MATTEO RICCI IN POST-CHRISTIAN EUROPE

Gerard J. Hughes

JUST OVER 400 YEARS AGO, IN 1582, the Jesuit Matteo Ricci arrived in China as a missionary. Faced with a highly sophisticated and complex culture, he had to decide—or discover—how to make his Christian beliefs even intelligible, let alone attractive, to the Chinese. The strategy he developed was a model example of what today would be called 'inculturation'. He became a mandarin, an important figure at the court of the Emperor, and an author of works which even today are regarded as Chinese literary classics. Only then—many years later, in 1603—did he publish what was in effect a Chinese catechism, a work which embodied painstaking research into the meaning of the several Chinese ideograms which might conceivably be used to translate the word 'God'. Only after a long process of learning did he trust himself to talk accurately to Chinese people about his religious beliefs and practices, as someone who was at the same time an Italian Jesuit and a cultivated peer of his Chinese fellow-scholars. He did so in terms which he had learnt from the Chinese themselves; and he integrated Chinese practices such as paying reverence to one's ancestors into Christian liturgical practice.[1]

Both at the time and subsequently, Ricci was strongly criticized. He was said to be watering down the Christian message, and to have corrupted Christian practice with elements of pagan worship. He had, for instance, avoided the public use of images of the naked crucifix in deference to Chinese sensibilities; other missionaries, about to be deported for parading the crucifix, bitterly said to Ricci that at least they had been willing to preach Christ crucified. He was criticized by

[1] For information on Ricci, it is still worth reading Vincent Cronin, *The Wise Man from the West* (London: Hart Davis, 1955). See also Jonathan D. Spence, *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci* (London: Faber, 1985). Ricci's own work has been published in a bilingual edition: *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven (T'ien-chu Shih-i)*, translated by Douglas Lancashire and Peter Hu Kuo-chen (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1985).

The Way, 44/2 (April 2005), 71-82

Matteo Ricci

his Christian contemporaries for interpreting as mere reverence for the ancestors what was in fact the outright worship of the ancestors as gods. Translation of the verbal expressions of Christian belief into Chinese from Italian or Latin, and the use of Chinese rites within Christian liturgy, were, so the critics alleged, radically misleading. A marketing strategy, and an eagerness to be understood and accepted, had led to serious mistranslation and to a total misrepresentation of the faith.[2]

History has a way of repeating itself. I suggest that a similar conflict over pastoral policy can be found in our own day. It is hardly news that policies like Ricci's are still a matter of dispute in what used to be called 'missionary lands'. Less obviously, they are also occurring now in Europe, as Christians try to respond to the post-Christian culture now prevalent here. Now, as in Ricci's time, violent disagreements about pastoral practice are underpinned by sharply contrasting theological positions. Many official Church responses to the post-Christian culture of Europe resemble what Ricci's critics typically said: we must remain faithful in belief and in practice to the integrity of the gospel. The suggestion that we need to begin by listening to the post-Christian position of most of our contemporaries, and see how things go from there, will seem enlightened to some; but others will see it as inevitably watering down the Christian message for the sake of a specious popular appeal. The problem is real and far from simple, whether in theory or in practice. The dispute is just as acrid as it was in Ricci's day. How are we to proceed?

[2] The case for the critics of Ricci's approach is well reported by J. S. Cummins, *A Question of Rites: Friar Domingo Navarrete and the Jesuits in China* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1993).

Portrait of the Post-Christian European

I suggest that we might begin as Ricci did, and try simply to acquaint ourselves with what post-Christian Europe is actually like.

For a start, contemporary Europe is multi-cultural; gone are the days of a Christianity which, despite the differences between Catholics and Protestants, could still claim to constitute a world-view shared by all right-thinking people. The cultures of many Europeans owe little or nothing to Christianity. Some are unchurched Christians; others are Sikhs or Hindus or Muslims, to list only a few of the possibilities. This multiplicity itself, with Christianity only one strand in a very complex cultural web, is crucially important; for it surely challenges the simple picture held by some early missionaries, and repeated by some Christians and some Muslims today, that there is obviously just one true religion, surrounded by a whole chaos of confused superstition and ignorance. Even the belief that there is some one religion in a privileged position cannot be maintained in *that* over-simple way. There are many viable ways of life, to put it no more strongly, in which religion plays no part at all, as well as many in which different religions play different parts. The diversity of contemporary Europe can be seen as a rich cultural cornucopia or as a fatally open Pandora's box; but it cannot reasonably be read as a culture still fundamentally Christian that needs at most a little tidying up, a quick ecumenical polish.

Diversity and Disillusion

Let me outline something of the attitudes of those who have a generally Christian background. I will draw upon a survey of religious belief in Britain conducted by the state broadcasting organization, the BBC, in association with the religious weekly *The Tablet* in 2000. I will supplement this with my personal experience of such people as my university colleagues, or students whom I have taught, or people to whom I have offered some spiritual direction.

There is an important distinction to be drawn between people to whom Christianity has never in fact been a live option, and those for whom Christian belief has been tried and in one way or another found wanting.

The first group can hold a bewildering variety of beliefs, only some of which have any close relationship to Christianity. More of them believe in a Life Force than in a personal God; more believe in the

devil than believe in God; almost twice as many people think of themselves as 'spiritual' than would admit to belief in God; many would claim that their most significant religious experiences occur in prayer. Jesus is thought to be just a man, or even just a character in a story. Of the teachings of Jesus (except perhaps for the duty to love one another and the threat of Hell), they remain largely ignorant. Almost all European post-Christians can recall a certain amount of Christian vocabulary. They can very roughly describe what Christians celebrate at Christmas, or at Easter—they can (more or less) tell the Christmas and Easter 'stories'. They know that there are various Christian denominations, which they believe are divided largely by differences over the status of the Pope, controversies about sexual ethics and abortion, and, bizarrely, by their different views about uninhibited singing and dancing in church. In all this we can easily see the decayed fall-out from the implosion of Christianity which occurred some considerable time ago, before most of these people were born. They perceive Christianity as somehow long discredited, without themselves having sufficient experience or knowledge to enable them to justify this view.

People who have tried Christianity and found it wanting often have a much better knowledge of Christianity,[3] but for a variety of reasons they find it very unsatisfactory, and they explicitly reject some central Christian beliefs—or at least refuse to commit themselves to them. They may dismiss various theological discussions as concerned with useless technicalities; examples might be the doctrines of the Trinity, the claim that Jesus is 'of one being with the Father', transubstantiation, and resurrection. It is not only theological technicalities which are rejected; for along with them go adherence to the beliefs which those technicalities are intended to express, in the divinity of Christ, the real presence in the Eucharist, and life after death. I suspect that people often feel that the very technicality of theological discussion has served to undermine the doctrines. However, they do not necessarily reject Christianity entirely. Their

[3] Indeed, better than that of some practising Christians: I was told of a sixteen-year-old Roman Catholic girl who, when asked what it meant to her to be a Catholic, replied, 'You can't have sex before marriage, you can't use birth control after marriage, you can't have an abortion, and you have to send for the priest when you are dead'. It is not just the unchurched who have almost no idea about Catholicism or even Christianity.

rejection is selective, and the selection varies from individual to individual. In addition, such people may well incorporate among their religious views elements from non-Christian religions, such as Sufism, Buddhism or one of the several varieties of nature religion.

The Desire for Spirituality

By their own admission, what many post-Christian Europeans have in common is a desire for a deeper spirituality. This desire is not necessarily obvious, nor even always clearly acknowledged or understood; and it is very variously expressed. Post-Christian Europeans, like any other large group, include extroverts and introverts, mystics and charismatics. Their immediate religious needs are notably different from each other, even if it might be argued that they are at some deep level the same. But the desire for a deeper spirituality is to a considerable degree free from ties to any particular form of religious belief; indeed it can co-exist with a denial of religious belief.

The desire for a deeper spirituality

To illustrate: I have asked several groups of students in their last year at secondary school whether they have had anything in the previous three months which they would term in some sense a religious experience. Usually about seventy percent say that they have; but they are normally quite unable to say why they think it 'religious'.[4] Again, I taught one student who was very impressed by the traditional proofs for the existence of God and by other philosophical discussions about the nature of God; but she said both that she still could not believe in God, and that she very much wished that she could. Note the combination of desire and frustration.

In post-Christian Europe, there is a general sense that Christianity has failed to respond to important needs. Those who have had little effective contact with Christianity simply have no sense of how the gospel could possibly be relevant to their lives; those who have moved beyond Christianity often have a more focused view, and sometimes an angrier one, both of their own spiritual needs and of Christianity's utter failure to satisfy them.

[4] The percentage is a rough approximation, but it does not seem to vary much between faith schools and others.

Sharing the Gospel

Practising Christians are prone to regard post-Christians primarily in negative terms; either they have been deprived of the faith, or else they have lost it. Like Ricci's critics, they regard the people among whom they live as religiously inadequate.

Ricci's first response was quite different; he saw that he could only share the Gospel with people if he first learnt from them. This suggestion seemed outlandish at the time. But perhaps we contemporary Christians have to be outlandish in just this way. What do today's post-Christians have to offer us? Is there anything which they might have learned, facets of religious and moral truth that they might teach us in virtue of *their* culture?

To share the Gospel is to share in a mutual learning experience, in which I discover what I mean through the process of discovering how what I say strikes others, and of finding out what they might want to say on a roughly similar topic. One cannot simply explain to them the truths in which one believes. One cannot 'preach the gospel' in that sense to someone whose culture, and therefore whose language also, is not ours, even if they happen to use many words that seem to correspond to ours.

Before we start, we, like Ricci, have to get to grips with the complexities involved. Ricci took more than ten years before he felt confident enough to translate *Deus* into Mandarin without being misunderstood, and his choice of *T'ien-chu* is still controversial. We ourselves might reflect on what mainstream Catholic Christians mean when they speak of eating Christ's body and drinking his blood in the Eucharist. It may be obvious enough to their fellow-believers that they are not describing some horrendous cannibalistic ritual; but what do people from outside a Christian culture make of it? What comes across to outsiders when Christians say that Jesus is God and not simply a human person, or when we use expressions such as 'the word of God' or 'being redeemed by the blood of Christ?' No simple dictionary will be able to teach people outside our faith-communities the nuances which are involved in figurative and extended expressions such as these. It is only through an empathy, learnt through patient observation or even participation, that someone who begins from outside a Christian religious culture will grasp what we really mean. A wooden, allegedly

To understand a religion requires empathy and patience

simple, understanding of the words used is thoroughly misleading. We need to be much more aware of the fact that what we say may come across to others as hopelessly crude, or even nonsensical, and be rejected for that reason.

Equally patient and sensitive negotiation is essential when we discover that many, perhaps most, post-Christian Europeans claim to have had religious experiences and to be spiritual people, interested in finding words with which to express their experience. The same issues about translation and mutual understanding arise again, this time on perhaps a more personal level. When they say that they do not believe in God, exactly what are they denying? What exactly do they mean when they speak of 'a religious experience', or when they describe themselves as spiritual but not religious, or when they say that they cannot imagine a life after death?

Given the difficulties here, one may well understand why Ricci's critics wanted to insist that things were much more straightforward: you just had to tell people what to believe. But Ricci's approach seems, in the long run, far more realistic and far more promising.

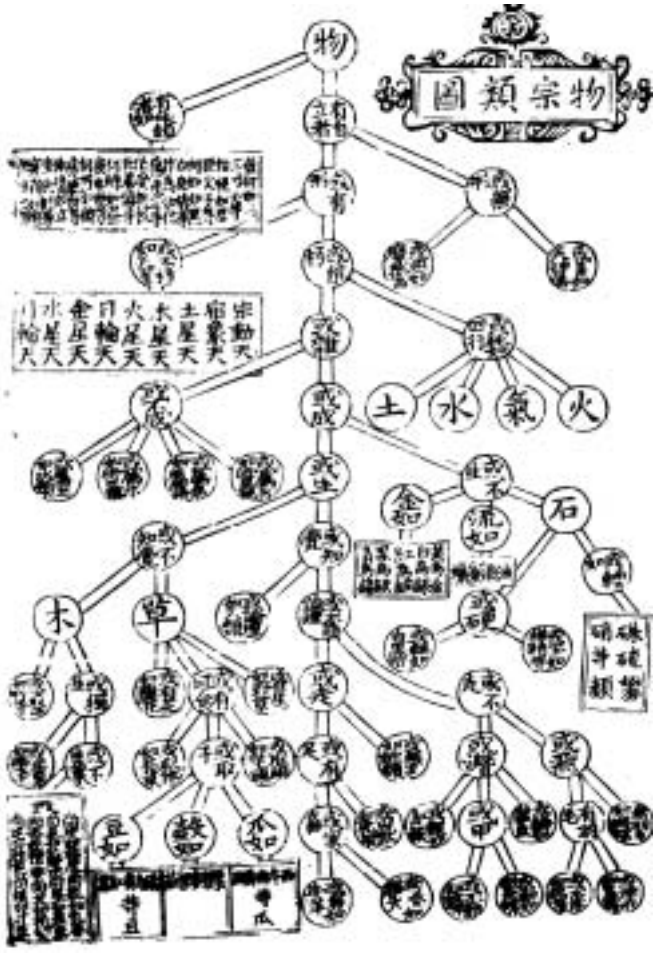
The Nature of Christian Truth

It is of course deceptively easy to talk about growth in mutual understanding, about learning from one another, and about the development of a new language in which to communicate more effectively. But there are important theological issues which need to be settled. If we all have to learn from one another and speak anew about our beliefs, is the result not inevitable going to be a minimalist 'common ground', a vague religiosity in which Christianity is no longer recognisable, and has perhaps disappeared altogether? What will happen to Christian truth if such an approach is taken to its implied conclusion?

We must remember that truth is not somehow a Thing in Itself. Truth belongs to (some of the) statements we make; what we say is true if it corresponds to the way in which things really are. Religious statements will be true if they correctly describe some aspect of the relationships between ourselves and God. True religious statements can be made in any one of hundreds of human languages; they may set out to describe any of the multitude of ways in which God can be said to relate to us; and, if God is ultimately a mystery beyond our complete

grasp, even our true statements are going to be inadequate, incomplete, leaving much more unsaid. In principle, then, in order to understand the religious statements of others—other Christians, members of other faiths, unchurched post-Christians—we need to tackle all the problems about translation; we need to discover whether what others are saying is true or false, and to ask whether they might be truly describing an aspect of God's relationship to us which we have not thought to express. Answering those questions is not at all easy in practice.

I believe that the one God revealed in Christ through the Spirit is fundamental and unchanging. But, in so saying, I am speaking in the Christian terms which are familiar to me and to most of you, my readers. If asked what that statement means, I might well point to the nearest Christian theological library. But might not a Buddhist or a European post-Christian also have ways of expressing that same reality? And indeed, might there not be other aspects of the reality of God upon which they have been particularly drawn to reflect? It is, after all, part of our Christian belief that the Spirit of God is offered to everyone, not just to those who have assimilated Christian preaching; the description of Pentecost makes it clear that those who have received the Spirit will not all be saying the same things. In the early years of Christianity we can see, for instance in the Gospel of Matthew, that some Christians spoke in largely Jewish terms against a background of traditional Jewish imagery, and retained many Jewish practices. Other Christians, as is clear from the letters of Paul, had very different practices, and spoke in very different terms about what God had done in Christ and how we should respond to it. The early Christians found their differences disquieting; but over the centuries we have learned to value all these early traditions and to resist crude attempts to harmonize them. 'Who was right, Paul or Matthew?' is a question to which the answer is 'both'; but *not* because they are uttering the same truths, for they clearly are not. The early Christian Churches had to learn from one another—and that was a slow, painstaking and at times painful process. Paul was no less controversial in his day than Ricci in his, and for very similar reasons. Both were involved in an enormous culture-shift; and both resisted over-simple solutions to the problems of sharing Christianity in a new and challenging environment.



Ricci's Diagram of the Different Kinds of Being, from the 1603 Beijing edition of **The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven**

In Acts, Luke describes Paul's efforts to meet the Athenian philosophers on their own ground (Acts 17:16-34). Luke goes out of his way to present Paul's approach in an entirely favourable light: the reason why some of the audience were not convinced was the superficial nature of their interest, in contrast to those who wished to hear more. It is interesting to contrast this account of Paul's approach in Athens with what Luke's Paul had said to members of the Jewish

Diaspora in Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:14-50). Paul varied his message for different audiences. Our post-Christian world, with its increasingly rapid technological change, and its interest in spirituality rather than in the Church, presents us with a similar challenge which we need to take equally seriously.[5]

Learning in Dialogue

If we listen attentively to today's post-Christians, they will, of course, also enrich our understanding of our own Christianity. The contribution made by the largely post-Christian feminist movement is surely an excellent, and as yet not fully assimilated, contribution of this kind. Perhaps, too, our contact with post-Christians will reveal places where our own understanding of Christianity was not merely incomplete, but positively mistaken. We have as precedents for this the Enlightenment views on science, and hence on cosmogony and evolution, which were and still are taken by many post-Christians to be reasons for rejecting Christianity. Many Christians still cannot assimilate the results of scholarship over the last 150 years concerning the nature and meaning of biblical texts.

Christians have already had to learn not to burn witches or execute heretics. Much more controversially, it is accepted in most post-Christian circles that some second marriages may be morally admirable, even though the first spouse is still alive. Surely it cannot be denied that Christians may well have more to learn. And some of it they will need to learn from post-Christians. Of course, to admit this much will raise fears that we have started down a slippery slope, and that at the bottom there is but a minimalist religion—one which might have historical roots in Christianity, but which is Christian no longer. It is in these terms that people like Ricci's critics can mount an emotionally powerful argument. But unless we continue the process of patient listening, Christianity will become even more sidelined than it already is.

We can observe a similar dynamic occurring in our own day, with the various ecumenical dialogues, notably those between Anglicans and Roman Catholics. Once real care had been taken to articulate

[5] The variety of problems is well exhibited by the essays in the first part of *Comparative Theology: Essays for Keith Ward*, edited by T. W. Bartel (SPCK: London, 2003).

Roman Catholic and Anglican beliefs on eucharist, or papal primacy, or holy orders, apparently obvious contradictions between the two positions tended to disappear. The resulting statements proved to be mutually acceptable to all those who took part in the lengthy conversations.[6] Throughout the discussion of each topic there had to be some careful translation in order to avoid mutual misunderstanding. Perhaps more strikingly, in the end *neither* side simply repeated word for word what they started with. Both had learned more about their respective beliefs.

As with inter-Church dialogue, so with dialogue with post-Christians. The outcome cannot be determined in advance. Just as we believe that there is much of importance that we have to offer, we must also make it clear that we are willing to learn from them, with the presupposition that they will have much to contribute to our understanding of Christianity. If it seems that many contemporary post-Christians have a kind of 'pick and mix' approach to religious beliefs and practices, we Christians need to ask:

- Are they perhaps right to reject some things which we have mistakenly accepted without really thinking them through?
- Have some of the practices which they reject genuinely outlived their usefulness? Might it be that they are no longer helpful to people seeking to deepen their relationship with God?
- What can we learn from the non-Christian practices taken from Zen Buddhism or Sufism, for example, which post-Christians sometimes import into their spiritual lives precisely because they find them helpful?

One sometimes has the impression that Christians are apt to be especially hard on post-Christians. They seem to be responding to the perceived 'pick and mix' approach with an insistence on 'all or

[6] Significantly, though their reports were widely accepted in both Churches, what dissatisfaction there was came from people who had *not* had first-hand experience of the discussions which led to those reports. The critics would claim to have understood what the reports were saying, and on that basis to have disagreed with various points. I would seriously contest their claim to have understood the reports at all adequately.

nothing'. Like ourselves, post-Christians will have their shortcomings of one kind or another. But it is at least as likely that they, like us, are sincerely seeking God as best they can, and that they have found their experience of this or that Christian community an impediment rather than a help. We need to give an unconditional welcome to those who are interested enough to establish contact.

We would do well, therefore, to remember the long history of Christianity and the enormous changes, both cultural and theological, which have taken place within that culture down the ages. Creeds—in the plural—have been formulated; mistaken views abandoned; different aspects emphasized. History has no end, and cultural change will always be with us. Moreover, dialogue will never come to a complete and final conclusion. But, to put the matter in Christian terms, it is part of our faith that we have to preach the gospel to all nations, and that our attempts to do so as sensitively and respectfully as we can will be supported by the gift of the Spirit. For the Spirit is given to everyone who seeks a deeper understanding of the unfathomable riches of God. In coming to understand who God is for others we will surely come to know better who God is for us. If we fail to take post-Christians seriously, our words will fall on deaf ears and our own faith will suffer.

Gerard J. Hughes SJ taught philosophy at Heythrop College, University of London, for many years before becoming Master of Campion Hall, Oxford, in 1998. He has published books on ethical theory, on philosophical issues regarding God, and on Aristotle; he is also an enthusiastic gardener.