

A Century of Incoherent Missionary Policy. Propaganda Fide and China:

From the Accommodation Imperative (1659's Instruction) to the Condemnation of the Chinese Rites (1742)

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[Abstract] This essay is to illustrate the inter-cultural features involved in the Chinese Rites Controversy, which had a devastating impact on the Chinese missionary endeavor. The 1659 instruction by Propaganda Fide, also known as the Magna Charta of the Congregation, obliged apostolic vicars and all missionaries in eastern Asia, including China, to carry out the missionary practice of adaptation. Missionaries were prohibited from combating local customs and traditions, except when they were in obvious contradiction to faith or morals. The directives also included the invitation for the promotion of indigenous clergy. The instructions were quite innovative, just as innovative was the missionary method envisaged by Francesco Ingoli, Propaganda Fide's first director. Sadly enough, the ground-breaking directives were not put into practice, quite paradoxically, exactly by Apostolic Vicars and missionaries sent by Propaganda Fide. Subsequent pronouncements by Propaganda Fide and by the same Pontifices contradicted early openness. Proposals coming from China for the promotion of Chinese clergy and liturgical adaptation were disapproved. At the end of the Rites Controversy, Chinese Christians were forced to discontinue the practice of the traditional rites in honour of the ancestors. The Rites Controversy was initiated in Fujian province in mid-1635. Dominican and Franciscan missionaries objected to the evangelization method introduced to China by Matteo Ricci and Giulio Aleni. Propaganda Fide and the Holy See were called in to declare whether the Christians were allowed to participate in the ancestral rituals. In contradiction with 1659's Instruction, Rome was unable to make a coherent decision, and the controversy dragged on. Pope Clement XI was determined to disapprove the Rites hoping, at the same time, to save China Mission from destruction. Sadly, the two objectives could not be achieved together. In 1742, Benedict XIV condemned the Rites in the most solemn fashion, putting to a definitive end China Mission as envisaged by Matteo Ricci.

My contribution to the symposium concerns inter-cultural aspects involved in historical controversies between Propaganda Fide and the China mission, which had a devastating impact on evangelization.

First Part

The Accommodation Imperative for Mission Today

Faith and Interculturality¹

The China mission proved that accommodation, the result of the encounter between faith and culture, is an imperative in the process of evangelization. In the early days, Propaganda Fide acknowledged that, but was unable to walk that line coherently. Today's pluralism of culture and cultures makes the relationship between faith, mission and culture even more complex.

Numerous cultures coexist in the same village, city, community and family. Not only that, post-modern and post-human complexity make different cultures co-exist within each one of us. We are multi-cultural subjects, and the different cultures within ourselves might even be in opposition.

“Accommodation” was a major feature in the Jesuits’ mission. This accommodation has its theological roots particularly in Thomas Aquinas, Erasmus of Rotterdam and Ignatius of Loyola. Aquinas adopted the term accommodation to describe the process by which, in the Holy Scriptures, God has spoken to humanity in a human fashion, intelligible to people. God accommodates us by speaking our language.

Erasmus of Rotterdam introduced the concept of *accommodatio Christi*: Christ accommodated himself by coming into the world.

The founder of the Society, Ignatius of Loyola, adopted the principle of accommodation for mission: “It is not that they must become like us, but we like them.”²

¹ On this topic, see Gianni Criveller, *The Parable of the Inculturation of the Gospel in China: A Catholic Viewpoint*. Centre for the Study of Religion and Chinese Society: Occasional Paper no. 14, Chung Chi College, Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2003. In Chinese: *Theological Annual*: vol. 26 (2005): 1-59; Gianni Criveller, “The Missionary Method of Matteo Ricci,” *Tripod*, n. 158 (2010): 13-54.

² As reported by Joseph Sebes, “A ‘Bridge’ Between East and West: Father Matteo Ricci S.I.,

The Question of Language

Language was central in missionary controversies in China. Language is not just a tool of communication but is itself communication, the specific existential form of expressing one's own reality. Language is the abode of existence, its form and its boundary. Do the evangelizers of today know the postmodern and post-human languages? What do we know about the languages of young people, immersed into the digital reality? Is our language meaningful to people we evangelize? Mission is no longer a question of the Gospel encountering cultures geographically other. Many evangelizers are unfamiliar with the languages and cultures of the new generations.

The Question of Translation

The controversies in China started out of the fear of translating the evangelical message into a different language, into another world. Translation is a form of accommodation. Do we accept today the risk of translating? The translation of the Christian message into an understandable and contemporary language is the new, difficult, frontier of accommodation or rather of evangelization.

We have seen that Thomas Aquinas observed that God speaks to us in human language, originating the term *acomodatio*. God accommodates us by speaking our language: we say the Bible is the "Word of God," and such it is. But, in fact, it is a very human word, even imperfect, as imperfect are several biblical words and episodes. If it were not a human word, the Bible would be incomprehensible to humans.

The Question of a Church as People of God

The fate of the mission and the fate church is the same. China missionaries asked the Church to be entrusted to local clergy. Chinese priests were discriminated against and given a second-class position. Today it is no longer a question of local clergy only, but of restoring the mission to those to whom it belongs: the disciples of Jesus, the baptized, the entire holy people of God.

His Time, His Life and His Method of Cultural Accommodation," in Lo Kuang ed., *Collected Essays of the International Symposium on Chinese-Western Cultural Exchange in Commemoration of the 400th Anniversary of the Arrival of Matteo Ricci S.J. in China* (Taipei, Furen Daxue, 1983), 73.

Every baptized faithful, woman or man, being a Christian, as the name says, is another Christ. All baptized are kings, responsible participants in the community, in imitation of Jesus the Good Shepherd. All baptized are priests, that is, capable of offering their lives to God in imitation of Christ, the one and only priest. All baptized are prophets, missionaries who announce the word of the gospel of life.

If we take this doctrine seriously, we will already be a completely different church and a different mission. The Church must become the Church of the baptized, women and men, with their charisms and ministries, without discrimination. We are in the age of the image, and too often, the image that the Church offers is of an all-male, clerical, chauvinist, patriarchal, vertical and authoritarian society. This is not an evangelical Church. Many people today, including young people and women, from all over the world, stay away from a Church with such a poor image.

Second Part

Accommodation Imperative in the 1659's Instruction

With the foundation of Propaganda Fide in 1622 and the innovative vision by Francesco Ingoli, its first director, the Holy See entered into modernity, and reclaimed its prerogatives and fine-tuned its methods.

As first archivist, Ingoli collected records and reports; letters and minutes of meetings; instructions, circulars and decrees, creating the basis for the extraordinary rich archives of Propaganda. Propaganda Fide quickly became the Roman Curia's best-informed office on worldwide affairs. The documentation collected on the mission field would become important for both the Congregation's planning on missionary method and activities, and for the future historiography as well.

The Holy See invented a new method for exercising its authority: appointing titular bishops as Apostolic Vicars, so that they would function on behalf of the Pope bypassing the colonizing policies of Spain and Portugal.

The patronage (*patronado* in Spanish and *padroado* in Portuguese) was the ecclesiastical privilege bestowed upon Iberian nations by Pope Alexander VI in 1493 in the Treaty of Tordesillas, a concession based on the theory that the Pope had supreme authority all upon the world, including the non-Christian countries.

In 1659 Propaganda Fide changed its missionary approach, spelling it out in the *Instructions for Apostolic Vicars of Cochinchina, of Tonkin and China*. This important document is considered the *Magna Charta* of the Congregation. The *Instruction* obliged Apostolic Vicars and all missionaries to adopt the practice of accommodation. Missionaries were to preserve local customs, values and traditions, except when in contradiction to faith or morals. The directives also included the invitation for the promotion of indigenous clergy, adequate spiritual and intellectual formation for the missionaries; the request that missionaries abstain from politics and commerce to preserve the spiritual character of mission. Financial independence from Spain and Portugal were also important aspects of the *Instruction*.

This is one of the most famous passages of the *Instruction*:

“Do not make any effort, do not use any means of persuasion to induce those peoples to change their rites, their lifestyle and their customs, unless they are openly contrary to religion and good morals. In fact, what is more absurd than transplanting France, Spain, Italy or some other European country to China? This is not what you must introduce, but faith, which does not reject or harm the rites and customs of any people, provided they are not bad, but rather wants to safeguard and consolidate them.”³

Propaganda Fide however, soon found itself embroiled in Rites controversies in India and China, and other juridical controversies in conflict with the prerogatives, rights and privileges claimed by Spain and Portugal. The ground-breaking directives were not put into practice.

Subsequent pronouncements by *Propaganda Fide* contradicted the 1659 *Instruction*. Plans for the promotion of Chinese clergy and liturgical adaptation were disapproved and Chinese Christians were forced to discontinue the practice of the Rites.

³ The Latin text and Italian translation are to be found in Massimo Marocchi, *Colonialismo, cristianesimo e culture extraeuropee. La istruzione di Propaganda Fide ai vicari apostolici dell'Asia Orientale (1659)*. Jaca Book: Milano, 1980, 50-53. The English translation here is mine.

Third Part

Propaganda Fide and Calls for Accommodation from China

The Question of a Liturgy in Chinese Language⁴

Jesuit Superior Nicolò Longobardo, the successor of Matteo Ricci, was the first asking for a dispensation from using Latin in the liturgy. There were numerous mature men suitable for the priesthood, but they could not possibly learn Latin.

In 1615, Pope Paul V gave the permission for adopting Chinese language in the liturgy and permitted other liturgical adaptations. On the other hand, he decided it was too early to ordain Chinese priests.

The concession, known as “Paul V’s privilege,” was not put into practice. Belgian missionary Nicolas Trigault, the “father of Chinese liturgy,” who personally obtained the privilege from Paul V, died tragically while translating into Chinese Catholic liturgical texts. This sad incident stopped the project.

In 1654, Jesuit Luigi Buglio resumed the translation of the liturgical and theological texts. However, *Propaganda Fide* did not confirm Paul V’s concession.

Jesuits Michal Boym and Martino Martini, while in Rome, asked the permission to use Chinese as liturgical language. In 1658, the question was submitted to Propaganda Fide, under Pope Alexander VII.

Francesco Albrizzi, secretary of Propaganda Fide, was in favor of the Chinese liturgy, stating that unless Chinese language were allowed, China’s conversion would be impossible.

A compromise was reached: China would be allowed to ordain mature men, who did not know enough Latin, provided that they could read it and that the canon of the Mass and the formulas of the Sacraments were explained to them. It was known as

⁴ For more information on this paragraph and the following one, I refer the reader to Gianni Criveller, “The ‘Parable’ of Liturgical Inculturation in China from the 17th Century to the Present: with particular reference to the Memorial by Antoine Thomas (1695)”; in *From Antoine Thomas S. J., to Celso Costantini, Multi-aspect Studies in Christianity in Modern China*, edited by Ku Weiyang & Zhao Xiaoyang (Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press, 2011), 102-139.

The “privilege of Alexander VII.” Few Chinese priests were ordained at the end of 17th century under that privilege.

A few years later, when Buglio’s translations of Latin texts into Chinese were finally available, the Jesuits sought to obtain confirmation of Paul V’s dispensation. Rome’s attitude changed: now it was favorable to the ordination of native clergy but not to an indigenous hierarchy. Rome also refused to confirm Paul V’s concession about using Chinese as liturgical language.

Jesuits kept sending appeals to Rome asking to use the Chinese language and for the ordination of a larger number of Chinese priests.

Jesuit Prospero Intorcetta and Philippe Couplet went to Rome, respectively in 1670 and 1684, to advocate for the cause of Chinese liturgy at Propaganda Fide. They were both unsuccessful.

Antoine Thomas’ Call for Chinese Clergy and Liturgy

In 1695, the Belgian missionary Antoine Thomas wrote a memorial addressed to Pope Innocent XII: *On the need to ordain Chinese priests and the dispensation to offer the sacrifice of the Mass in Chinese*.

The Pope transmitted it to the Congregation of Propaganda Fide without positive result.

The request by Thomas concerned the promotion of indigenous clergy and was in line with 1659 *Instruction*. The Jesuit missionary argued that the Church of China needs Chinese priests and a Chinese hierarchy to convert the immense country to the Christian faith.

The time appears favorable after the 1692 Edict by the Kangxi Emperor. The larger the number of faithful in each province of the Empire, the less likely a future persecution that could extinguish the incipient Catholicism. The tragedy of persecution in Japan, Thomas argued, proves that only local priests and bishops will be able to save the Church in time of persecution.

The ancient practice of the Church, continued Thomas, was to choose leaders among local men. Chinese people, according to Thomas, are more learned than the Greeks and the Romans. To those who find fault in the Chinese priests, Thomas objected that everywhere some clergy are unworthy, but it does not disqualify an entire community. In fact, concludes Thomas, Chinese priests had proven to be even better than European ones.

Thomas' second petition was about obtaining permission for the Chinese priests to celebrate in their own language. Thomas went back to the practice of the first millennium, when Mass was celebrated in Hebrew, Greek, Latin and various other national languages. For the sake of successful evangelization, the Popes allowed different liturgical languages. This rule, noticed Thomas, applies to China even more urgently.

Under the present circumstances, Thomas argued, it is impossible to train young Chinese men in excellent Latin. Sending youngsters to Europe does not seem to be a viable solution. It would be better to train trustworthy mature adults, proficient in their own culture, for the role of leadership. So did the Apostles.

Thomas did not exclude the use of Latin; he simply asked for permission to celebrate in either language. Allowing use of the Chinese language was both in accordance with the tradition of the Church and the most reasonable option under the circumstances.

China, explains Thomas, is an entire new world, possibly with more inhabitants than Catholics in the rest of the world. Even the conversion of neighboring nations depends upon the Chinese. Thomas concluded his memoir by claiming that this issue is the greatest since the beginning of the Church.

In 20 years, several China missionaries went to Rome to plead the case of the China Mission. They wrote various memorials and submitted them to Propaganda Fide and other Roman authorities. They are a remarkable documentation in the history of missionary thought. Yet they did not achieve their objective, which arguably would have been a tremendous turning point in the practice of cultural exchange in the life of the Church in China.

China Mission, Language, Theology and the Rites Controversy⁵

The Chinese Rites Controversy (17th-18th centuries) was a major turning point in the history of Chinese Catholicism. It had a devastating impact on missionary endeavors

⁵ On the Chinese Rites controversy, and related issues, see my essays: "The Chinese Rites Controversy. The Narrative of an Ill-Fated Misunderstanding," edited by, Hoster B. and Kuhlmann D., *Rooted In Hope: China - Religion - Christianity: Festschrift In Honor Of Roman Malek S.V.D, on The Occasion Of His 65th Birthday*. Monumenta Serica monograph series LXVIII/1. Routledge: Oxon/ New York. 2017, 205-227. Also "The Theological Background of the Chinese Rites Controversy," edited by, Chen, Alexander Tsung-Ming, *Catholicism's encounters with China: 17th to 20th century*. Leuven: Ferdinand Verbiest Instiute, 2018.

in China, yet the history of the Rites Controversy has not yet been told in its entirety and complexity.

The Rites controversy began in Fujian province in mid-1635. Dominican and Franciscan missionaries objected to the evangelization method introduced to China by Matteo Ricci and Giulio Aleni. The controversy started over a discussion about the meaning of Chinese ideograms. In a very important sense, the controversy was about the cultural process of translation.

The controversy was also about theology: were the ancestral rituals religious or civil? Could Christians take an active or passive part in them? Matteo Ricci stated that the rites in honor of the ancestors were not idolatrous and probably not superstitious as well. This position was based on *probabilism*, a moral doctrine professed by the Jesuits. *Probabilism* says: if you are not definitely certain that something is morally wrong, then you can opt for freedom of doing it, provided that it is probably good.

The Holy See and especially Propaganda Fide were called in to decide whether or not the Christians were allowed to participate in the ancestral rituals. Propaganda Fide and Rome were unable to make a clearcut decision, and the controversy dragged on for several decades.

In 1684, Propaganda Fide started sending to China its own missionaries, with the purpose of limiting the excessive power of the Iberian nations. They were called *propagandisti*, i.e. missionaries sent expressly by Propaganda Fide, and subject to it, even if they were members of a religious order. In the following decades, many *propagandist* missionaries followed. Among them Carlo Orazi da Castorano, whose importance in the controversy of the Rites is difficult to exaggerate.

China's Emperor Kangxi and Pope Clement XI got personally heavily involved and it reached an incredible level of complication and animosity. A vast amount of writings were produced in China and in Europe. Two Papal Legations to China (17th century) could not solve the matter, and the tension between Beijing and Rome escalated.

In 1704, the commission of the four cardinals of Propaganda Fide, with the approval of Clement XI, decided against the Rites: the tablets of the ancestors adopted by Catholics should omit the final characters that followed the name of the deceased: "place of the soul" (*lingwei*), considered a "superstitious belief" of the presence of the soul in the tablet.

A dozen Chinese Catholic literati had argued that this was not the interpretation that should have been given to these characters. Again, linguistic interpretation and the issue of translation are fundamental issues.

Clement XI was determined to disapprove the rituals but hoping, at the same time, to save the China Mission from destruction. But the two objectives were not compatible.

In 1742 Benedict XIV condemned the Rites in the most solemn fashion, putting to a definitive end not only to the century-long controversy, but also to the China Mission initiated by Matteo Ricci based on the method of accommodation.

The Jesuits lost a major battle, and for other reasons as well, their reputation collapsed, to the point that the same Society of Jesus was suppressed in 1773. In 1939, the Holy See, under the influence Celso Costantini, its Delegate to China, dramatically reversed the prohibition of the Rites.

The Second Vatican Council promoted the practice of inculturation and in the post-Council reflection Matteo Ricci became one of the most admired and mentioned missionaries. Recent Popes John XXIII, Paul VI, John Paul II, Benedict XVI and Francis praise Matteo Ricci as a great and exemplary missionary. They confirmed the correctness, the farsightedness and the enlightened of Matteo Ricci's missionary method, underlining the justness and validity of his "accommodation."

The damage caused by the failure to apply the accommodation imperative is still hovering over the Church. In some Asian areas, Christianity is considered still a "foreign religion." Yet, Christianity—in its original inspiration—is neither a religion nor something foreign. Christianity is a universal faith.

【摘要】 本文旨在闡述中國禮儀之爭所涉及的跨文化特徵，它對中國的傳教工作產生了毀滅性的影響。傳信部 1659 年也被稱為《傳教憲章》的指示，責成東亞地區包括中國在內的宗座代牧和所有傳教士開展適應本地文化的傳教方法。傳教士被禁止反對本地的習俗和傳統，除非它們明顯違背信仰或道德。這些指示也包括邀請重用本地神職人員。這些指示非常具有創新性，正如傳信部首任部長方濟各·英戈利所設想的傳教方法一樣具有創新性。可悲且相當矛盾的是，由傳信部派遣的宗座代牧和傳教士沒有將這些開創性的指示付諸實踐。傳信部和教宗隨後的聲明，與早期的開放態度互相矛盾。來自中國關於重用國籍神職人員和禮儀本地化的提案被拒絕。在禮儀之爭結束之時，中國基督徒被迫停止拜祭祖先的傳統儀式。禮儀之爭始於 1635 年中期，在福建省爆發。道明會和方濟會的傳教士反對利瑪竇和艾儒略引入到中國的傳教方法。傳信部和羅馬教廷被要求聲明是否允許基督徒參與祭祖。由於與 1659 年的指示相矛盾，羅馬無法做出一致的決定，使爭論一直持續。教宗克萊孟十一世決定不贊成這些禮儀，同時希望挽救中國傳教團免於毀滅。遺憾的是，這兩個目標無法同時達成。1742 年，本篤十四世以最嚴厲的方式譴責了禮儀，徹底結束了利瑪竇所設想的中國傳教活動。