Jeremy Clarke


Jesuit historian Jeremy Clarke analyses the identity (re)constructions of Chinese Catholic Christianity through the ages. As entry point the author focuses on the veneration of Mary and Mariology in Chinese Catholicism. The Chinese Catholic Church has been officially consecrated to Our Lady Queen of China at the first plenary council in Shanghai in 1924 through the initiative of the apostolic delegate Celso Costantini (1876-1958), who had official instructions to work towards the sinization of the Catholic Church and enhance the local clergy for leadership. Later Bishop Gong Pinmei (also known as Ignatius Kung; 1901-2000), the first church leader of Chinese descent since the 17th century, conducted a re-consecration at the Marian pilgrimage centre Sheshan in the vicinity of Shanghai under the onslaught of the communist forces. This already points to the centrality of Marian devotion in the process of forming a Chinese branch of Catholicism. Whenever Chinese Christians had escaped another persecution they attributed their rescue to Marian interventions.

A particularity of Clarke’s study is that he treads images of Mary as sources for his historical and theological account.

One way to examine the outpourings of faith is to analyze the use of imagery, tangible indications of the various devotions that exist in the Catholic world, whether in the form of statues, paintings or rosary beads. Changes in the imagery provide clues to the emergence of new identities, thereby assisting in the unraveling of the complex entanglements that have characterized the history of the Chinese Catholic communities (p. 5).

Clark divides his study into three major parts: (1) Images of Mary in China before 1842 (p. 15-47), (2) The Chinese Catholic Church since 1842 (p. 51-139) and (3) Images of Mary in the early twentieth century (p. 143-200). The end of the First Opium War (1839-1842) that opened the country to foreign influences marks for Clarke ‘the beginning of the modern period’. French Catholicism made its inroads into China and left its stamp on the local church through a Lourdes ‘revival’ that was Eurocentric and had nationalist overtones. When Vatican views on mission changed again at the beginning of the 20th century not the least under the impact of the devastating consequences of nationalism in the Great War, a Renaissance of the missionary art from the period before 1842 and the Rites controversy occurred that found its expression in a kind of Neo-Accommodation. While the focus of Part One and Three is on the
images of Mary, Part Two is more historical and theological oriented, reconstructing the development of the veneration of Mary and Mariology, probably not the least due to the lack of material evidence of Chinese Christian art from this period.

Part one reconstructs the beginnings of Chinese Christian art from the rare pieces that have been preserved. Due to the delicate nature of paintings on silk or rice paper most of what is left is made of stone. Yet even then things have been found rather by accident. The stele of Sianfu (781), an account of the first contact with Nestorian Christianity that bears an engraving of the cross standing on a lotus on its top is the earliest known evidence of Chinese Christian Art so far. It had been rediscovered in 1623 or 1625.

The so called ‘Christian tombstones of Quanzhou’, a multicultural-religious coastal city, belong to a larger collection of stones dating from the 14th century that was rediscovered in the 1940s and comprises not only stones of Nestorian and Latin rite but also Buddhist as well as Muslim background which share certain iconographic similarities. Prominently the headstone of the Franciscan missionary Andrew of Perugia ‘features an engraved pair of angel-like creatures supporting a figure sitting on a lotus flower [which] indicates that the smaller Latin Rite community was not averse to the use of Nestorian iconography’ (p. 19f.). Clarke refers himself to ‘the observed antagonism between the communities’ (p. 19f.) and admits that this can be also due to the fact that ‘the same artists were involved in the production process’. Yet he concludes: ‘Even in times of hostility, evidence of hybridity can be found’ (p. 21).

In 1951 / 52 two tombstones were rediscovered in the neighbouring city of Yangzhou. They bear the names of Katerina Ilioni († 1342) and her brother Anthony († 1344), Italian expatriates that belonged to the foreign trader community. The inscriptions are in Latin. Clarke follows Francis Rouleau SJ (1900-1984), who first described the discovery, in interpreting the illustrations on the martyrdom of St Catherine of Alexandria as hybrid. While the Madonna on the top of the headstone is sitting on a Chinese style rostrum, it is however debatable whether her facial features and that of baby Jesus on her lap are really sinicized. They still resemble the probably Western style model. The depictions of the angels might show some local influence since the stone carvers were probably Chinese. At the moment only a rubbing of the stone is available. Both stones are supposed to be in the collection of the local museum; unfortunately Clarke was denied access. Whether the Franciscans deliberately opted for accommodation remains controversial regarding their conflict-ridden relationship with the Nestorians and their later stance in the rites controversy.