A Brief History of Christianity in China

Review of *A New History of Christianity in China*[1]

G. Wright Doyle

Daniel Bays has given us the results of decades of study in a volume that is remarkably comprehensive, concise, and compelling. The Introduction explains that this history arises from the need to present the results of the significant research on Christianity in China of the past three decades. Kenneth S. Latourette's magisterial *History of Christian Missions in China* is 80 years old; Jean-Paul Charbonnier's *Christians in China*, though always fair to Protestants, focuses on the Roman Catholic experience.

The book provides both a broad sweep of the history of Chinese Christianity and sufficient detail to make the story interesting. In each chapter, for example, Bays names the individuals who drove the action; he also gives more extended vignettes of key institutions and movements.

We find a balance, too, between admirably objective discussions of controversial topics and people, and candid "in my opinion" comments, all of which must be taken seriously, regardless of one's point of view. In other words, Bays has tried to be fair without denying us the benefit of his mature judgment.

As Professor Mark Noll writes, "Readers interested in a solid historical treatment of the dynamic story of Christianity in China need look no further. This is *the* book."

Principal Themes

The narrative traces several major realities: "The basic tension between (foreign" mission and (Chinese) church"; "the always-present instinct of the Chinese state…. To monitor and control religious movements; as a result, Christianity was usually not see only, indeed not even primarily, as a 'religion' or belief system, but as a behavioral phenomenon which could cause endless trouble." (2)

Bays detects a "persistent, overriding dynamic" in Chinese Christian history: "The Chinese Christians were first participants, then subordinate partners of the foreign missionaries, then finally the inheritors or sole 'owners.'" This process was also always a cross-cultural one, "the result of which has been the creation of an immensely varied Chinese Christian world in our day." (1)

Two major themes which arise from this story are, first, "the notion that Christianity,

[1] *A New History of Christianity in China*, by Daniel H. Bays. Malden, MA: John Wiley & Sons, 2012. X + 241 pages. ISBN 978-1-4051-5955-5 (paperback)

when it is separated from its bonding with Western culture in a package we may call 'Christendom,' is perfectly capable of adapting to function in different cultural settings. " The other is "the remarkable flexibility and creativity in the Chinese relationship with Christianity (or perhaps 'Christianities')." (2)

Overview

The author divides the history of Christianity in China into eight periods, devoting a chapter to each, with an appendix on the Russian Orthodox Church and Ecclesiastical Mission in China. Rather than repeating what he says, I shall merely point out a few highlights, including some of his own personal opinions, some of which are controversial.

The Nestorian Age and the Mongol Mission, 635-1368

He notes, but does not presume to assess, the recent claim that Christianity entered China in the first century A.D. Clearly, "Nestorian" Christianity, which arrived in the seventh century, was a "remarkable combination of Christian ideas and concepts mixed with Daoist and Buddhist terms," but "we still do not have a good grasp of the 'religious content' of Nestorian Christianity." (10)

As a result, Bays will not decide what really caused the extinction of the Luminous Religion (or Church of the East) in the Tang dynasty, though the absence of Han Chinese converts much surely have been a factor. Instead, "what was most noteworthy and portentous for the future… is the alacrity with which the Christian faith took on distinct Chinese characteristics," a theme to which he returns often. (11)

We are reminded that Nestorianism made a huge impact on some of the Turko-Mongolian tribes that Khubilai Khan, founder of the Yuan dynasty, was a Christianity; and thus that when the Roman Catholics sent missionaries to the Mongol court they found Nestorians already present in numbers, resulting in vigorous competition between the two traditions. Why did Christianity disappear again at the close of the Yuan dynasty? "The elements of Christianity may have been so closely tied to the foreign presence that there was almost no influence on indigenous persons and institutions." (14) The foreigners, in turn, depended on support from the government; when it fell, so did their work. Finally, the Black Death in Europe and shifting geo-political realities stopped the flow of missionaries from Europe.

The Jesuit Mission of Early Modern Times

The second era of Roman Catholic missions to China "constituted a key transition in the worldwide serial movement of the Christian faith to parts of the non-West. It was also an important part of the first cross-cultural experience of the West." (18-19)Two major forces led to this development: The Protestant Reformation and the Roman Catholic reaction to it, and "the rise of the first of a succession of seaborne empires beginning in the early 1500s," in the case of China, the Portuguese incursions into Asia. "All agreed on the unitary nature of Christianity and European culture. This was 'Christendom.'"(20)

Bays begins with "Matteo Ricci, the Jesuits, and the Larger China Mission," which followed several strategic policies, especially in the early years:

"Accommodation and adaption to Chinese culture. Evangelization from the top

down, addressing the literate elite, even the emperor if possible. Indirect evangelism by means of science and technology convince the elite of the high level of European civilization. Openness to and tolerance of Chinese moral values and some ritual practices." (21-22)

He then turns his attention to "the real action," which he considers to have been the ways in which later generations of Jesuit missionaries scattered across China to create "local rural-based Christian communities" consisting mostly of commoners and low-ranking elites; these communities, and others like them, have persisted into the 21st century, and were more the "faith of families" than the "religion of converts."(23-24) Of particular interest to Bays is the variety of ways in which Roman Catholicism took on the flavor of traditional Chinese religion and culture, a process which has continued, and one that has evoked some concern by Roman Catholic priests who were afraid that syncretism was taking place.

After a survey of different regions in which Roman Catholicism took root, Bays tells the story of the Rites controversy, in which his sympathies lie with the Jesuits, not the "rites haters." The ensuing proscription of Roman Catholicism in China drastically reduced the number of missionaries, but did not eradicate the communities of adherents, who learned to live "on their own" throughout the "long eighteenth century" until renewed Western advances "opened the door" for missionaries and believers to practice their faith openly.

Protestants Catholics, and Taipings, 1800-1860

New actors enter the scene in the early 1800s, as Protestants began sending missionaries and expanding their mercantile empires. Bays gives brief but adequate sketches of the pioneer missionaries, most of whom concentrated upon translation of the Bible and production of other Christian literature in Chinese, along with evangelism. Very soon, they also composed substantial works of Sinology for Western readers.

The story of the Opium Wars and the "Unequal treaties" that opened China to foreign missionary travel and settlement makes sad reading, especially given the lack of opposition to these wars by the missionaries and sometimes even their cooperation with imperialist governments (though one wishes that Bays had shown how the missionaries usually attempted to mitigate the harsher provisions of the proposed treaties). Mostly, they were convinced that the treaties would work for the furtherance of the gospel. In the end, for better or for worse, Christianity was "embedded" in the treaty system.

As for the Roman Catholics, the new treaties allowed for the return of large numbers of European priests, who quickly began to re-assert control over what had become an indigenous organization, arousing strong opposition from Chinese believers.

Bays' evaluation of the Taiping rebels is quite interesting. On the one hand, he acknowledges that some of their beliefs and practices were bizarre and not considered orthodox by most missionaries, but on the other he believes that they should be considered "Christian enough" and points out the fundamental challenge they posed to the Confucian social order. He thinks that the Qing officials who saw the Taipings as a "Christian" threat to the entire Chinese governmental and "socio-political system" were correct. Their uprising was "the most important single event of these decades" and its influence persists to this day in the presence of "sectarian movements in the countryside"

that "bear some resemblance to them." (61)

On a more positive note, Bays gives recognition to a number of prominent Chinese Christians whose work in evangelism and translation were invaluable.

Expansion and Institution-Building in a Declining Dynasty 1860-1902

"At no time in Chinese Christian history was the problem of violence being directed at missionaries and Christians" than during this period, "[y]et this was also a time when the young Chinese Protestant church and in different ways the Roman Catholic church as well, put down roots of community that constituted a solid foundation for the future." (66)

The number of Protestant missionaries exploded, reaching about 3,500 by 1905; so did the number and variety of missionary societies and the range of works they undertook. On the one hand, the China Inland Mission, founded by J. Hudson Taylor in 1965, concentrated upon the rural areas; on the other, many confused their efforts on the cities, where they built a vast infrastructure of educational and medical institutions. During the famine in North China in the 1870s a number of missionaries engaged in sacrificial famine relief efforts.

The Protestant missionaries were mostly united in their general evangelical theology and overall aims. Bays, along with others, believes that one of their convictions was that China needed "Christian" civilization, and that "Christian" really meant "Western." Between 18090 and 1920, more than 33,000 college-educated students joined, or were inspired by, the Student Volunteer Movement to go to change China with the Gospel and their ideas of modern society.

Meanwhile, the Chinese elite of Confucian scholar-officials "did not like Christianity. They thought it was a seditious doctrine but had to tolerate it, lest foreign, especially French political or military power be mobilized." They saw the missionaries as direct competitors to their own local prestige and power, and often stirred up ordinary citizens. A major cause of resentment was the way many missionaries, especially Roman Catholics, were given formal or informal status equal to that of magistrates, and their converts were made exempt from temple taxes and legal prosecution. The "religious cases" that resulted vexed the Chinese government for decades.

The Chinese church grew, despite resistance from officials. Some converted to gain material benefits; others found a new socio-political identity in the growing church community; and some were attracted by the promise of moral renewal, while others saw Jesus as a more "efficacious god" than the local idols.

The status of women rose, especially as more and more girls received education; women also were given scope for activities in the church. Bays introduces us to a number of leading Chinese Christians, only a few of whom received the recognition they deserved by foreigners at the time. Some of these became part of a group of reformers urging Western-style changes in society. They were spurred on by missionaries like Timothy Richard, Young J. Allen, and Gilbert Reid, and joined by a larger number of non-Christian Chinese with similar political views. After a brief ascendency, they were repudiated and eliminated by the Qing government, which in the end also supported the savagely anti-foreign Boxer Rebellion.

Bays does not hide the role played by some missionaries in the havoc wreaked by

victorious foreign troops after the rebellion was crushed, and opines that their excessive hopes for radical reform led to disgust and even anger towards the recalcitrant Qing government.

The 'golden Age' of Missions and the 'Sino-Foreign Protestant Establishment,' 1902-1927

"Ironically, the undoubted tragedy of the Boxer events in 1900 ushered in a period of more than two decades during which both the foreign mission enterprise in China and Chinese Christian communities seemed to flourish," even as "the Christian movement … was sliding toward a precipice." (93) The defeated Qing government inaugurated a series of ambitious reforms, many of them inspirited by Protestant missionaries and their urban converts, especially those educated in Protestant schools. Numbers of adherents grew, as did autonomy from missionary control.

Independent congregations, founded and led by Chinese, proliferated, despite the indifferent response of Western missionaries, who were not always sure whether the Chinese were ready to run their own churches and institutions, as the careers of Marcus Ch'eng (Chen Chonggui) and Cheng Jinyi illustrate.