



# ACCOMMODATION AND ACCEPTANCE

An Exploration in Interfaith Relations

AMBROSE MONG



# Accommodation and Acceptance

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*An Exploration in Interfaith Relations*

Ambrose Mong



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*To Alejandro Salcedo, Director of the Escola São Paulo, Macau,  
who insists on dialogue with Buddhists.*

When the center is clear, one can be very flexible. This is an important principle in Taoist philosophy and in the practice of *tai chi*. This philosophy runs through Fr Ambrose Mong's book. Clarity of his own belief enables him to study the beliefs of others and acknowledge their merit. If we recognize the divine nature in each human being, how can we not be interested in how that nature is expressed? Vatican II took a clear position that non-Christians can be saved. Once we accept that there are non-Christians in heaven and there are Christians in hell, it becomes easier for us to open our hearts and minds to those with different beliefs. *Accommodation and Acceptance* is what we are called to be.

**George Yeo**

Chairman of Kerry Logistics

Member of the Vatican Council for the Economy  
and Former Singapore Foreign Minister

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# Foreword

Reflecting on global religious pluralism and interfaith relations is an important task in today's world, so torn apart by its many conflicts and crises. When we consider the immense diversity of religious faiths, about which we have more awareness and information than any previous generation, we have to ask ourselves, what is the significance of this diversity? How can we achieve greater mutual understanding and work more closely together towards a greater unity of humanity? How can the development of better interfaith relations help us to work for peace and justice, so that the human community can flourish locally, regionally, and globally, and human-Earth relations are kept at a sustainable level?

These questions involve many choices which have to be exercised responsibly. If we want to foster a more equitable, more peaceful, and less violent world, we have to take a constructive approach to our religious diversity, not one of mutual opposition and exclusion. We must choose between building *one* interrelated human global community or destroying ourselves and the Earth. Some Jewish, Christian, and Muslim leaders of the Interfaith Just Peacemaking project have rightly stated that

The twenty-first century is shaping up to become the century of the world's religions. Key religious elements are influencing most major conflicts and misunderstandings between peoples and nations around the world. Globalization has not only increased business connections, it has increased religious interactions. To date, these interactions have mostly been used as a means to instigate and inflate conflict. At least that is what has made news. . . . But it is also true that the opening of the religious borders can reveal unprecedented religious opportunities for addressing conflicts in creative

ways. Indeed, many are responding to current crises by demonstrating interreligious respect and by developing more peaceful relationships.<sup>1</sup>

In fact, at the present moment there exists a special urgency to ask ourselves how we can use the multiple resources of different faiths for the good of the human community rather than its violation and destruction. This is ultimately a profoundly ethical and spiritual question that opens up a compelling vision which can energize us into action. But it requires openness and dialogue, the willingness to listen to and learn from each other, which is often a hard task. To be open to dialogue is to be open to adventure and risk, to the challenge of transformation.

Religious pluralism is here to stay, but what do we do with it? How can a greater awareness and acknowledgement of religious differences be used as an opportunity to widen the doors and windows of our minds, so that we learn to appreciate the faiths of others and overcome dividing differences by the transforming powers of understanding and love? Faced with religious pluralism and an extraordinary diversity of beliefs and spiritualities, we have to reflect on the deeper meaning of this situation. How can we discern not only the existence of diversity, but also become aware of the spiritual contribution that the world faiths, each in their own way and also all together, can make towards solving some of our contemporary problems, not least the problem of constructing a meaningful and dignified human life for more people on the planet?

The great faith traditions of the world are not isolated, fortified territories of an exclusive kind; they are homes of the Spirit in which our whole being can be nurtured and strengthened. If we do not look at religions exclusively from the outside, seeing nothing more than their defective institutional settings and structures, but discover their deeper spiritual resources, we become aware that all the spiritual traditions together present us with an immensely rich, global heritage which belongs to all of humankind. They are part of our human planetary inheritance, but also so much more – a rich revelation of an inexhaustible divine ocean of love, compassion, and mercy, and of the possibility of human dignity

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1. Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, ed., *Interfaith Just Peacemaking: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Perspectives on the New Paradigm of Peace and War* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 1.

and wholeness. We can also see that the ethical codes of different faiths can help us to discover what has been called a “global ethic” for conflict resolution, for the overcoming of violence, poverty, and inequality, and for learning the art of peace-making.

Much has been written on the conditions, methods, and problems of interfaith communication in recent years. The missionaries, religious thinkers, and theologians from East and West that are discussed in this book provide excellent examples of how attitudes, in-depth enquiries, and understanding have changed over time, but especially during the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Dialogical concerns have grown so much over recent years that we now even speak of a “dialogue of civilizations.” Numerically the believers of different faiths engaged in the experimental and experiential process of dialoguing may still be comparatively few, but the knowledge of and interest in interfaith relations has spread much more widely around the globe and is steadily growing now.

The ground-breaking work of early pioneers and path-finders was initially followed by the setting-up of such organizations as the World Congress of Faiths, founded in 1936 by Sir Francis Younghusband in London, and later by the efforts of the Temple of Understanding, the World Council of Churches’ subunit on “Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies,” and the Roman Catholic initiatives in interfaith dialogue encouraged since the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). Besides these there have been many individuals and groups fostering dialogue at a grassroots, rather than an official, level. Thus the interfaith movement, as it is sometimes called, has gained considerable momentum since its beginning, which is often dated to the year 1893, when the first Parliament of the World’s Religions was held in Chicago. The contemporary interfaith movement gained new momentum from the centenary celebration of this Parliament in 1993, followed by other regular Parliaments since then.

The historical background of contemporary interfaith relations reminds us clearly, if a reminder is necessary, that interfaith dialogue initiatives are primarily a feature of modernity. They were originally, in their beginning, linked to the western expansion of mind and occurred within a colonial and missionary context, whether in India, China, Japan, North Africa, or the Middle East. It was in colonized countries, opened up to Christian missions, that Christians first encountered religious diversity and were existentially and intellectually challenged to reflect on the significance of profound religious differences. This earlier history

still affects some of the dynamic patterns of interfaith dialogue today, although many contemporary “dialogicians” may not always be fully aware of this colonial and missionary heritage.

The end of colonial rule and of Christian missions from a position of superiority has long given way to engagement and dialogue in the context of an *equal partnership in dialogue*. The contemporary practice of dialogue is itself an event of *religious* significance, and that is why it is also particularly important for contemporary spirituality.

Dialogue is always an ongoing process without closure; it involves mutual discovering, living, studying, working, and worshiping as well as debating together, so that empathy grows and relations are strengthened. It requires a spirit of openness and trust, without any tacit schemes of displacement, absorption, or conversion. Without giving up the particularities of one’s own faith, one may nevertheless arrive at a certain “reconception” of each faith, perceived anew through encountering another faith in another person or persons. The experience of dialogue has been described as “passing over” from one’s own faith into another, returning back to one’s own faith and experiencing it in a new way. Thus interfaith dialogue can lead participants to the existential realization that each faith has received a valuable glimpse of a larger, more complete vision, so that we can learn in and through dialogue to complement each other’s insight and disclosure of the divine. It is not a question of competition and exclusiveness, as the fundamentalists of all traditions often seem to think, but rather of a complementarity of different visions which, when related to each other, can grow into greater fullness. Without losing our respective identities, the task of relating our respective visions to each other can enlarge and enrich us all together and give us access to deeper understanding and sharing, so that we may become empowered to work together for a better world.

For many western people the discovery of the religions from the East, especially from India, China, and Japan, and the immersion into Buddhism has been a journey of liberation and enlightenment. Some writers and practitioners of interfaith dialogue even speak of a “double belonging.” I would like to argue that such belonging is not yet enough, for we need to become *spiritually multi-lingual* and *multi-focused*. This is not arguing for relativism, but for a *true relationality* in a very complex world, a relationality that is not only fostered between different human beings, different faiths, and different worldviews, but also a relationality that applies between human beings and the Earth. It is a commitment to pluralism without sliding into relativism.

For the Christian believer it is ultimately in communion with God that we can be truly in communion with others, that we can learn to respect and love their otherness in its own right, so that others become transformed from strangers and aliens into friends and neighbors. In actual practice we are all too painfully aware of our brokenness and fragmentation, of oppression and exploitation setting diverse human groups against each other. There exist so many groups of “others” in today’s world that we must ask how we respond spiritually and practically to such otherness.

Spirituality has often been described as a quest or journey, but also as an inner struggle, a wrestling with good and evil spiritual forces, or a response to a higher calling, a discipline, a practice, a whole way of life. From the contemporary scientific perspective of the interrelated evolution of life and cosmos, one can also describe spirituality by using the image of the dance – the dance of energy and life in the universe, the dance of life within us, and our life in the world as an expression of the dance and life-giving breath of the Spirit integral to all human flourishing. One definition of spirituality that I find particularly helpful is that of the Hispanic Christian women in the United States who describe spirituality as the *struggle for life*. It embraces all of life, and all of life is a struggle: to solve problems, to make sense of life, and to engage in an ongoing process of discovery, learning, and transformation.

Among the beacons of light on the path to greater creativity and acceptance of interfaith relations that Father Ambrose Mong describes in such illuminating detail here is the twentieth-century French priest, scientist, and mystic, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. For Teilhard the active currents of faith around the globe are indispensable for feeding and maintaining the human zest for life. He wrote that when we are “sustained and guided by the tradition of the great human mystical systems we succeed, through contemplation and prayer, in entering directly into receptive communication with the very source of all inner striving.”<sup>1</sup>

That is to say, people of faith, people of prayer and spiritual practice, people who are seekers and pilgrims on the path of life, can meet, share, and walk together, respecting each other’s spiritual heritage and treasures in new ways unknown to earlier generations. The experience of interfaith dialogue can empower them to work together for greater justice, peace, and equality. Seen from this

1. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Activation of Energy* (London: Collins, 1972), 242.

perspective, the spiritual probing of religious pluralism and the drinking from each other's spiritual wells may indeed be the great spiritual event of our time, full of significance for the future well-being of the entire planet and all its peoples.

This book, with its strong examples of interfaith lives and reflection, invites its readers to discover many spiritual riches that can help and enlighten them in their own lives, and it can inspire and encourage them to work more closely together with others for the greater good of all.

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## Preface

The importance of interfaith relations, which is the focus of this work, cannot be over-emphasized in our times. During his recent visit to Turkey, Pope Francis called for dialogue to assist in ending fundamentalism and terrorism. Advocating interreligious initiatives in the context of promoting peace and the flourishing of life for all, the pontiff insists that adopting an attitude of openness in truth and love must be the hallmark of our dialogue with adherents of non-Christian religions. This attitude of openness includes accepting others and their different ways of living, thinking, and speaking. Pope Francis also emphasizes the importance and the transformative power of listening to others. Aware that our planet is being threatened by human greed and excessive consumption, he has called upon people of different religions to work together to care for the Earth, our common home.

In respecting the fundamental differences that exist between various religious traditions, Pope Francis does not advocate a facile syncretism that would become absolute for all but instead believes that true openness means remaining steadfast in our own beliefs and convictions. In other words, those taking part in interreligious dialogue must be clear and joyful in their own religious identity and at the same time open to the understanding of others. The grace of God that Christians experience in Jesus Christ must be shared with others so that their lives may also flourish. At the same time, deeply aware that no one has a monopoly on truth and grace, Christians must be prepared to learn from other traditions.

In his recent encyclical, *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis says that the global environmental deterioration we are facing should encourage religions to dialogue with one another for the sake of protecting nature and defending the poor. The gravity of the ecological crisis should motivate adherents of different religions to work together for the welfare of humanity. This task requires us to be patient, self-disciplined, and generous in seeking the common good. From the outset, the pontiff attempts to show how Christians' faith convictions,

as well as those of other believers, should lead them to care for our environment and for the most vulnerable of our brothers and sisters.

In view of the church's call for dialogue, I have embarked on a journey to explore Christianity's checkered history in its relationships with other faiths through the centuries by studying those pioneers who took bold steps towards understanding the so-called "pagans." This work begins with Matteo Ricci and his companions, who established the Roman Catholic Church in China in the sixteenth century, and concludes with Hans Küng's concept of *humanum* for judging the authenticity of a religion. In many ways this work is a sequel to my earlier book, *Are Non-Christians Saved?*, in which I explored Joseph Ratzinger's approach to religious pluralism. In this present volume, I have identified others who have taken a somewhat different approach to Ratzinger's normative understanding of Christianity in relation to other religious beliefs.

Many people have assisted me in writing this book in different ways. First, I would like to thank Ursula King for writing the Foreword. Special thanks to the various scholars and theologians who generously offered their comments and suggestions on the chapters. They are as follows: Aloysius Pieris SJ, Peter C. Phan, Gavin D'Costa, Ursula King, Paul Knitter, Gerard Hall SM, Kuruvilla Pandikattu SJ and Kang In-gun SJ. Thanks also to Lai Pan-chiu, my *Doktorvater*, who is always ready to provide his professional advice and guidance.

Others have helped me in proofreading and editing, such as Patrick Tierney FSC, Patrick Colgan SSC, Margaret Cleary OP, Scott Steinkerchner OP, Jolene Chan, Hilia Chan, and Anne Lim. I would also like to express my sincere gratitude to those who have encouraged me in my writing endeavors all these years. They are as follows: Josephine Chan, Anthony Tan, George and Veronica Tan, Philip Lee, Tommy and Emily Lam, Patrick Chia, Ruth Wong, Gemma Yim, Henrietta Cheung, Rev James Boey, Rev Judy Chan, Richard Tan, Dennis Chang SC, Rosalind Wong, and Abraham Shek. Special thanks to Rev Henry Ng Kwok Po, the parish priest of Ss. Cosmas and Damian Church, who has generously given me time to finish this work while helping me to settle down into parish life. I am very grateful for his support and encouragement.

Last but not least, Adrian Brink, managing director, and Lisa Sinclair, editor, of James Clarke & Co., have been instrumental in bringing this work to fruition. I would like to thank them and their staff at this independent and excellent press in the UK for their dedication and support. Any errors that remain are, of course, my own.

**Ambrose Mong**

Tsuen Wan, Hong Kong, 2015



# Introduction

Long before interreligious dialogue was considered urgent and important for the church's formulation of policies and pastoral programs, there were extraordinary missionaries, religious thinkers, and theologians who sought to study and understand non-Christian religions. This was at a time when there was only suspicion and condemnation of these so-called "heathen religions." The results of these efforts were twofold: a better grasp of non-Christian religious traditions and a deepening of the missionaries' own religious convictions. By making a paradigm shift in missionary endeavors, some were able to win converts in a nation like China, which was hostile to foreigners and all that they stood for. Further, some of these forerunners of interreligious relations adopted double religious identities as a way of giving witness to their faith. This embracing of two religious identities, or some aspects of the second one, did not necessarily compromise their original religious convictions but actually enhanced and deepened them.

This study, entitled *Accommodation and Acceptance: An Exploration in Interfaith Relations*, explores the works of some prominent Christian missionaries and thinkers regarding non-Christian religions. By their innovations, these pioneers in interfaith relations have blazed new paths for better understanding between people of diverse beliefs in a world torn by conflicts and violence. The importance of faith in politics and international relations means that dialogue between different religions has become more urgent in light of globalization and increased divisiveness and confrontation between the East and the West. Hans Küng puts it succinctly: "No peace among the nations without peace among the religions. No peace among the religions without dialogue between the religions. No dialogue between the religions without investigation of the foundations of the religions."<sup>1</sup>

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1. Hans Küng, *Islam: Past, Present and Future* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2007), xxiii.

Massive immigration and the influx of refugees from the third world to the first has caused much pain and conflict and created moral dilemmas. As a result of this, the religious landscape in the West is changing rapidly and we are acutely aware of our religious diversity and our ignorance of “the Other.” The context of this work, thus, is religious pluralism, which is thriving and becoming vitally important. In the last few decades we have witnessed the growth of many non-Christian religions in Europe, which compete with its Christian tradition. At the same time, Asia has experienced a rapid expansion and flourishing of Christian churches, especially in South Korea and China, where the predominant religions have long been Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism.

Many thoughtful Christians have acknowledged the past mistakes of missionaries who were unwitting servants of colonial powers. Nowadays missionaries risk being servants of globalization and multinational corporations, which are ruthless in exploiting workers in third world countries. Nonetheless, we have to acknowledge that some missionaries have also been heroic defenders of the human rights of the native people whom they sought to convert. They have also built countless schools, colleges, and hospitals for local people. Many people in Asia would not have received a decent education were it not for the efforts of these foreign missionaries.

Nonetheless, the embracing of the Christian faith by the locals has also caused much pain and division within families that were traditionally Buddhist, Taoist, or Confucianist. In China, when the religious orders fought over the Rites controversy, resulting in tension between the Emperor and foreign missions, it was the local Roman Catholics who suffered most. Conflicts in Europe were brought over to Asia by rival western powers, which affected the local people in the worst possible ways. It is no wonder that after centuries of missionary toil, Christianity is still a minority religion in most parts of Asia.

The evaluation of other faiths through a Christian perspective, known as the theology of religions, has been conveniently classified into three categories by Alan Race: exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. This model has been developed and refined by other scholars such as Jacques Dupuis and Paul Knitter. In spite of its limitations and shortcomings, this paradigm can serve as a useful guide in our study of interfaith relations.

- I. *Exclusivism*. The New Testament presents Christian faith as absolute and final: “And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). In the Fourth Gospel, Jesus also says, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me” (John 14:6). Thus, the church’s predominant attitude throughout its history has been to regard other religious beliefs as false. In the Roman Catholic Church we have the axiom “*Extra Ecclesiam nulla salus*,” meaning “Outside the church there is no salvation.” Originally, the people this referred to were heretics and schismatics, but later the phrase also came to cover non-Christians.<sup>1</sup>
- II. *Inclusivism*. This category implies “an acceptance and a rejection” of other religions. On the one hand, it accepts other religions as possessing some truths. On the other hand, it rejects them as not being valid paths for salvation as they do not recognize Christ who alone can save. Inclusivists believe that non-Christian religious truths belong, ultimately, to Christ alone, and thus they need to delineate the “lines between the Christian faith and the inner religious dynamism of other faiths.” Inclusivism attempts to integrate non-Christian religions into Christian reflection. It aims to hold together two fundamental principles: that God’s grace operates in all the great religious traditions of the world and that the uniqueness of the manifestation of this grace lies in Christ.<sup>2</sup>
- III. *Pluralism*. Pluralists hold that religious truth cannot escape its cultural conditioning. This means that the diverse forms of religious experience represent different cultural responses to the divine initiative. Therefore, no religion can claim a monopoly on truth.<sup>3</sup> Religious pluralism holds all legitimate religions to be the same, in that they can help us to reach God or find salvation. It is important to recognize that pluralism, in the theology of religions, does not mean

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1. See Francis Sullivan, *Salvation Outside the Church? Tracing the History of the Catholic Response* (New York: Paulist Press, 1992), 22-23.

2. Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1982), 38.

3. *Ibid.*, 76.

that all religions are equally valid as paths to salvation, but implies that at least some are. The main feature of religious pluralism is tolerance of differences in others. Advocates of pluralism stress that religions must learn from each other in order to have a better grasp of divine reality, since no religion has complete control over truth.

### *Outline and Sequence of the Work*

Chapter 1 focuses on Matteo Ricci, who established the Roman Catholic Church in China in the sixteenth century. Ricci understood that the best way to reach non-believers was through accommodation rather than denunciation of their beliefs. A gifted scholar, Ricci mastered Chinese and translated Christian concepts into local vernaculars. This chapter studies how Ricci and his companions incorporated elements of Confucianism into Roman Catholicism as part of the Jesuit policy of cultural accommodation in the Far East.

Although this work is written from a Roman Catholic perspective, as an ecumenical gesture, I have included a Protestant missionary in Chapter 2. One of the greatest missionaries in China in modern times was the Baptist, Timothy Richard. Besides giving witness to the gospel and translating Buddhist texts into English, Richard was also very much involved in social, economic, and political reforms in China. This chapter explores the influence of Matteo Ricci on Richard regarding cultural accommodation and his efforts to be “Chinese in China.”

Chapter 3 examines the works of Paul Knitter regarding religious pluralism, interreligious dialogue, and its relationship with the theology of liberation. We will also focus on Knitter’s correlational approach to dialogue and his embrace of Buddhism, which is also part of his Christian identity.

Chapter 4 investigates Aloysius Pieris’s writings on Christianity and its relationship with Buddhism. Pieris believes that Christianity will be relevant in Asia only if it is willing to work as an equal partner with other religions in the continent to alleviate the sufferings and poverty of the masses.

An influential voice for promoting dialogue among world religions is Raimon Panikkar. In Chapter 5, we will study Panikkar’s attempt to embrace Hinduism and Buddhism as a Christian. Regarding his spiritual odyssey, Panikkar wrote that he left Europe as a Christian,

found himself a Hindu in India, and returned home as a Buddhist, all without losing his Christian identity. In this chapter we will examine Panikkar's influential work, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*, first published in 1964.

Chapter 6 explores the spiritual journey of the English Benedictine monk, Bede Griffiths, who spent most of his life in India attempting to adapt Hindu teachings within the Christian framework. One aspect of Hindu philosophy is the notion of non-duality or *advaita*, which Griffiths adopted in his spirituality and in his understanding of other religions as complementary to Christianity. This *advaitic* approach to faith led him to conclude that all religions will eventually converge without losing their distinct identities.

Chapter 7 examines Teilhard de Chardin's inclusivistic approach towards other religious traditions. It attempts to show that his understanding of the evolution of humankind or the evolution of consciousness is related to his understanding of the evolution of the great religions in the world. He too believed that all authentic religions will eventually converge when the Kingdom of God is fully realized.

Chapter 8 examines Jacques Dupuis' work, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (1997), focusing on the issue of religious pluralism and the paradigmatic shift from church-centered to Christ-centered to God-centered and finally to Kingdom-centered Christianity. It is Dupuis' conviction that God reveals himself through all authentic faiths in many and diverse ways, and hence interfaith dialogue is important for us to deepen our understanding of the mystery of his will.

Chapter 9 analyzes Gavin D'Costa's trinitarian theology as an approach to interreligious dialogue. D'Costa believes that the trinitarian approach is more open and responsive to other religious traditions and at the same time faithful to official Roman Catholic teachings. This chapter also presents Peter Phan's multiple religious belonging as a more effective option in the Asian context when engaging in dialogue.

Chapter 10 presents the practice of mindfulness from the Buddhist and Christian perspectives. It emphasizes the fact that we do not have to be Buddhists or stop being Christians or Hindus to follow this aspect of Buddhist spirituality. We then conclude this work with Hans Küng's understanding of *humanum* as a criterion for determining the truth and goodness of a religion and Joseph Ratzinger's understanding of Christianity as the true religion.

This work is a modest attempt to provide readers with a sense of how the church, through its thoughtful members, has shifted its position since the sixteenth century from renunciation to accommodation and acceptance of other religious traditions. With this new level of consciousness achieved after Vatican II, the church has begun to look upon non-Christian religions as equal partners in building a better world and as fellow pilgrims in its journey towards the Kingdom of God.

# 1.

## The Gentle Way

After many years of fruitless attempts by western missionaries to establish a foothold in Beijing, Matteo Ricci and his companions were finally given permission to enter the Forbidden City and to build a house and a church in accordance with Chinese laws. This breakthrough for Ricci and his Jesuit brethren represents a significant period in the history of cultural dialogue between the East and the West. Ricci had come a long way, motivated by a fervent desire to spread the Roman Catholic faith and to save souls for the greater glory of God – *Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam*. To succeed in China, Ricci would need more than just raw faith to convert the Chinese who, by and large, believed they were superior to everyone else in the world. He would need science and technology and a willingness to accommodate and learn from this mystifying oriental culture. Ricci was gifted with these traits to an extraordinary degree and this is what made his life in China so fascinating from a religious, historical, and cultural point of view. Joseph Needham considered Ricci “one of the most remarkable men in history, not only an extraordinary linguist, mastering the Chinese language to perfection, but also a scientist and mathematician of eminence.”<sup>1</sup> In the story of Ricci’s life, we are introduced to the first significant encounter between

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1. Quoted in John D. Young, *East-West Synthesis: Matteo Ricci and Confucianism* (Hong Kong: Centre of Asian Studies, University of Hong Kong, 1980), iii. Hart, however, does not believe it was an encounter between two great civilizations, the East and the West, but an incidental “collaboration” between some Chinese officials and the Jesuit missionaries. See Roger Hart, *Imagined Civilizations: China, the West, and Their First Encounter* (Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins University Press, 2013), 1-2. Some material in this chapter appeared as an article: Ambrose Ih-Ren Mong, “The Legacy of Matteo Ricci and his Companions,” *Missiology* 43, no. 4 (2015), 385-397.

European and Chinese civilizations. A bridge between East and West, Ricci's life and work in China is one of the most fascinating episodes in mission history.

This chapter attempts to appraise Matteo Ricci's effort to accommodate Confucianism in propagating Christianity in China, and also his polemics against Buddhism. It attempts a critical study of Ricci's work, *The True Meaning of The Lord of Heaven* (1603), emphasizing its strengths and weaknesses. An appreciation of native culture implies a sympathetic understanding of its religions. Although Ricci was, in general, against Buddhism and Taoism, this chapter concludes that he can still be considered a pioneer in laying the foundations for interfaith relations and cultural exchanges. Following in the footsteps of Francis Xavier, Ricci sought to tell the Chinese about Christianity in their own context. During Ricci's time, interfaith relations were rare in church mission, but in our post-modern and post-western Christian era, we urgently need a paradigm shift in our understanding of transforming mission. In this shift, inculturation is an indispensable tool towards understanding the other. It is but a step towards interreligious dialogue – hence the relevance of re-visiting Ricci.

It should be noted that “accommodation” as a method of evangelization is as old as Christianity itself. The early church fathers sought to convey the Christian message using categories adapted from Hellenistic culture. This was so successful that the church made it an exclusive norm. It is not clear to what extent Ricci was aware of this patristic period of inculturation and to what extent he was improvising. But by adapting Christianity to Chinese culture, Ricci was simply following in the footsteps of Justin, Athenagoras, and Clement of Alexandria. Justin said, “Whatever men have uttered right belongs to us Christians.” Further, the theory of *logos* claims that “whatever either lawgivers or philosophers uttered well, they elaborated by finding and contemplating some part of the Word.”<sup>1</sup> However there is no evidence that Ricci had studied patristic literature seriously in either Rome or Goa.

During the Ming period, Confucianism was the best vehicle through which to transmit the Christian faith among the Chinese intellectual elite. Both Confucianism and Christianity are still

1. Quoted in Paul Rule, “Jesuit and Confucian: Chinese religion in the journals of Matteo Ricci, SJ, 1583-1610,” *Journal of Religious History* 5, no. 2 (1 December 1968), 107.



very much alive today and they can enhance and illuminate each other, as Paul S. Chung has argued: “Confucianism as a living tradition becomes a catalyst in bringing Christian faith to the project of ethical humanism, and Confucian social ontology of *ren* and politics of rectification become an interlocutor for Christian theology to be more socially engaged and amenable to reconciliation, justice, and recognition of the other.”<sup>1</sup> It is to Ricci’s credit that he eventually refrained from criticizing non-Christian beliefs by focusing on ethics and virtues in the tradition of the Great Sage, Confucius, known to the Chinese as Master Kong.

### *Background*

Born in Macerata, Italy, in 1552, Ricci belonged to the lower nobility, a family of four sisters and eight brothers. His father, Giovanni Battista Ricci, was a pharmacist, and his mother, Giovanna Angiolelli, came from a noble family. At the Jesuit college in his hometown, Ricci distinguished himself as one of the brightest students. He was then sent to Rome to further his education, and his father hoped that he would one day become a lawyer in the papal court. However, against his father’s wishes, he abandoned law and sought entry into the Society of Jesus, a new and prestigious religious order specializing in education and with a strong missionary thrust, founded by the Spaniard, Ignatius Loyola, in 1534.

On 15 August 1571, Ricci entered the novitiate, the first stage of a long formation in the Society of Jesus. Alessandro Valignano was the novice master. Shortly after, Valignano was appointed Visitor in the Indies and left Rome in 1574, together with forty young Jesuits. Valignano was to exert a great influence on Ricci in his formulation of missionary methods and strategies in the Far East. A lot has been written about Ricci’s success in China, but, as we shall see, it was Valignano who devised the policy of cultural accommodation.<sup>2</sup>

1. Paul S. Chung, “Christian–Confucian dialogue in construction of cultural reality: global-critical, intercivilizational, and postcolonial,” *Ching Feng* 11, no. 1 (1 January 2012), 55.
2. See “Trigault, to the Reader,” in Nicholas Trigault, ed., *China in the Sixteenth Century: The Journal of Matthew Ricci: 1583-1610*, translated by Louis J. Gallagher, SJ (New York: Random House, 1953), xi-xii.

As a Jesuit scholastic at the Roman College (the present day Pontifical Gregorian University), Ricci had to carry out the course of study prescribed by the *Ratio Studiorum*, which included the humanities and grammar. Jesuits are not to reject “accepted culture, neither poetry and rhetoric nor logic and natural and moral philosophy, neither metaphysics nor mathematics . . . because the order must be endowed with every possible means of edification.”<sup>1</sup> Besides the study of philosophy and theology as required for the priesthood, an important part of his training as a Jesuit was the study of mathematics, astronomy, geography, and applied disciplines like mechanics and architecture. These studies proved to be very useful when he arrived in China, for Ricci had something novel to offer the Chinese. Mathematics in particular was considered an important subject at the Roman College, taught by the famous German Jesuit, Christopher Clavius, a prominent astronomer and mathematician. Clavius, regarded as the Euclid of the sixteenth century, was to have great influence on Ricci. Later, Ricci would put his mathematical knowledge to good use in China, a nation that had its own mathematical tradition distinct from the West. He was able to use his scientific knowledge to communicate with a civilization eager to learn from the wise man from the West.

Joining the Jesuits meant belonging to a culturally elite group of priests and brothers who were highly disciplined, energetic, and flexible. Jesuit missionaries travelled along the routes opened up by explorers to spread the gospel in all corners of the world, such as Africa, South America, India, Malacca, Japan, and the Moluccas. China was considered the most challenging nation for the propagation of the faith. Francis Xavier was the first missionary to attempt to enter China during the Ming dynasty, but without success. He died in Shangchuan, an island ten kilometers off the mainland, while waiting in vain for permission to enter China proper. It was left to Matteo Ricci to take up this challenging task.<sup>2</sup> Accepted for the mission, he and his Jesuit companions left Rome on 18 May 1577. On the way to the Far East, Ricci stopped in Goa, a city along the west coast of India, to continue his studies for the priesthood at the Jesuit College of St Paul.

1. Quoted in Michela Fontana, *Matteo Ricci: A Jesuit in the Ming Court* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2011), 6.
2. See Ricci’s own accounts, “Blessed Francis Xavier Undertakes to Enter China but Fails,” and “The Chinese Expedition Is Again Attempted by the Jesuits,” in Trigault, ed., *China in the Sixteenth Century*, 117-135.

### *Religious Intolerance*

Goa was a Portuguese colony which maintained strict surveillance over religious orthodoxy. This charge was given to a local tribunal of the Inquisition, headed by Bartolomeu da Fonseca, who boasted of burning many heretics. In this Portuguese outpost, Ricci witnessed the worst of the religious intolerance when seventeen were burned at the stake after being forced to walk through the streets in tunics impregnated with sulphur. Many of them were Jews forced to embrace Christianity (*conversos*) but suspected of secret adherence to Judaism.<sup>1</sup> In spite of the diversity of Goa, with a large number of Hindus and Muslims, the Portuguese allowed only the practice of Roman Catholicism in the city.

Besides hearing of the burning of heretics in Goa by the Portuguese Inquisition, Ricci became aware that the local Hindu and Muslim populations were being forced to accept Christianity. In fact, Portuguese soldiers had burned down the city's Hindu temples in 1540. Christian converts were required to abandon their castes and customs, and to adopt Portuguese names and manner of dressing. These two events must have shocked and scandalized Ricci. Later, he would receive news that his Jesuit companions, including Rodolfo Aquaviva, head of the mission at Salcette near Goa, had been killed by indigenous people because of their hatred for the priests in connection with the destruction of their temples by Portuguese authorities.<sup>2</sup> Obviously, contempt for local religions on the part of the missionaries would only lead to conflict and violence, as Ricci would quickly learn.

Experiencing the brutalities and cruelties of the Portuguese colonizers must have been a rude awakening for the young Ricci: “[He] found himself in that world of blurred boundaries between the sacred and the secular, where religion was mixed up with trafficking, war, coercion, and death.”<sup>3</sup> It was certainly a far cry from what he had learned and expected regarding the mission while he was a student at the Roman College. These horrifying

1. On the inquisition and persecution of the “white Jews” in Goa, see Jonathan D. Spence, *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci* (New York: Penguin Books, 1984), 110-111. See also Christopher Shelke, SJ, “Creative Fidelity in Inculturation,” in Christopher Shelke, SJ, and Mariella Demichele, eds., *Matteo Ricci in China: Inculturation Through Friendship and Truth* (Roma: Gregorian & Biblical Press, 2010), 128.
2. Michela Fontana, *Matteo Ricci: A Jesuit in the Ming Court* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2011), 25.
3. *Ibid.*, 24.

experiences of the religious intolerance of the Portuguese rulers in India, combined with the tropical heat, took their toll on him. Ricci became very ill and was transferred to Cochin, a town south of Goa. For nearly a year, he stayed in Cochin, continuing his study of theology and teaching Latin and Greek to the local pupils. He was ordained to the priesthood in Cochin and celebrated his first mass on 26 July 1580.

From the beginning Ricci stood firmly on certain principles regarding the mission and the role of the church. He was not afraid to speak out and oppose his superiors when he thought they were wrong. The Jesuit authorities had forbidden ethnic Indians studying for the priesthood from attending courses on philosophy and theology for fear that they would be too proud of their learning and thus refuse to work with the poor. This was an ill-founded policy, Ricci thought. He questioned why European novices were allowed to be educated in the entire syllabus while the Indians were not. Further, he argued that not all European priests put their knowledge to good use. A staunch defender of the role of knowledge and culture in evangelization, Ricci insisted that all priests, European as well as Asian, must be well trained; otherwise, the laity would be deprived of competent spiritual guides. Besides, having ill-equipped priests among the native people would provoke hatred and might encourage superficial conversions.

Thus we see Ricci championing the right of the Indian Jesuits to have the same intellectual formation as their European counterparts. Despite its international outlook, the Society of Jesus was reluctant to recruit native people, believing that they did not possess the required intellectual abilities. In fact, Ricci belonged to the minority of Jesuits who supported the admission of Indians into the company.<sup>1</sup>

Ricci's protest was a courageous step for a member of an order that emphasized absolute obedience. Described as a person who was "emotional yet disciplined, obedient yet critical," Ricci stood by his conviction regarding the importance of knowledge in winning converts.<sup>2</sup> He had observed at close quarters how the coercions of the Portuguese soldiers in Goa regarding religion as well as trade only caused fear and hatred. Ricci was determined to adopt

1. R. Po Chia Hsia, *A Jesuit in the Forbidden City: Matteo Ricci (1552-1610)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 49.

2. *Ibid.*, 50.

a totally different policy, as laid down by his mentor, Alessandro Valignano. In his strategy to win converts among the Chinese, he would embrace the *modo soave* – the gentle method – when dealing with his hosts’ culture.

### *Alessandro Valignano*

Born in 1539 to a noble family in Chieti, Alessandro Valignano was a well-built and impressive person. Unlike Ricci, who entered the Society as a fervent young novice straight from college, Valignano had studied law at the University of Padua. Later, he was arrested and imprisoned for allegedly assaulting a woman. Released from prison thanks to the intervention of Cardinal Borromeo, Valignano then joined the Jesuits at San Andrea. As mentioned earlier, he was Matteo Ricci’s novice master in the novitiate. As Jesuit Visitor to the Far East, Valignano was convinced that missionaries should learn the language and culture of the country in which they worked. They needed to learn the native way of life, to adapt to the country’s customs, and to respect its traditions, unless they contradicted Christian morality. Generally known as cultural accommodation, this missionary policy was considered *avant-garde* at that time and was rejected by Rome during the Chinese Rites controversy. The Jesuit sinologist, Pasquale D’Elia, described Valignano’s policy simply as follows:

It was certainly not his intention to “Europeanize” the peoples of the Far East. What he wanted, and very strongly, was that in all things compatible with dogma and evangelical morality the missionaries should become Indian in India, Chinese in China, and Japanese in Japan. This held for food, clothing, and social customs; in short, for everything that was not sinful.<sup>1</sup>

Of course, the Jesuits’ Far East mission was not just a simple tale of accommodation. A complex set of factors, arising from both European and Chinese circumstances, including the Chinese cultural imperative, dictated how the task of evangelization was to be carried out. By and large, the Jesuits in the Far East relied on evangelizing methods and pastoral practices employed by European Roman Catholics, which included the learning of indigenous languages and confronting other faiths.<sup>2</sup>

1. Quoted in Fontana, *Matteo Ricci*, 27.

2. Liam Matthew Brockey, *Journey to the East: The Jesuit Mission in China, 1579-1724* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), 406.