



## Universalitas & Pervasivitas

*il costituirsi e diffondersi della S.J. e suoi echi (1540 - 1773)*  
di A. Pisani

Schede autori Attività missionaria

### Matteo Ricci

L'opera di Matteo Ricci rimase nell'archivio della S.J. fino agli inizi del '900 quando venne riscoperta e pubblicata da p. Tacchi Venturi e, in seguito e in modo più integrale, da p. D'Elia. E' sul ms. di Ricci che si basa, con modifiche e aggiunte, la *De christiana expeditione apud Sinas* del gesuita belga **Nicolas Trigault**.

E' interessante notare che fu proprio Ricci, insieme a **Valignano**, uno dei promotori della strategia di evangelizzazione della Cina che faceva leva sulla superiorità delle conoscenze scientifiche europee e, in particolare, dell'astronomia. Quest'ultima, infatti, costituiva un importante strumento per guidare l'imperatore nelle dimensioni simboliche, liturgiche, rituali e divinatorie. Divisa in due branche ("segni del cielo" e "metodi calendariali"), l'astrologia cinese era allora praticata secondo due diverse metodologie: l'una autoctona, non fondata su modelli geometrici, e l'altra musulmana che utilizzava modelli di tipo tolemaico. Inevitabili le differenze tra i loro rispettivi risultati. L'intelligenza di Ricci fu quella di inserirsi all'interno di questo sotterraneo conflitto, convinto che, una volta che fosse riuscito a guadagnarsi la stima dell'Imperatore grazie alla superiorità della propria metodologia, sarebbe anche riuscito a far leva su quelle questioni teologiche che ben più gli stavano a cuore. Come cornice dei risultati pratici che era convinto di ottenere, Ricci stabilisce anche un programma di traduzione di opere scientifiche (gli *Elementi* di Euclide, il *Trattato dell'astrolabio*, il *Trattato della sfera* di Sacrobosco, ecc.) edite a cura del suo maestro, il famoso **Clavius** (1537-1622).



Ricci made his classical studies in his native town, studied law at Rome for two years, and on 15 Aug., 1571, entered the Society of Jesus at the Roman College, where he made his novitiate, and philosophical and theological studies. While there he also devoted his attention to mathematics, cosmology, and astronomy under the direction of the celebrated Father Christopher Clavius. In 1577 he asked to be sent on the missions in Farthest Asia, and his request being granted he embarked at Lisbon, 24 March, 1578. Arriving at Goa, the capital of the Portuguese Indies, on 13 Sept. of this year, he was employed there and at Cochin in teaching and the ministry until the end of Lent, 1582, when Father Alessandro Valignani (who had been his novice-master at Rome but who since August, 1573, was in charge of all the Jesuit missions in the East Indies) summoned him to Macao to prepare to enter China. Father Ricci arrived at Macao on 7 August, 1582.

### Beginning of the mission

In the sixteenth century nothing remained of the Christian communities founded in China by the Nestorian missionaries in the seventh century and by the Catholic monks in the thirteenth and fourteenth (see CHINA). Moreover it is doubtful whether the native Chinese population was ever



BIBLIOTECA UNIVERSITARIA DI GENOVA – PERCORSI TEMATICI

## Universalitas & Pervasivitas

*il costituirsi e diffondersi della S.J. e suoi echi (1540 - 1773)*  
di A. Pisani

Schede autori Attività missionaria

seriously affected by this ancient evangelisation. For those desiring to resume the work everything therefore remained to be done, and the obstacles were greater than formerly. After the death of **St. Francis Xavier** (27 November, 1552) many fruitless attempts had been made. The first missionary to whom Chinese barriers were temporarily lowered was the Jesuit, Melchior Nuñez Barreto, who twice went as far as Canton, where he spent a month each time (1555). A Dominican, Father Gaspar da Cruz, was also admitted to Canton for a month, but he also had to refrain from "forming a Christian Christianity". Still others, Jesuits, Augustinians, and Franciscans in 1568, 1575, 1579, and 1582 touched on Chinese soil, only to be forced, sometimes with ill treatment, to withdraw. To Father Valignani is due the credit of having seen what prevented all these undertakings from having lasting results. The attempts had hitherto been made haphazard, with men insufficiently prepared and incapable of profiting by favourable circumstances had they encountered them. Father Valignani substituted the methodical attack with previous careful selection of missionaries who, the field once open, would implant Christianity there. To this end he first summoned to Macao Father **Michele de Ruggieri**, who had also come to India from Italy in 1578. Only twenty years had elapsed since the Portuguese had succeeded in establishing their colony at the portals of China, and the Chinese, attracted by opportunities for gain, were flocking thither. Ruggieri reached Macao in July, 1579, and, following the given orders applied himself wholly to the study of the Mandarin language, that is, Chinese, as it is spoken throughout the empire by the officials and the educated. His progress, though very slow, permitted him to labour with more fruit than his predecessors in two sojourns at Canton (1580-81) allowed him by an unwonted complacency of the mandarins. Finally, after many untoward events, he was authorized (10 Sept., 1583) to take up his residence with Father Ricci at Chao-k'ing, the administrative capital of Canton.

### **Method of the missionaries**

The exercise of great prudence alone enabled the missionaries to remain in the region which they had had such difficulty in entering. Omitting all mention at first of their intention to preach the Gospel, they declared to the mandarins who questioned them concerning their object "that they were religious who had left their country in the distant West because of the renown of the good government of China, where they desired to remain till their death, serving god, the Lord of Heaven". Had they immediately declared their intention to preach a new religion, they would never have been received; this would have clashed with Chinese pride, which would not admit that China had anything to learn from foreigners, and it would have especially alarmed their politics, which beheld a national danger in every innovation. However, the missionaries never hid their Faith nor the fact that they were Christian priests. As soon as they were established at Chao-k'ing they placed in a conspicuous part of their house a picture of the Blessed Virgin with the Infant Jesus in her arms. Visitors seldom failed to inquire the meaning of this, to them, novel representation, and the missionaries profited thereby to give them a first idea of Christianity. The missionaries assumed the initiative in speaking of their religion as soon as they had sufficiently overcome Chinese antipathy and distrust to see their instructions desired, or at least to be certain of making them understood without shocking their listeners. They achieved this result by appealing to the curiosity of the Chinese, by making them feel, without saying so, that the foreigners had something new and interesting to teach; to this end they made use of the European things they had brought with them. Such were large and small clocks, mathematical and astronomical instruments, prisms revealing the various colours, musical instruments, oil paintings and prints, cosmographical, geographical, and



BIBLIOTECA UNIVERSITARIA DI GENOVA – PERCORSI TEMATICI

## Universalitas & Pervasivitas

*il costituirsi e diffondersi della S.J. e suoi echi (1540 - 1773)*  
di A. Pisani

Schede autori Attività missionaria

architectural works with diagrams, maps, and views of towns and buildings, large volumes, magnificently printed and splendidly bound, etc.

The Chinese, who had hitherto fancied that outside of their country only barbarism existed, were astounded. Rumours of the wonders displayed by the religious from the West soon spread on all sides, and thenceforth their house was always filled, especially with mandarins and the educated. It followed, says Father Ricci, that "all came by degrees to have with regard to our countries, our people, and especially of our educated men, an idea vastly different from that which they had hitherto entertained". This impression was intensified by the explanations of the missionaries concerning their little museum in reply to the numerous questions of their visitors.

One of the articles which most aroused their curiosity was a map of the world. The Chinese had already had maps, called by their geographers "descriptions of the world", but almost the entire space was filled by the fifteen provinces of China, around which were painted a bit of sea and a few islands on which were inscribed the names of countries of which they had heard ó all together was not as large as a small Chinese province. Naturally the learned men of Chao-k'ing immediately protested when Father Ricci pointed out the various parts of the world on the European map and when they saw how small a part China played. But after the missionaries had explained its construction and the care taken by the geographers of the West to assign to each country its actual position and boundaries, the wisest of them surrendered to the evidence, and beginning with the Governor of Chao-k'ing, all urged the missionary to make a copy of his map with the names and inscriptions in Chinese. Ricci drew a larger map of the world on which he wrote more detailed inscriptions, suited to the needs of the Chinese; when the work was completed the governor had it printed, giving all the copies as presents to his friends in the province and at a distance. Father Ricci does not hesitate to say: "This was the most useful work that could be done at that time to dispose China to give credence to the things of our holy Faith. . . . Their conception of the greatness of their country and of the insignificance of all other lands made them so proud that the whole world seemed to them savage and barbarous compared with themselves; it was scarcely to be expected that they, while entertaining this idea, would heed foreign masters." But now numbers were eager to learn of European affairs from the missionaries, who profited by these dispositions to introduce religion more frequently with their explanations. For example, their beautiful Bibles and the paintings and prints depicting religious subjects, monuments, churches, etc., gave them an opportunity of speaking of "the good customs in the countries of the Christians, of the falseness of idolatry, of the conformity of the law of God with natural reason and similar teachings found in the writings of the ancient sages of China". This last instance shows that Father Ricci already knew how to draw from his Chinese studies testimony favourable to the religion which he was to preach.

It was soon evident to the missionaries that their remarks regarding religion were no less interesting to many of their visitors than their Western curiosities and learning, and, to satisfy those who wished to learn more, they distributed leaflets containing a Chinese translation of the Ten Commandments, an abbreviation of the moral code much appreciated by the Chinese, composed a small catechism in which the chief points of Christian doctrine were explained in a dialogue between a pagan and a European priest. This work, printed about 1584, was also well received, the highest mandarins of the province considering themselves honoured to receive it as a present. The missionaries distributed hundreds and thousands of copies and thus "the good odour of our Faith began to be spread throughout China". Having begun their direct apostolate in this manner, they furthered it not a little by their edifying regular life, their disinterestedness, their charity, and their patience under persecutions which often destroyed the fruits of their labours.



BIBLIOTECA UNIVERSITARIA DI GENOVA – PERCORSI TEMATICI

## Universalitas & Pervasivitas

*il costituirsi e diffondersi della S.J. e suoi echi (1540 - 1773)*  
di A. Pisani

Schede autori Attività missionaria

### Development of the missions

Father Ricci played the chief part in these early attempts to make Christianity known to the Chinese. In 1607 Father Ruggieri died in Europe, where he had been sent in 1588 by Father Valignani to interest the Holy See more particularly in the missions. Left alone with a young priest, a pupil rather than an assistant, Ricci was expelled from Chao-k'ing in 1589 by a viceroy of Canton who had found the house of the missionaries suited to his own needs; but the mission had taken root too deeply to be exterminated by the ruin of its first home. Thenceforth in whatever town Ricci sought a new field of apostolate he was preceded by his reputation and he found powerful friends to protect him. He first went to Shao-chow, also in the province of Canton, where he dispensed with the services of interpreters and adopted the costume of the educated Chinese. In 1595 he made an attempt on Nan-king, the famous capital in the south of China, and, though unsuccessful, it furnished him with an opportunity of forming a Christian Church at Nan-ch'ang, capital of Kiang-si, which was so famous for the number and learning of its educated men. In 1598 he made a bold but equally fruitless attempt to establish himself at Peking. Forced to return to Nan-king on 6 Feb., 1599, he found Providential compensation there; the situation had changed completely since the preceding year, and the highest mandarins were desirous of seeing the holy doctor from the West take up his abode in their city. Although his zeal was rewarded with much success in this wider field, he constantly longed to repair his repulse at Peking. He felt that the mission was not secure in the provinces until it was established and authorized in the capital. On 18 May, 1600, Ricci again set out for Peking and, when all human hope of success was lost, he entered on 24 January, 1601, summoned by Emperor Wan-li.

### Last labours

Ricci's last nine years were spent at Peking, strengthening his work with the same wisdom and tenacity of purpose which had conducted it so far. The imperial goodwill was gained by gifts of European curiosities, especially the map of the world, from which the Asiatic ruler learned for the first time the true situation of his empire and the existence of so many other different kingdoms and peoples; he required Father Ricci to make a copy of it for him in his palace. At Peking, as at Nan-king and elsewhere, the interest of the most intelligent Chinese was aroused chiefly by the revelations which the European teacher made to them in the domain of the sciences, even those in which they considered themselves most proficient. Mathematics and astronomy, for example, had from time immemorial formed a part of the institutions of the Chinese Government, but, when they listened to Father Ricci, even the men who knew most had to acknowledge how small and how mingled with errors was their knowledge. But this recognition of their ignorance and their esteem for European learning, of which they had just got a glimpse, impelled very few Chinese to make serious efforts to acquire this knowledge, their attachment to tradition or the routine of national teaching being too deep-rooted. However, the Chinese governors, who even at the present day have made no attempt at reform in this matter, did not wish to deprive the country of all the advantages of European discoveries. To procure them recourse had to be had to the missionaries, and thus the Chinese mission from Ricci's time until the end of the eighteenth century found its chief protection in the services performed with the assistance of European learning. Father Ricci made use of profane science only to prepare the ground and open the way to the apostolate properly so called. With this object in view he employed other means, which made a deep impression on the majority of the educated class, and especially on those who held public offices. He composed under various



BIBLIOTECA UNIVERSITARIA DI GENOVA – PERCORSI TEMATICI

## Universalitas & Pervasivitas

*il costituirsi e diffondersi della S.J. e suoi echi (1540 - 1773)*  
di A. Pisani

Schede autori Attività missionaria

forms adapted to the Chinese taste little moral treatises, e.g., that called by the Chinese "The Twenty-five Words", because in twenty-five short chapters it treated "of the mortification of the passions and the nobility of virtue". Still greater admiration was aroused by the "Paradoxes", a collection of practical sentences, useful to a moral life, familiar to Christians but new to the Chinese, which Ricci developed with accounts of examples, comparisons, and extracts from the Scriptures and from Christian philosophers and doctors. Not unreasonably proud of their rich moral literature, the Chinese were greatly surprised to see a stranger succeed so well; they could not refrain from praising his exalted doctrine, and the respect which they soon acquired for the Christian writings did much to dissipate their distrust of strangers and to render them kindly disposed towards the Christian religion.

But the book through which Ricci exercised the widest and most fortunate influence was his "T'ien-chu-she-i" (The True Doctrine of God). This was the little catechism of Chao-k'ing which had been delivered from day to day, corrected and improved as occasion offered, until it finally contained all the matter suggested by long years of experience in the apostolate. The truths which must be admitted as the necessary preliminary to faith ó the existence and unity of God, the creation, the immortality of the soul, reward or punishment in a future life ó are here demonstrated by the best arguments from reason, while the errors most widespread in China, especially the worship of idols and the belief in the transmigration of souls, are successfully refuted. To the testimony furnished by Christian philosophy and theology Ricci added numerous proofs from the ancient Chinese books which did much to win credit for his work. A masterpiece of apologetics and controversy, the "T'ien-chu-she-i", rightfully became the manual of the missionaries and did most efficacious missionary work. Before its author's death it had been reprinted at least four times, and twice by the pagans. It led countless numbers to Christianity, and aroused esteem for our religion in those readers whom it did not convert. The perusal of it induced Emperor K'ang-hi to issue his edict of 1692 granting liberty to preach the Gospel. The Emperor Kien-long, although he persecuted the Christians, ordered the "T'ien-chu-she-i" to be placed in his library with his collection of the most notable productions of the Chinese language. Even to the present time missionaries have experienced its beneficent influence, which was not confined to China, being felt also in Japan, Tong-king, and other countries tributary to Chinese literature.

Besides the works intended especially for the infidels and the catechumens whose initiation was in progress, Father Ricci wrote others for the new Christians. As founder of the mission he had to invent formulae capable of expressing clearly and unequivocally our dogmas and rites in a language which had hitherto never been put to such use (except for the Nestorian use, with which Ricci was not acquainted). It was a delicate and difficult task, but it formed only a part of the heavy burden which the direction of the mission was for Father Ricci, particularly during his last years. While advancing gradually on the capital Ricci did not abandon the territory already conquered; he trained in his methods the fellow-workers who joined him and commissioned them to continue his work in the cities he left. Thus in 1601, the mission included, besides Peking, the three residences of Nan-king, Nan-ch'ang, Shao-chow, to which was added in 1608 that of Shang-hai. In each of these there were two or three missionaries with "brothers", Chinese Christians from Macao who had been received into the Society of Jesus, and who served the mission as catechists. Although as yet the number of Christians was not very great (2000 baptized in 1608), Father Ricci in his "Memoirs" has said well that considering the obstacles to the entrance of Christianity into China the result was "a very great miracle of Divine Omnipotence". To preserve and increase the success already obtained, it was necessary that the means which had already proved efficacious should continue to be



BIBLIOTECA UNIVERSITARIA DI GENOVA – PERCORSI TEMATICI

## Universalitas & Pervasivitas

*il costituirsi e diffondersi della S.J. e suoi echi (1540 - 1773)*  
di A. Pisani

Schede autori Attività missionaria

employed; everywhere and always the missionaries, without neglecting the essential duties of the Christian apostolate, had to adapt their methods to the special conditions of the country, and avoid unnecessary attacks on traditional customs and habits. The application of this undeniably sound policy was often difficult. In answer to the doubts of his fellow-workers Father Ricci outlined rules, which received the approval of Father Valignano; these insured the unity and fruitful efficacy of the apostolic work throughout the mission.

### **Question of the divine names and the Chinese rites**

The most difficult problem in the evangelization of China had to do with the rites or ceremonies, in use from time immemorial, to do honour to ancestors or deceased relatives and the particular tokens of respect which the educated felt bound to pay to their master, Confucius. Ricci's solution of this problem caused a long and heated controversy in which the Holy See finally decided against him. The discussion also dealt with the use of the Chinese terms T'ien (heaven) and Shang-ti (Sovereign Lord) to designate God; here also the custom established by Father Ricci had to be corrected. The following is a short history of this famous controversy which was singularly complicated and embittered by passion. With regard to the designations for God, Ricci always preferred, and employed from the first, the term T'ien chu (Lord of Heaven) for the God of Christians; as had been seen, he used it in the title of his catechism. But in studying the most ancient Chinese books he considered it established that they said of T'ien (Heaven) and Shang-ti (Sovereign Lord) what we say of the true God, that is, they described under these two names a sovereign lord of spirits and men who knows all that takes place in the world, the source of all power and all lawful authority, the supreme regulator and defender of the moral law, rewarding those who observe and punishing those who violate it. Hence he concluded that, in the most revered monuments of China, T'ien and Shang'ti designate nothing else than the true God whom he himself preached. Ricci maintained this opinion in several passages of his T'ien-chu-she-i; it will be readily understood of what assistance it was to destroy Chinese prejudices against the Christian religion. It is true that, in drawing this conclusion, Ricci had to contradict the common interpretation of modern scholars who follow Chu-Hi in referring T'ien and Shang-ti to apply to the material heaven; but he showed that this material interpretation does not do justice to the texts and it is at least reasonable to see in them something better. In fact he informs us that the educated Confucianists, who did not adore idols, were grateful to him for interpreting the words of their master with such goodwill. Indeed, Ricci's opinion has been adopted and confirmed by illustrious modern Sinologists, amongst whom it suffices to mention James Legge ("The Notions of the Chinese concerning God and Spirits", 1852; "A Letter to Prof. Max Muller chiefly on the Translation of the Chinese terms Ti and Chang-ti", 1880).

Therefore it was not without serious grounds that the founder of the Chinese mission and his successors believed themselves justified in employing the terms T'ien and Shang-ti as well as T'ien-chu to designate the true God. However, there were objections to this practice even among the Jesuits, the earliest rising shortly after the death of Father Ricci and being formulated by the Japanese Jesuits. In the ensuing discussion carried on in various writings for and against, which did not circulate beyond the circle of the missionaries only one of those working in China declared himself against the use of the name Shang-ti. This was Father Nicholas Longobardi, Ricci's successor as superior general of the mission, who, however, did not depart in anything from the lines laid down by its founder. After allowing the question to be discussed for some years, the superior ordered the missionaries to abide simply by the custom of Father Ricci; later this custom together with the rites was submitted to the judgment of the Holy See. In 1704 and 1715 Clement



BIBLIOTECA UNIVERSITARIA DI GENOVA – PERCORSI TEMATICI

## Universalitas & Pervasivitas

*il costituirsi e diffondersi della S.J. e suoi echi (1540 - 1773)*  
di A. Pisani

Schede autori Attività missionaria

XI, without pronouncing as to the meaning of T'ien and Shang-ti in the ancient Chinese books, forbade, as being open to misconstruction, the use of these names to indicate the true God, and permitted only the T'ien-chu. Regarding the rites and ceremonies in honour of ancestors and Confucius, Father Ricci was also of the opinion that a broad toleration was permissible without injury to the purity of the Christian religion. Moreover, the question was of the utmost importance for the progress of the apostolate. To honour their ancestors and deceased parents by traditional prostrations and sacrifices was in the eyes of the Chinese the gravest duty of filial piety, and one who neglected it was treated by all his relatives as an unworthy member of his family and nation. Similar ceremonies in honour of Confucius were an indispensable obligation for scholars, so that they could not receive any literary degree nor claim any public office without having fulfilled it. This law still remains inviolable; Kiang-hi, the emperor who showed most goodwill towards the Christians, always refused to set it aside in their favour. In modern times the Chinese Government showed no more favour to the ministers of France, who, in the name of the treaties guaranteeing the liberty of Catholicism in China, claimed for the Christians who had passed the examinations, the titles and advantages of the corresponding degrees without the necessity of going through the ceremonies; the Court of Peking invariably replied that this was a question of national tradition on which it was impossible to compromise.

After having carefully studied what the Chinese classical books said regarding these rites, and after having observed for a long time the practice of them and questioned numerous scholars of every rank with whom he was associated during this eighteen years of apostolate, Ricci was convinced that these rites had no religious significance, either in their institution or in their practice by the enlightened classes. The Chinese, he said, recognized no divinity in Confucius any more than in their deceased ancestors; they prayed to neither; they made no requests nor expected any extraordinary intervention from them. In fact they only did for them what they did for the living to whom they wished to show great respect. "The honour they pay to their parents consists in serving them dead as they did living. They do not for this reason think that the dead come to eat their offerings [the flesh, fruit, etc.] or need them. They declare that they act in this manner because they know no other way of showing their love and gratitude to their ancestors. . . . Likewise what they do [especially the educated], they do to thank Confucius for the excellent doctrine which he left them in his books, and through which they obtained their degrees and mandarinships. Thus in all this there is nothing suggestive of idolatry, and perhaps it may even be said that there is no superstition." The "perhaps" added to the last part of this conclusion shows the conscientiousness with which the founder acted in this matter. That the vulgar and indeed even most of the Chinese pagans mingled superstition with their national rites Ricci never denied; neither did he overlook the fact that the Chinese, like infidels in general, mixed superstition with their most legitimate actions. In such cases superstition is only an accident which does not corrupt the substance of the just action itself, and Ricci thought this applied also to the rites. Consequently he allowed the new Christians to continue the practice of them avoiding everything suggestive of superstition, and he gave them rules to assist them to discriminate. He believed, however, that this tolerance, though licit, should be limited by the necessity of the case; whenever the Chinese Christian community should enjoy sufficient liberty, its customs, notably its manner of honouring the dead, must be brought into conformity with the customs of the rest of the Christian world. These principles of Father Ricci, controlled by his fellow-workers during his lifetime, and after his death, served for fifty years as the guide of all the missionaries.



BIBLIOTECA UNIVERSITARIA DI GENOVA – PERCORSI TEMATICI

## Universalitas & Pervasivitas

*il costituirsi e diffondersi della S.J. e suoi echi (1540 - 1773)*  
di A. Pisani

Schede autori Attività missionaria

In 1631 the first mission of the Dominicans was founded at Fu-kien by two Spanish religious; in 1633 two Franciscans, also Spanish, came to establish a mission of their order. The new missionaries were soon alarmed by the attacks on the purity of religion which they thought they discerned in the communities founded by their predecessors. Without taking sufficient time perhaps to become acquainted with Chinese matters and to learn exactly what was done in the Jesuit missions they sent a denunciation to the bishops of the Philippines. The bishops referred it to Pope Urban VIII (1635), and soon the public was informed. As early as 1638 a controversy began in the Philippines between the Jesuits in defence of their brethren on the one side and the Dominicans and Franciscans on the other. In 1643 one of the chief accusers, the Dominican, Jean-Baptiste Moralez, went to Rome to submit to the Holy See a series of "questions" or "doubts" which he said were controverted between the Jesuit missionaries and their rivals. Ten of these questions concerned the participation of Christians in the rites in honour of Confucius and the dead. Moralez's petition tended to show that the cases on which he requested the decision of the Holy See represented the practice authorized by the Society of Jesus; as soon as the Jesuits learned of this they declared that these cases were imaginary and that they had never allowed the Christians to take part in the rites as set forth by Moralez. In declaring the ceremonies illicit in its Decree of 12 Sept., 1645 (approved by Innocent X), the congregation of the Propaganda gave the only possible reply to the questions referred to it.

In 1651 Father **Martin Martini** (author of the "Novus Atlas Sienensis") was sent from China to Rome by his brethren to give a true account of the Jesuits practices and permissions with regard to the Chinese rites. This delegate reached the Eternal City in 1654, and in 1655 submitted four questions to the Sacred Congregation of the Holy Office. This supreme tribunal, in its Decree of 23 March, 1656, approved by Pope Alexander VII, sanctioned the practice of Ricci and his associates as set forth by Father Martini, declaring that the ceremonies in honour of Confucius and ancestors appeared to constitute "a purely civil and political cult". Did this decree annul that of 1645? Concerning this question, laid before the Holy Office by the Dominican, Father **John de Polanco**, the reply was (20 Nov., 1669) that both decrees should remain "in their full force" and should be observed "according to the questions, circumstances, and everything contained in the proposed doubts".

Meanwhile an understanding was reached by the hitherto divided missionaries. This reconciliation was hastened by the persecution of 1665 which assembled for nearly five years in the same house at Canton nineteen Jesuits, three Dominicans, and one Franciscan (then the sole member of his order in China). Profiting by their enforced leisure to agree on a uniform Apostolic method, the missionaries discussed all the points on which the discipline of the Church should be adapted to the exigencies of the Chinese situation. After forty days of conferences, which terminated on 26 Jan., 1668, all (with the possible exception of the Franciscan Antonio de Santa Maria, who was very zealous but extremely uncompromising) subscribed to forty-two articles, the result of the deliberations, of which the forty-first was as follows: "As to the ceremonies by which the Chinese honour their master Confucius and the dead, the replies of the Sacred Congregation of the Inquisition approved by our Holy Father Alexander VII, in 1656, must be followed absolutely because they are based on a very probable opinion, to which it is impossible to offset any evidence to the contrary, and, this probability assumed, the door of salvation must not be closed to the innumerable Chinese who would stray from the Christian religion if they were forbidden to what they may do licitly and in good faith and which they cannot forego without serious injury." After the subscription, however, a new courteous discussion of this article in writing took place between





BIBLIOTECA UNIVERSITARIA DI GENOVA – PERCORSI TEMATICI

## Universalitas & Pervasivitas

*il costituirsi e diffondersi della S.J. e suoi echi (1540 - 1773)*  
di A. Pisani

Schede autori Attività missionaria

Father Domingo Fernandez Navarrete, superior of the Dominicans, and the most learned of the Jesuits at Canton. Navarrete finally appeared satisfied and on 29 Sept., 1669, submitted his written acceptance of the article to the superior of the Jesuits. However, on 19 Dec. of this year he secretly left Canton for Macao whence he went to Europe. There, and especially at Rome where he was in 1673, he sought from now on only to overthrow what had been attempted in the conferences of Canton. He published the "Tratados historicos, politicos, ethicos, y religiosos de la monarchia de China" (I, Madrid, 1673; of vol. II, printed in 1679 and incomplete, only two copies are known). This work is filled with impassioned accusations against the Jesuit missionaries regarding their methods of apostolate and especially their toleration of the rites. Nevertheless, Navarrete did not succeed in inducing the Holy See to resume the question, this being reserved for **Charles Maigrot**, a member of the new Société des Missions Etrangères. Maigrot went to China in 1683. He was Vicar Apostolic of Fu-kien, before being as yet a bishop, when, on 26 March, 1693, he addressed to the missionaries of his vicariate a mandate proscribing the names T'ien and Shang-ti; forbidding that Christians be allowed to participate in or assist at "sacrifices or solemn oblations" in honour of Confucius or the dead; prescribing modifications of the inscriptions on the ancestral tablets; censuring and forbidding certain, according to him, too favourable references to the ancient Chinese philosophers; and, last but not least, declaring that the exposition made by Father Martini was not true and that consequently the approval which the latter had received from Rome was not to be relied on.

By order of Innocent XII, the Holy Office resumed in 1697 the study of the question on the documents furnished by the procurators of Mgr Maigrot and on those showing the opposite side brought by the representatives of the Jesuit missionaries. It is worthy of note that at this period a number of the missionaries outside the Society of Jesus, especially all the Augustinians, nearly all the Franciscans, and some Dominicans, were converted to the practice of Ricci and the Jesuit missionaries. The difficulty of grasping the truth amid such different representations of facts and contradictory interpretations of texts prevented the Congregation from reaching a decision until towards the end of 1704 under the pontificate of Clement XI. Long before then the pope had chosen and sent to the Far East a legate to secure the execution of the Apostolic decrees and to regulate all other questions on the welfare of the missions. The prelate chosen was **Charles-Thomas-Maillard de Tournon** (b. at Turin) whom Clement XI had consecrated with his own hands on 27 Dec., 1701, and on whom he conferred the title of Patriarch of Antioch. Leaving Europe on 9 Feb., 1703, Mgr de Tournon stayed for a time in India (see **MALABAR RITES**) reaching Macao on 2 April, 1705, and Peking on 4 December of the same year. Emperor K'ang-hi accorded him a warm welcome and treated him with much honour until he learned, perhaps through the imprudence of the legate himself, that one of the objects of his embassy, if not the chief, was to abolish the rites amongst the Christians. Mgr de Tournon was already aware that the decision against the rites had been given since 20 Nov., 1704, but not yet published in Europe, as the pope wished that it should be published first in China. Forced to leave Peking, the legate had returned to Nan-king when he learned that the emperor had ordered all missionaries, under penalty of expulsion, to come to him for a piao or diploma granting permission to preach the Gospel. This diploma was to be granted only to those who promised not to oppose the national rites. On the receipt of this news the legate felt that he could no longer postpone the announcement of the Roman decisions. By a mandate of 15 January, 1707, he required all missionaries under pain of excommunication to reply to Chinese authority, if it questioned them, that "several things" in Chinese doctrine and customs did not agree with Divine law and that these were chiefly "the sacrifices to Confucius and ancestors" and "the use of ancestral



BIBLIOTECA UNIVERSITARIA DI GENOVA – PERCORSI TEMATICI

## Universalitas & Pervasivitas

*il costituirsi e diffondersi della S.J. e suoi echi (1540 - 1773)*

di A. Pisani

Schede autori Attività missionaria

tablets", moreover that Shang-ti and "T'ien" were not "the true God of the Christians". When the emperor learned of this Decree he ordered Mgr de Tournon to be brought to Macao and forbade him to leave there before the return of the envoys whom he himself sent to the pope to explain his objections to the interdiction of the rites. While still subject to this restraint, the legate died in 1710. Meanwhile Mgr Maigrot and several other missionaries having refused to ask for the piao had been expelled from China. But the majority (i.e. all the Jesuits, most of the Franciscans, and other missionary religious, having at their head the Bishop of Peking, a Franciscan, and the Bishop of Ascalon, Vicar Apostolic of Kiang-si, an Augustinian) considered that, to prevent the total ruin of the mission, they might postpone obedience to the legate until the pope should have signified his will. Clement XI replied by publishing (March, 1709) the answers of the Holy Office, which he had already approved on 20 November, 1704, and then by causing the same Congregation to issue (25 Sept., 1710) a new Decree which approved the acts of the legate and ordered the observance of the mandate of Nan-king, but interpreted in the sense of the Roman replies of 1704, omitting all the questions and most of the preambles, and concluded with a form of oath which the pope enjoined on all the missionaries and which obliged them under the severest penalties to observe and have observed fully and without reserve the decisions inserted in the pontifical act. This Constitution, which reached China in 1716, found no rebels among the missionaries, but even those who sought most zealously failed to induce the majority of their flock to observe its provisions. At the same time the hate of the pagans was reawakened, enkindled by the old charge that Christianity was the enemy of the national rites, and the neophytes began to be the objects of persecutions to which K'ang-hi, hitherto so well-disposed, now gave almost entire liberty. Clement XI sought to remedy this critical situation by sending to China a second legate, John-Ambrose Mezzabarba, whom he named Patriarch of Alexandria. This prelate sailed from Lisbon on 25 March, 1720, reaching Macao on 26 September, and Canton on 12 October. Admitted, not without difficulty, to Peking and to an audience with the emperor, the legate could only prevent his immediate dismissal and the expulsion of all the missionaries by making known some alleviations of the Constitution "Ex ill, die", which he was authorized to offer, and allowing K'ang-hi to hope that the pope would grant still others. Then he hastened to return to Macao, whence he addressed (4 November, 1721) a pastoral letter to the missionaries of China, communicating to them the authentic text of his eight "permissions" relating to the rites. He declared that he would permit nothing forbidden by the Constitution; in practice, however, his concessions relaxed the rigour of the pontifical interdictions, although they did not produce harmony or unity of action among the apostolic workers. To bring about this highly desirable result the pope ordered a new investigation, the chief object of which was the legitimacy and opportuneness of Mezzabarba's "permissions"; begun by the Holy Office under Clement XII a conclusion was reached only under Benedict XIV. On 11 July, 1742, this pope, by the Bull "Ex quo singulari", confirmed and reimposed in a most emphatic manner the Constitution "Ex ill, die", and condemned and annulled the "permissions" of Mezzabarba as authorizing the superstitions which that Constitution sought to destroy. This action terminated the controversy among Catholics. The Holy See did not touch on the purely theoretical questions, as for instance what the Chinese rites were and signified according to their institution and in ancient times. In this Father Ricci may have been right; but he was mistaken in thinking that as practised in modern times they are not superstitious or can be made free from all superstition. The popes declared, after scrupulous investigations, that the ceremonies in honour of Confucius or ancestors and deceased relatives are tainted with superstition to such a degree that they cannot be purified. But the error of Ricci, as of his fellow-workers and successors, was but an error in judgment. The Holy See expressly forbade it



## Universalitas & Pervasivitas

*il costituirsi e diffondersi della S.J. e suoi echi (1540 - 1773)*  
di A. Pisani

Schede autori Attività missionaria

to be said that they approved of idolatry; it would indeed be an odious calumny to accuse such a man as Ricci, and so many other holy and zealous missionaries, of having approved and permitted their neophytes practices which they knew to be superstitions and contrary to the purity of religion. Despite this error, Matteo Ricci remains a splendid type of missionary and founder, unsurpassed for his zealous intrepidity, the intelligence of the methods applied to each situation, and the unwearied tenacity with which he pursued the projects he undertook. To him belongs the glory not only of opening up a vast empire to the Gospel, but of simultaneously making the first breach in that distrust of strangers which excluded China from the general progress of the world. The establishment of the Catholic mission in the heart of this country also had its economic consequences: it laid the foundation of a better understanding between the Far East and the West, which grew with the progress of the mission. It is superfluous to detail the results from the standpoint of the material interests of the whole world. Lastly, science owes to Father Ricci the first exact scientific knowledge received in Europe concerning China, its true geographical situation, its ancient civilization, its vast and curious literature, its social organization so different from what existed elsewhere. The method instituted by Ricci necessitated a fundamental study of this new world, and if the missionaries who have since followed him have rendered scarcely less service to science than to religion, a great part of the credit is due to Ricci.

### Sources

[MATTEO RICCI], "Dell' entrata della Campagna di Giesu e christianita nella Cina" (MS. Of Father Ricci, extant in the archives of the Society of Jesus; cited in the foregoing article as the "Memoirs of Father Ricci", a somewhat free tr. Of his work is given in TRIGAULT, "De christiana expeditione apud Sinas suscepta ab Societate Jesu". "Ex P. Matthaei Ricci commentariis libri", V (Augsbrg, 1615); DE URSIS, "P. Matheus Ricci, S.J. Relacao escripta pelo seu companheiro" (Rome, 1910); BARTOLI, "Dell' Historia della Compagnia di Gesu. La Cina", I-II (Rome, 1663). Bartoli is the most accurate biographer of Ricci; d'ORLEANS, "La vie du Pere Matthieu Ricci" (Paris, 1693); NATALI, "Il secondo Confucio" (Rome, 1900); VENTURI, "L'apostolato del P. M. Ricci d. C. d. G. in Cina secondo I suoi scritti inediti" (Rome, 1910); BRUCKER, "Le Pere Matthieu Ricci" in "Etudes", CXXIV (Paris, 1910), 5-27; 185-208; 751-79; DE BACKER-SOMMERVOGEL, "Bibl. Des ecrivains de la C. de J", VI, 1792-95). Chinese Rites.- BRUCKER in VACANT, "Dict. De Theol. cath., s.v. "Chinois (Rites)" and works indicated; CORDIER, "Bibl. Sinica", II, 2nd. Ed., 869-925; IDEM, "Hist. Des relations de la Chine avec les puissances occidentales", III (Paris, 1902) xxv.

**About this page:** APA citation. Brucker, J. (1912). Matteo Ricci. In The Catholic Encyclopedia. New York: Robert Appleton Company. Retrieved June 8, 2010 from New Advent: <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/13034a.htm> - MLA citation. Brucker, Joseph. "Matteo Ricci." The Catholic Encyclopedia. Vol. 13. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1912. 8 Jun. 2010 <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/13034a.htm> - Transcription. This article was transcribed for New Advent by John Looby. Ecclesiastical approbation. Nihil Obstat. February 1, 1912. Remy Lafort, D.D., Censor. Imprimatur. +John Cardinal Farley, Archbishop of New York. - Copyright © 2009 by Kevin Knight. Dedicated to the Immaculate Heart of Mary.

“[The] conversion was to procede at the top and the bottom simultaneously, but it was to be effected



BIBLIOTECA UNIVERSITARIA DI GENOVA – PERCORSI TEMATICI

## Universalitas & Pervasivitas

*il costituirsi e diffondersi della S.J. e suoi echi (1540 - 1773)*  
di A. Pisani

Schede autori Attività missionaria

primarily from the top down. Missionaries would work among the people, but some missionaries would serve the ruling class to maintain their good will toward Christianity. Ricci would, of course, concentrate his attention upon the emperor and the literati. Ricci fully recognized that things other than religious teachings would be the attraction at the top. [...] To have Christianity or Learning from Heaven accepted both among the higher-ups and among the people, it had to become an integral part of Chinese culture and be taken off the list of foreign and pernicious doctrines. The ‘indigenization’ was more important to Ricci than numbers [...] He also realized that ‘indigenization’ among the higher-ups would require the written word: books. Also, the forum to accomplish ‘indigenization’ at the top would not be the church or the house of worship but the academies (*shu-yüan*), highly popular during the Ming dynasty.[...] ‘Indigenization’ was to be accomplished with a four-faceted method: lifestyle, terminology (with underlying ideas and conceptions), ethics, and rites. For a successful ‘indigenization’, all four were equally important yet not equally difficult to implement. The least controversial was the first and the most controversial the fourth. Yet, the most crucial and difficult was the second. [...] [I]t was Ricci’s intention to foster a cultural blending from the inside (Chinese rites) as a transition process to a permanent cultural blending from the outside (Western rites) His successors and the K’ang-his emperor, in his declaration of 1700, understood Ricci’s intention in this manner. This is called the ‘Jesuit thesis’: the attitude of Ricci and his successors regarding the problem of certain immemorial non-Christian habits of thought and action that externally gave the appearance of illicit superstition. It has been defined by the French Jesuit Sinologist, Antoine de Beauvillier (1657-1708), in this terse formula: ‘There is danger in admitting the rites but a greater danger in suppressing them’. Moreover, the Jesuits were content to give the Riccian method of cultural accommodation the theological note of ‘probability’ [...] Ricci and his successors did not deny that the opposite opinion was ‘safer’, and that it is why they, unlike their more militant adversaries, did not try to impose their views on those missionaries whose consciences were more at ease with the stricter religious ideas they had been taught. Let us not forget, however, that without the Jesuit method their adversaries would never have been able to set foot on Chinese soil.”

**Cfr.:** Joseph Sebes S.J. “The precursors of Ricci” in: *East meets West. The Jesuits in China, 1582-1773* edited by Charles E. Ronan, S.J. and Bonnie B.C. Oh Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1988 p. 41 ss.

“...fu merito del gesuita padre Matteo Ricci, nel 1596, aver localizzato la Cina tra il 19° e il 42° parallelo di latitudine nord, dimostrando che tale paese non varcava i limiti del 120° meridiano di longitudine est, da Parigi, aver riorganizzato le notizie sparse che vi si riferivano e dato loro una più organica disposizione, ma soprattutto aver tolto di mezzo l’antica e ormai obsoleta differenziazione, del tutto errata di Cina/Catay, facendo di quella diade un tutto unico, e cioè una sola nazione, la Cina appunto, o Impero Cinese, del che egli stesso ebbe conferma definitiva allorché mise piedi a Pechino, per la prima volta, nel 1601. Il gesuita Ricci aveva, dunque, per primo, infranto le tenebre dell’ignoto, portando la Cina fuori dall’ambito geo-mitologico, ma, inconsapevolmente, avrebbe finito col dar vita a un nuovo mito etico-politico-religioso, che, prendendo l’abbrivio dai primi lustri del Seicento e dall’opera e dall’esperienza ricciane, si sarebbe allungato, con le sue estreme propaggini, fino all’età dell’illuminismo. [...] Da Matteo Ricci, attraverso la questione dei riti cinesi



## Universalitas & Pervasivitas

*il costituirsi e diffondersi della S.J. e suoi echi (1540 - 1773)*  
di A. Pisani

Schede autori Attività missionaria

e malabarici, e il poligenismo e preadamitismo di **Isaac de La Peyrère**, si sarebbe giunti fino a Voltaire, alla disgregazione della concezione cristiana della storia e alla storia come storia della civiltà e delle umane idee, una storia che cessava di essere, oltre che eurocentrica, anche bibliocentrica, giudaico-cristianocentrica, e teocentrica, come l'aveva intesa e voluta il Bossuet, e all'affermazione di una comune, libera, universale religiosità naturale di tutti i popoli. Da qui, proprio nell'età della Controriforma, avrebbe finito per prendere l'avvio innanzitutto il processo di laicizzazione della religiosità che avrebbe portato allo scetticismo, al libertinismo nell'età moderna e all'agnosticismo illuministico... In tutti i modi, era stato lo spirito del Rinascimento a 'scoprire', attraverso i gesuiti, l'Estremo Oriente : Valignano e Ricci, s'è detto, uomini del Rinascimento, assai più che campioni di una conservatrice e reazionaria Controriforma.”

**Cfr.:** Sergio Zoli *Dall'Europa libertina all'Europa illuminista* Firenze: Nardini, 1997, p. 85.

“Per il Ricci, le cerimonie aborigene, ovvero gli onori tributati a Confucio e agli antenati defunti in cui i missionari si erano imbattuti nella loro opera di evangelizzazione in Oriente e che erano parte integrante della struttura stessa della società cinese [lo stesso valeva per l'India relativamente al sistema indiano delle caste che il gesuita **Roberto De Nobili** (1577-1656), l'altro grande apostolo del cristianesimo nel Malabar, e più precisamente a Madura, aveva accettato come istituzione politico-sociale, sia per le cerimonie che per i riti cui erano avvezzi i bramini, cioè la classe elitaria, che il gesuita toscano s'era segnatamente impegnato a convertire assieme al confratello, il gesuita portoghese Giovanni de Britto], non erano niente affatto «idolatrici e forse nemmeno superstiziosi», ma invece andavano considerati come cerimonie eminentemente civili e non religiose. D'altra parte, per quanto atteneva alla più irta questioni dei termini e quindi del lessico da usarsi per tradurre in lingua cinese i termini fondamentali del cristianesimo [...] lo stesso Ricci aveva... optato per l'adozione di un vocabolario cinese vero e proprio, studiando, infatti, appositamente per conto suo la lingua cinese, più che per la mera sinizzazione dei termini cristiani. Questa, di un investimento linguistico autoctono e genetico che tenesse conto delle radici aborigene primigenie della etnia sinica, era parsa ai gesuiti, e in primis al Ricci, la miglior soluzione per una efficace evangelizzazione dell'antico Catai. D'altronde, l'indirizzo impresso dal missionario gesuita maceratese (e cioè il metodo di adattamenti e accomodamenti a costumi e riti epicorici) all'opera di evangelizzazione in Cina, non era stato accettato all'unisono da tutti i membri della Compagnia di Gesù, taluni dei quali si erano dissociati da tali posizioni lassistico-permissivistiche ancora al tempo in cui il Ricci era in vita. Tra i dissenzienti v'era stato quel padre Nicola Longobardi (1566-1654) che era divenuto successore del Ricci come direttore della missione gesuitica a Pechino, e inoltre, più tardi, tra Sei e Settecento, i gesuiti Fouquet e Visdelou, mentre energiche opposizioni s'erano levate da parte di domenicani, francescani, agostiniani e cappuccini che s'erano sempre eretti a paladini della più rigorosa ortodossia contro ogni mistificazione idolatrica del cristianesimo con i costumi e le cerimonie locali di popoli infedeli.”

**Cfr.:** Sergio Zoli *Dall'Europa libertina all'Europa illuminista* Firenze: Nardini, 1997, p. 439.

“L'opera più indicativa dell'atteggiamento di dissenso anti-ricciano del gesuita Longobardi è quel *Traité sur quelques points de la religion des Chinois* che, scritto attorno al 1622-25 in lingua francese ... a conclusione di una sorta di sondaggio compiuto nel corso di diversi anni presso un



BIBLIOTECA UNIVERSITARIA DI GENOVA – PERCORSI TEMATICI

## Universalitas & Pervasivitas

*il costituirsi e diffondersi della S.J. e suoi echi (1540 - 1773)*  
di A. Pisani

Schede autori Attività missionaria

buon numero di letterati cinesi, aveva avuto anche una redazione latina, *Confucio eiusque doctrina tractatus*, e stigmatizzava la tesi che i cinesi avessero conosciuto o avuto una nozione di Dio, mentre, registrando le reazioni dei letterati cinesi alla propaganda cristiana, metteva in guardia contro ogni forma di ibridismo, presso le classi colte, tra visione del mondo cinese e visione del mondo cristiana. Tale trattato, rimasto a lungo inedito e fatto gettare alle fiamme dal vice-provinciale dei gesuiti **Furtado** tra il 1635 e il 1641 come lesivo dell'indirizzo ricciano di evangelizzazione adottato allora dai gesuiti, fu poi inserito (qualche copia pure si salvò) dal domenicano Domingo Navarrete nei suoi caustici, antigesuitici *Tratados historicos, politicos, ethicos y religiosos de la Monarchia de China*, Madrid, 1676... Il trattato del Longobardi ebbe risonanza proprio nel periodo più acceso e cruciale della controversia sui riti, dopo l'edizione che ne diede il Leibniz nel 1701..."

**Cfr.:** Sergio Zoli *Dall'Europa libertina all'Europa illuminista* Firenze: Nardini, 1997, p. 495, nota 125.

Sui riti cinesi **cfr. anche:** **“Jesuit-Dominican controversies over Chinese rituals: European and Chinese textual strategies”**, by Eugenio Menegon (Department of History, Boston University); Gianni Criveller, **La controversia dei riti cinesi: storia di una lunga incomprensione**, Milano, Museo Popoli e Culture PIME, 2012,. I Quaderni del Museo 23.

**Vedi anche:** **profilo biografico di Matteo Ricci nel sito dell'Enciclopedia Treccani**