

BOOK REVIEWS

NICOLAS STANDAERT, AD DUDINK (eds). *Forgive Us Our Sins. Confession in Late Ming and Early Qing China*, Monumenta Serica Monograph Series LV, Sankt Augustin: Institut Monumenta Serica, 2006, pp. 268. ISBN-10: 3-8050-0540-1, ISSN 0179-261X

The book is a collection of articles by such famous specialists as Eugenio Menegon, Erik Zürcher, and Liam Matthew Brockey, supplied with some primary texts and translations of texts on the Christian practice of confession that were used by missionaries in China. The main purpose of the book, according to its editors, is to fill the gap of previous studies concerning the adaptation of Christianity in China, namely, the investigation of ritual, which is essential in understanding Chinese culture and religion in general and the accommodation of Christianity in particular. The articles deal with the different perspectives of ritual of confession, aiming to reveal ‘how confession as a foreign ritual became embedded in the Chinese Christian communities’ (p. 7).

The first article by Eugenio Menegon, ‘Deliver us from Evil’, is concerned with two main topics or aspects of ritual that are discussed in two parts accordingly: the prescriptive-normative and practical, presenting a general view of the chronological development of confession in China in the 17th and 18th century ‘from a conception of the sacrament as a tool of moral self-reform in a “Confucian” vein’ (75) towards a more ritualized practice. The analysis of the main descriptions of sacramental confessions introduces the body of prescriptive texts, written for the Chinese by famous missionaries Matteo Ricci, Giulio Aleni, and others. They are divided by the author into four main categories: simple catechetical texts about confession for the vast majority of Christians, elaborate texts for Christian literati, apologetic texts for non-Christians, and manuals for Chinese priests. Menegon reveals how missionaries dealt in practice with such a very different public as the Chinese, trying to adapt themselves to traditional Chinese ways of thinking. He also shows what difficulties of sacramental confession, as followed from this traditional thought, they dealt with in their practice, such as the difficulty of Chinese to unveil one’s sins to another person, that is to confess, and to kneel in confession, which was contrary to the traditional Confucian practice of individual self-examination, or the difference of the visible bodily manifestations of humility, showing the true contrition, or even the traditional segregation of men and women in Chinese society according to ‘outside’ and ‘inside’ (domestic) spheres, which demanded special circumstances for the confession for Chinese women.

All those examples, illustrated by the letters of missionaries and other documents, are very valuable in bringing important details into the understanding of the adaptation of Christianity in China and its problems.

The second part of the article explores the practice of confession as experienced in social and religious life, focusing particularly on three dimensions of the sacramental penance: the ritual as a community-building device, as a response to the psychological and individual needs of the individual, and as a disciplinary tool in the hand of missionaries. Discussing the first dimension of the ritual, Menegon presents a number of examples of various ways and means used to organize the rituals of confession in different areas of China under different circumstances and the regularities and irregularities of the practice due to some difficulties such as the seasonal massive bouts of confession, which were an enormous burden on the missionaries, or the attitude of Chinese women to the sacrament, which demanded the testing of the boundaries of permeability between the inner and outer spheres for those women themselves, as well as for the missionaries in their approach to women.

Analyzing the second dimension of the ritual, the author reveals how confession was fitted into the popular Chinese religious beliefs in the existence of evil forces, thus working as a way of protection from those forces with an effect similar to exorcism and amulets, which were quite popular in Chinese religious life. According to the author, the confessor was compared 'to a good doctor healing the penitent from his or her sins' (p. 58), thus helping to use the ritual of confession 'as a powerful way to heal their body as well as their souls' (p. 66). In the discussion of the third dimension of the ritual, he stresses the use of the sacrament of penance by missionaries as the most direct tool to control the religious and social behaviour of the Christian community and exert the priest's authority in the community.

The final chapter deals with indulgences as an efficacious form of rituality for diminishing the impact of sins in one's life and afterlife. Menegon explains the attractiveness of this system, which became more important from the 18th century, owing to some features of Chinese traditional religion and culture, namely, the importance of filial piety and concerns with deceased ancestors. Thus, the system of indulgences was considered by Chinese Christians very helpful in gaining through their merits and payments the salvation of their baptized ancestors. The author concludes, that in consequence this determined the growing neglect of individualized spiritual direction through confession and a rise in penitential rituality concerned with efficaciousness in the form of indulgences.

The article, although it is more descriptive than analytical, is very valuable in providing the reader with detailed information not only about the particularities of the job of missionaries in China and their compromising strategies, but also about working

at a time when Christianity was being suppressed in China. It is well documented by additional materials, which are provided in five appendixes and include the comparison of the tables of contents of two lists of the rules for purification written by Aleni (*Dizui zhenggui lue* and *Dizui zhenggui*), the Chinese translations of *Confiteor* and *Act of Contrition*, the English translation of *The Four Essentials of Confession* (used by Franciscans), the examination list from *Dizui zhenggui lue*, and a statistical analysis of the number of confessions and number of communions of Dominican and M.E.P. missions in Fujian and Sichuan between 1730 and 1813. Regrettably, the author did not present any comparison of Christian rituals of confession with Taoist practice of confession, as if such did not exist in imperial China. It seems that he tries to separate Confucianism from Daoism in the same strict manner as Christian missionaries did, although in practice they were not so separated. In discussing the lists of sins made by missionaries and adapted to the Chinese context, the author also avoids any comparisons with the Chinese practice of counting their sins in 'ledgers of merit and demerit', which would help to understand the differences and similarities between Chinese traditional practices and the Christian practice and morality of confession.

This gap, however, is partly filled by the next article of Erik Zürcher 'Buddhist *Chanhui* and Christian Confession in Seventeenth-century China'. The article starts with the attempt to put the Christian practice of confession into the context of the Confucian practice of moral self-cultivation, admitting that 'unlike the Confucian discipline of self-cultivation, which ideally is an autonomous process of moral improvement undertaken for its own sake', the Catholic practice was based on 'the strictly individual act of confession made to the priest, who alone is authorized to confer absolution' (p. 105). However, the importance attached by Christian devotees to the rite of confession as the only effective way to escape divine wrath and damnation after death allows the author to compare it with Buddhist *chanhui* (confession of guilt and remorse), which was concerned with the generation of merit in order to avoid an unhappy rebirth. Zürcher remarks that there was some Buddhist revival among followers in literati circles and an upsurge of lay Buddhism in the late Ming, with regular performances of *chanhui* meetings.

Discussing the practice of *chanhui* liturgies, the author concentrates mainly on Mahayana liturgical texts of Chinese origin, which belong to the so-called *chanfa* ('penitential methods') genre and deal exclusively with non-monastic penitential meetings. He discusses the role of the priest, the concept of merit and sin, and the motivations of those liturgies, which help to show the similarities and differences between *chanhui* and Christian rituals of confession. Zürcher discerns more differences than similarities, pointing out especially the 'communal' nature of merit generated in those liturgies; the 'automatic' working of merit through the mechanism of 'stimulus

and response' (*ganying*); the status and role of the Buddhist priest as 'a messenger reciting the confessional formulas and transferring the merit to other beings' (p. 120), rather than the embodiment of the supernatural and exclusive authority to remit sins; the participation in the liturgy of large groups of superhuman beings, which bring to the liturgy the devotional element; the orientation of the *chanhui* liturgy not only to sin, remorse, and confession, but also to joy and hope; the generic and generalized understanding of sins confessed and lack of emotional involvement in the ritual by the participants; and finally, the realization of the illusoriness of sin itself, which from the Christian perspective would deny the meaning of the very practice of confession.

Those differences help to understand the reasons for the Christian critique of Buddhism in general, and Buddhist rituals of *chanhui* in particular, which is then presented by Zürcher. The analysis of this critique is documented here by the detailed opinions of concrete persons. He also provides a short classification of sins in *Gongguo ge* (Ledgers of merit and demerit) and a Christian confessional manual, showing in which points the Christian list of sins was accommodated to Chinese social reality and traditional Chinese values. Zürcher comes to the conclusion that Christians in their fundamentalist rejection of all traditional religious and mantic practice 'even surpassed the most "purist" Confucian literati' (p. 124). His final conclusion is that Christianity, by providing the purifying and redeeming rituals of confession, could work in that period as a substitute for the Buddhist ceremonies of *chanhui* and rather complement Confucianism on the basis of their shared personal nature of individual self-examination. The conclusion seems to me a little bit unexpected because of the lack of any broad comparative analysis of the Christian and Confucian way of self-examination. Thus, I miss the answer to the question how Christianity, in such a case, could complement the sense of moral dignity, the reliance on the moral self, the optimistic view of human nature as good, and the importance of face and shame that were at the core of Confucian teaching and its practice of self-cultivation and self-examination. In spite of this, the article is very valuable in bringing more light to the understanding of the differences between Chinese Buddhism and Christianity in very practical aspects, thus helping to better understand the latter's hostility towards Buddhism, which is presented in other studies rather superficially.

The next article, 'Illuminating the shades of sin' by Liam Matthew Brockey, examines the use of auricular confession by Jesuit missionaries in China during the 17th century, claiming that they relied on confession as the most effective locus of moral suasion due to the lack of more effective means of constraining their Chinese penitents to practice Christian standards of morality. The first part of the essay

provides a narrative chronology of the Jesuits' use of the sacrament of penance in China, starting from its introduction among rural Christians in northern Guangdong Province in the first years of the 17th century to the increase and intensification of the practice in 1640 (due to the dynastic change and waves of violence across China that caused fear of death). The story is drawn from the rare written testimonies of the priests themselves, correspondence of missionaries, annual letters, and administrative documents, which reveal in a unique way some of the difficulties, self-sacrifice, specific duties, and demands of missionary work due to the particular circumstances in China at that time.

In the second part of essay, L.M. Brockey discusses the text by Jose Monteiro, *Vera et Unica Praxis breviter ediscendi, ac expeditissime loquendi Sinicum idioma...* (The True and Only Brief Way for Quickly Learning to Speak the Chinese Language...), which was created for distribution to new recruits to the China mission. The author concentrates on the final section of the text, which consists of imagined dialogues between a Chinese Christian as a penitent and a Jesuit priest concerning questions of morality and sin. He analyses questions about the Ten Commandments and inquiries about the Seven Capital sins, revealing how the Jesuits viewed the sins of Chinese penitents and 'typical' moral state of Chinese Christians, pointing out its similarities with the penitents of Catholic Europe, as well as the unique or 'typically Chinese' sins as indicated and included in the manual. By using such a comparative analysis, the author shows in a very concrete way the differences between Chinese and Christian visions of morality, pointing out some difficulties which Jesuit missionaries dealt with in order to reform Chinese customs. The analysis of Monteiro's text leads the author to the conclusion, that 'China Jesuits considered their penitents to be on similar to rustics in Catholic Europe, with the exception of a few cultural specificities' (p. 148). However, in sharing the intention of their confreres in Europe to 'reform the customs' of their followers, Jesuits in China had to practice their sacrament of penance by two steps: first 'to instill a proper attitude toward religion', and second, 'to rid Chinese Christians of the "scandalous" elements of indigenous behavior', insisting 'upon forms of lay comportment that met the exacting standards of the Society of Jesus' (p. 173).

The article is followed by the translation of Jose Montiero's *A Missionary Confessional Manual* mentioned above, done by L.M. Brockey and Ad Dudink, with some introductory words on its Lisbon manuscript and Chinese version, and published here in three languages: Portuguese, English and Chinese. Such a scrupulous and trilingual presentation of the text allows the reader not only to make more full view of the kind of Christian morality instilled by Jesuits, but also to inquire into the details of translation.

The book is readable not as a collection of separate articles, but as a very collective investigation of the topics from different aspects, although the editors have presented in the introduction the idea of the book only in very brief, general terms. I think that the book could be very valuable to investigators of the history of Christian missions in China, bringing to light their very specific and inadequately studied aspects and details of their teaching and practice.

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