
ACCOMMODATION AND UNIVERSALISM: AN EARLY MODERN EXPERIMENT IN RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

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It is undeniable that the 16th century and the two centuries that followed were marked by religious struggles in various senses of this term. Within Europe, of course, the main demarcation line was drawn between the reformed churches and the Catholic orthodoxy, at first mostly a doctrinal division and/or critical debate that nonetheless had horrible political and social consequences. Another version of the same debate was taking place outside of Europe, under the umbrella of colonial and semi-colonial world exploration. Travelers, merchants, and especially missionaries who ventured beyond Europe witnessed in person that each of the countless new localities had different traditions of worship that could – by analogy – be called religions. Using the label of paganism, the old term for any non-Christian non-monotheistic worship (or simply one that pre-dated Christianity), soon became too vague and the proponents of this dialogue had to seek ways to talk and think about religious phenomena outside the framework of Christianity. This paper will focus on the approach of accommodation with its universalist implications, which developed in European contacts with China, but which after that has become an influential paradigm for interreligious dialogue.

Tolerance and search for a common ground

The first step in the religious dialogue between China and Europe was already made centuries before the founding of the Jesuit mission in Beijing, at the time of the Mongol rulers of Yuan dynasty. Europe

found out about them through the writings of Marco Polo¹. This was not a time of religious tolerance in Europe, so Polo must have been genuinely surprised when he saw how the matters of rituals and religion were treated among the Mongol rulers. As we can read in the Ramusio version of the *Travels*, Polo's party witnessed the Great Khan Kublai celebrating Easter in a ritual that included both The Book of Gospels and incense burning and he is said to have similarly celebrated all of the religious holidays of the people in his great empire:

... he always acts in this fashion at the chief Christian festivals, such as Easter and Christmas. And he does the like at the chief feasts of the Saracens, Jews, and Idolaters. On being asked why, he said: 'There are Four Prophets worshipped and revered by all the world. The Christians say their God is Jesus Christ; the Saracens, Mahomet; the Jews, Moses; the Idolaters, Sogomon Borcan [*Sakya-Muni Burkhan* or Buddha], who was the first god among the idols; and I worship and pay respect to all four, and pray that he among them who is greatest in heaven in very truth may aid me.'²

The attitude that the Great Khan displays towards the four religions is obviously a pragmatic one and it was, if we can trust the accounts of Polo and other writers, obviously the custom of the Mongol imperial court. Nevertheless, practice was separate from the creed. "He all the while believes in none of them," said William of Rubruck³ for Kublai's predecessor, Möngke. If we are to believe the writers' accounts, this tolerance obviously had more of a symbolic political significance for the Khans. Allowing, tolerating, or even practicing a religion also meant that the respective communities were brought under the Khan's patronage, or, sometimes, that he even hoped to have some practical benefits by having the makers of miracles and helpful tricks on his side. Following a version of Pascal's Wager, Khan's religion seemed like a rational pragmatic and/or political choice. What is surprising about these 13th century accounts, however, is not what they noticed about the multi-religious practice of this or the other Mongolian ruler, but that

¹ The actual authorship of this semi-fictional travelogue is of course a much debated issue, but for practical purposes we here follow the traditional attribution.

² Marco Polo, Sir Henry Yule and Henri Cordier, *The Travels of Marco Polo: The Complete Yule-Cordier Edition* (New York: Dover Publications, 1993), 348.

³ *Ibid.*, 349.

they chose to reveal it to the audience of the time. It is fairly unusual to read those lines on the background of the simultaneous developments in Europe and the Middle East. The year when William of Rubruck was visiting Möngke⁴ and commenting on his Easter celebrations saw the end of the Seventh Crusade, and a few years after Marco Polo admired the religious tolerance of Möngke's younger brother Kublai, now already the Great Khan, the Eighth Crusade began. Europe was going through a very close encounter with another religion, but religious tolerance was not considered an option. The framework of any inter-religious relationship was far from mutual understanding and dialogue – although perhaps at times it was just as pragmatic as the practice of the Khans. There is not enough credible information about the reception of these travel accounts at the time to make judgement about their intents or the readers' interpretations, but, when the travel connection with Asia was re-established, their alleged religious tolerance again became a topic in writing about Chinese monarchs.⁵

However, for most of the Christians arriving to Asia after Polo and Rubruck the most important part of the information about the religiously tolerant Mongol Khans was the part about them allowing or even welcoming Christian practices. This story partly confirmed another myth that invited travelers to undertake such an arduous journey in the first place, a belief that was very strong at the time of the Crusades and that offered an exciting promise. This was the legend of a Christian ruler in the East, the so-called "Prester John". A mysterious letter – most probably a collage of various elements, such as accounts on Nestorian Christian communities in Asia and earlier texts on Eastern Syriac Christianity, such as the apocryphal *Acts of Thomas* – started circulating in Europe in the second half of the 12th century. Attributed to somebody called *Presbyter Johannes*, or, in translation, Prester John, it was allegedly a letter written to Byzantine emperor Manuel Comnenus.⁶ The letter

⁴ Michael Prawdin, *The Mongol Empire: Its Rise and Legacy*, tr. Eden Paul and Cedar Paul (New York: Macmillan, 1940), 298.

⁵ Helena Motoh, "Accounts of (in)tolerant rulers: Kang Xi's 1692 decree in the context of the shaping of the concept of religious tolerance in Europe," *Azijske in afriške študije*, 2008, vol. 12, iss. 2: 23-38.

⁶ Robert Silverberg, *The Realm of Prester John* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1972), 1.

was full of exotic descriptions and vivid imaginary, but the most important message was straightforward and timely: on the other side of the continent, behind the countries of the Muslim rulers, there is again a Christian world, waiting to be reunited with the Christian Europe. A century after the forged letter started circulating, people like Polo and Rubruck came back with a realistic version of the same account, namely, that there is a powerful king in the East who supports Christian beliefs. Equating Kublai Khan with Prester John was not feasible even in the semi-fantastic genre of a travelogue, but his tolerance to the Christian practices and the fact that his mother was a Nestorian Christian⁷ did help promote the idea that there was a common ground upon which missionary enterprise could be possible.

Familiarity in difference

The land route from Europe to Asia turned into a bigger challenge after the fall of the unified Mongol empire, and especially after the fall of Constantinople in 1453. The search for alternative routes to Asia also opened up a new path for the Christian missionaries. Formally established in 1540, in the midst of Counter-Reformation, the Jesuits decided to focus on spreading their faith as one of their main goals. After failing in their initial vow to go to Jerusalem⁸ Asia became one of their destinations, the other most important being South America. The Jesuit Asian experience in many ways differed greatly from the one in South and North America. Not only did they encounter an urbanized civilization, complicated systems of government, and sophisticated literary traditions, but they also believed to have found the lost realm of Asian Christianity. Following the old fables about Prester John it was easy to make an intellectual bridge to the claim that Asia, especially China and partly the Indian subcontinent, was an old lost ally. The missionary work was therefore seen not as the challenge of meeting a foreign and incomprehensible spiritual territory, but the revival of an

⁷ Michael Prawdin, *The Mongol Empire: Its Rise and Legacy*, 298.

⁸ Andrew C. Ross, *A Vision Betrayed: The Jesuits in Japan and China, 1542-1742* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1994), XIII.

old friendship and familiarity, and hostility was replaced by the intent to find the common “language” in which the message of faith could be transmitted.

The most important official ramification of this attitude was the so-called “accommodation method”, promoted by Matteo Ricci (1552-1610), the founder of the Beijing Jesuit mission. Ricci arrived to China in 1583 and began his missionary work as the assistant to a fascinating Jesuit scholar, namely Michele Ruggieri. Ruggieri was the first Jesuit missionary who managed to master the Chinese language to the point of fluency and complete literacy; some accounts even claim that he mastered 12000 characters in the two years of study⁹. The Jesuit Visitor of Missions in the Indies, Alessandro Valignano, sent Ruggieri back in 1588 and Ricci took over the establishment of the Chinese mission. Ricci’s approach became exemplary. His excellent command of the Chinese language and manners enabled him to socialize with the high class of scholarly officials. Valignano entrusted the young Jesuit Ricci to start expanding the mission further north and in 1600, in his second attempt, he finally managed to get himself accepted for an audience before the Chinese emperor,¹⁰ which marked the beginning of the Jesuit mission in Beijing.

The imperial capital became for Ricci the testing ground for his new method. But the accommodation method was not entirely Ricci’s invention. The origin of this approach can be traced back to the first, original generation of Jesuits. The founder, or better spiritual father, of the first Jesuit community, Ignatius of Loyola, had already set several guidelines that determined the accommodationist approach. In his interesting analysis of the Jesuit take on accommodation, Stephen Schloesser¹¹ identifies five areas in Jesuit teaching and practice, which made possible the development of accommodations approach. (1) Loyola’s *Spiritual exercises* already show a turn, typical for many of the 16th century theological reflections (including reformed factions), namely the

⁹ Nicolas Standaert, ed., *Handbook of Christianity in China*, vol. 1 (Boston: Brill, 2001), 862.

¹⁰ Paul A. Rule, *K’ung-tzu or Confucius, The Jesuit Interpretation of Confucianism* (Sydney, London, Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1986), 24.

¹¹ Stephen Schloesser, “Accommodation as a rhetorical principle”, *Journal of Jesuit Studies* 1 (2014): 354-361.

shift towards individual religious experience. Loyola is therefore especially careful not to prescribe one path for all and his *Spiritual Exercises* instruct the spiritual teacher to adjust the way exercises are performed for the particular living reality of each individual, their age, intelligence, profession, and other conditions and limitations. The goal is not to regulate the learner's conditions, but to "accommodate" the teaching itself in order to be successful. (2) Personal experience was considered a prerequisite even to the academic training of a Jesuit novice. Six testing *experiencias* were required: undertaking a month of spiritual exercises in total seclusion, serving in a hospital, making a pilgrimage while begging for food and shelter, performing the most basic and lowest tasks in the Jesuit house, teaching the Christian faith in public to simple audiences, preaching, and hearing confessions.¹² All these testify to the importance of a lived experience and all its challenges in the life of a future Jesuit. Accommodation in this case was a personal one, an adjustment that also included an ascetic transcending of the harsh living conditions and trained the novice to be able to get along with and to accommodate to very different people and environments. (3) The self-representation of the Jesuits was very much related to their original, pre-Tridentine mission. They emphasized flexibility, friendliness, and an approachable style as the main characteristics of a good Jesuit. In Polanco's words the Jesuit lifestyle was not for the "duros de cabeça", the hard headed ones.¹³ In his analysis, Schloesser sees (4) the emphasis on preaching as one of the most determining characteristics of the Jesuit order. The preacher's intent was to move listeners, to provoke and invite a change in conduct, and to do so through by appealing to emotions, not mere rationality. This approach, for Schloesser, brings the Jesuits closer to the *rhetorical* attitude towards the religious truth, especially when connected with the previous points and applied in the last important Jesuit characteristic, (5) the attention given to education. The rhetorical approach to the truth formed a bridge between accommodation in practice and accom-

¹² *Ibid.*, 357.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 358.

modation in teaching and spreading of faith, making the Jesuit project a unique experiment.¹⁴

Accommodation in China

This experiment was successful in Asia. the accommodation approach was advocated by the forbearer of the China mission and one of the initial group of Jesuits, Francis Xavier (1506–1552). As a missionary in Japan he insisted on the translation of all the Christian texts that were used into the Japanese language. He also demanded that his fellow missionaries pay special attention to adjust their habits and manners to the local customs in Japan and to abide by the local rules and regulations. Xavier himself never reached China, dying on an island just off the Chinese coast. His approach was continued by the Visitor Valignano who used this argument to oppose the competing Franciscan and Dominican missionaries in China. Compared to the harsh and rigid approaches that Jesuits accused those two groups of having, Valignano insisted that the Jesuit missionaries had to first learn the language and writing and then try to accustom themselves as well as possible to the Chinese community.

Accommodation became the leading approach in the Chinese Jesuit mission at the turn of the 17th century. This significant shift can be noticed in the difference between two texts used for religious teaching. Two catechisms were published by Jesuit missionaries at the time. Ruggieri published the first one with the title *The Veritable Record of the Lord of Heaven* (*Tianzhu shengjiao shilu*, 天主圣教实录) in 1582, and Ricci supplemented it with his version of catechism in 1603 with the title *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven* (*Tianzhu shiyi*, 天主实义). There are many differences between the two texts. A formal distinction, which undoubtedly also influences the content, is that they are written in a different catechism style. Ruggieri's work, according to Paul Rule, is of a doctrinal type, a positive systematic explanation of the

¹⁴ See also: Robert A. Maryks, "Rhetorical Veri-Similitudo- Cicero, Probabilism, and Jesuit Casuistry," in *Traditions of Eloquence: The Jesuits and Modern Rhetorical Studies*, ed. Cinthia Gannett and John C. Brereton (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 65.

Christian teaching, while Ricci writes a dispute, a justification of the Christian doctrine against the opinions of its critics.¹⁵ Ruggieri's text is straightforward in what it presents: he explains for example that Jesus Christ died on the cross and that a Christian can only have one wife or husband.¹⁶ On the other hand Ricci's approach is accommodationist. As was indicated by Standaert¹⁷ and further explored by Meynard¹⁸, the initial idea for Ricci's change of approach came from Allesandro Valignano's similar text, the *Catechismus Japonensis*. What Valignano came to understand after the initial period of missionary work was that the historical revelation was difficult to explain to the audience in Japan and it posed an obstacle for reaching more potential converts. The method Valignano decided to use was an accommodationist one. He organized his *Catechismus* in two parts, first presenting the Christian religion through natural revelation – using the philosophical arguments and the logic of universal natural reason – and only then, in the second part, presenting the content of historical revelation.¹⁹

Following the example and the instruction of Visitor, Ricci conceived *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven* along similar lines. The co-author and editor *De Christiana expeditione apud Sinas*, Nicolas Trigault, comments on Ricci's work in a similar fashion:

This new edition was written as a more ample explanation of Christian Doctrine, but before being published, it was so arranged as to be chiefly adapted for use by the pagans. (...) this new work consisted entirely of arguments drawn from the natural light of reason, rather than such as are based upon the authority of Holy Scripture. In this way, the road was leveled and made clear for the acceptance of the mysteries dependent upon faith and upon the knowledge of divine revelation.²⁰

A decision to base the missionary work primarily on the use of the arguments of natural reason, and not on the truth of the historical re-

¹⁵ Rule, *K'ung-tzu or Confucius*, 7.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁷ Cf. Nicolas Standaert, *Handbook of Christianity in China: 635–1800* (Leiden: Brill, 2001).

¹⁸ Thierry Meynard s.j., "The Overlooked Connection between Ricci's Tianzhu shiyi and Valignano's *Catechismus Japonensis*," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 40/2: 303–322.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 305.

²⁰ Matthew Ricci, *China in the Sixteenth Century: The Journals of Matthew Ricci, 1583–1610*, tr. Louis J. Gallagher (New York: Random House, 1953), 448.

velation, also allowed Ricci to make perhaps the most surprising omission. Focused on the elements that he could explain with rational arguments, the *Tianzhu shiyi* leaves out several key elements of historical revelation, those that were most difficult to grasp for the Chinese converts: the crucifixion and passion of Jesus Christ, but also the obligation of monogamy.

In order to come even closer to his potential Chinese readers, Ricci – well versed in classical learning – decided to use the passages, arguments, and motives from Chinese classical texts. References from the *Book of Poetry* (*Shijing*) and *Book of Documents* (*Shujing*) were used to illustrate the Christian teaching.²¹ Trigault comments on that, too:

The book also contained citations serving its purpose and taken from the ancient Chinese writers; passages which were not merely ornamental, but served to promote the acceptance of this work by the inquiring readers of other Chinese books. It also provided a refutation of all the Chinese religious sects, excepting the one founded on the natural law, as developed by their Prince of Philosophers, Confucius, and adopted by the sect of the literati.²²

This decision was crucial for the success of the accommodationist strategy of the Jesuits in China. From the very beginning Ricci saw Confucianism as a possible bridge towards establishing the dialogue on a common ground, while he fully rejected both Buddhism and Daoism. The other two religions had the elements of idolatry, while for Ricci Confucianism seemed to be a religion based on natural reason alone. With later authors, most notably Leibniz, this alleged trait of Confucianism came to be known as the natural theology of the Chinese. Trigault quotes Ricci in a debate with a disagreeing Buddhist scholar:

Our arguments must be drawn from reason, not from authority. Since we disagree in doctrine and neither of us admits the validity of the books of the other, and since I could quote any number of examples from my books, our argument now is to be settled by reason, which is common to us both.²³

According to Ricci's interpretation the light of reason brought Chinese ancient scholars close to Christianity, but was later tainted by the

²¹ Rule, *K'ung-tzu or Confucius*, 35.

²² Ricci, *China in the Sixteenth Century*, 448.

²³ *Ibid.*, 342.

idolatrous teachings of Buddhists and Daoists. Christianity, however, is said not to have remained at the level of the light of natural reason, but to have made one key step further into the realm of the supernatural. This addition can only be understood and approached through the truth of historical revelation. The Biblical reference often used for such an understanding is the apologetic account of the Apostle Paul in Athens in (Acts, 17, 23), where he finds the altar in Athens, dedicated to the “Unknown God” and explains to the Athenians that they have unknowingly been worshipping the Christian God, and he only provides them with the explanation in the form of historical revelation.

Characteristically for Ricci’s method, however, this surplus is persistently kept for a later time and becomes more and more subordinate to the natural-theological core of the missionary teaching. This shift in the “Christianity for Non-Europeans” also marks another more European shift, a turn from the theology of revelation to natural theology, which starts to take shape in the debate between the Jesuits and Jansenists in 17th-century France.

Universalization of religion

In their affirmation of the primacy of natural religion the Jesuits established a common ground for their own missionary project, the language in which they could explain the truth of the Christian religion and their way of converting a growing number of Chinese Christians. Or so they hoped. Although (or perhaps also because) their method of conversion was much more successful compared to the Dominicans and Franciscans, they were confronted with a strong opposition that started to come from Europe. The debate picked up after the publication of an openly apologetic Jesuit book, *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus* (1687). Dedicated to French king Louis XIV, the book was a compendium of translations of Classical texts and general information on China. It included the translations of three of *Four Books* – Confucius’ *Analects*, *Doctrine of the Mean* and *The Great Learning* – accompanied by a chronological table and various texts on geography, demography, etc. The ideas on the natural religion of the Chinese developed by Ricci still formed a basis for the Jesuit standpoint, but were developed even

further. The climate in which the book was written, however, differed greatly from Ricci's time. The protagonists were French Jesuits, whose loyalty or at least reference was France and its king much more than Rome. Dynastic rule had also changed in China. If Ricci was working with several Han Chinese scholars of the late Ming dynasty, now the Manchu Qing dynasty came to power, while such a profile of scholars was labeled "Ming Loyalists" and fell in disgrace. For the French Jesuits of the late 17th century the dialogue was to be held with Qing emperors and not with scholars.²⁴ The textual emphasis also shifted. If the previous generation focused primarily on the key texts of classical Confucianism (*Confucius Sinarum Philosophus* was in a way the result of that), the new generation of Jesuits saw that they could better prove the ancient Chinese monotheism Ricci was talking about through the means of another textual reference, the *Book of Changes* (*Yi jing*). The decision was also pragmatic, because the choice of a cosmological classic was better suited to what the Jesuits were supposed to contribute when they served at the court, i.e. astronomy, calendars, etc.

Several issues became a problem for the critics of the Jesuit China mission. The debated topic is usually summed up as the "rites controversy", but accusations were actually broader than that. "Rites" alluded to the decision by the Jesuits to still allow their new converts to practice the veneration of Confucius and – even more essential for them – ancestral rites for their deceased relatives. The Jesuit choice of Chinese terminology for the Christian God was also questioned. The Jesuits decided on a cultural translation instead of mere phonetic transliteration, so for the Christian God they were using the term Lord of Heaven (*Tian zhu*). Such concessions were in line with the Jesuit principle of accommodation and were not difficult to justify with regard to their otherwise high opinion on the natural disposition of Chinese people to become Christians. The Jesuits, still interpreting the Chinese as a naturally religious people along with the Ricci presumption, believed that China was an excellent example that God-given nature is enough for salvation, even without grace. It is in this aspect that the quarrel bet-

²⁴ D. E. Mungello, *Curious Land: Jesuit Accommodation and the Origins of Sinology* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1989), 248–249.

ween the Jesuits and their critics over the salvation of potential Chinese converts was only a case in a larger theological dispute going on at the time between two contesting views on the prerequisites for salvation. The discussion itself was much older and began with contesting views on salvation by two church authorities from two sides of the known world, North Africa and Britain. Augustine defended the view that, after the Fall, humans are unable *not to* sin and can only be saved by God's grace. Pelagius, on the other hand, criticized Augustine's view and believed that God gives man his inherent nature as the basic predisposition, which enables him to choose good, while grace only facilitates this process.²⁵ Although Pelagius' views were condemned heretic, a compromise between the Augustine doctrine of grace and Pelagian view on free will was found in the late 16th century by Louis Molina, Jesuit from Evora in Portugal. His book *De liberi arbitrii cure Gratiae donis concordia* (1588) claimed that grace-given salvation can only happen if free will cooperates. This view soon got a lot of support, especially among the Jesuits, but the critics from the Dominican side were also very unforgiving.²⁶ As Escobar and Gazier point out, the two sides of the theological dispute were coming from very different circumstances. The Jesuits were a missionary order outside of Europe and engaged in the restoration of Catholicism in Europe, so the practical solution they could apply had to be a broader and more open view on grace and potential salvation. The situation for Dominicans was different:

The Spanish Dominicans, on the other hand, favoured a narrower, less generous theory, tinged with the fatalism of a race, which had achieved its national consciousness in the age - long struggle with the Moors, and having something of that aristocratic exclusiveness peculiar to the Order, which administered the Spanish Inquisition. The Dominicans could fearlessly destroy, knowing how few there are among the Elect; the Jesuits preferred to cast wide their nets, believing that salvation is for all men and that it was their peculiar mission to spread this truth.²⁷

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 339.

²⁶ Escobar and Gazier, "Chapter VIII- Jesuit and Jansenist," in *Europe in the Seventeenth Century*, by David Ogg, 6th Rev. ed. (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1954), 326.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 327.

Another new religious movement, the Jansenists, joined the Augustinian side of the debate and emphasized that grace was the sole prerequisite of salvation, reserved for the few. For Jesuits the fact that China had not received revelation in its history did not mean that the Chinese could not be saved. A book was published along these lines in Paris in 1696, strongly supporting the Jesuit view. The author, Louis-Daniel Le Comte, himself a missionary in China for two years, strongly advocated the validity of missionary work among the Chinese:

Sometimes we are surprised, that China and the Indies were buried in the darkness of idolatry for almost all the time since the birth of our Lord, while Greece, a part of Africa and almost all of Europe enjoyed the light of faith; but we don't pay attention to the fact that China has for more than two thousand years preserved the knowledge of the true God and practiced the purest moral principles, while almost all of the rest of the world was mistaken and corrupted.²⁸

God's grace was granted to the Chinese millennia before it was given to Europe, claims Le Comte, and that was evident from the classical texts and the high level of public morality alike. This claim understandably caused a great upheaval in the opposing group of scholars, wondering if now Le Comte wants to say that the Chinese were the original chosen people. He does really make a surprising and very influential claim. The Chinese, he says, were the first to know a monotheist God.

The traces of real religion, which we find for consecutive centuries in the Chinese, lead us to confirm the Divine Providence.²⁹

The proof for the "real religion" according to Le Comte, is the veneration of the Supreme Emperor (Shang Di), which was attested since the earliest royal dynasties:

The knowledge of the true God was kept for centuries after the emperor Cam-Vam and most probably a long time after Confucius.³⁰

...

²⁸ Louis Le Comte, *Nouveaux mémoires sur l'état présent de la Chine* (Paris: J. Anisson, 1696), 146–7. Accessed at: <https://archive.org/details/nouveauxmemoiresozleco>.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 148.

... idolatry did not contaminate the spirit even three centuries later, until the emperor Yéou-Vam, who ruled 800 years before the birth of our Lord.³¹

But however provocative this might seem at the turn of the 17th century, it was still a paraphrase of the similar ideas in works from Ricci onward. What is more interesting in Le Comte is the next step he takes towards explicit universalism. God's grace claims Le Comte – again in the fashion of Molina – is not a privilege given to a few. The comparison he gives is very telling, using the metaphor of the sun:

When distributing his gifts, God makes no unfair preference; instead he chooses moments to let shine the light of his grace, which rises and sets successively in different parts of the World, the humans can then make a good or bad use of it.

Le Comte claim was straightforward and the critics could not stay quiet. The controversy was now raging and, between Beijing, Paris, and Rome, the fate of the Jesuit project became more and more uncertain. Four years later a letter was addressed to the Pope from Missions étrangères.³² The title was explicit: *Les idolâtries et la superstitions chinoises*; its content was a thorough refusal of the ideas in Le Comte's book and two other pro-Chinese Jesuit texts. The Jesuit defense then came from another angle – claiming that ancestor worship and other rituals were civic rites and not religious in nature, a distinction that supported an influential paradigm shift in Europe³³, but was not successful in the particular case. The inquisition finally forbade both the Chinese rites and the accommodation method, and that was confirmed in 1704 by Pope Clement XI with the bull *Cum Deus Optimus*. The final condemnation was made eleven years later with the bull *Ex illa die*, and after a long struggle of the papal seat to actually apply the condemnation

³¹ *Ibid.*, 141. The names of the rulers are quite difficult to identify, the –Vam part probably comes from »wang«, the king. *Yéou-Vam* could be king You of Zhou, who ruled at approximately that time.

³² Mungello, *Curious Land*, 331. This was an organization of missionaries, established in the late 17th century and subject directly to the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith in Vatican. The missionaries in this organization were mostly opponents of accommodation.

³³ Cf. Nicolas Standaert, "The Jesuits did NOT manufacture Confucianism," *EASTM* 16 (1999): 115-132.

in China it was again sealed by Benedict XIV, who censored both Jesuit adjustments – of rites and of terminology – with *Ex quo singulari*. The Jesuit order itself was suppressed in 1773 by Clement XIV.

In two centuries of the Asian mission the Jesuits' missionary work was barely successful, the number of converts considerably small, and the influence on the respective countries limited both in scope and time. The two intellectual shifts, however, that occurred in the framework of the Jesuit China mission were of much greater significance. Coming from a lived experience of people spending all their lives in faraway parts of the known world and practicing first-hand what we today might call intercultural dialogue, these shifts were not mere experiments of thought, but pragmatic models of intellectual, religious, and practical mediation. We could perhaps say that the missions were in many ways themselves an experiment, a laboratory, where their ideas and paradigms were formed, tested, and then brought back to Europe. Two phenomena addressed in the present paper, the accommodation method and the universalism of grace, are good examples of such, already foretelling the mental shifts of the Enlightenment era ahead.

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