

„LES JÉSUITES DU QUÉBEC EN CHINE (1918–1955)“*

by Julian F. Pas

The advantages of historical hindsight is that it is often easier to distribute blame and praise, while the persons involved in the historical process are not often aware of the consequences of their actions. In view of what has happened in China since the founding of the People's Republic, missionaries engaged in missionary activities among the Chinese people in the 19th–20th centuries, have not only been the objects of doubt, criticism, condemnation, but also of praise and, during their time of crisis and exile, of compassion. It is the historian's task to try to unravel the truth about all these contradictory perceptions and statements and answer a few very basic questions: was the harsh treatment suffered during the early communist rule justified? Were the praise and admiration of their fellow Christians back home justified?

When picking up JACQUES LANGLAIS' book about an important period of Canadian missionary efforts in China, all those questions and many more about the very nature, justification and methodology of mission work in general, come to the mind of the informed and interested reader. How is he going to tackle them?

Looking at the table of contents, my curiosity is aroused: Part One (pages 7–76) deals with the Canadian Jesuit missionaries active in China from 1918 till 1955: This 1st part is biographical and historical. It describes the Jesuit personnel in question, their personal background and their training: they are Roman Catholic priests in the order of the Jesuits from French-speaking Quebec sent to China to evangelize the Chinese people of Süchow (not to be confused with the more southern Soochow, also spelled Suchow). The prefecture of Süchow is situated in the N. W. corner of Kiangsu, sandwiched between the provinces of Shantung, Honan and Anhui. It occupies a strategic position on the crossroads of two major railways and is also traversed by the grand canal from North to South. The population consists 95 % of farmers struggling for a living in a not too reliable climate and in ever changing political circumstances. The period from 1918 to 1955 was indeed characterized by major political, social and economic turbulences in China: the initial struggles to implement the revolution of 1911, the internal divisions growing into a major conflict between political parties, the war of Japanese aggression and the final civil war after 1945 leading to the defeat of the Nationalist party. These were years of extreme hardship for the Chinese people, and did certainly not facilitate the evangelizing activities of foreign missionaries.

Parts Two and Three constitute, of course, the substance of LANGLAIS' work. In Part Two (pages 77–184) he discusses the native profane traditions, whereas in Part Three (pages 185–275) he deals with the 'religious' or 'superstitious' traditions of China. The distinction is not always easy to make, but the author does not follow his own preferences here: the criterion he uses are the views expressed by the missionaries themselves. Here lies the value and originality of the presentation. Although the author makes a choice of the materials under investigation, the sources are reports and letters written by the missionaries themselves: their views about the Chinese people among whom they were working, their understanding of Chinese customs and traditions and

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the reactions of the people toward the presentation of the Christian Gospel. The value of these sources is very high, but also has its limitations: their value lies in the immediate eye-witness contact of the authors with the Chinese world in one area. Süchow can be seen as a sample case relating somehow to the rest of China. The limitations are due to the nature of the readers for whom those documents were originally written: the Christian community back home, in Quebec. When missionaries write, either in their personal letters or for a wider circle of Christian readers, i. e., hopefully sponsors of the missionary effort in China, there tends to be some bias in their writings. Not necessarily, of course, and not always, but the possibility exists and to use these documents as sources of objective information, one has to be very careful. I must admit that J. LANGLAIS has done an excellent piece of work with the materials available to him; he is both sensitive to the problems facing the China Jesuits, but he does not show any bias in their favour when subjecting their work in China to a careful scrutiny. This will become obvious in his conclusion (pages 277-353).

In Part Two LANGLAIS presents these aspects of China which in the view of the missionaries, but interpreted by LANGLAIS himself, are not essentially religious, but rather profane. These traditions are seen as indifferent to the Christian message. The other type of traditions, equally strong and enduring, are called "pagan" or "superstitious": they are more immediately linked with China's religious customs and are perceived by most missionaries as incompatible with a Christian vision of life, and therefore as obstacles to conversion. The criterion of distinction is purely theological.

The profane traditions of Süchow and of China in general are very complex: they include cultural traditions, such as popular knowledge of medicine and agriculture, workmanship and folklore; social institutions of family, clan, administration, and in these times of turmoil, secret societies and banditry (warlords); and finally a complex of customs related to social interaction, celebration of the festivals and family traditions concerning marriage, funeral customs, sale of women and children. It is remarkable how by arranging his sources, LANGLAIS succeeds in writing a short treatise of Chinese (profane) traditions. Actually it is not surprising: even taking into account their theological premises, the Jesuits in Süchow have lived so many years among the Chinese, that they should be well informed. However, there is no general consensus in judging this part of the Chinese tradition. Although many traditions, such as agricultural expertise, are considered quite compatible with a Christian life style, there are other aspects which are perceived by some Jesuits as threats to the faith: such are the funeral customs and some rules of etiquette. Other missionaries are more progressive and in the spirit of their predecessor M. RICCI make efforts to accommodate within Christianity as many native traditions as they possibly can. But there are other Chinese conceptions and practices which are considered religious and superstitious by all, and therefore as obstacles to Christian life and conversion.

This is the scope of Part Three: LANGLAIS once again is quite sensitive to the Chinese situation. Reading his sources carefully, he finds that most of the Chinese religious conceptions and practices are related to the popular religion (pages 189-222), whereas the institutional systems Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism are only briefly discussed (pages 223-240). This, of course, reflects the nature of his sources.

What are the missionaries' attitudes to this complexity of religious world views and practices of the Chinese people? In general terms the majority of them would perceive them as superstitions. In contrast with other authors who use the term 'superstition' without clearly defining it, LANGLAIS tries to arrive at a definition, once again based on his sources: superstition could be defined as "the whole body of beliefs and practices of the pagan (i. e. Chinese) religion, in which enters a feeling of servile fear with regard to the divine" (p. 194). The concept of superstition is of crucial importance whenever a

different culture is being assessed. Even if the above definition is based on the missionaries' own opinions, it is not necessarily accurate. WEBSTER defines superstition as "any belief or attitude that is inconsistent with the known laws of science or with what is generally considered in the particular society as true and rational; especially such a belief in charms, omens, the supernatural, etc.; any action or practice based on such a belief or attitude; such beliefs or attitudes collectively." What is crucial in WEBSTER's definition is that superstition is rather irrational and inconsistent with the commonly accepted (rational) views of a given society. Therefore, one can a priori expect on the missionaries' side a negative attitude toward Chinese religion, since it is contrary to the Christian faith. But there is more. In LANGLAIS' definition the element of "service fear" is essential: it means an irrational degree of fear, a scare that seems to run through people's lives and determines most of their actions. Many scholars of Chinese religion would probably agree with this characterization: the Chinese world view includes belief in an enormous number of evil spirits or ghosts, always ready to strike at innocent people; so that most religious activities consist in warding off evil or ridding oneself from already contracted evil influences. I wonder, first of all, whether this is a correct assessment – it seems a little too extreme; – and secondly, how does it differ from the Christian attitude, where belief in a wrathful deity and in a host of corrupted angels or devils has also been very significant. Are scholars and missionaries not unfair when they compare the ideal of Christianity with the practice of Chinese religion? One should compare ideal with ideal, and practice with practice. Of course, the missionaries in China working with a 95 % farming population, would encounter the practice rather than the ideal. The ideal can be found among the professionals of religion and among the intellectuals, who also have accused their fellow Chinese to be overly superstitious.

One final comment is necessary: Western scholars have a notion of religion which is based on a Western experience, centered in fact on the Judaeo-Christian concept of monotheism. Applying this Western idea to the Chinese situation may not be fair in itself, and moreover may lead to wrong perceptions. The deities and spirits are not infinitely transcendent and separate from the world; they are close to the people, and the people treat them in ways similar to the ways they treat fellow human beings. If some spirits are dangerous, people do all they can to protect themselves, in ways similar to how we protect ourselves from disease and infection. But our lives are not completely dominated by our fears and anxieties. The Chinese people similarly are very practical in their relationship with the spirits, but I do not believe that their whole lives were controlled by fear of the supernatural.

In the eyes of the missionaries, who perceived Chinese religion through Western glasses, most of the Chinese religious practices were superstitious. Once again, this was a theological a priori which moreover justified their very presence in China. However, somehow it does not sound convincing to reduce Chinese rituals such as funeral rites and the use of talismans to mere superstitions, while at the same time spraying a Christian grave with holy water, and wearing medals and scapulars for protection.

It seems that any system of religion is vulnerable to the attack of superstition as well as to the cancer-like intrusion of formalism and ritualism. These phenomena are, however, more readily recognized in the religious observances of others.

The last section of Part Three deals with the "Chinese Rites" (pp. 251–275), reflecting bitter memories of the 'Controversy of Rites' which ended with negative verdicts in 1715 and 1742, and affected all R. C. missionaries in China until 1939, when the oath imposed on them was abolished by Rome. LANGLAIS seems to side with the opposition in its view that Rome had acted unwisely, due to lack of correct information and especially because of calumnies spread against the Jesuits in China. With the

Roman decree *Plane Comperum* of 1939 the attitude of most missionaries does not change overnight; they are too much impregnated with a-priori like conceptions and even when the highest authorities implicitly recognize their former mistakes, it does not follow that their views are shared by those in the field. Perhaps, the missionaries felt that once again Rome did somehow not fully understand the situation. And I must admit, in favour of missionary reaction as expressed in the apostolic letter of MGR. CÔTÉ, Dec. 1940, that the interpretation of Rome's decisions is not always easy. J. LANGLAIS (p. 265) criticizes MGR. CÔTÉ for his rigorist attitude in matters of ritual where Rome favours tolerance. But in some respects, the missionaries were right to resist tolerance, and LANGLAIS is a little too critical. I mention only one case: the Chinese practice of burning spirit money for one's ancestors. I cannot see how the custom could have been taken over in a Christian context, since it is intimately linked together with the Chinese belief in the after-life, and incompatible with Christian theology. I also partially disagree with LANGLAIS' interpretation of a ritual event of honoring the ancestors, which took place in Taipei 25 years later. The author comments that the "policy of substitution has been abandoned by the Chinese Church in favour of a policy of adaptation to traditional Chinese culture and even of adoption of Chinese rites, thus allowing Christians to celebrate their ancestral rites publicly and on the traditional dates." (p. 275) This event, I admit, was an important and overdue change of attitude, but did not purely reflect a policy of adoption but rather of selective adaptation: although fruit offerings were made and incense was burnt, there is no mention of burning spirit money. This is in accordance with a growing reaction against this practice among the Buddhists and other religious groups in Taiwan itself.

In the Conclusion (pp. 277-315) the author discusses the overall significance of the Jesuit missionary experience in Süchow. Since the issues involved are extremely important from the point of view of intercultural contact in general, the Jesuit story in my view goes beyond the limited historical and geographical framework of modern China, and calls for a more detailed analysis. The main issue at stake is how to evaluate the Jesuits' missionary activities in China in order to discover principles for intercultural exchanges in different spatio-temporal settings. First, how did the Jesuits themselves perceive their evangelization work in China? There is – almost a priori – no doubt about their good faith and personal merits. The question is: did they have the correct insight in the significance and the methodology of their mission? Admittedly, their task was extremely difficult: not only did they face a mountain of cultural problems, but, moreover, the political situation in China aggravated by social-economic factors, as well as the ecclesiastical rigorism prevalent in that period, were so many obstacles which cannot easily be overcome through faith and reliance on divine assistance. The missionaries' objectives were to evangelize China, to convert the pagans and to establish or implant the Church. A secondary aim was to civilize China, in the sense of introducing modernization, especially in education. This went hand in hand with a certain westernizing influence, and resulted in a tendency toward marginalization. The westernizing and even romanizing process was due to the Jesuits' own cultural-religious background, and was partially unconscious. Although theoretically it is possible to separate what is essential in the Christian faith from what is culture bound and non-essential, in actual practice few missionaries appear to have studied this problem seriously. LANGLAIS feels that one would expect a more serious effort in this regard from the Jesuits who otherwise felt proud of their great predecessor, MATTEO RICCI. When VINCENT LEBBE appeared in China he did not find much support amongst his fellow missionaries and here again the Jesuits made no exception. As a result the type of Christianity introduced into China was not one reduced to its essential, authentic nature, but one loaded with its cultural embodiments of the centuries, first in Europe,

then in Quebec. As JACQUES LANGLAIS points out (pp. 298–307), the Süchow experience reflects the traditional Quebec type of Christianity, characterized by a strong rural character of the missionary pastorate (in contrast with the protestant churches who focused on the cities); a stress on education in the liberal arts (vs. the protestant efforts toward medical instruction); a rigorist and marginalizing “pastorate” leading toward a ghetto-church, and reflecting an attitude of non-involvement in social-political issues; a strong personal devotionism and an authoritarian clericalism. The latter tied to an unconscious belief in their own superiority was perhaps the root of a certain paternalistic attitude toward the Chinese clergy: they were treated as mere auxiliaries, and rarely assigned to positions of authority. This last factor was, in my view, far from unconscious: Western missionaries in China, not only in Süchow, shared this attitude of superiority and strongly resisted the Roman efforts to indigenize the clergy. This deluded attachment to their own authority proved to be more harmful to the work of the missionaries than they would be willing to admit.

The whole problem of missionary intent boils down to theological perceptions: convinced of the sacredness and uniqueness of the Christian faith, especially before Vatican II, missionaries almost necessarily would adopt a negative attitude toward indigenous traditions. There seems to be no hope of reaching a compromise with pagan conceptions and customs: when a Chinese converts to Christianity, he has to burn his former idols. This attitude, aggravated by the triumphalism of the Western world in a period of China's weakness, cannot but provoke resistance, contempt and rejection on the Chinese side. As a result, one can forecast the outcome: Christianity remained mainly a ghetto.

The second series of questions circles around the objective imprint or results of the missionary experience. Here again, the Quebec Jesuits are just one example among many others. It is easy to attach blames in retrospect, but even in the midst of the developments, not enough efforts were made to assess the particular situation of China and the numerous problems arising from its long cultural history. As a result of the policies adopted, the Church in China remained marginal and withdrawn from the socio-economic problems and political issues of China. After the communist take-over their verdict against the missionaries was harsh and sometimes even brutal: accusations of imperialism, counter-revolution, art activities, espionage, spreading of superstition, etc. were not all ways based on truth but not always imaginary either. In trying to understand the marxist over-reaction, one has to realize how deeply China had been wounded by Western aggression, and how the missionaries followed behind traders and generals, protected by Western guns. The verdict of history seems to be rather negative: one modern author, JEROME CH'EN, sees the work of the missions undeniably as a failure in terms of conversion. In terms of their impact on China, he suggests it was another failure: “Handicapped by their foreignness, their small numbers, the language barrier, their intellectual mediocrity, their racial prejudice, their sectarianism, and their growing bureaucratism, what little the missionaries had succeeded in achieving collapsed like a house of cards in 1949.” (J. CH'EN, *China and the West Society and Culture 1815–1937*, Indiana University Press/Bloomington and London, 1979, pp. 149f).

Although J. LANGLAIS' assessment is less harsh, it is not less critical: he admits that the Süchow experience “after years of concerted efforts, was still at a little advanced stage of religio-cultural encounter” (p. 313). The efforts made were not good enough: those who dedicate themselves to this task, have to be totally detached from their own cultural prejudices and have to open themselves fully to the acceptance of the others. Only full acceptance of the cultural plurality of this world will lead to good results. Reflecting upon past mistakes is a painful exercise, but necessary toward enlightenment.