

5-2010

# Conflict and Accommodation--Matteo Ricci's Approach to Catholic Evangelization in China

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## Recommended Citation

Clark, Anthony E. , "Conflict and Accommodation--Matteo Ricci's Approach to Catholic Evangelization in China" Whitworth University (2010). *History Faculty Scholarship*. Paper 28.

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Matteo Ricci, SJ (1552 - May 11, 1610)

利瑪竇 / Xi Lai Ma Tai

"Servant of God"

SAINT ANTHONY OF PADUA INSTITUTE LECTURE (ST. MARGARET MARY CHURCH)  
Oakland, California (8 May 2010, 8:00 pm)  
Prof. Anthony E. Clark

TODAY IS MAY 8

400 Years Ago on May 11

Lecture Outline: "Conflict and Accommodation - Matteo Ricci's Approach to Catholic Evangelization in China"

→ Begm w/ 天主教子及聖神之名.

There are around 10 million Catholics in China today - during Ricci's life there were just a few hundred...

I. First, thank you for bringing me here to speak about a very important topic - Catholic Christianity in China as it was planted by Matteo Ricci.

Last Fall I was @ Ricci's tomb: As I approached a European camera was appeared to be filming a program on the Western science & technology to China. But beside the tomb a number of Chinese Catholics were reciting prayers to Mary - perhaps asking for Ricci's intercession!!!

a. On his way to Beijing to "convert the emperor of China," Matteo Ricci, S.J., (1552-1610) and his confreres were intercepted near the coastal city of Tianjin. On the pretense that the Jesuit Fathers were hiding precious stones.

- i. The court eunuch, Ma Tang (fl. 1590s), emptied Ricci's bags, taking his relics, chalice, and other sacred objects.
- ii. But Ma found something that aroused his anger and led him to imprison Ricci for "bewitching" men with "poisonous sorcery," and for using the object to assassinate the emperor "by enchantment"; what the eunuch had discovered was Fr. Ricci's crucifix, which displayed Christ suspended in his passion.
- iii. Ricci was in China; he spoke Chinese, wore Chinese clothing, wrote Chinese books, but below the Chinese patina he created while in China he was a devoted Christian who often meditated on the crucified Lord while practicing St. Ignatius of Loyola's, S.J., (1491-1556) first spiritual exercise.

1. "Imagine Christ our Lord suspended on the cross before you, and converse with him: . . . What have I done for Christ? What am I doing for Christ? What ought I do for Christ? In this way too gazing on him in so pitiful a state as he hangs on the cross, speak out whatever comes to your mind."

- b. Matteo Ricci was an apologist for dialogue in a society very unlike his native Europe - he had to face 5,000 years of cultural history very unlike the West.
  - i. Dialogue for Ricci was always motivated by love of Christ and bringing that love to others.

where Matteo Ricci was born.

II. Pope Benedict XVI, in a recent letter to the bishop of Macerata, Italy, has called this year a Jubilee Year (2010) to commemorate the fourth centenary of Matteo Ricci's death in Beijing in 1610.

- a. The Holy Father calls Ricci a man, "gifted with profound faith and extraordinary cultural and academic genius."
- b. He also praises his dedication to weaving a profound dialogue between West and East in order to root the Gospel in the culture of the great people of China.
- c. Not only can Matteo Ricci be heralded as the father of the Jesuit mission in China, but he can also be acclaimed as one of the founders of Christian apologetics in the context of cultural and religious dialogue.
- d. One of the largest problems one confronts when discussing Matteo Ricci is the problem of his method of missionary accommodation – what does it mean to accommodate Christianity to another culture?

This is a particularly relevant question in

Imagine walking around Rome, turning around - that w/ out Christianity

The same is true of

out Popular temples: and to text, carry spirits

- i. The central thing to remember about Ricci is that his foremost interest was the conversion of China, not cartography, physics, or astronomy.
- ii. In the beginning of his private journals he wrote "who can doubt that this whole expedition of which we are now writing is divinely directed, since it is entirely devoted to bringing the light of the Gospel to souls."
  - 1. Despite what Ricci has himself stated about his reasons for going to China, there are a growing number of Christians and non-Christians who wish to secularize him.
  - 2. In a booklet published in China in 2006, and made widely available to foreign visitors during the 2008 Olympics, *Following the Footsteps of Matteo Ricci to China*, Ricci is largely depicted as simply a foreign diplomat to China, noting that when Ricci lived in Beijing his major task was entering the palace four times a year to repair chime clocks.
- iii. Was Matteo Ricci chiefly a cultural ambassador or was primarily an apologist for the teachings of the Church.

One of the most important questions is related to

- III. ~~My goal today will be to discuss~~ how Ricci approached the missionary enterprise in a completely pagan culture – viz, who was the real Ricci?
- a. Was he the secular scientist who drew maps, mastered Confucian philosophy, and repaired clocks, or was he at heart a dedicated Christian?
    - i. We have seen that he traveled with a crucifix and other objects required to celebrate Mass, but he also carried instruments for cartography and charting stars.
  - b. To better understand why Matteo Ricci went to China, and how the Jesuits of his era perceived their role, we must place him in the context of the Protestant Reformation. *→ the Counter-Reformation.*
    - i. The Jesuits were fashioned by their founder as a missionary Order to help restore Europe back to the Catholic Church, and bring other nations into it.
    - ii. Fr. Gianni Criveller, P.I.M.E., notes that:
      1. *①* The fourth vow of special obedience to the Pope, ~~rather than emphasizing the Pope's supreme authority and the Jesuits' spirit of obedience,~~ is to express the affirmative will of total availability and the boundless desire to be sent to any corner of the world to preach the Holy Law. *②*
    - iii. And to win Protestants and pagans to the Church meant preparing a group of men to win in the battlefields of the soul and the mind; the Society of Jesus was to be more pious and more educated than those who they met. *Counter-*
  - c. Matteo Ricci is a good example of Jesuit formation during the Reformation. *h*
    - i. He studied from two famous intellectuals, the great German mathematician, Christophonus Clavius, S.J., (1538-1612) and the Italian theologian and defender of the Church, St. Roberto Bellarmine, S.J. (1542-1621).
    - ii. The real Ricci was both scientist and apologist, but science was not at that time viewed as antagonistic with faith; he was a Christian scientist and a Christian apologist.

1. He was typical of the Jesuits of his time, who made intellectual acumen a tool for evangelization.
- d. Matteo Ricci's mastery of difficult Confucian texts was less an example of his conversion to China's culture and religions than a method of demonstrating Christ's truth above secular wisdom.
  - i. As Howard Goodman and Anthony Grafton have said, Ricci "worked with texts: Confucian classics that he mastered as the price of entrance to conversation with the Chinese elite and Western classics that gave him the authority to offer an alternative to Confucianism."

IV. This leads us to the so-called "Ricci Method."

- a. As Pope Benedict XVI has suggested, Matteo Ricci had a particular gift at cultural dialogue, but that gift was for Ricci entirely dedicated to "sowing the Gospel seed."
  - i. He was prepared by rigorous study to confront skeptical opponents with learned confidence.
- b. One of his most effective weapons, however, had little to do with his intellectual brilliance; the Chinese were in fact more impressed with his ability to live his "foreign religion without threatening their own cultural identity."
  - i. Ricci's approach was in fact partially inherited from his fellow Jesuit, Fr. Michele Ruggieri, S.J. (1543-1607), who taught him to adapt Catholicism to Chinese language and traditions rather than make Europeans of the native Chinese.
  - ii. The so-called "Ricci method" was little more than adapting the teachings of the Church to Chinese society, of accommodating Catholic devotional and liturgical life to Chinese sensibilities.
- c. In addition to his belief that Christianity can have a different cultural appearance in different cultures without being essentially changed, Ricci understood that being a profoundly hierarchical society, the best way to convert China to Christ was to first convert the emperor.
  - i. Fr. Jean-Pierre Charbonnier, M.E.P., has thus written that the Jesuits "dreamed of a new Constantine for China."

- ii. If the emperor was a Christian, he argued, so would all of China be.
  - d. One of Ricci's most forward-thinking apologetic methods was his notion that Christianity was already inherent in the writings and philosophy of ancient China.
    - i. Here we see that Matteo Ricci had already applied what the Second Vatican Council declared four centuries later, that other religions "often reflect a ray of truth that which enlightens all men."
    - ii. He set out to locate passages in Chinese works that resembled Christian teaching, and he wrote his own works to highlight these shared beliefs.
    - iii. He also wrote of China's religious and philosophical differences from Christianity, but he did so in a Chinese style.
- V. Matteo Ricci's most famous book is his Tianzhu shiyi (The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven), in which he stages an imaginary debate between an imagined Chinese scholar (*zhongshi*) and a Western one (*xishi*).
- a. Throughout the work the Chinese scholar is cleverly answered by the Western one, who always underscores the intellectual and religious superiority of the West.
  - b. But Ricci also demonstrated his own deep understanding of Confucianism and the Chinese literary canon; he was able to pit both traditions against each other precisely because he had mastered them both equally.
    - i. In order to teach Christ to China he had to accommodate Christian terms to the Chinese language.
    - ii. And true to Matteo Ricci's careful accommodationist method of apologetics, he does not mention Christ until the final chapter of his book, where the Western scholar finally reveals that the Lord of Heaven descended into the world to save it from its original sin.
  - c. After his frightening experience with the eunuch, Ma Tang, Ricci concluded that there were inherent Chinese cultural aversions to depictions of Christ's passion, and he decided to hold back some aspects of Christianity until the Chinese were more culturally prepared for them.

- i. In a letter to the Society's Superior General in 1596, he wrote, "We only venture to move forward very slowly . . . it is true that up till now we have not explained the mysteries of our holy faith, but we are nonetheless making progress by laying the principle foundations."
  - 1. By calling attention to elements of Christianity that were more amenable to Chinese ideas, he wished to introduce such things as Christ's crucifixion more slowly.
  - 2. He followed St. Paul who said, "I am all things to all men, that I might by all means save some."
    - a. Matteo Ricci became Chinese to save the Chinese.

VI. Three of his most famous converts became what are called in China "the three great pillars of Chinese Catholicism."

a. His "method" did not result in a large number of converts, but the few who did come to the faith under his spiritual direction were in turn responsible for many more conversions.

b. Ricci wanted to attract the attention of China's intellectual elite.

c. So, he participated in open debates with Buddhist clerics and Confucian officials, engaging China's learned masters in the topics of science, philosophy, and theology.

d. China's literati were most impressed at first by his ability to memorize long passages from Chinese texts after only a fleeting glance.

*At first the Catholic missionaries actually dressed like Buddhist monks - until they better understood 佛教.*

i. Ricci wrote, "In order to increase their wonder, [I] began to recite [the characters] all by memory backwards in the same manner, beginning with the very last until reaching the first. By which they all became utterly astounded as if beside themselves."

1. Knowing that the ability to memorize the classics was how one achieves prominence in China's civil service examinations, Ricci was able to employ Western techniques of memorization to astonish the native Chinese.

e. It was his intellectual displays and his humility that resulted in the conversion of the "three pillars," Xu Guangqi (1562-1633), Li Zhicao (1565-1630), and Yang Tingyun (1557-1627).

i. The most illustrious of these early Chinese Catholics was Xu Guangqi (Paul Xu), who achieved the highest rank possible in the court exams and qualified for the celebrated Hanlin Academy, where China's brightest thinkers collected in the capital to advise the emperor.

1. Xu was drawn to Catholic teaching after reading Matteo Ricci's *Tianzhu shiyi*, and was later baptized with the name Paul, after St. Paul the Evangelist.

2. After studying in Beijing under Ricci from 1604 to 1607, Xu Guangqi moved to Shanghai where he established a family church, the famous *Xujiabui* (Xu Family Estate). → (Zikawei)

a. The *Xujiabui* remains today one of China's Catholic centers, and in 2006 the Jiangsu Broadcasting Corporation began televising a television series celebrating the legacy of Ricci's most renowned disciple, Xu Guangqi.

f. The other two "pillars," Li and Yang, also distinguished themselves as high-level Confucian officials, and rendered constant support to the growing Chinese Church after they became Catholics.

g. Ricci's "method" of apologetic dialogue with the Chinese on their own terms had worked; the "three pillars" indeed worked zealously to share the Gospel with other Chinese.

i. Matteo Ricci understood that the most effective people to evangelize Chinese people are in fact native Chinese themselves. → X

VII. Pope Benedict XVI has realized correctly that Matteo Ricci's respectful approach to preaching in China has earned him an honored place in China and Taiwan.

a. In 1983 the Republic of China (Taiwan) celebrated Matteo Ricci's contribution to Chinese society by issuing a special commemorative stamp in his honor.

i. He appears on the stamp as an august "foreign" man with a full white beard, while the Great Wall of China undulates behind him.



b. In China he is cultural ambassador Ricci, scientist Ricci, Confucian Ricci, but he is seldom mentioned there as Father Ricci, a Catholic priest and apologist for Christianity.

i. But he is nonetheless highly respected in Mainland China for his ability to bridge the cultural gap between China and the West.

1. His tomb is the site of many visitors – scientists, historians, sinologists, and Jesuits who honor his legacy as a great man of their Order.

2. As I passed through the imposing gates of the Beijing Communist Party School of China – which now surrounds his tomb – I expected to find his tomb surrounded by tourists.

3. ~~There were a couple of European tourists at his tomb, discussing Ricci's role as a "cultural ambassador" of the West in China.~~

4. ~~But after the tourists had left, along with their cameras, a small group of Chinese gathered beside me, intoned the sign of the cross (*Yin fu ji zhi sheng shan zhi ming*), and prayed the Hail Mary (*Wan fu Maliya . . .*).~~

ii. In China there are two groups of people who honor Matteo Ricci:

iii. Those who value his maps, clocks, and Western novelties.

iv. And those who know him as an apologist for Christianity.

1. I introduced myself to the Chinese Christians praying beside me, and they told me of how China's Catholics all thank Father Ricci for bringing them the Eucharist, churches, theology, Christian morality, and most of all, salvation.

VIII. China now has over ten million Catholics (there were 3 million in 1949), and each one of them owes some debt to the efforts and prayers of Matteo Ricci.

a. In the end of his book, Tianzhu shiyi, a work that has converted so many Chinese to the faith of the Church, Father Ricci wrote:

i. <sup>(a)</sup>The holy Church therefore has sacred water which it uses on those who enter its gates. Everyone who wants to follow this Way, who

deeply repents his past wrongdoings, and who sincerely wants to turn away from his transgressions to do good and receive this sacred water, will receive love of the Lord of Heaven, and will have all his former evil forgiven. He will be like a new-born Child.”

道 = New employee

b. In the end Matteo Ricci filled many roles, and China and the world can rightly appreciate his ability to build cultural, scientific, and technological bridges between two very different cultures.

to describe the Catholic faith rather than 道教

i. But in his private journals, letters, and scores of Latin, Italian, and Chinese books, Matteo Ricci reveals himself to be an apologist for dialogue, a dialogue that above all leads others to baptism in Christ.

Fr. Matthias Lu

Say something about him...

Additional Quotes:

Fr. Lu also understand this principle - bringing Aquinas to 中国 in 中文

“In considering Matteo Ricci’s intense academic and spiritual activity, we cannot but remain favorably impressed by the innovative and unusual skill with which he, with full respect, approached Chinese cultural and spiritual traditions. It was, in fact, this approach that characterized his mission, which aimed to seek possible harmony between the noble and millennial Chinese civilization and the novelty of Christianity, which is for all societies a ferment of liberation and of true renewal from within, because the Gospel, universal message of salvation, is destined for all men and women whatever the cultural and religious context to which they belong.”

Pope Benedict XVI

“From his first contacts with the Chinese, Father Ricci based his entire scientific and apostolic methodology upon two pillars, to which he remained faithful until his death, despite many difficulties and misunderstandings, both internal and external: first, Chinese neophytes, in embracing Christianity, did not in any way have to renounce loyalty to their country; second, the Christian revelation of the mystery of God in no way destroyed but in fact enriched and complemented everything beautiful and good, just and holy, in what had been produced and handed down by the ancient Chinese tradition.”

Pope John Paul II

“I am leaving you on the threshold of an open door, that leads to a great reward, but only after labors endured and dangers encountered.”

Matteo Ricci, S.J. (on his deathbed)