular were the priests and so renowned their learning that some young Corean nobles, members of the usual embassy to Peking, sought them out, and at least one became a convert. From him sprang a movement which has survived down the centuries, and is at present existent in Corea in the form of considerable numbers of Romish converts.

The sudden downfall of the Ming dynasty threatened destruction to this work as the termination of the Mongol dynasty had done. But Adam Schaal, the German successor of Ricci, was retained at his astronomical post by the young Manchu emperor, and soon gained a very-influential position under the new dynasty. So favourable was the impression made by him that he was permitted, in 1650, six years after the accession of the Manchus, to lay the foundation of a large church on an extensive piece of ground close to the palace, granted by the emperor. This "temple" exceeded in height all other surrounding buildings. Inside it, in letters of gold, was the inscription by the emperor in praise of Christian teaching. And the sixty-sixth lineal descendant of Confucius forwarded four complimentary scrolls, which Schaal, with pardonable pride, exhibited in a conspicuous part of his new church. When the highest authorities were thus friendly, it need scarcely be said that the mission was very successful in making converts. A storm-cloud, raised by jealousy of Schaal's prominence, passed over the mission, which, however, left it intact as to numbers, though afterwards there were fewer officials, though still some, who openly joined the church. I may state here that there was less difference between the Romanist teaching then and Protestantism than there is now.

One of the learned Jesuits sent out under the direct auspices of the King of France notes that there were seventy missionaries from various Romish societies scattered over the empire. Each baptised every year between three and four hundred. In five years 50,000 idolators were baptised, besides nearly 5000 dying infants in Peking. There were two hundred churches and congregations in the empire. He concludes thus:—"This church (in China) heretofore very famous, but after that wholly overturned by superstition, bath at last been re-established one age ago, by one of the greatest men of our society, and augmented by the labours of a great many missionaries, governed by wise prelates, honoured by the protection of many emperors, supported by the bounty of all the princes of Europe."

How, then, it may well be asked, with this magnificent spring-tide of prosperity has the Romish Church not only not progressed, but actually gone back since those days ? It has not been from

lack of numbers of men ready to take up the 'place of those departed, nor yet from lack of zeal on the part of many of them. It is from the inherent and fatal viciousness of the Romish system. While weak, Jesuits are meek and lowly ; but when once they obtain power, it seems as if it were impossible to prevent them from becoming arrogant, troublesome and meddling. In Peking they became involved in a plot against a young emperor in favour of a brother whom they believed more likely to further their religion. In the provinces they stepped in between the law and converts accused of criminal conduct. It was not their religious zeal, it was their incessant

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and ultimately intolerable political action, which destroyed for ever the opportunity they had of converting China. For the same reason they are bitterly hated by officials and people to this day, though Father Hue is correct in stating the Chinese to be "tolerant and sceptical." Such a thing as purely religious persecution is virtually unknown in the history of China.

To this tolerance, the Mahommedans are a living witness. Not only have they never been persecuted because of their religion, but as many as are able to occupy governmental posts are perfectly free to do so. Several of the civil officials, and many of the higher officers in the army are Mahommedans, whose mosques are respected, and their worship unchallenged. But as Le Compte stated, "They are disturbed by no one, because they disturb no one." Had Romish priests learned this, to them apparently impossible lesson, China would have been to-day virtually a Roman Catholic power.

Seeing that Russia and France have again and again proved their inability to understand missions, except as political agencies, and that German colonisation has begotten a new-born missionary zeal on the same basis, we need scarcely be surprised if a nation like the Chinese regarded missionaries as political agents, especially when they saw the power of France intervening in their behalf to set up an *imperium in imperio*. This the Chinese refused to permit. Recently, when arguing with intelligent Chinese against their belief, they pointed to Cochin China, and urged that first came the French missionary, then the convert, then persecution, then the French army to avenge persecution, and then, annexation of the country. Their hostility to missions has, therefore, been entirely political, and in no sense religious.

Protestant missions have hitherto suffered from the action of the Romanists, and will continue to suffer till they are proved to be non-political. It is to be hoped that the firm stand recently taken by China against the French Protectorate of native Christians will soon terminate this unseemly phase of missions; and meanwhile appeals to the consul should be as rare as possible.

It is unnecessary to dwell upon the history of Protestant missions to China, which have had to fight so uphill a battle against the accumulated hatred of the people, who have been unable to distinguish between Roman Catholic and Protestant. Suffice it to say that in the beginning of the century, Morrison had to hide himself by day in an underground cellar in Canton to prevent the people knowing of his presence in the country—somewhat of a contrast this to the reception of Ricci and Schaal—and that in a recent year 4000 persons were added by baptism to the church. Protestant missions have been in many places attacked as Romish stations were. But these attacks when not for the reasons already explained were often caused by the missionary insisting on building his dwelling-house or chapel after western models. The Chinese should perhaps have welcomed this addition to their architecture, but they resent it. A riot springs up, the foreign house is pulled down, then follows lengthy legal correspondence, the authorities are caused a

considerable amount of trouble, the damage is ultimately made good, but a feeling of bitterness is left behind.

It is a mistake to suppose that the average mandarin can be guilty of hounding on the people against the missionary. The mandarin under whom a riot breaks out is almost always a sufferer by it. His reputation as a peace-preserving magistrate is blighted, and sometimes blasted. Whatever therefore his private feelings, it is contrary to self-interest for him to encourage disturbance. As happened in the case of Ricci, there are still mandarins who, privately the friends of the missionary, would deprecate a visit to their yamen, or the institution of a station in their city, if the sentiment of the community happened to be hostile to the foreigner.

As far back as 1870, the talented prime minister, Wun Siang, was able to distinguish between Romish and Protestant, or "French" and "English" missionaries. In his remarkable document on the missionary difficulty he declared with truth that the people did not know the difference. But this difference is becoming increasingly known, and the knowledge is producing good results. There are officials of all grades now friendly, who even in recent years regarded Christianity with contempt or aversion, and some mandarins of various ranks have confessed themselves secret believers. It is surely, from the standpoint of the Christian, a matter of no small importance that, in the interior, where the consul can have no residence, nor the merchant a place of business, the missionary may not only preach, but is permitted to purchase or rent premises, where he can live and carry on his work. A life characterised by patience, guided by caution and prudence, combined with a preaching founded on knowledge, as well as urged with zeal, will enable the missionary to prove that he is not a political agent ; and will lead the people to judge of Christianity on its merits.

There has been a good deal of discussion on the apparent failure of missions, and even from sensible men a wail of sorrow, or a burst of anger has been drawn forth by the comparative insignificance of the numbers of converts to the overwhelming increase in the numbers of heathen. Judging from the mission field of China, both the sorrow and the anger are equally misplaced. The farmer throws away and covers over great quantities of seed which is for a time invisible. He is not disheartened when after an interval he sees only here a single blade, and there, a couple bursting through the ground with great black spaces between. To his practised eye the earth is disturbed by an unseen agency, which will shortly transform the blackness into a mass of lovely green. We, too, see in many parts of China that the blackened mass is heaving, its solid fixity is gone forever, it moves, and it is by-and-by absolutely to disappear under the gladsome verdure of a new life.

John Ross

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