Beyond Religious Exclusivism: The Jesuit Attacks against Buddhism and Xu Dashou's Refutation of 1623

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Abstract

The article examines the dynamics of religious competition brought into Asia by Christianity in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. More specifically, it analyzes how Xu Dashou adopted an exclusivist approach in order to defend his own traditions, leading him to a full rejection of Christianity. After engaging himself for some time in an anti-Christian campaign, he understood that the exclusivist approach he had embraced was not congenial with his own traditions and, drawing from the metaphysical insights of Buddhism and Confucianism on ultimate reality and truth, he showed a way beyond religious exclusivism.

Keywords

Christianity – Buddhism – Confucianism – three teachings – exclusivism

Introduction

Inter-religious dialogue is increasingly seen as a necessity and an opportunity for all the world's religions. As religions are engaging in this dialogue, it is important to recognize the different mechanisms that have hindered it in the

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past. This paper discusses how Xu Dashou, a scholar in late Ming China, responded to Christian attacks on Buddhism by writing a treatise of refutation. After setting the historical background for Christianity in the area of Hangzhou around 1620, and the personal background for Xu Dashou, I shall reconstruct from archival evidences and his own treatise the complex motivations behind his initial interest in Christianity and his final rejection. More precisely, I shall analyze the dynamics of exclusion promoted by the Jesuit missionaries against Buddhism, and how Xu reacted by adopting a similar exclusivist approach which led him to great intellectual difficulties. This polemic between Christianity and Buddhism invites us today to reflect on the possibilities of a mutual dialogue between Christianity and other religion in general.

The Jesuit Attacks and the First Buddhist Reactions

In the sixteenth century, Jesuits missionaries encountered various forms of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, Thailand, Japan, and China. In those countries, Buddhism was not the only religion and could usually live harmoniously with other religions.¹ Westerners were puzzled by the tolerance of Asian religions because Europe at that time was torn apart by religious wars, each side holding that, as truth could only be one, religion in one particular country should also be one. During his stay in Japan in 1549–51, Francis Xavier (1506–52) had discussions with Buddhist monks and came to a preliminary, partial understanding of Buddhism. Other Jesuits like Cosme de Torres (1510–70), Luís Fróis (1532–1597), and Baltasar Gago (c.1520–83) investigated Buddhism further. On this basis, Alessandro Valignano (1539–1606), the Jesuit visitor for East Asia, worked from 1579 to 1582 in editing the *Catechismus christianae fidei*, known also as the *Catechismus Japonensis*.² His work notably presented Buddhism as a double-teaching: a popular doctrine consisting in the worship of deities, and an elite religion reserved to monks. According to those Western categories,

1 This does not exclude the fact that sectarian violence was committed sometimes in name of the Buddha or of the Buddhist community.

2 Alessandro Valignano, *Catechismus christianae fidei, in quo veritas nostrae religionis ostenditur, et sectae Japonenses confutantur* [*Catechismus Japonensis*] (Lisbon: Antonius Riberius, 1586; reprint: Tennessee: Kessinger La Vergne, 2009). See also Josef Franz Schütte, *Valignano's Mission Principles for Japan*, trans. John J. Coyne (Saint Louis, MO: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1980); and, more recently, Urs App, *The Cult of Emptiness: The Western Discovery of Buddhist Thought and the Invention of Oriental Philosophy* (Tokyo: University Media, 2012).

the popular teaching of Buddhism was a superstition or idolatry, but the inner teaching of the monks was even more pernicious because hidden: it amounted to nihilism and radical atheism.³ The *Catechismus Japonensis* analyzes through Aristotelian and Scholastic categories the inner teaching of Buddhism, and it shows its teaching to be intellectually flawed.

When the Italian Jesuit Michele Ruggieri (1543–1607) came to China, he explained Christianity in reference to Buddhism. His *True Record of the Lord of Heaven* (*Tianzhu shilu* 天主實錄, 1584) adopts many Buddhist terms in order to express Christian doctrine (paradise or *tiantang* 天堂, hell or *diyu* 地獄), and yet it clearly refutes central tenets of Buddhism like the transmigration of souls. Later, Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) made the decisive step of explaining Christianity in Confucian terms, and his *True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven* (*Tianzhu shiyi* 天主實義, 1603) represents a vigorous refutation of Buddhist teachings, especially on transmigration and fasting.⁴

The reactions of the Buddhist communities to the Jesuits' attacks were quite late and quite slow. In 1608, the Buddhist layman Yu Chunxi 虞淳熙 (1553–1621) sent a letter to Ricci asking him to stop his attacks on Buddhism and to study it instead.⁵ However, the Jesuits and Chinese Catholics continued their assault on Buddhism. In 1615, five years after Ricci's death, for the first time a Buddhist monk, Zhu Hong 祿宏 in Hangzhou, wrote a refutation of Christianity. His refutation of the Christian concept of heaven in his *Four Essays on Heaven* (*Tianshuo siduan* 天說四端), is quite cursory, and Zhu Hong instead focused on the religious precepts of fasting and the interdiction of killing. Despite being unsystematic and quite superficial, this refutation of Christianity by Zhu Hong marks a turning point, because he was one of the most eminent Buddhist figures of his time.⁶ Thus, it is not mere coincidence that in Nanjing the following year Shen Que (沈漼) launched the first official interdiction of Christianity, and finally obtained from the imperial court a nationwide prohibition of the new religion. This event put for the first time the Catholic Church under the spotlight, and it came to be known as the Nanjing case, or Nanjing persecution, depending whether one looks at it from the point of view of the

3 See Thierry Meynard, "Chinese Buddhism and the Threat of Atheism in Seventeenth-Century Europe," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 31 (2011): 3–23.

4 See Matteo Ricci, *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven*, trans. Douglas Lancashire and Peter Hu; revised edition by Thierry Meynard (Chestnut Hill, MA: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2016), 169–95.

5 See Douglas Lancashire, "Buddhist reaction to Christianity in Late Ming China," *Journal of the Oriental Society of Australia* 6 (1968–69): 82–102, here 83.

6 See Lancashire, "Buddhist reaction," 87–91.

government or from the point of view of the Catholic Church.⁷ However, after only a couple of years, Christianity could resume its fast-track development. This was particularly the case in Hangzhou, where the Church was protected by prominent Chinese Catholics like Li Zhizao (李之藻, 1571–1630) and Yang Tingyun (楊廷筠, 1562–1627).

Xu Dashou: The Personal Background

Having described the historical background, let us now turn to our main character. In the summer of 1625, in Fuzhou (福州), Xu Dashou (許大受) decided to destroy the book he had painstakingly written two years before. His heart was filled with contradictory thoughts and feelings. Memories came to mind of how he had met the missionaries, of his conversations with Giulio Aleni (1582–1649) in the church of Hangzhou, of how he had diligently read the Christians' books, fervently attended religious services, and met new friends.⁸ In this period of intense intellectual stimulation, he had also encountered difficulties accepting some elements of the Christian teaching, and so he ultimately delayed his baptism. Around this time, his mother had passed away. Friends and relatives who had already received baptism had urged him to be baptized as well, and probably suggested organizing Christian funerals for his mother. But what assurance could Christianity give him about the eternal rest of his parents, now both deceased, since they had not been baptized? How could he express the feelings of a filial son if the fate of his parents had already been sealed at their death? Finally, Xu made up his mind: he would hold Buddhist funerals for his mother and invite Buddhist monks to recite incantations for his mother so that she might be reborn in the Pure Land of Amitabha Buddha. His decision meant abandoning all the Christian ideas, rituals, relationships that had shaped his life in past years. And yet, he could not simply abandon Christianity in this way; he felt the need to convince himself how Christian teaching was flawed and perverse. While observing the prescribed mourning rituals at home for forty-nine days, Xu wrote a refutation of Christianity, methodically criticizing its doctrine and rituals. He thought that by writing this refutation he could completely eliminate Christianity from his life. But this

7 See Edward Kelly, "The Anti-Christian Persecution of 1616–1617 in Nanking" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1971).

8 Concerning Aleni, the best presentation to date is still Gianni Criveller, *Preaching Christ in Late Ming China: The Jesuits' Presentation of Christ from Matteo Ricci to Giulio Aleni* (Taipei: Taipei Ricci Institute, 1997).

was not enough: Christianity should also be banned from the entire country. He realized how ineffective the prohibition of 1617 had been, and thus a systematic treatise was needed, showing how wrong, pernicious, and dangerous Christianity was. The mourning period being over, Xu went out and distribute his treatise among the high officers in the provinces of Zhejiang and Fujian. He called it *Zuopi* 佐闢 (Help to the refutation), because he was aware that, not being employed in any important function, he could hope only that, through the connections of his deceased father, he might approach some high officials who could urge the court to ban Christianity. After two years of vain attempts at convincing prominent officeholders, Xu may have realized that his desire for revenge against Christianity had not brought him the peace he was looking for, and on the contrary was leading him astray. In a final twist, Xu decided to destroy the copies of the treatise he still had in stock and even to take back some he had given away. Such is, in a nutshell, Xu's tortuous itinerary as we can reconstruct it. In order to understand more fully the intellectual, psychological, and spiritual twists of Xu Dashou, we need to start narrating his story from the beginning.

Xu's father, Xu Fuyuan (許孚遠, 1535–1604), was a well-known figure in the political and intellectual scene of the time. A native of Deqing (德清), not far from Hangzhou, in 1562 he successfully passed the highest grade of the imperial examination, and came to occupy high positions, becoming the inspector-general, or *xunfu* (巡撫), of the province of Fujian. In this position, he contributed to the national defense against the disorders caused by pirates. Later, he occupied other high positions in Nanjing. In the margins of his political career, Xu Fuyuan pursued intellectual interests. Devoted to Confucianism, he maintained contacts with leading scholars and he himself produced some commentaries on the Confucian Classics.⁹

Chinese sources tell us very little about Xu Dashou himself; fortunately, Professor Adrian Dudink of Leuven University was able to find precious information on him in the Jesuit reports of the period. Based on those archival documents, Dudink wrote a very detailed and precise analysis of different documents concerning Xu Dashou.¹⁰ Xu Fuyuan had two sons, but the elder died at a young age.¹¹ In 1609, five years after the death of his father, Xu Dashou invited Ye Xianggao 葉向高 (1562–1627), a friend of his father's and

9 "Biography of Xu Fuyuan" (*Xu Fuyuan zhuan* 許孚遠傳), *Ming history* (*Mingshi* 明史), *juan* 283.

10 See Adrian Dudink, "The *Sheng-ch'ao Tso-p'i* (1623) of Hsü Ta-shou," in *Conflict and Accommodation in Early Modern East Asia*, ed. Leonard Blussé and Harriet T. Zurndorfer (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 94–140.

11 Dudink, "The *Sheng-ch'ao Tso-p'i*," 107–8.

a high-ranking official, to write an inscription for Xu Fuyuan's tombstone. Xu Dashou was admitted in the imperial academy in Nanjing, and in deference to his father's merits, he served as an officer in the ministry of justice.

What were the motivations for Xu Dashou in writing the *Zuopi*, this anti-Christian work in ten volumes, or *juan* (卷)? In his study, Dudink proposes some hypotheses. My own study here is based on those hypotheses, and attempts to go further by reconstructing Xu Dashou's intellectual and spiritual journey. The story will unfold in four stages: first, his initial interest in and study of Christianity; second, his rejection of the Christian faith because of his intellectual reservations and a personal crisis; third, the active phase of attacking Christianity and his reshaping of the Chinese tradition in a xenophobic direction; fourth, his destruction of the *Zuopi* and the end of his anti-Christian campaign.

First Stage: Xu as Catechumen

Within a couple of years of the national prohibition of 1617, Christianity was able to continue its development. In 1620, the more open-minded Ye Xianggao was back in his post as Grand Secretary of the Grand Secretariat (*neige shoufu*, 內閣首府) in Beijing. In Hangzhou in particular, Christianity was flourishing, under the patronage of Li Zhizao and Yang Tingyun. In 1623 alone, Aleni published three books: *The Complete Map of all the Countries* (*Wanguo quantu*, 萬國全圖), *The Records of Regions beyond the Jurisdiction of the Imperial Geographer* (*Zhifang waiji*, 職方外紀), and *The Survey of Western Learning* (*Xixuefan*, 西學凡), to the immense pride of the Christian community. It seems that the sad memories of the Nanjing Case, or Nanjing Persecution, were gone for good. Even in Deqing, Xu Dashou's town, the Catholic communities expanded quickly, reaching three hundred people, according to the Jesuit annual letter of 1623.

In Hangzhou itself, Xu would have had many occasions to interact with this new and rapidly expanding community. The Third Refutation of the *Zuopi* informs us that Xu had conversations with Aleni. Those may have happened around 1620–22 since Aleni had arrived at Hangzhou only in 1619. Xu went to Aleni to learn about Christianity, and both developed a personal relationship. Also, when Xu's mother passed away in 1623, Aleni visited his family house in Deqing in order to express condolence; he was still hoping that Xu would finally embrace Christian faith.¹² The *Zuopi* tells us that Xu had also contacts with

12 Annual letter 1624, 177–78; see Dudink, "The Sheng-ch'ao Tso-p'i," 134–35.

other Jesuit missionaries. Among them was Niccolò Longobardo (1559–1654) whose name is mentioned three times in the *Zuopi*.¹³

Around Xu there were also a good numbers of Chinese Catholics. He would have certainly known Li Zhizao and Yang Tingyun, but it seems that Xu avoided on purpose mentioning their names in the *Zuopi*. In the Fifth Refutation, he mentioned instead his personal friend, Zhou Guoxiang 周國祥, as well as a Catholic in Hangzhou who held regular gatherings in his own house.

The great deal of Christian literature mentioned in the *Zuopi* suggests that Xu had already acquired considerable familiarity with Christian doctrine in 1621–22. The Eighth Refutation alone mentions the titles of more than ten different works.¹⁴ Xu was also quite familiar with Catholic liturgy, since he mentions basic prayers like the Our Father and the Creed. The Fifth Refutation also describes the ritual of baptism (holy water, salt, candle, and so on), and so it seems that Xu attended the baptism of one of his friends, perhaps the Zhou Guoxiang mentioned above.¹⁵ Further, the *Zuopi* shows that Xu had an insider's knowledge of the organization of the Catholic community in Hangzhou. Thus, Dudink made the hypothesis that Xu was a convert or a catechumen.¹⁶ However, if Xu had been baptized at some point, the Jesuit missionaries would not have failed to mention it, and so it is more probable that Xu was never baptized, but hesitated to embrace Christianity due to some intellectual and personal reserves.

The Second Stage: Xu's Rejection of Christianity

It is difficult to know the reasons for conversion to a religious faith; it is even more difficult to know why someone abandons a religious faith and turns against it. Xu Dashou had studied Christianity for two years and had interacted with the Catholic community of Hangzhou, but he suddenly changed his mind. Probably something in the Catholic doctrine presented a stumbling block for him: the Christian claim of exclusivity, as we have mentioned in the

13 According to Joseph Dehergne, Longobardo was in Hangzhou in 1621–23; see *Répertoire des jésuites de Chine de 1552 à 1800* (Rome: Institutum Historicum S.I., 1973), 154.

14 *Zuopi* 34a, 290. The text of the *Zuopi* was edited by Tokugawa Nariaki (1800–60) for the Kōdōkan House 弘道館 in Mito 水戸藩, and included in a Buddhist collection: Gen-Min bukkyō hen 元明佛教編, 1856, 14:11045–650. I have used a reprint of it, published in Taiwan by Huayu Press 華宇出版社: *Dazangjing bubian* 大藏經補編, 1986, 28: 273–94.

15 *Zuopi* 18a, 282.

16 Dudink, "The *Sheng-ch'ao Tso-p'i*," 130.

introduction of this article. When Jesuit missionaries and Chinese Catholics presented Christianity they felt the need to distinguish it from Buddhism. This was not only a mark of hostility towards Buddhism, which they regarded as idolatry, but also a pedagogical necessity: since the two religions shared so many similarities, it was necessary to clarify Catholic teaching by highlighting its doctrinal differences with Buddhism, and in this process of clarification, the missionaries and the Chinese Catholics would easily make value judgments, declaring that Christianity alone is correct, and Buddhism completely wrong. In the *True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven*, Ricci discarded the whole of Buddhist teaching as wrong, and he also slandered the Buddhist monks as liars, hypocrite, and corrupt.¹⁷ Most of the Chinese Christians entirely agreed about rejecting Buddhism, either because they had had little sympathy for Buddhism even before conversion (like Xu Guangqi [徐光啟], 1562–1633), or because their conversion made them reject their former faith (like Yang Tingyun). Not only did Christianity require abandoning Buddhism completely, but also it demanded denying any truth to the faith's doctrines. Thus, at the psychological level, people who had previous ties with Buddhism may have been hesitant to adopt the new faith. Also, at the intellectual level, those assertions of exclusivism would have been the most difficult to accept.

According to the Jesuit annual letter of 1623, Xu's mother passed away in 1623, and this would have created a personal crisis tearing him apart between the Christian teaching and his own tradition.¹⁸ His mother's death forced Xu to make a decision, and he eventually decided for traditional funerals. We do not know whether his mother was a devout Buddhist or not, but Xu would certainly have considered the fate of his deceased parents. Catholic doctrine could give him no definitive assurance about their salvation. In the Fifth Refutation, Xu Dashou summarizes the Catholic position: "A good son who flatters the Lord of Heaven will certainly go to paradise, but this would be of no profit to his parents because the wrath of God is terrible and no one can escape from it."¹⁹ Xu Dashou may have felt helpless, finding in Christianity no way to alleviate his possible guilt about the fate of his father and mother burning in hell. In the Sixth Refutation, Xu also condemned Christianity for not respecting ancestors. In contrast, through Buddhist funerals, Xu could express his feelings of filial piety. According to the Jesuit letter of 1623, he turned his house in a temple of idols, inviting monks to recite prayers. When Aleni came to visit

17 See, for example, Ricci, *True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven*, 357.

18 *Annual letter* 1623, 405a/b; see Dudink, "The *Sheng-ch'ao Tso-p'i*," 111.

19 *Zuopi* 17a, 281.

him in Deqing and learned that Xu was organizing Buddhist funerals for his deceased mother, the missionary would have been shocked, but he may nevertheless have decided to visit Xu's home in order to express his condolences. On such an occasion, it would certainly have been improper for Aleni to engage Xu in argument.

His mother's funeral may have provided Xu Dashou with the occasion for rejecting Christianity, but there were other elements which could have played an important role in his decision. First, Xu was probably astonished and quite worried by the rapid growth of Christianity. In 1623, when Aleni published his three books in the space of one year, some Chinese Catholics in Hangzhou became very arrogant, even to the point of saying that "Confucius does not measure up to Aleni by far" (Fourth Refutation).²⁰ Xu may have been worried about the influence of Christianity among his own relatives. According to the Jesuit annual letter of 1623, his cousin Xu Shoujie (許受節) had been baptized together with his son and grandson.²¹ From Aleni Xu Shoujie had received an *Agnus Dei*, a small medal with Christ as the Lamb of God. When Xu Shoujie happened to cross the Yellow River on a boat and was caught in a strong tempest, he held the medal and prayed; immediately the winds stopped and he was able to reach the shore safely. This kind of religious fervor may have appeared suspect to Xu Dashou, who seemed to have contacts with Christianity before Xu Shoujie did and engaged in lengthy studies to understand Christianity more deeply. Xu Dashou may also have been skeptical about the miraculous powers of such a medal: in the Seventh Refutation he mocks the superstition of Catholics who believed that a similar medal had saved a Christian house from a huge fire in Hangzhou.²² According to the Jesuit annual letter of 1623, it seems that Xu Shoujie was baptized before the death of Xu Dashou's mother. If that is the case, we can imagine that a fervent convert like Xu Shoujie would have tried to convince Xu Dashou to arrange Christian funerals for his aunt, and also have argued against Buddhist funerals. Xu Shoujie's extreme stance may have backfired and pushed his cousin in the opposite direction.

A second concern for Xu Dashou was that Christianity undermined social stability and threatened national security. In the late Ming period, external pressure was put upon China from the Manchus to the north, the Japanese to the east, and the Portuguese to the south. In a report to the imperial court,

20 *Zuopi* 16a, 281.

21 Dudink, "The *Sheng-ch'ao Tso-p'i*," 112–23.

22 According to Dudink (117–19), the fire happened on August 15, 1621, but the house of Li Zhizao was spared from destruction.

mentioned by Xu Dashou in the *Zuopi*, his father Xu Fuyuan had expressed concerns over an alliance between the Japanese, the Portuguese in Macao, and the Spanish in the Philippines.²³ Xu Dashou also mentions some incidents that had occurred to the Portuguese in Guangdong some one hundred years before. Domestically, China suffered from rebellions like that of the sect of the White Lotus in the Shandong province, which ended only in 1622. In the same year, another rebellion instigated by Ye Langsheng (葉郎生) started in the northern part of Zhejiang province, not far from Hangzhou. In this climate of great instability, Xu Dashou came to see Christianity as a danger to social stability and national security. He states in the *Zuopi* that foreigners had entered China without authorization, making conversions through gifts of money, and that the Christians were not abiding by the laws and could instigate a rebellion, like the sect of the White Lotus.²⁴

Xu Dashou is not an isolated case of someone who initially became interested in Christianity and then turned hostile. When he was in Beijing, Shen Que had friendly relations with the Jesuits,²⁵ but in Nanjing he was probably irritated by Alfonso Vagnone's (1566–1640) open criticism of Buddhism. Similarly, Jiang Dejing (蔣德璟, 1593–1646) at first collaborated with Aleni on one of his books in 1623, but when a religious case arose in Fujian in 1637, he advocated the elimination of Christianity.²⁶ We can discern a common pattern in people like Xu Dashou, Shen Que, and Jiang Dejing, who were initially attracted to Christianity, but, after having studied it more deeply, discovered Christian claims that they could not accept, especially the statement that Christianity had the full truth and that Buddhism was completely wrong. Thus, their initial sympathy towards Christianity turned into a deep hostility. Like Shen Que and Jiang Dejing, Xu Dashou felt disappointed by Christianity and decided to fight against it at the political level, but unlike them, Xu also felt the need to ground this political battle on an intellectual basis, and so he investigated the foundations of Christianity to reveal its flaws and contradictions. Xu rejected Christianity, yet he adopted its radicalism. As Christianity was denying any truth and good in Buddhism, Xu attempted to show that Christianity was completely wrong and pernicious. To the exclusivism of Christianity, Xu answered with the same degree of exclusivism.

23 *Zuopi* 3b, 275.

24 *Zuopi* 18b–19a, 282; 41a, 293.

25 Dudink, “The *Sheng-ch'ao Tso-p'i*,” 132.

26 Wang Xiliang 王喜亮, “Poxieji fanjiao yuanyin yanjiu” 《破邪集》反教原因研究 [Research on the reasons behind the anti-Christian work, *Poxieji*] (MA thesis, Sun Yat-sen University 中山大學碩士學位論文, 2015), 22.

Third Stage: Xu's Anti-Christian Campaign

In order to refute Christianity, Xu reread the books he had first encountered as a catechumen. He systematically refuted Christian doctrines, like their ideas about God, creation, and the soul, as well as Catholic rituals and even the secular knowledge of geography and astronomy brought by the Jesuits.

Compared to previous refutations of Christianity, the *Zuopi* is certainly the most comprehensive and systematic. Another distinctive feature is that it refutes Christianity from the point of view of the three Chinese traditions of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. This is a completely new approach and constitutes the originality of the *Zuopi*. In the introduction, Xu sets up a rhetorical question: why not refute Christianity from the point of view of Confucianism alone, leaving Buddhism aside? Xu answers:

Since the foreigners say that there is a life after death, it is necessary to use Buddhism with Confucianism in order to refute their doctrine. Their trick is precisely to openly attack Buddhism and to secretly destroy Confucianism. Their nominal attack on Buddhism aims at deceiving Confucians without deep understanding. I shall strive to show everyone that their pernicious doctrines do not reach the level of Buddhism and Taoism, and even less to the level of Confucianism. Those three teachings cannot accommodate a fourth one. In terms of correct government and learning, the way transmitted by the wise people across the ages is incorruptible.²⁷

Here Xu reveals the missionaries' strategy: first to attack Buddhism, and later to attack Confucianism. Thus Confucians should not rejoice at seeing Buddhism attacked by Christianity, and of course they should not unite with Christianity against Buddhism, but instead they should join with Buddhists against the Christians who aim at destroying the whole of Chinese tradition, including Confucianism. Similarly, when Buddhists understand that the Christians look down on Confucius, they should not tolerate it and they should defend Confucianism. As we can see, Xu's strategy of uniting the three teachings counteracts precisely the strategy of Christianity of playing them against each other. The *Zuopi* enacts a sacred union of the three teachings against Christianity, with each teaching being able to refute Christianity in a specific area: the five Confucian relationships refute the egalitarian conception of Christian communities; the Buddhist doctrine of reincarnation refutes the utilitarian conception of the Christian paradise; the naturalism of Daoism refutes Christian dogmatism.

²⁷ *Zuopi* 2a, 274.

We need to pay attention to the fact that in the process of refuting Christianity, Xu is reshaping the Ming concept of the Three Teachings into One (*sanjiao heyi*, 三教合一), which initially meant that the three teachings were not opposed to each other and could in fact be harmonized. Here, Xu adds a new meaning by creating an exclusivist unity of the three teachings: when a new teaching (Christianity) comes into China, the unity of the three teachings must be enhanced to a defensive level, to protect the three against the intrusion of a fourth. In other words, the arrival of Christianity forces the tradition to change itself and to redefine its boundaries. The remodeling of the three teachings into an exclusivist system led Xu Dashou to adopt radical stances to counteract Christianity's radicalism. The *Zuopi* shows a strong xenophobia, rejecting the presence of the foreigners on the Chinese soil, and rejecting all their knowledge in astronomy and geography as incorrect and useless. Xu also recounted stories that he knew to be only rumors, without any reality. For example, in the Seventh Refutation, he quotes a report written one hundred years before, according to which the Portuguese were stealing children to eat their flesh.²⁸ Similarly he copied from Yu Chunxi the story that the missionaries converted people to Christianity by offering money or mechanical clocks.²⁹ Xu Dashou had personal contacts with foreigners and Chinese Catholics in Hangzhou, and he knew beyond all doubt that those stories were unfounded. However, in order to build his case against Christianity and stir up hostility, he made use of the stories furnished by Yu Chunxi. Similarly, Xu expressed his opposition to Catholic rituals that violated the rules of gender separation, and went even further by suggesting that the priests and the Catholic women "were committing impure acts at night" (*hunye hunza* 昏夜混雜).³⁰ Such rumors against Christians circulated in Hangzhou, being repeated over and over in the anti-Christian literature. In order to stir up panic against Christianity, Xu went so far as to express his fear of being murdered by the Christians.

Fourth Stage: The Intellectual Reasons for Aborting the Anti-Christian Campaign

In 1623, after having published the *Zuopi*, Xu Dashou took upon himself the responsibility of distributing it. According to the Jesuit annual letter of 1623, Xu went to see the officer in Deqing and warned him that Christians might

²⁸ *Zuopi* 26b, 286.

²⁹ *Zuopi* 18b, 282.

³⁰ *Zuopi* 18a, 282.

attempt to stir up a rebellion and kill the local officers.³¹ In 1624, on account of the *Zuopi*, the governor of Hangzhou decided to ban Christianity, but before the ban was promulgated, Ye Xianggao happened to go through Hangzhou and was able to persuade the governor to set the plan aside. At that time, Ye Xianggao invited Aleni to go to Fuzhou. According to the Jesuit annual letter of 1625, Xu Dashou himself went to Fujian and there distributed his *Zuopi* to the high officials. In April or May 1625, Xu Dashou visited Ye Xianggao at Fuzhou. Xu knew that Ye was protecting the Christians, but he may have decided to visit him because of the personal connections between Ye and his father, Xu Fuyuan. In the presence of Ye Xianggao, Xu Dashou unexpectedly met Aleni. We can easily imagine Xu Dashou's unease at facing Aleni, and, according to the Jesuit annual letter, Xu Dashou merely expressed his thankfulness to Aleni for having visited him in Deqing after his mother passed away.³²

The letter of 1625 informs us about the final twist to the story. A Chinese Catholic named Zhao Mingyang (趙鳴陽, baptismal name of Melchior) went to see Xu Dashou in Fuzhou and told him all the errors contained in the *Zuopi*—probably the ones we have noted above.³³ Xu Dashou knew clearly that, in many passages of his work, he had unfairly framed Christianity for the sake of creating a feeling of panic towards it. According to the letter, Xu promised to burn the remaining copies of his work, and he went to see Aleni to ask for forgiveness. It seems that Xu indeed destroyed many copies of the *Zuopi*, because only twenty years later the Buddhist monk Ouyi Zhixu (藕益智旭, 1599–1655) complained that the work was very difficult to get hold of.³⁴ Fortunately for us, Xu was unable to destroy all the copies.

Xu's decision to abort his anti-Christian campaign can be understood from different angles. First, he may have realized that he had not had much success in rallying high officials against Christianity, due to Ye Xianggao's still considerable power in the region. Equally, he may have recognized that his *Zuopi* contained unfounded accusations against Christianity, perhaps feeling some shame at holding such extreme opinions and advocating such harsh policies upon people he had befriended in the past. Also, at the psychological level, his

31 Dudink, "The *Sheng-ch'ao Tso-p'i*," 116.

32 Ibid., 131.

33 Concerning the role of Melchior Zhao in strengthening the connection between Ye Xianggao and Aleni, see George Dunne, *Generation of Giants: The Story of the Jesuits in China in the Last Decades of Ming Dynasty* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1962), 190–91.

34 See Charles B. Jones, "Pì xiè jí 闢邪集: *Collected Refutations of Heterodoxy* by Ouyi Zhixu (藕益智旭, 1599–1655)," *Pacific World* 11 (2009) 351–408, here 356.

campaign against Christians did not bring him the peace he sought, but had instead led him astray, towards feelings of hate.

Ultimately, intellectual reasons may have been even more persuasive. Xu may have felt that the new role he had played in defense of the Chinese tradition was a mistake, and in fact ran counter to the ideals of Confucianism and Buddhism, as we shall see.

In the Second Refutation, Xu stated that Christians committed the mistake of venerating a God, at once invisible and yet animated by desires and attached to the illusions of selfhood (*wojian* 我見).³⁵ In the Seventh Refutation, Xu expressed the same criticism in Confucian terms: by harboring the seven feelings of happiness, anger, sadness, joy, love, hate, and desire (*xi nu ai le ju ai wu yu*, 喜怒哀樂懼愛惡欲), the Lord of Heaven showed himself unable to reach the realm of the unity of nature (*yixing*, 一性).³⁶ According to Xu's understanding, God created the world and humanity only for his own selfish satisfaction, for the sake of having people to worship him. Because the Christians have this conception of a God who distinguishes himself from the rest of the cosmos and demands from human beings an absolute obedience and reverence, they engage in competition with other teachings, claiming that their religion alone is correct. In contrast, the Buddha and the neo-Confucian concept of *Taiji* (太極) go beyond any idea of separateness from the cosmos. Thus they are not morally attached to the cosmos, or, as Xu said in the Seventh Refutation:

the Buddha exists beyond all dharma, and this is similar to the Confucian saying that everything unites with the *Taiji* and that The Most Venerable has no equal. The true body in its fullness is one with its fundamental nature, without claiming Venerability for itself. Circumstances may lead to different karmic retributions and transformations, or as the Confucians say, each thing has its own *Taiji*, so that everyone is Venerable unto himself. However, the Buddha teaches that the self has no real existence, and thus no one and nothing can be considered as being inferior. The one who reaches the universal principle is called the Venerable, meaning that he has realized the equality of everything.³⁷

According to Xu, Buddha or the *Taiji*, unlike the Christian God, contain and unite everything precisely because they do not have any desire of controlling

35 *Zuopi* 8a, 277.

36 *Zuopi* 24a, 285.

37 *Zuopi* 21a, 284.

things or any desire of being venerated. From this standpoint, we can understand now why the reactions of the Buddhist world to the Christian attacks were slow and mild.

Christianity brought to China two completely new concepts, which are deeply interrelated: the idea of an absolute God, and the idea of an exclusivist religion. Chinese Christianity adopted many ideas and expressions from Confucianism, but yet felt the need to separate itself strictly from Buddhism, Daoism, and popular religions. Facing the exclusivist attitude of Christianity, Buddhism faced a dilemma: could it adopt the same approach in refuting Christianity, and still be faithful to their more inclusive stance? My analysis of the *Zuopi* shows that Xu Dashou, in his refutation of Christianity, inclined to an exclusivist approach, building up an enclosed interpretation of Three Teachings into One. In order to respond to Christianity's unfair attacks on Buddhism, Xu adopted no fairer strategies, and came to immerse himself into the conflict. For example, Ricci in the *True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven* had wrongly accused the Buddhists of having borrowed from Christianity the concepts of paradise and hell, and to have corrupted their original meaning.³⁸ In the Seventh Refutation, Xu Dashou replies in kind, listing the concepts Christianity stole from Buddhism. Paradoxically, all the commonalities between Christianity and Buddhism that could have provided a platform for dialogue became instead the battlefield between the two.

Once Xu started to fight back, it became difficult for him to disengage. He developed a one-sided view on reality, and promoted extremist stances toward Christianity. His *Zuopi* came to stress the cultural difference between the Chinese and the foreigners, and he fomented fear against a foreign religion.

Such an exclusivist approach runs contrary to the ideals of both Buddhism and Confucianism as just elaborated by Xu Dashou, since, in the highest realm of Buddha or *Taiji*, all things are equalized, and unlike the Christian God, the Buddha and the *Taiji* are not distinguished from all else. This metaphysical view on the ultimate reality precludes Buddhism or Confucianism being erected as an absolute teaching above all others, but on the contrary leads to the idea that all teachings are equal in their ultimate goals. Xu may have finally decided to abandon his anti-Christian campaign because he now saw things from the point of view of the equalization of all teachings. He no longer felt the need to fight back.

³⁸ Ricci, *True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven*, 117.

Conclusion

Early Jesuit missionaries in Asia had a very superficial understanding of Buddhism, and so their refutation of Buddhist philosophy based upon Aristotelianism and Scholasticism was often off the mark, and could be easily dismissed by those like Xu Dashou. In fact, behind the familiar aspect of an organized religion, the Jesuit missionaries encountered the disconcerting idea of an absolute that was not expressed as a personal God.

Facing Christianity's attacks, Buddhism could either ignore them or answer back. Xu Dashou initially chose the second way, and created a new idea of China based on the three traditions of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism, in order to prevent the intrusion of a fourth doctrine. But having created an enclosed idea of China, Xu Dashou may have realized that this defensive construction ran counter to the universalism of his own tradition.

Modernity has produced the idea of religious pluralism and ecumenical dialogue. In contrast to the traditional conception of religious tolerance that had prevailed in Asia, and which was ultimately embraced by Xu Dashou, the modern concept stresses a proactive dialogue between religions, based on mutual respect and mutual understanding. Religions may accept and welcome inter-religious dialogue as an opportunity to change for the better, to rid themselves of the idea that they alone embody the fullness of truth, to enrich their self-understanding through encounter with other traditions—so that Buddhists may become better Buddhists, and Christians better Christians. Xu Dashou's insights about an absolute reality that is itself completely de-absolutized are an invitation for Christianity and other religious traditions to find similar forms of de-absolutization that could be a common ground for dialogue.