

# INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

## The Experience of some Pioneer Jesuits in Asia

*Adolfo Nicolás*

THERE IS NO DOUBT that in the sixteenth century all missionaries—Jesuits and others—had a very difficult task. And I say this not just in reference to the dangers and hazards of the appalling travel conditions; nor to the political, cultural and commercial obstacles that constantly faced them; nor even to the linguistic barriers raised by the complexity of languages which had evolved over centuries of thought, culture and sophisticated reflection on human and social relations. Even more difficult than these problems was the question of how to disentangle their strictly missionary aims from the much more material aims of colonisation and commerce which motivated the European nations, and which happened to coincide with them both in time and place.

However, the overriding difficulty, to my mind, was of an ideological-theological nature, and its negative influence has had an impact on all missionary endeavours right up to our own time. The basic assumption of a 'mission' was that all the 'others' were in the wrong and were heading, almost inevitably, for eternal damnation. Only by getting them to abandon their religions and become members of the Catholic Church would it be possible to give them some chance of salvation. This was quite the wrong baggage for those journeying to the Orient to proclaim the gospel! The very words that could provide the Good News for the few who welcomed the message spelt out very Bad News for everyone else. This included the Ancestors, the cultural world in which they had lived, and the religions that had offered life and meaning to nations and generations in their search for inner understanding.

*The Way*, 50/4 (October 2011), 7–33

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It is absolutely essential to grasp this ideological-theological context if one is to understand the great—and also the less well-known—missionaries of Asia. Both then and later, their ‘mission’ was truly a cultural and religious assault on the spiritual life and the inner peace of communities and peoples. Of course, the missionaries would never have seen it like that. To them, the ‘mission’ was ‘to open the door of salvation’ ... ‘to save from hell’ ... ‘to offer to recently discovered peoples (?) the new life brought by Christ’ ... ‘to make room in the Ark of Salvation for people walking in darkness’.

The missionaries we shall be looking at in this article were brought up with this frame of mind which, in the context of Asia and its great religions, was inadequate, lamentably narrow-minded and hardly acceptable. We can only mention a few of the most outstanding missionaries here. Because they are so well known, we can be brief and dispense with most of the historical detail. This article is intended mainly as an invitation to reflect on their work and on the questions they raise for those of us who have inherited their heartfelt interest in—and even their passion for—the liberating and salvific meeting of different religions.<sup>1</sup>

At the risk of repeating the obvious, but so as to avoid certain misconceptions, a few general remarks are worth making at the outset. They will help us to put what follows in context and prevent our seeming unjust to those who went before us. Any intelligent consideration of the past has to maintain some distance, one of honest respect, if justice is to be done as we try to imagine the horizons within which the people we are discussing moved and thought. Anything less would vitiate our search for meaning.

The first obvious point to bear in mind is that none of these missionaries had at their disposal what today are known as the social sciences: cultural anthropology, philosophy of religion, social psychology and such like. The sixteenth-century missionaries knew very little about the origin, development and function of different religions in general, and of the Asian religions in particular. In the worst scenario, such religions were considered to be the work of the devil. It would, however, be very unjust to expect a deep knowledge of the complexities of cultures

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<sup>1</sup> My debt should be mentioned to the many Jesuits who have contributed very generously of their knowledge and thoughts to this article; and in particular I wish to mention Fr Amaladoss (India) and Frs Üçerler, Veliath and Yamaoka (Japan).

and religions from people of that time, since they lacked the analytical tools, the models and the theoretical background for such knowledge.

Similarly, the philosophical-theological training then available was not adequate for an understanding of 'revelation' in the context of human mediation in all its cultural, psychological, social and historical complexity. From a modern point of view, they held very imperfect hermeneutical presuppositions about the function of language and symbol, about the logical gulf between ideas and models of comprehension, and about the profound mutual implications of philosophy and theology.

As human thought always is, theology was, of course, influenced by unfounded premises, ill-defined concepts and many ambiguities. Concepts such as 'salvation', 'faith', 'grace'—all of key importance for the work of evangelization—were given definitions now considered far too narrow. The theology of the Holy Spirit had ceased to develop and, to all intents and purposes, was missing from that of 'mission'. To add to the problem, the split between systematic theology and spirituality had become accepted, and this rift was perhaps of the greatest significance at the moment of crisis for the Oriental mission. The great strength of the Jesuits at that time lay in the area of spirituality, which could have served as a bridge in the dialogue with the religions of Asia. Instead, most of their catechetical endeavours, and the discussions that followed them, were directed almost entirely at the explanation of topics which by their very nature must always remain beyond the reach of logical human discourse.

### ***Francis Xavier and the Experience of Japan***

Some 450 years ago, Xavier reached Kagoshima in the south-west of Japan, probably in mid-October 1549. His personal impact in his contacts with the Japanese of different social strata, combined with the vivid and extraordinarily positive picture of Japan and its inhabitants that he was able to send back to Europe, has left an indelible mark on the historical memory of the period.

Yet Xavier had arrived in Asia weighed down with the inevitable burden of prejudice and misconceptions mentioned above. He shared with his contemporaries an ignorance of the nations, languages and people. His extraordinary zeal arguably impelled him into a missionary practice that was problematically simplistic and precipitate. Not



St Francis Xavier

surprisingly, he has been described as the 'Divinely Impatient'.<sup>2</sup> In fact, in one of his letters to Ignatius, who insisted on knowing all that he could of the work of his fellow Jesuits, Xavier tried to justify his pastoral method in some detail. Something made him feel that Ignatius would not look favourably on the speed with which large numbers of people in the south of India were being admitted into the faith of the Church. It was probably in India that Xavier first displayed his pastoral and missionary misconceptions. Narrow, intolerant theology misdirected his zeal into a

series of negative actions, commonplace at the time, against non-Christian temples, their sculptures, doctrines and practices. It was also in India that Xavier had most difficulty in overcoming his cultural—even racial—prejudices.

Nevertheless, Xavier had depth of mind and had acquired a genuine experience of God and God's world, and a sense of mystery in which he had been initiated by Ignatius. Moreover, Xavier was capable of changing. We all go through youthful periods in our lives, periods of imprudence and intolerance which we readily recognise in others. With his transfer to Japan and his meeting with a highly developed culture, and with people capable of expressing something of that culture in terms that Europeans could understand, Xavier underwent a fundamental change in his missionary style. The great pity is that while in India he never came into contact with currents of thought and

<sup>2</sup> The well-known Spanish author José María Pemán wrote a play around the personality of St Francis Xavier with the title *El divino impaciente* (1933).

experience that long predated those of Europe. His surprise and his change would have been much more radical.

In any case, it is Japan that allowed—obliged—him to listen, to observe, to learn and to clarify so much that he then encountered for the first time. He was the first European to set foot in Kyoto. The city and its whole religious world fascinated him. When he learnt that one of the most important Buddhist centres in Kyoto was the Hieian Temple, high on a mountain, he wanted to go at once to visit the monks, but he was not allowed. However, from now on this would be his strategy. In Kagoshima, on first entering Japan, Xavier soon established contact with Ninshitsu, the Grand Master and Superior of the Zen temple of Fukushōji. Ninshitsu is known historically as someone of exemplary personal life and great breadth of knowledge. The two conversed on religious themes: salvation and human happiness. Xavier had similar conversations with the temple administrator and other officials. This contact with a ‘religious experience’ of undoubted value and great depth had a considerable attraction for Xavier and he regularly visited Buddhist temples and talked with the monks. In Kagoshima he was well received and struck up a lasting friendship with Ninshitsu. To this day, that friendship continues between the Superior of the temple and Catholic figures in the local church.

One can see in these contacts a new attitude of deep respect for the individual: a genuine interest in the other’s faith, practices and significance. Since Xavier frequently had problems in trying to understand Buddhist concepts, he returned to the temple with questions. When he arrived in Yamagushi in 1551, Xavier kept up his habit of talking to the religious authorities. Such encounters produced mixed feelings: on the one hand, there was the joy of discovering points in common concerning life and moral principles, values and attitudes to life and human behaviour—so much so that in some of his letters Xavier wondered if Christian missionaries from the St Thomas Church of India had not already been before him in Japan. On the other hand, he was astonished that his interlocutors did not go along with the philosophical-theological lines of argument that he put before them. Most of these conversations ended with questions unanswered.

This type of conversation is clearly a positive form of dialogue, which we may call Type A. It springs from an important change of attitude. This sort of dialogue implies respect, interest in another religious

world, an effort at authentic understanding and a first step towards friendship. It is astonishing to find in the letters of Xavier so much information on the Buddhism that existed then in Japan.

In spite of all this, Xavier remained convinced that his principal mission was to tell the Japanese about Christ and his salvation. Much of his effort went into catechesis. For him, this centred on three main points: the existence of one God, the Creator; the reality of eternal life, the immortal soul and the possibility of salvation in this other life;<sup>3</sup> and the fact that Jesus is the Saviour. Such a preoccupation with catechesis led him and his listeners to discover the differences between different religious beliefs and therefore the need for a process of mutual clarification. So he undertook a second type of dialogue, Type B, which consisted in a process of mutual 'purification' of concepts and terms.

In the Europe of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, such a form of dialogue normally took the form of a public debate, very much in the style of the scholastic debates common in the University of Paris. One may well ask whether this was likely to produce dialogue of any depth when transposed to Japan, or even whether it was in harmony with an Ignatian emphasis on mutual help in achieving deeper knowledge of the truth. However, the public debate became a regular practice among missionaries at this time and would continue even after Xavier's death.

And, to give Xavier due credit, apparently not a few notable cases of conversion and of improvement in Christian living resulted from such debates. Both Cosme de Torres and Juan Fernández testified that, as they continued with the practice, some of those who presented the strongest counter-arguments eventually ended by being the best converts. Xavier himself wrote in a letter from Cochin on 29 January 1552:

The difficulties encountered in working with an intelligent race that is eager to know in what law one is to be saved bring with them very great consolations, so much so in fact, that in Yamaguchi, after the duke had given us permission to preach the law of God, so many people came to ask questions and to argue with us that it seems to me that I can truthfully say that I had never before in my life received so much pleasure and spiritual consolation as I did in seeing that God our Lord confounded the

<sup>3</sup> According to Fr Yūki this point was generally admitted by most Japanese at that time.

pagans through us and the victory which we were constantly gaining over them.<sup>4</sup>

The closing remark points to a third type of dialogue, Type C, whose most positive characteristics have appeared already. This third type was largely the result of the fundamental aim pursued by Xavier—the good and the salvation of his hearers. Sometimes this made him adopt quite an aggressive attitude. It was well known that in his time there was no lack of problems, abuses and scandals among the Buddhist monks of certain temples. Xavier reacted in prophetic fashion and did not hesitate to adopt a harsh and condemnatory tone when speaking to the monks; he was arguing in favour of the good and the salvation of their followers, to whom they should have been giving a good example and helping them in the practice of virtue. This side of Xavier's mission is of particular interest and importance.

Xavier cannot be described as an opportunist. He was a man of integrity, completely dedicated to the mission of evangelization. He never took his eye off the final goal: that is, conversion and the adoption of a way of life in conformity with the will of God and the moral law. As his knowledge of the varied Buddhist sects and of the problems that divided the groups and temples increased, the discussions became more tense, and in certain quarters there was practically open war. In this context, Xavier's preoccupation with 'improving the lives of the monks', quite apart from whether they became Christian or not, had an important theological and spiritual dimension.

Xavier believed that, even if they did not convert, the monks could be good and live according to God's law. Thus he was admitting, even if implicitly, that the Spirit of God could be at work also among Buddhist monks. In addition, he thought it worth his while to do what he could to improve the life and good example of the monks within the Buddhist fold. In this way, the ordinary people would benefit. To adopt a modern terminology, borrowed from Lonergan, we can say that Xavier was calling the Buddhist monks, not only to an intellectual conversion (through debates) and a religious conversion (through catechesis), but also to a moral conversion. Deep within Xavier something was telling

<sup>4</sup> Francis Xavier to his companions in Europe, 29 January 1552, in *The Letters and Instructions of Francis Xavier*, translated by M. Joseph Costelloe (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1992), 326–343, here 343.

him about the goodness of Buddhism for the improvement and salvation of the monks and of the Japanese people—even if Xavier’s own theological system did not allow him to find an expression for this feeling or provide a channel in his programme of evangelization.

### ***Alessandro Valignano and Japan after Xavier***

#### *The Mission in China after Xavier*

As might have been expected, later developments did not follow a regular, uniform pattern, not even among Jesuits. Xavier’s flexibility, allied to his human and religious depth, had allowed him to go beyond the mental confines of his Roman Catholic epoch. His followers did not all live up to this. We find in Japan a great variety in the styles and interpretations of missionary work. A considerable number of influential Jesuits, such as Organtino and Pedro Navarro, followed the guidelines indicated by Xavier. Luís d’Almeida, a Jesuit brother, even went to Kagoshima to meet the monk Ninshitsu, only to find that he was already dead. These missionaries continued using the method of public debate, the *sui generis* dialogue inherited from the scholastic tradition. Others concentrated their attention on cultural themes and adopted a way of life more in conformity with Japanese custom. There were also some, such as Gaspar Coelho, who were opposed to the practice of any form of dialogue. However, there was a remarkable interest in gaining more knowledge of the religious beliefs current in Japan. Various Jesuits dedicated time and effort to the study of the different Buddhist sects. Outstanding among them was another Jesuit brother, Vicente Hōin. He was one of those who drew up the standard textbook on such sects for the benefit of Jesuit students. Br Hōin happened to be studying in Nara when the 26 ‘Martyrs of Nagasaki’ were put to death. On hearing what had happened, he left everything and hurried to Nagasaki to die with them.

The one aspect that cast something of a shadow over this effort at understanding the ‘other’ is that the driving motive behind such study was the desire to ‘refute’ all these sects. The aim was to produce preaching that would convince their hearers ever more strongly of the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The cultural and the theological prejudices remained firm, despite the apparent openness. As Fr Yūki has noted: ‘They were all influenced by an erroneous translation of the





*Monument to the Nagasaki martyrs*

Psalm *Omnes dii gentium, daemonia* ["All the gods of the gentiles are demons"]. Fr Yūki goes on to explain that when the Japanese doctor Manase Dosan was converted, he had to advise the missionaries not to use the word 'demons' for the Kami and Hotoke, revered as 'spirits' or 'divinities' by the Shinto or Buddhist religions. They were to say that these were simply human and, as such, incapable of bringing salvation.

So far, the story has concerned a group of men caught between a series of preconceptions and prejudices on the one hand, and the experience of finding a new and unknown world on the other. A couple of generations were to pass before any real encounter between the two worlds could occur. The great chance might have come in the second decade of the seventeenth century, with the Jesuit missionaries prepared for a more productive coexistence with Buddhist leaders and followers. Unfortunately the great Shogun Tokugawa Ieyasu, who unified the country with an iron grip, then decreed the Era of Persecution, which closed the country to all external contact and cut off all possibility of a deeper, more authentic dialogue (which we might call Type D) between Christianity and the local religions. Such cordiality would not

become possible until the end of the nineteenth and start of the twentieth centuries. By that time, both sides will have changed radically.

It is possible to speak of one further form of dialogue (Type E): this is the dialogue that took place between the Japanese martyrs and their persecutors. In the martyrologies one finds anecdotes in which the martyrs, full of spirit, peace, and even of happiness and good humour, speak with their torturers in the most inspiring terms. Such stories are not lacking in the accounts that described the final moments of life of the Japanese martyrs. They record a dialogue full of great serenity and benevolence. Since the memory of the martyrs continues to be a source of light for the Asian Churches (as was said explicitly in the Synod for Asia of 1998, and taken up by John Paul II in his apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia*), one should not forget this form of 'benevolent and serene' dialogue that took place at the moment when the martyrs gave their lives for Christ.

*Alessandro Valignano*

The Italian Jesuit Alessandro Valignano is another extraordinary figure in the history of the missions. When he joined the Jesuits at the age of 27, he was well educated, with experience of advanced academic studies and also of a spell in prison. The date is 1566, and if one had to choose the person who, after Xavier, had the greatest influence on the Japanese mission, it would have to be Valignano. When he was 35 years old, he went as personal 'visitor' on behalf of the Superior General of the Jesuits to the so-called 'East Indies'. His three visits to Japan coincided with the three major political figures of the time: Nobunaga, Hideyoshi and Tokugawa Ieyasu. The first visit, in 1579, took place thirty years after the arrival of Xavier. In all, he would spend ten years in Japan. His influence was decisive, both in Japan and in China, where another younger Italian Jesuit, Matteo Ricci, would put Valignano's vision into practice.

His task in Japan was not an easy one. Among the many things he needed to do was to restructure the Japanese mission (after considerable mishandling by the Superiors who preceded him), and to ensure that the life of the Jesuits should be in accord with the customs of the region. In this he was following the directives given by Xavier to Cosme de Torres, and in practice he was putting in place a policy of what today would be called 'inculturation'. If one remembers that missionary policy at that time was based on the imposition of European models, the work

of Valignano and his missionaries can be seen as truly courageous and forward-looking.

Unfortunately, Valignano was like Xavier in the poor esteem he had for Africa and India. But his appreciation for Japan and its people was of the highest. One can see this even before he stepped on to Asian soil. He wrote of Japan in flattering terms. Even his attitude to Buddhism was on the whole very positive. He spoke only with praise of the monks, of their teaching, of their stories and tradition about the 'Hotoke' (half-divinised human figures who intercede for mortals and help them to be saved). Valignano himself never took part in any dialogue, but he urged his followers to study Buddhism in order to be able to establish dialogue and—of course—to refute errors. When evaluating Buddhist teaching, he was critical, but he did not reject it outright and was able to see positive aspects.

Later scholars consider that his understanding of Buddhism was basically correct and well presented.<sup>5</sup> However, his criticism of Buddhist doctrines was less fortunate, although he refrained from any personal attacks. In the Preface [*Proemium*] to his *Catechism* he wrote:

Nothing should ever be said that might offend or wound someone. Rather our only aim and our most sincere desire is that all may understand the difference between the true and the false. The one thing that we are seeking—with effort and great longing—is that all may choose and follow the true path of life, that they may conduct themselves in a way that that will allow them to save their souls and reach, without fail, the desired goal of eternal life.<sup>6</sup>

In his positive understanding of Buddhism, Valignano made a significant distinction between the 'inner teaching' concerned with progress in the spiritual life and the external practices of greater popular appeal. Whereas Valignano was effusive in his praise for the first, he dismissed the latter as superstitions and of less value. Here also the limitations of his theology prevented a more nuanced approach to the religious reality of the 'other'. Perhaps also one sees here a certain tension latent in Ignatian spirituality, with its search for spiritual depth, even if in the Exercises we are urged to respect and praise popular devotions.

<sup>5</sup> Josef Franz Schütte, *Valignano's Mission Principles for Japan*, 2 volumes (Anand: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 1980, 1983).

<sup>6</sup> Alessandro Valignano, *Catechismus Christianae fidei* ... (Lisbon, 1586), fol. 2r.

It may be possible to recognise in the attitude of Valignano and other Jesuits of his time the influence of a strong humanist spirit. Despite the limitations imposed on missionaries by contemporary Roman Catholic theology, they had a feeling for the human value of persons and cultures. This allowed them to search constantly for the hidden possibilities of goodness and truth to be found in the midst of 'error'. They could do so because of their belief in the ultimate goodness of creation. They had a frame of mind that sought to integrate nature and grace, avoiding false dichotomies and any form of Manichaeism. This highly spiritual humanism empowered the missionaries to overcome the narrow limits of their acquired theology, even if they could not formulate it. Nadal was emphasizing the need for Jesuits to study theology '*spiritu, corde, practice*' ('with the spirit, the heart and a sense of reality'). It is not surprising, therefore, that Valignano, even while constantly refuting Buddhist doctrines, was treating them very seriously, striving all the time to understand them better, and both practising and teaching the need to be objective, kindly and considerate.

### **Matteo Ricci and the Experience of China**

#### *An Extraordinary Man and His Work*

Ricci was a genius who would try to put the guidance of Xavier and Valignano into practice. As with all genuine pioneers, his movements and his decisions were the result of taking his vision to its final consequences, but with an enormous flexibility that left room for changes, adaptations and the new discoveries that he was making as the ignorance with which he started gradually lessened. For Ricci, as for those before him, the aim was the evangelization of China. And like the best of those who preceded him, he set about achieving this aim in an Ignatian style: to see, to learn, to judge, to discern, to decide what is best for all. Such a style requires a readiness to change, to accept correction, to adapt to a new setting. Thanks to his outstanding intelligence he would be able to reach levels that were beyond anything open to other missionaries.

From the beginning, Ricci plunged into Chinese culture, not simply with an eye on externals, but—something unheard of for a foreigner—with an impassioned study of the life, thought and religious sentiment of the Chinese people, extending his investigation to the earliest classical

texts. Anyone who has had experience of Chinese culture will have some idea of how gigantic Ricci's task was. His desire was to create nothing less than a Chinese form of Christianity, while preserving, without compromise, the authentic faith. To do this he needed to discern with great sensitivity, so as to allow the small Christian community that he was forming to have its traditional rituals and customs, condemned as superstitious by those who never attained that level of discernment. If this was thought to be making compromises, these were only a tactical move and not compromises of theology or of faith. In the end Ricci was seeking what all the missionaries desired: the conversion of China to Christ.

**To create  
nothing less  
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Chinese form  
of Christianity**

What was preoccupying him was how to prepare the people of China, who respected and followed the traditions of their ancestors, to be able to receive the message of Jesus and be convinced of the universal value of the Christian faith. In today's terms, despite the ambiguity of such an expression, he can be seen to be doing the work of 'pre-evangelization'.

Matteo Ricci arrived in Macao in 1582, and the following year he set up residence in the south of the country. On entering China, he had his head shaved and wore the dress of a Buddhist *bonze*. He would later abandon such garb, realising that the dominant system of thought in China was clearly Confucian. This period coincided with the final decades of the Ming dynasty, described by some authors as a period of administrative corruption, but of intellectual vitality. Ricci made rapid progress in learning the language. He faced up to the challenge and devoted all his energy to grasping the secrets of Confucian thought and of the classical Chinese texts. This involved a strategic option that would be both his strength and his weakness: the slogan adopted to describe such a choice is: *Jinru paifo* ('Draw closer to Confucianism, repudiate Buddhism').

From the start Ricci was attracted by the notion of continuous personal growth achieved through study and spiritual self-control. Here was a policy that a missionary could put into practice on the path towards God. It could be called an 'expansion of Confucianism'. But by rejecting Buddhism and Taoism, Ricci fell all too readily into the trap of too negative a judgment on traditions that had great depth and wisdom. Ricci's original tactical decision weakened his otherwise undoubted genius and it also illustrated once more how difficult open interreligious dialogue is.



*Matteo Ricci meeting the Chinese scholar Hsu Kuangchi*

In his philosophical-theological thinking, Ricci opted for an extremely difficult path: he wanted to demonstrate the value and truth of Christianity, using Chinese history and Chinese thought. He had the audacity to call into question the supposed Confucian atheism of the Ming period by quoting texts taken from the original writings. This was an attack from within. The Chinese classical texts were enlisted as allies of Christianity: the earlier wise men were presented as 'perfect' but incomplete. They were thought of as preparatory agents who were opening the way for God's revelation in Jesus Christ. Christianity could fill the void that was left by Chinese sages and Chinese tradition. Ricci's catechism coincided in content with that of Xavier: for Christianity to take root in China it would be necessary to accept the existence of an Almighty Creator God, along with the teachings on the immortality of the soul and the need for a virtuous life (with its reward in the hereafter). Ricci's dialogue catechism, *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven* (*Tianzhu shìyì*), was well received in China, even if it was severely criticized in Europe because of the lack of any explicit mention of the Trinity, the incarnation and redemption. Once again the European professors failed completely to see the incredible effort Ricci had to

make to offer in presentable fashion for Chinese intellectuals the first steps towards Christianity.

For any fair-minded person it is not difficult to appreciate Ricci's extraordinary openness of mind and spirit to the people whom he wanted to lead to Christ. He saw clearly that there could be no real harmony or understanding between the neo-Confucianism of his time and the Christian faith. But he was aware that human thought is contingent and was convinced at the same time that, behind the superficial currents, there were other deeper and wiser trends. Ricci turned passionately to the origins, to the great classics, to the experience that brought to birth a way of thought that could achieve such complexity and come so close to Christianity. He was careful not to cheapen in any way the assets of the faith. His aim was to open channels of communication with another human community that had such different cultural roots. Ricci is an outstanding example of true dialogue and 'inculturation' in an epoch when such men were sorely lacking.

The dialogue undertaken by Ricci was slow and gradual, attentive to the personality and culture, the religiosity and thought of the other. There were many gaps and much genuine searching. Great humility was needed, the humility to advance one step at a time, very gradually, at the risk of one's good name and reputation because of the many misunderstandings with colleagues. Ricci remained faithful to his Ignatian tradition: ready to accept new facts; ready to recognise the voice of God speaking in a new way, one unknown before but worthy of respect; ready to acknowledge the real growth of the other, the one being accompanied in the name of God and with the guidance of the Spirit. It is a tradition that says one should never impose on a retreatant what the latter is not able to bear.

There would be accusations of syncretism against Ricci and his companions. Such accusations came because there was, on their part, an openness without prejudgment to what may be good or legitimate in another person's life and way of acting, including the religious sphere. Those who opposed them, whether among Catholics or among Confucians, would be those for whom, in matters of faith and philosophy, the only principle to be followed is one of 'all or nothing'.

*A Way of Carrying out the Mission*

Through his originality and the courage of his project of ‘evangelizing from within’, Matteo Ricci has left his mark on the history of the missions. He has also left his mark on Chinese culture by entering into dialogue, on an equal footing in terminology, language and knowledge of classical texts, with the academics and thinkers of the seventeenth century. The effect of his writings was immense, and they even had a direct influence on the foundation of the first community of Korean scholars<sup>7</sup> at the end of the eighteenth century.

But Ricci was not alone. One should rightly think of him as the most notable and brilliant representative of a series of Jesuit missionaries, all of whom made an attempt to give to their evangelical work a new vision inspired by Ignatian spirituality, by their faith experience and by the open-mindedness of the humanism in which they had been educated. Names to recall, alongside that of Ricci but with equal respect and admiration, are those of Ruggieri, Longobardo, Tomás Pereira, Philippus Maria Grimaldi, Adam Schall, Bouvert, Gerbillon and Ferdinand Verbiest. These men kept alive and developed further the scientific and philosophical interests of Ricci, together with his dedication to a process of evangelization that put dialogue at its heart.

A brief summary of the key concepts and activities adopted by these missionaries in their encounter with such diverse peoples and cultures will help to highlight aspects of their apostolic method. In the next section, I shall adopt a more reflexive and synthetic approach. In the case of all these missionaries one can see:

- a clarity that was human, religious and scientific about the purpose of their work. What they all wanted was to preach the gospel and convert souls to Christ. Such a conversion was understood to have three dimensions: the heart (religious), the mind (intellectual) and a way of living (moral).
- unquestioning acceptance of the missionary principles of Xavier and Valignano, and of the need to gain full entry into Chinese culture. They undertook to make Christianity ‘Chinese’, while guarding intact the substance of the faith.

<sup>7</sup> These laymen were to initiate the knowledge of Christianity in Korea.



- the use of a 'salvific dialogue',<sup>8</sup> thanks to which their missionary attitude gained a dynamic tone of openness to others and of intense and intelligent interchange. The fact that its premises were conditioned by the state of Catholic theology in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is part of its inevitable historical situation.
- such a dialogue required from them all an immense effort to study and observe the reality and thought and religious position of the people with whom they wished to dialogue. These missionaries exemplified a true dedication to the overall truth shared by all, and not just to the 'European truth' learnt in the universities.
- equally important for such a dialogue was the Ignatian principle that one should always presume that those with whom one speaks are worthy of trust and fairness. Ricci wrote in the book mentioned above:

It is better to refute [the teachings of Buddhists and Taoists] than to hate [the men who hold these opinions]; and it is better still to use clear reasoning than to refute them merely with many words; for Taoists and Buddhists are all produced by our great Father, the Lord of Heaven, and we are therefore all brothers.<sup>9</sup>

- a special characteristic of this type of mission was the assurance with which the Jesuits undertook it. It seems to me that one can recognise here an echo of the experience of God that they had lived in the Exercises and kept alive throughout their ministry. Such an experience formed part of their means of communication in a context where they were to be challenged about the credibility of their message. Such an assurance came in part from their unambiguous orthodoxy. If in some areas their extreme openness appeared inconsistent, this was usually an effect of the Catholic orthodoxy then being taught in their theology.

<sup>8</sup> If one may apply here a term found much later in the Apostolic Constitution of John Paul II, *Redemptoris missio*, n. 12.

<sup>9</sup> Matteo Ricci, *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven (T'ien-chu Shih-i)*, translated by Douglas Lancashire and Peter Hu Kuo-chen, edited by Edward Malatesta (Taipei, Paris and Hong Kong: Institut Ricci, 1985), chapter 2, nn. 69, 101. Parentheses in the original.

- the criticisms levelled against them from the Catholic side stemmed simply from two continuous misunderstandings: they were accused of syncretism because of the freedom they wisely granted to Chinese Christians in a process of discerning the value to be granted to ancient rituals and traditions. And another set of accusations involved the degree of their fidelity to Christian truth; the reason was that the missionaries adopted a process marked by a great delicacy and sensitivity in arriving step by step at the premises of the Christian faith. It looks to me as if their very fidelity to Ignatian spirituality provoked misunderstandings in other missionaries who were less sensitive to discernment and freedom in the development of faith.
- finally we have to recognise that the only theology available to the missionaries, whatever human failings they may have had themselves, was far from adequate at the moment of dialogue with Asia. The dualism of many of the categories of thought taken for granted in Europe made them ill-suited for a dialogue with Asian ways of thinking.<sup>10</sup>

### ***Reflections Based on Ignatian Spirituality***

Interreligious dialogue is no longer a novelty in the Church. From the Second Vatican Council onwards, the Church has undertaken an ‘examen of conscience’ and an exercise in dialogue that are full of energy—from the base communities up to the initiatives, so dramatic and committed, of the Successor of Peter, which have courageously challenged the whole Church. Vatican II invited all to a new universal sense of fraternity with believers everywhere, no matter what their religions. It also sparked a new awareness of God’s plan for the salvation of all. In Asia this call was heard with great enthusiasm, and it was adopted and became part of the teaching of the local magisterium. The proof can be seen in the many documents issued by the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences (FABC).

The Society of Jesus has adopted these directives and incorporated them as part of the normal apostolic thinking of the Order at its 34th

<sup>10</sup> For further explanation, see Bob Whyte, *Unfinished Encounter: China and Christianity* (London: Collins, 1988), 74.

General Congregation in 1995. Historically there is a long and varied tradition in the Society which has been confirmed in our own time. There is no lack of outstanding names for eastern Asia: in Japan, Enomiya-Lasalle, Dumoulin, Kadowaki, Johnston, Kennedy and many young Jesuits who are putting Buddhism into practice or studying it in depth; in China, the Matteo Ricci Institute in Taipei, where a long list of scholars are engaged in the study of religions and religious feeling in China; in Korea, Kister and others involved in the study of Shamanism.

For dialogue with Islam, the Jesuits in Indonesia, the Philippines and Malaysia are working in harmony with Jesuits from other parts of the world. In southern Asia, much effort is devoted to interreligious dialogue, and to the practice of different forms of prayer and Hindu, Buddhist and Muslim ascetical and mystical traditions. The list could be extended. This is an era of dialogue, interaction, collaboration at different levels, with practices in common and a growing mutual goodwill that offers new hope for the future. Inevitably, there are major obstacles and difficulties in some sectors, countries or communities, but the major trends of missionary endeavour have undergone a fundamental shift. From the ordinary teaching of the Church, the Society of Jesus has confirmed with its 34th General Congregation the so-called Four Dialogues: shared life, collaboration in social works, theological discussion, and deep religious experience. These are worthy heirs to the different types of dialogue (A to E), originally tentative and uncertain, initiated by Xavier, Valignano, Ricci and their followers.

As briefly as possible, we can examine now how Ignatian spirituality has had, or should have, its effect on interreligious dialogue. This is most clearly seen when presented as numbered points.

1. The starting point for Ignatian spirituality is an unconditional openness to the 'other', the 'neighbour', recognised in his or her way of life, set in a real, complete world, with a culture and an inner life. This forms part of an open approach to all reality, especially to the reality of the human heart, in its deepest feelings and in their reflection in daily social life. A good expression of this respect for reality appears in the Preamble to the book of the *Spiritual Exercises*: one should not judge lightly, nor presume malice in the intentions and practices of those we meet. Here 'openness' is a synonym for benevolence and acceptance. Such an openness enables us to understand new situations, new cultures, new ways of encountering God, while avoiding prejudice and compensating for one's own lack of intelligence.

As Ignatius accompanies us on our spiritual and human way, every detail, every experience is of importance for him. The questions for an Ignatian missionary have to be, 'How is it possible for people to be so good in spite of everything? What is the source of that goodness? What should I discover of the presence and activity of God and God's spirit in these people, these cultures, these religions?' These initial questions, and this sensitivity to the gifts and working of the Spirit, are much more Christian and Ignatian than any abstract academic teaching, in which the label 'natural goodness' was stuck on to anything not previously categorized as Christian. When all is said and done, the final fruit of the Ignatian Exercises is the discovery and taking to heart of the affectionate, creative presence of God in all things. And if that presence is in 'all things', it is especially recognisable in persons, cultures and—even more—in religions. They are the purest and most genuine expression of mankind's search for meaning, transcendence and God.

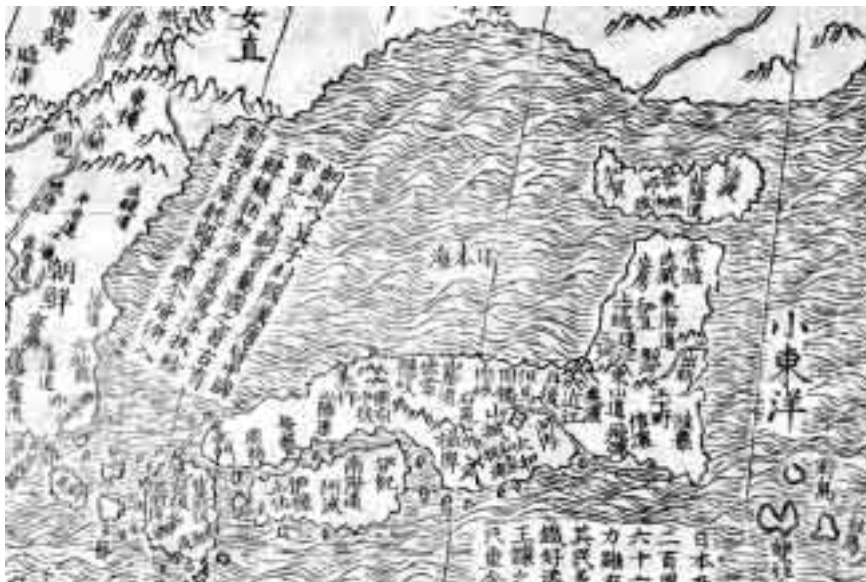
2. The primary preoccupation of the Jesuit in his approach to the 'neighbour' has always been, in the best Ignatian spirit, pastoral and salvific. When Ignatius and his companions launched into apostolic work, they were constantly seeking the 'good of souls', reaching out to real persons at their deepest level. There are two important dimensions to this orientation.

On the one hand, there is a heartfelt, visceral desire, based on the 'visceral' yearning of the Living God (in the Old Testament) and Jesus (in the New Testament) for the salvation of all. Nowadays, the Catholic Church accepts as common doctrine that such is the desire and will of God. Unfortunately, such clarity did not prevail in the theological notions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and this caused anguish for Xavier, Ricci and their fellow missionaries. As long as they were obliged to teach the condemnation of the Ancestors, both in China and in Japan, they were conscious within themselves of the incongruity of such teaching.

On the other hand, from an Ignatian viewpoint, such missionary and pastoral work is understood as a process through which people are helped to advance towards a life in God and to become aware of God's presence in themselves. Perhaps what has been most frequently lacking in the Asian mission has been this salvific and pastoral dimension, though it is much more important than the theological disquisitions that fill much of the catechesis. Several times the Synod of Asian Bishops requested a more adequate reflection on this topic, 'What is

Jesus' salvation like?' and 'How is one to understand that Jesus is the "way" in the Asian context?' If our pastoral work is to be Ignatian, our task is to cooperate with people so that they can see, feel and live 'what we have ... touched with our hands, concerning the word of life' (1 John 1:1).

3. For such a pastoral effort—a dialogue of salvation—a deep sense of the mystery and freedom of God is needed. How is it possible to help others along the path of God unless one has discovered that path for oneself? On this point, Ignatius is remarkably clear. No human agent can replace or surpass union and intimacy with God. Ignatius wants his Jesuits to be warm-hearted men, whose feelings have been formed in God's own heart, men of affection and devotion. On their spiritual path, the *Exercises* speak constantly of tasting and feeling internally, of interior knowledge, of the interior movement to feel as Jesus felt, so as to discover God's own feelings in God's ultimate mystery. The work of the one who accompanies in the Exercises (wrongly called the 'director') is to be vigilant to recognise if the exercitant is feeling correctly, as God wishes and in accordance with Christ. The Ignatian service is one of assisting 'right feeling' (*orthopathos* or *orthopatheia*) rather than 'right thinking' (*orthodoxia*). It is out of this feeling that there comes effortlessly



Japan, from Matteo Ricci's world map of 1602

‘right living and doing’ (*orthopraxis*). For the Ignatian experience and vision, the ‘orthodoxy’ that we preach is a salvific process, not a fixed point to which our searching and dreams are moored.

As is true of Thomas Aquinas, Augustine and St Paul, so for Ignatius: God is a God who is always free, who gives life, provides light and opens paths. In all this, God never ties down or limits anything. God is always free. The Ignatian perspective is essentially Trinitarian. God starts with a free act and an entry into human history, which reaches its most explicit revelation in the life of Jesus, but does not imply by that a narrowing of God’s salvific love. Ignatius follows Jesus as a model in the mission, and Ignatius asks of his sons to live in, with and like the Master, in intimate communion with his person and mission. The 34th General Congregation has defined once again the Jesuit apostolate as service in this same mission.

Ignatius’ commitment to the gospel is an option for the freedom of God and for the freedom of his sons, who live in the freedom of the Spirit. It is gratifying, then, to see that the most outstanding of his sons have carried with them to other continents that same feeling of respect, of attentive listening and humble observance when they recognise the signs of an original Presence, the footprints of saving God, left in a multiplicity of forms and expressions (see Hebrews 1:1). Consequently, one of the best qualities in a missionary will have to be an unlimited capacity to be taken by surprise, yet again, by the beauty, the goodness, the richness of the presence and working of the Divine in the ‘neighbour’, especially in one who has been unknown until recently, or even one who has been feared or despised. Such a capacity to be surprised is a spiritual attitude that refrains from setting mental conditions on the way in which God acts—to save, to set free, to make Godself known.

The mystery of God has always been thought of as inexhaustible, unfathomable, impossible to encapsulate in words, concepts or systems. Consequently those educated along Ignatian lines are prevented from turning theological theories, images and systems into absolutes. As Joseph Ratzinger (now Benedict XVI) explained, all religious language has only an approximate value. And to paraphrase in more general terms what St Augustine says of the Trinity, when we speak theologically, we are not explaining the mystery, but we are trying not to remain silent before the questions about God and God’s existence (*non ut explicetur, sed ne taceretur*).

4. Relying on such interior and spiritual foundations, the Ignatian-inspired apostle lives in a constant and continuing 'state of discernment': a discernment of words, concepts, styles of life, means of communication and of preaching, pastoral methods and strategies. Thanks to such a state, the missionary becomes sensitive to looking at the whole person, and not just his or her theological ideas. To discern, one has to be able to grasp how other traditions and beliefs or systems affect and influence the lives, the ways of thinking, the values and the relationships of their followers. Discernment equips one to see the reality of other religions with no spirit of competition, no fear, no insecurity, no envy, no arrogance and no prejudice. 'You will know them by their fruits' (Matthew 7:16), Our Lord told us, and his remark retains the same force and vitality now as it did then.

As Fr Michael Amaladoss<sup>11</sup> has pointed out, it is from such mutual knowledge and respect between followers of different religious persuasions that a process of shared enrichment and learning can begin. In its turn, that process leads spontaneously to collaboration in a common concern for the human and spiritual good of others and for values threatened by our societies and cultures. Eventually it leads to shared participation in decisive action on behalf of justice and peace, of human rights, of the reduction of the inhuman poverty that is overwhelming large sectors of our planet. Inevitably, in this attempt at communication, there will be misunderstanding. As mentioned earlier, Valignano, Ricci and many other missionaries were accused of syncretism and of much worse. That is the risk one runs with openness. However, if one wants to follow the advice of St Paul, 'test everything; hold fast to what is good' (1 Thessalonians 5:21), one cannot leave aside areas where experiment and discernment are essential until the time when the community of faith decides to accept or reject these new efforts to encounter those who are 'other'.

5. Ignatian apostolic discernment supposes a series of principles, and while it is true that these have been proclaimed—indeed by the highest authority in the Catholic Church—and generally accepted by

<sup>11</sup> See *Mission Today: Reflections from an Ignatian Perspective* (Anand: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 1989); *Making All Things New: Mission in Dialogue* (Gujarat: Anand, 1990); *Ignigo in India* (Anand: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 1992); 'Inculturation and Ignatian Spirituality', *The Way Supplement*, 79 (Spring 1994), 39–47; *Beyond Inculturation: Can the Many Be One?* (New Delhi: ISPCK, 1998).

the Church, they continue to cause disquiet among the more punctilious guardians and theoreticians of missionary purism and strictness of life.

- A principle of 'proportion' should apply in the presentation of the truths of the faith. The magisterium has begun speaking of 'a hierarchy of truths'. This allows the missionary, the catechist and the preacher to give priority to a number of key concepts in the faith, while delaying the presentation of others, which are not rejected but simply postponed until an appropriate moment occurs for them to appear and touch the hearts of the faithful. It would be unwise to burden the peoples of Asia all at once with a mass of doctrinal and theological thought that has been gradually developing over twenty centuries in the West. A sensitive rhythm in the disclosure of such teaching is needed to allow for its assimilation and for growth in the faith. One of the accusations against Ricci was that he had been unfaithful in his mission, precisely because of his prudence in determining priorities.
- Along with the principle, there is also one called by John Paul II, on his first visit to Africa, the gradual approach. Just as doctrines can be ranged by priority of importance, they can also be spread out in a temporal sequence.
- Discernment requires 'flexibility' and a capacity for self-criticism, so that one is prepared to take into account new viewpoints and discoveries.
- Discernment also supposes that there is a peaceful and varied use of different programmes and varied pastoral strategies for different groups. Quite distinct methods in liturgical and spiritual practice may be needed to help simple people from those needed for those who have undergone complex and deep experiences, or who have been conditioned in a negative way by an excess of spiritual rationalism.

6. To close these reflections, some remarks are needed about the dangers that threaten the sort of interreligious dialogue presented here, however desirable it may seem in Ignatian terms. Above all, one should avoid a presentation of Christianity which might be seen as an 'assault' on the listeners' personal and religious world. This could happen



if, in our endeavour to get our message across, we were to demolish the system by which those others have lived and on which they have built their self-identity up until now. With attacks of this type we run the risk of eliminating not only the negative and harmful aspects of a particular religious mentality, but also the good and the positive things that the Spirit of God had already brought to birth in the hearer's heart.

A second important caution to bear in mind is the avoidance of hasty—especially if negative—judgments about experiences which may not be our own. Unfortunately, it is not uncommon to come across criticism of other people's religious practices of which the critic has had no personal experience, and which he or she is not even prepared to discuss with the best, or at least reasonably sensible, representatives of those practices. In all cases, second-hand accounts ('I've heard', or 'I've read', or 'they tell me') never provide a good criterion for condemning a religious practice which may have a deep-rooted tradition and may have given proof of great fruitfulness in goodness and mercy. Once again, the criterion 'You will know them by their fruits' holds good!

Finally, the encounter with those believing in other religious traditions should awaken in us a greater capacity and diligence in deepening our own theological reflections, beyond what we are capable of in too protected and uniform a context. When such an encounter with the 'other' raises questions about the validity of some of our own theoretical positions, it is surely an occasion to go more deeply into them and—with the help of the Holy Spirit and greater thought on our own part—to seek inspiration for an interior process of purification and renewal of our faith. Examples from the past concerned the impossibility of salvation outside the Catholic Church, or the atrocious consequences that followed the teaching of the eternal condemnation of 'most of' the Ancestors in Asia. A theology with an Ignatian character cannot ignore these vital human questions, even if raising them will cause problems within the institutional Church.

### **Conclusion**

In my opinion, there are reasons enough to believe that we are at the dawn of a new paradigm of evangelization. There have been many urgent calls for a new theology of mission. However, despite many

congresses and conferences, such a theology has not yet emerged. In fact, it should have appeared back in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but the religious world was not ready for it. Xavier, Valignano, Ricci and many other great missionaries, filled with a truly Christian and Ignatian spirit, opened the way that should have led to the discovery of such a paradigm. Unfortunately, obstacles arose and the search was cut short. But today it can no longer be stopped, despite efforts (mainly unconscious in my opinion) to ignore, deny or underestimate the mass of new data, both superficial and profound, emerging from the encounter with other religions. But reality is stronger and more durable than theory, and theology, which is by no means lacking in goodwill and scientific rigour, is struggling to assimilate and express this reality from a higher viewpoint, one still to be properly defined. Ignatian spirituality can and will, I am sure, be of great help here and fulfil a decisive function. We can only ask, when will this be?

In the formation of this paradigm of evangelization-through-dialogue, two important dimensions have to be borne in mind. Both form part of today's world outlook. On the one hand, there is the experience, communicated more and more clearly to scholars and to the general public, of the past history and humanising influence of the great world religions; of their fruit of salvation at the personal and communal levels; of the profundity of their intuitions; of the inner and integral human values of their methods of prayer, meditation and asceticism; and of their ideals of personal and social life, compassion and harmony throughout history. On the other hand, there is also the painful and overwhelming experience of world problems and needs. It would be obscene to speak of religions and dialogue while closing one's eyes to the gigantic problems of the present moment: world poverty; the knife-edge balance for or against a civilisation that opts for life or death; the sudden spread of worldwide systems of communication that has united our planet in a completely new way; the globalisation of practically all aspects of our way of life, with the opportunities and dangers brought in its wake. When we undertake interreligious dialogue, our aim must be to help one another mutually to combine and direct our energies towards such global problems and opportunities, for the benefit of a more human, more just, more caring and more merciful world. This new attention to the problems that affect everyone will be able to reduce the waste of energy through inward-looking quarrels

and recrimination, often inspired by theological opinions now seen to be of doubtful orthodoxy, if not downright wrong.

Our hope is that this new paradigm will open the door to the use of methods inspired by Ignatius. We may hope that all men and women of God will become aware of their creative power, leading them into a solidarity of spirit, a strength and joy which will bring forth the peace, justice and compassion in the world of which we constantly dream. Perhaps then we will be able to enjoy, for the first time, all the gifts of the God who is the God of all peoples and nations, the God at work from the beginning in all men and women. Any doubts the official Church may have about a language that speaks of 'the complementarity of religions' will be laid to rest as the experience grows of a true complementarity, one based not on pointing out deficiencies, but rather on the recognition of the abundant generosity of the gift of the Spirit, something which far surpasses all our thought and lack of faith.

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