XU GUANGQI AND BUDDHISM

Unlike some other late Ming Christian literati, like Yang Tingyun 楊廷筠 (1563–1629), who before their conversion had been lay Buddhists, Xu Guangqi 徐光啟 had no Buddhist family background, and his knowledge of Buddhist doctrine appears to have been rather superficial. The only reference to Xu’s interest in the subject occurs in his “Christian biography” (Xu Guangqi xinglüe 徐光啟行略, 1678, by Philippe Couplet and Zhang Xingyao 張星曜), in which it is said that in his early youth Xu not only studied the Confucian classics but also became broadly familiar with the Buddhist and Daoist scriptures, “which he considered illusory and false, and unfit to serve as a way to establish oneself in life, so after all he found no satisfaction in them”. However, this statement cannot be accepted at face value; it sounds like a cliché that one would expect to find in this clearly propagandistic Christian text. Xu Guangqi’s anti-Buddhist writings testify of no more than a rather superficial acquaintance with Buddhist doctrinal ideas and of a critical observation of ritual and devotional practices which formed part of lay Buddhism, and which he rejected as being irrational and superstitious.

In taking his stand against Buddhism Xu was inspired from two different quarters, which, however, in his worldview were completely integrated: his adherence to the movement called “Practical” (or “Solid”) studies (shixue 實學), and his acceptance of “Heavenly Studies” (tianxue 天學), i.e. the combination of Christian beliefs and European science and technology introduced by the Jesuits. The way in which in his case these various elements constituted a consistent whole is abundantly attested in his writings. It starts from the observation that in the course of many centuries the original teachings of Confucius (a system of pure moral guidelines

1 Couplet and Zhang 1678:1b (for bibliographical data see Appendix). In his “Summary Account of my Father’s Life” (Xiankao shilüe 先考事略, XGQJ vol. II: 526), Xu merely states that his father “was generally familiar with books on yin and yang, astrology, mantic arts, and Buddhist and Daoist texts”, which does not suggest a specific commitment to Buddhism. That Xu Guangqi himself as a young boy received his elementary education in a village school in a Buddhist temple is not relevant, since temples were very often used to that purpose.
for the individual, state and society, combined with some kind of original monotheism) had become both incomplete and degenerated. Part of the ancient wisdom had been destroyed by the “fires of Qin”, and whatever remained had become diluted and—literally—mystified by borrowings from Buddhism and Daoism. As a result, in some quarters Confucianism had been deflected from its down-to-earth, practical aims of political and social guidance (jingshi 經世) and turned into a metaphysical system of vain theorizing and mystical introspection. The Heavenly Studies may serve to remedy the situation in various ways. They serve to restore the original monotheism of China’s golden past and thus “fill the gaps in Confucianism” (bu ru 補儒). By their emphasis on science and technology they reinforce the practical value of Confucianism-cum-Christianity for state and society. And last but not least, the Jesuits’ utter rejection of Buddhism, Daoism, and all kinds of “popular superstition” serves to improve the mores and to restore Confucianism to its pristine purity. It was on the basis of this hybrid ideology that Xu Guangqi developed his anti-Buddhist argumentation.

In doing so, he was also directly influenced by the Jesuits’ own polemical writings (and no doubt also by their ideas as they expressed them in oral communication), and it may therefore be useful here to summarize the Jesuit arguments as found in Matteo Ricci’s Chinese writings (notably in his Tianshu shiyi 天主實義 and in his letter to the Buddhist scholar Yu Chunxi 虞淳熙 of 1610).

(1) The first and most basic objection concerns the transcendental nature of the Buddha, who has passed beyond all existence, and who is therefore superior to even the highest gods. In the Jesuit perspective this means that Śākyamuni, a mere human teacher, has attempted to place himself above God—an act of spiritual usurpation and rebelliousness.

(2) The Buddhist argument that Buddhahood here stands for the “undifferentiated” Absolute (called kong 空, “Emptiness”) as the substratum of all phenomena is rejected: Ricci and all later Jesuit apologists take kong in its literal sense, and deny that such Emptiness (and “Non-being”, wu 無) can produce anything.

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2 Ricci 1603, I, section 4: 47a–48b: Lancashire and Hu 1985: 205-09 (par. 208–42); also in Ricci’s letter to Yu Chunxi, in Bianxue yidu 辯學遺牘 (see Appendix), p. 4b (p. 644).