IMPERIAL CHINA'S REACTIONS TO THE CATHOLIC MISSIONS*

MICHAEL LOEWE

I. The Christian presence in China

Four principal stages may be discerned in the introduction of different forms of Christianity to China. The Nestorians of the early centuries were followed by a few friars and other travellers of the Middle Ages; the sixteenth century saw determined efforts of the Roman Catholic Orders, and it is with that stage that this paper is principally concerned. Finally the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were marked by the major impact of the protestant missionaries. These stages or series of incidents should be regarded as independent.

Nestorians monks who were in flight from the west had found their way to Ch’ang-an, capital of the T’ang dynasty, from the seventh century. Material testimony of their presence may be seen even now in the ‘Nestorian Monument’, engraved with inscriptions in Chinese and Syriac in 781; but it can hardly be claimed that these few travellers exerted much influence on Chinese culture or society, where they were but one of several groups who were propagating foreign faiths in China at the time. Buddhism had already experienced several centuries of integration in Chinese culture, alternately enjoying imperial patronage or suffering official proscription. But at the time when the Nestorians arrived, the Buddhist faith and its institutions were in a comparatively flourishing state, and a project was being undertaken to translate lengthy newly received Sanskrit scriptures into Chinese. Simultaneously Muslim Arabs had been penetrating into China, and although as yet we hear little of their religious activities, by the second half of the ninth century they had given rise to considerable commercial

* This article is based on a lecture given at St Edmund’s College Cambridge on 30 April 1986, in the series Catholicism and Culture: translations and adaptations.
activity and settlements in the south. In addition the imperial court and capital city countenanced the presence of Manichee and Zoroastrian teachers; there are some hints that imperial China saw no reason to reject any support for the material betterment of the population that might arise from their prayers and services.

The emissaries from Roman Catholic Europe of the thirteenth century included well known figures such as Giovanni dal Piano dei Carpini (?1182-1252), William of Rubruck (in Karakorum 1245-47) and, as is more generally known, Marco Polo of Venice, who was in China between 1271 and 1295. By contrast with the days of the strong native empire of T’ang, this was a period when Chinese weakness and instability had given way in face of alien conquerors, in this case the Mongols. There is little to show that attempts to propagate Christian doctrine at the courts of Khubilai Khan (reigned in China 1260-1294) and his successors were particularly effective or of sufficient strength to stimulate a significant intellectual reaction. Possibly this picture might be changed or clarified, if more direct evidence were to be forthcoming.

The third principal advance took place as a result of the Counter Reformation, in the form of an active, militant missionary policy, which led to the arrival of Jesuits, Dominicans and others in India, Japan and China. When Matteo Ricci reached China in 1583 he brought with him some new, forceful ideas for the accomplishment of his task, and he laid the foundations for a long-term strategy and the work of his successors. Particular interest attaches to this stage of Christian activity in China for a number of reasons. Ricci and his colleagues were able to penetrate to well-known men of letters of the day and high-ranking officials, and even proceed to personal discussion with some of the emperors; in this way they managed to exert a far stronger influence in China than their predecessors. Secondly, the work and attitudes of Jesuits, Dominicans and Franciscans raised intellectual controversies that affected not only the work of missionaries in China, but also aspects of the Church’s efforts elsewhere. In addition, the methods that Ricci adopted led to some long-lasting results, albeit not necessarily those that he would have wished or predicted. Finally there is a wealth of documentary records for this stage both in Chinese writings and in the reports submitted by the missionaries to their superiors.