

When the Chinese Met Jesus

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Abstract

Various missionary efforts brought Christianity into China. This paper focuses on the historical and social forces at the “point of contact” through the Jesuits, particularly that of Matteo Ricci in 1582. It outlines the style of delivery of the central Christian message and the perceptions of the various missiological constants as that time. The paper also seeks to describe the encounter between the Chinese and Christianity within China’s cultural, anthropological, social and philosophical context. Based on these considerations, it explores the Christologies of the Chinese people and missionary approaches appropriate for today.

Introduction

Various missionary efforts brought Christianity into China. This paper focuses on the historical and social forces at the “point of contact” through the Jesuits, particularly that of Matteo Ricci in 1582. By then China had been unified under the rule of the Qin dynasty (221 BCE), an absolute monarchy that lasted for more than 2,000 years. With its distinct executive style and core values, the rule of absolute monarchy not only shaped the social life and psychology of the Chinese, but also sustained China in the face of opposing forces. Although agricultural land was distributed, the largely farming populace was beset with anxiety and hardship brought about by natural calamities. Their woes were compounded by corruption and oppression dominant state and empire.

Dominating the philosophical and moral system of the 16th century was the school of Ru (Confucianism), which promoted proper relations within society and country as a way to progress. Individuals were to know their place in all situations, cultivate themselves, and grow in personal morality in the balance of politics and religion. Ru’s notion of harmony between Heaven and Human denotes a deep sense of the holistic relationship between humankind and the transcendent. Everyone was to strive to become a sage, a person who had reached enlightenment following the principles of love; righteousness; proper conduct; wisdom; and, courage. The ideas permeated industrial technical, domestic technical, symbolic culture, and most important, the world view of the Chinese.