



Verbiest Update

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The Fifth Encounter between Christianity and China: Only Persevering in Dialogue Can Lead to Success.

Four encounters between Christianity and China did not succeed

Historically the four encounters which have taken place between Christianity and Chinese culture, present a dramatic history! Today Christians in China still suffer the negative consequences of the failures of the past. However, in the recent twenty five years, the Chinese people have shown an increasing interest in Christianity, in ways never experienced before. Will this fifth encounter between Christianity and modern China succeed? While we can only speculate, it is very clear after so many failures, that the encounter will not succeed if the Church turns back on the road of confrontation. Only by persevering in dialogue will the Christian faith find its home in the hearts and mind of the Chinese people. Both sides must liberate themselves from the old and fruitless traumas of the past. From the beginning of his pontificate Pope Benedict XVI has called for dialogue in the Church in China: not the so called “patriotic” nor “underground” “churches”, but simply the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church in China. The obvious question which looms large in this scenario is: Will the Chinese civil authorities agree and engage in this dialogue in sincerity and truth?

A history marked by confrontation and failed attempts to acculturate

When the **Nestorians** introduced the Bible into China in the **7th century**, they strove to be guided by adaptation to Chinese culture and extant religious customs. Yet, due to historical situations in China, within two centuries, the Nestorian Church was completely destroyed. In the **13th century the Franciscans** re-introduced Christianity into China and also strove to adapt the Church to the culture of the Mongolians, who ruled China at the time. Subsequently, again due to political turmoil, the Mongolian Church was eradicated when the Ming Chinese expelled the alien Mongols from China. Thus two remarkable attempts to adapt Christianity to China failed.

During the **17th century the Jesuits** were pioneers of dialogue in respect for Chinese culture and religions. Regrettably, what the Jesuits considered as valuable and totally acceptable in Chinese culture, the Dominicans and other missionary orders considered as pure superstition. Confrontation instead of dialogue now grew both *inside* the Church and between the Church and China as a culture and civil society. This tragic confrontational development, caused Emperor Kangxi to withdraw his Edict of Tolerance – castigating Catholic faith officially as “foreign” and “not fit for China.”

This historic trauma rooted in confrontation and discord, continues to be a heavy cross born by Chinese Christians as they strive to renew and develop their Church as a fully acculturated and authentic expression of Christianity in China today. The Emperor’s expulsion of the missionaries and suppression of the Catholic Church was the “bitter fruit” of confrontation.

The **fourth encounter** between Christianity and China also brought shame upon the Church during the 19th and 20th centuries. Western colonial powers at that time exploited the weakness of China, which

lead to the Opium War (1840). Haplessly, the Church was involved in drafting the text of the Unequal Treaties between China and the colonial powers. She herself became later entirely controlled by the French Protectorate. As a result, the Church was identified with the colonial imperialistic powers. This remained China's oft repeated accusation against the Church during the Cultural Revolution (1965-75); and even until today is exploited at China's convenience. Although China was never able to take revenge against England or France for their outrages, it raged against the Church particularly on two occasions: once during the Boxer Uprising (1900) when thousands of Catholics and dozens of missionaries were murdered; and again during the Cultural Revolution (1965-1975) when radical slogans confirmed the cruel persecution, destruction and plundering of the Church as vengeance for what happened during the 19th century. During that tragic era, Church-State Relation in China can only be described with the words "*confrontation*" and "*conflict*".

Although the time of Mao Zedong, the Cultural Revolution, and even Marxism, belongs to the past in China, there is still an evident lack of religious freedom today. Nonetheless, at the same time, there is an undeniable acceptance of Christianity among the Chinese people, with exceptional increase in both Catholic and Protestant believers. How shall China and the Church deal with this new - the fifth - encounter between Christianity and Chinese culture and society? Both the Church and the State have an historic responsibility to assure that this fifth encounter should not fail. While it is unrealistic to expect that atheistic China and the Catholic Church might be friends, both carry with them the traumas of their own past; and both can only achieve stability and progress by putting an end to their old confrontational ways. Dialogue is the only way to these ends. Turning away from confrontation and persevering on the road of dialogue is the historic challenge which both the Church and State in China are faced with at this historic juncture.

Vatican Council II: pioneer in promoting dialogue

Long ago the Church was in conflict with the world; and then it was in confrontation. Since Vatican II the Church became a pioneer in the promotion of dialogue. In 1937, as Stalin sought to destroy the Church, Pope Pius XI wrote his encyclical "*Divini Redemptoris*" ("*Divine Redeemer*"). Historic circumstances prompted the pope to speak a harsh language of condemnation. Several years later an identical situation arose in China – both before and during the Cultural Revolution. Pope Pius XII wrote condemning language in "*Ad Apostolorum Principis*" ("*At the tomb of the prince of the Apostles*"- March, 23, 1958) just ten days after Chinese authorities had defiantly ordered two bishops to be ordained without papal authorization...part of a more general situation of confrontation among the nations in the world which came to be known as the Cold War.

Nonetheless, history went on its course, and new situations evolved. In 1963 Pope John XXIII wrote "*Pacem in Terris*" ("*Peace on Earth*") in which he stressed that the Church is open to different ideologies in the world. That was indeed a new ecclesial voice. In August 1964, at the beginning of the third session of Vatican II, Pope Paul VI wrote his important encyclical letter "*Ecclesiam Suam*" ("*His Church*") in which the word "*dialogue*" appeared for the first time in an official Church document. It meant the beginning of a new phase in Church history. These calls for dialogue echoed an important discovery of Vatican II: namely, the need of the Church to enter into dialogue with the world. They were an answer to emerging new global realities. The Church too wished to move with the times and continue further along the path of dialogue. While nations, religions and cultures were seemingly just discovering the need for dialogue, the Church since the time of Pope John XXIII was already promoting it.

Dialogue: an essential element of evangelization

During Vatican II the Church came to understand that dialogue with the world is an essential element of evangelization. This was a new insight for the Church in her own mission. Evangelization does not only consist in preaching the gospel, it presupposes as an essential dimension of such preaching, a willingness

to learn from and be respectful of those who receive the message; the more so, if our hearers are not only not our friends, but may even be outright opponents to the Church. It might even happen that they remain opposed and that in a moment of confrontation, the content of the gospel message is rejected. Such confrontation however need not cause an outright conflict or rupture. Rather a challenge arises to both partners to pass beyond the confrontation and to search for a way to live together, even to work together for a common good without betraying either one's own identity. The fruit of this dialogue is then a peaceful and fruitful coexistence which portends a measure of real progress, compared to the negative consequences of confrontation and conflict. At this time in history the whole world, including the Church, is uniquely undergoing a learning process from which there is no turning back. With every passing day, the irreversible process of globalization signals ever more clearly the need to engage in dialogue in every sphere of human interaction – doing so with mutual appreciation among and between religions, cultures and states.

Promoting dialogue with China was a priority of the popes for forty years

Rapprochement and dialogue with the Peoples Republic of China has been a papal pre-occupation beginning with the reign of Paul VI, continued under John Paul II and now with Benedict XVI. In 1970, two years before President Richard Nixon visited China, during a stopover in Hong Kong, Pope Paul VI, accompanied by the Vatican Secretary of State, Cardinal Cassarole, spoke with solicitude and affection for China and the Chinese people. The same year Paul VI pleaded at an FAO meeting (UN Food and Agricultural Organization), to admit China as a member of FAO.

During his long pontificate, Pope John Paul II demonstrated a remarkable will to dialogue with China. He avoided all obstacles and setbacks and sidestepped all situations of confrontation. He acquiesced in something that China never obtained from the real imperialists – France, England, Japan – offering a public apology for whatever the Church might possibly have done offending China during the 19th century. China could hardly have asked for a more to enter into dialogue. Yet China remained silent and has not effectively responded until today! Even though the Church takes serious exception to situations where religious freedoms are denied in China, she still insists that confrontation is not an option. In January 2007, in an historic first Pope Benedict XVI convened a China Consultation to discuss precisely these issues. The advice of the experts at this consultation was clear: to remain in a mode of dialogue, while avoiding confrontation with China. Benedict repeated this even more clearly in his Pastoral Letter to the Church in China (June 30, 2007). In essence his message concludes: whoever would advocate today for confrontation with China ignores forty years of precedence and only thwarts all that has been achieved this far by the popes in walking the road of constructive dialogue with China.

Promoting dialogue inside the Church and with the government in China is delicate and demanding

In our cooperation as sister Churches with the Church in China, and in our contacts with civil authorities, we follow the guidelines of Pope Benedict XVI. His pastoral letter may be summarized in three words: *engaging in dialogue, promoting reconciliation and building unity*. For several decades now, the Church in China has sadly been divided into two communities. Each has opted for its own way to survive in a very complex and ambiguous Chinese situation, while remaining true to their Catholic faith. We believe, with Pope Benedict XVI, that both are indeed faithful and united with the universal Church. We wish to loosen internal tensions, to encourage contacts between the two communities and by all means to avoid confrontation.

This task is delicate and demanding. It means first of all that Christians outside of China remain in dialogue with both Church communities, listening to both and “*in caritate et veritate*” (in charity and truth) try to understand both. Those who opt for maintaining contacts with one or the other exclusively, are acting against the guidelines of the pope. We cannot expect that Chinese Christians who suffered

persecution for years and who are still harassed today, should suddenly free themselves from old attitudes of confrontation and start speaking a language of dialogue. We also should fully understand that the harassment which they undergo today only serves to confirm them in their attitude of confrontation. Not surprisingly, they may even be irritated when those who have not endured their sufferings call upon them to be open and to enter into dialogue. This however, should not be an excuse for those of us outside of China to confirm them in their confrontational attitudes. This would only serve to confirm the existing bitterness and further undercut the call of the pope to dialogue. We should rather draw their attention to the points touching upon the identity of our faith which the pope continually stresses as non-negotiable. While dialogue is the main line stressed by the Benedict XVI in the Pastoral Letter, it does imply an element of "*confrontation within the dialogue*".

It is precisely around these points of disagreement that we must search for a *modus vivendi* in the dialogue with civil authorities. It is a grievous distortion to isolate and cite this paragraph out of context, and thereby reduce the whole letter to a "call to confrontation"! This is to betray the spirit and intent of the letter which is at heart a call for reconciliation, dialogue, unity. To encourage Christians in China today to speak the out-dated confrontational language of "Divini Redemptoris" is an anachronism. It only serves to confirm divisions inside the Church and will lead the Catholic Church in China and civil authorities onto a dead-end street of confrontation and deepened animosity.

We must also try to understand those who, in line with the wish of the pope, work in dialogue with civil authorities while remaining united with the Holy See. These people bear the heat of the day; while also suffering the opprobrium of those who misjudge their earnest intentions. On occasion we are perhaps shocked when one of them accepts to read a public statement imposed on him *per force*, seemingly questioning basic principles of the Church. These people apparently judge, that in a situation of such unfreedom, they are justified in doing so. It is fruitless and we would be guilty of rash judgment to confront our brothers on these matters in the media. Rather we ought to strive to clarify the matter through personal contact and dialogue. Only frank communication with and understanding for both partners in the Chinese Church, will resolve the contradictions and bear fruit.

In this way, out of a seemingly hopeless division, a "*united front of Christians*" can grow, not in confrontation with the authorities, nor to compromise in any way our identity, but towards dialogue to develop a *modus vivendi* in respect for the identity of each. This will lead to a new situation replacing the confrontation and conflicts of the past. It is by far more demanding but is more in line with Christian faith to dialogue frankly and try to solve disputes, rather than to encourage confrontation. Dialogue builds up confrontation destroys.

The challenge of China and of the Church is to remain engaged in dialogue

China and the Church are both caught in a three centuries old confrontation which was acerbated last century by the encyclical "Divini Redemptoris" and reached its dramatic peak during the Cultural Revolution. This confrontation produced deep mutual distrust from which both partners can only free themselves by a serious effort; yet this is the condition for dialogue. The fact that civil authorities in China are internally also divided and adopt different approaches towards religion, complicates the situation. Even today some officials still speak of religion using expressions of the Cultural Revolution era while others promote the construction of a harmonious society. These declarations contradict each other. It is hard to imagine how the civil authorities can afford such internal divisions while so much social unrest grows daily in their country! Each time a local authority in China persecutes the Church it creates a potential hotbed of unrest. By adopting a more reasonable attitude to solve problems of the Church, the government would find in the Church a partner for building a harmonious society.

Unfortunately incitement to confrontation coming from abroad offers these local officials an easy pretext to continue the persecution. Nevertheless, we hope that those who still opt for confrontation

will not block those who follow the pope on the way of dialogue and cooperation. Christians in China expect more freedom of religion. Yet, perhaps we are not fully using the freedom to evangelize that already exists. Let us support the evangelization projects that are going on and not block them.

The letter of Pope Benedict XVI and the proposal to dialogue is an offer of the Church. The atheistic government of China cannot afford to refuse this offer if it wishes to bring the situation of religious freedom in China to an internationally acceptable level. Meaningful recognition of Christianity by civil authorities and unity inside the Church in China would, in both instances, be an historic breakthrough, namely: a fifth and finally fruitful encounter between Christianity and China that would yield very positive benefits to both the society and the Church.

Jeroom Heyndrickx, cicm.

Website of Verbiest Institute :

<http://www.kuleuven.be/verbiest/>

Those of us who have been following the discussions on "the right approach" to China will discover in this article an answer of Father Jeroom to the articles of Fr. Cervellera in *Asia News* (February) and to an article of Cardinal Zen in *Gong Gao Bao* (Hong Kong, January).

Contacts



V.I.-KULeuven
Tel: +32-16-324350
Fax: +32-16-324455
E-mail: Verbiest.Inst@fvi.kuleuven.be



V.I.-Taipei
Tel: +886-2-23149631
Fax: +886-2-23119794
E-mail: vftaipei@seed.net.tw