Ambrose Mong


Ambrose Mong’s current book is an interesting work on inter-religious relations and interactions that took place between Christianity and other Asian religions over the last five centuries. Starting with the stalwart of the field Matteo Ricci in the 16th century, the book focuses on the views and practices of various pioneers in interfaith initiatives such as Timothy Richard, Paul Knitter, Aloysius Pieris, Raimon Panikkar, Bede Griffiths and many others who, though all from one religious tradition, were able to think beyond their religious boundaries and get into the shoes of the religious others whom they encountered in their respective historical contexts.

Chapter 1, entitled ‘The Gentle Way’, describes, true to its title, the life and work of legendary missionary Matteo Ricci who displayed ‘charm, intelligence and flexibility’ (p. 31) to cultivate unprecedented respect and appreciation for Asian cultures and religious traditions. In order to implement the policy of cultural accommodation which he imbibed from his novice master Alessandro Valignano, the Italian Jesuit learnt Chinese, mastered the philosophy of Confucianism, took a Chinese name, i.e., Li Madou and dressed like a Confucian scholar. By writing his first Chinese book not on Christian faith but on friendship, which offered to the Chinese literati 76 sayings from Greek and Latin, he assured ‘the Chinese of the importance of relationships based on equal footing and mutual respect’ (p. 17). Even though he presented himself as a Buddhist monk from India — which was well received among the Chinese people, his catechism entitled *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven* convincingly argued that Ancient Confucianism was closer to Christianity before it was contaminated by the influence of Buddhism and Taoism. For instance, he showed how the Christian idea of a personal god was not alien to the Chinese since ancient Chinese classics had already engaged with the notion of one personal god, *Shangdi*, the Lord of Heaven. Impressed by the book, the Chinese Emperor K’ang-hsi promulgated in 1692 an edict of toleration which was an official recognition of Christianity as a religion compatible with Confucianism. But opposition to his ideas and methods of accommodation not only came from Buddhists and neo-confucianists, but also from the Roman Catholic Church, including some of his fellow Jesuits and the Franciscans and Dominicans who frowned upon Ricci’s promotion of Chinese rites that sought to continue the traditional Chinese beliefs and practices regarding deceased ancestors and the celebrations related to Confucius.
Chapter 2, ‘Chinese in China’, is all about the work and contribution of the 19th century Baptist missionary to China, Timothy Richard (1845-1919). This chapter investigates Ricci’s influence on Timothy Richard as regards cultural accommodation that is evident not only in his outlook such as the wearing of Chinese scholar’s gown and cap but also in his mastery of Chinese language and Buddhist philosophy. He also explored new areas of accommodation that included efforts such as convening of the first inter-religious conference of China in modern times in 1904 and the establishing of modern Chinese university in T’ai-yuan-fu, Shanxi the curriculum of which included Western science and technology besides Christian theology. He wrote a book entitled *New Testament of Higher Buddhism* which unfolded the similarities and historical influences between Mahayana Buddhism and Christianity.

Staying with the so-far-arrived-at trajectory of interactions between Christianity and Buddhism, the author focuses in the third chapter entitled ‘Towards a Dialogical Community’ on Paul F. Knitter’s predilection for Buddhism as expounded in his famous work *Without Buddha I could not be a Christian*. Besides analysing the similarities and differences of views between this book and John Cobb’s work *Beyond Dialogue: Towards a Mutual Transformation of Christianity and Buddhism*, the chapter also describes the four models of doing theology of religions identified by Knitter, namely the replacement model, fulfilment model, mutuality model and acceptance model.

Chapter 4 entitled ‘Is There a Room for Christ in Asia?’, delineates the views of Aloysius Pieris, one of the best known South Asian theologians on interfaith relations in contemporary times. Taking seriously the Asian reality of poverty and the religiosity of the common masses, Pieris holds that the true purpose of dialogue between religions in Asia is to forge a strong partnership to alleviate the suffering and poverty of the masses. He calls upon the institutional church in Asia to learn religious socialism from the voluntary poverty of Buddhist monks and the mass poverty of the Asian people and to become a community of sharing and caring. Pieris is of the opinion that ‘a creative encounter the East and the West can take place with the fruitful interaction between Christian love and Buddhist Wisdom’ (p. 83). Understanding faith not as a dogma but as reliance on God, Pieris invites Asian Christian theologians to learn from the Buddhist notion of *sutras* as ‘non-dogmatic pneumatic and evocative stimuli’(p. 95) understanding of which would help open up their minds and hearts to a wide range of faith experiences.

Chapter 5, ‘Plunging into Ganges’, draws the reader’s attention to the views of Raimon Panikkar who, born into a family of a Hindu father and a Catalanian Roman Catholic mother, had inherited the legacy of interfaith encounter