
Clash of cultures: Westernised colonial Christianity and Chinese culture

Guns and Gospel: Imperialism and Evangelism in China, Ambrose Mong, Cambridge, UK: James Clarke, 2016. Review by Trish Madigan OP.

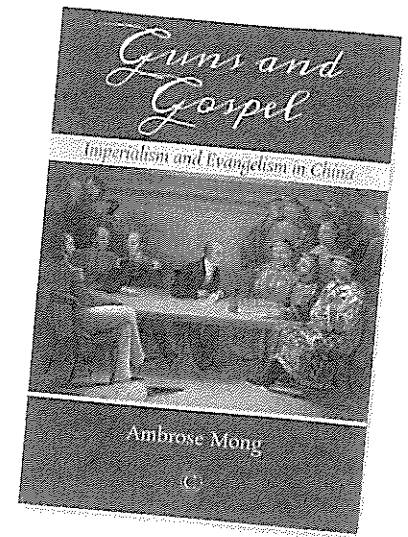
In China in recent times there has been a tussle between the Vatican and the Chinese government over who should have the final say on episcopal appointments. Whatever the final outcome of diplomatic initiatives on this issue, “Guns and Gospel: Imperialism and Evangelism in China,” recently published by Hong Kong Dominican priest and scholar Ambrose Mong, provides a valuable insight into the historical background of Chinese attitudes to Christian mission in China.

In a wide-ranging study, Mong sheds light on why Christianity is still a minority religion in China, despite the great toil and sacrifice of foreign missionaries. He develops the story of the coming of Christianity to China – from the Jesuit project of evangelization in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, to the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when Christian missionaries attached themselves to Western diplomatic, economic and military expeditions –

against a backdrop of the activities of the British East India Company and the events of the Opium Wars ending with the Treaty of Nanjing (1839-1842), the Taiping Rebellion (1850-1864), the Boxer Rebellion (1899-1901), and Mao Zedong’s early purges and the Cultural Revolution.

The first Catholic missionary in China, the Jesuit Matteo Ricci (1552-1610), arrived in 1582 at a time which coincided with the age of exploration and the establishment of colonies led by Spain and Portugal. But he was careful to distance his work from political influences, and is described today as a pioneer in cultural accommodation and the integration of Christianity with Confucianism. However, due to internal politics in the Catholic Church, the Jesuit policy of accommodation in mission was later abandoned.

A large part of Mong’s work also traverses the Protestant missionary experience of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He takes us into the lives of four Protestant



missionaries – Robert Morrison, Charles Gutzlaff, Hudson Taylor and Timothy Richard – as well as the world of the 20th century novelist Pearl Buck who spent 40 years in China. As countries such as Britain grew in economic power, there was a growing collusion between imperialism and mission, and the West increasingly imposed its own definitions not only on Christianity in China but also on the meaning of “civilisation.”

There are some surprising aspects to some of the stories. For example, we learn about

Continued page 48

UIC SWAG  47

REVIEWS

the life and work of the first Protestant missionary in China, Robert Morrison (1782-1834), who aimed to bring the light of science and the Christian religion to the people of Asia. Morrison is described as “possessed of unusual breadth of vision, integrity, singleness of purpose, devotion, scholarship and sound judgement.” He also wanted his students to “have a spirit of enlarged Catholic love” which would encourage converts to Christianity to “cherish union and not create division” – an ecumenical spirit of forging unity that was far ahead of its time. However, since Morrison combined his Christian mission with a role as an official interpreter for the East India Company, he somewhat unwittingly was viewed as an agent of British imperialist policy in China.

Other pioneer Protestant missionaries include Charles Gutzlaff (1803-1851), with a colourful career as a preacher as well as a collaborator in British territorial expansion; James Hudson Taylor (1832-1905), who later went on to establish the highly successful China Inland Mission (CIM), building on the pioneer evangelizing methods of Matteo Ricci, and Timothy Richard (1845-1919), a Baptist missionary in China who, besides giving witness to the Gospel, was deeply involved in education, social welfare, political and economic reforms.

The contents of this book are especially important for Western Christians seeking to understand China. A truth not always acknowledged or understood is that Christian mission in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries entered China on the

tailcoats of military domination. Gunboats carried the Gospel. However, Mong believes that the clash between Christianity and Chinese culture in the past was not so much a conflict between Chinese values and the Gospel message as a clash between Westernised colonial Christianity (“gunboat Christianity”) and Chinese culture. Christians can affirm traditional Chinese values such as benevolence, righteousness, wisdom and fidelity. However, any attempt to impose a Westernised form of Christianity today only serves to remind the Chinese people of a history of European imperialism and colonialism. He argues that, if the Church can be construed as a communion of local churches as taught by Vatican II, then there is hope that the Church may be truly Catholic and Chinese at the same time. ☺