

Review Article

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Robert Morrison and the Birth of Chinese Protestantism.
Christopher Hancock. London, Continuum International Publishing
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Christians in China A.D. 600 to 2000. Jean-Pierre Charbonnier.
San Francisco, CA, Ignatius Press, 2007. 605 pp. £12.66.
ISBN: 978-0898709162.

First introduced during the Tang Dynasty with the arrival of Nestorian Christianity in 635 AD, the church in China grew with Franciscan missionaries in the thirteenth century, strengthened by Jesuit missionaries in the sixteenth century, with a flowering under Protestants-Evangelicals in the nineteenth century. From the arrival of these first missionaries from the Syriac church in the seventh century (having followed the Silk Road from Persia all the way to Chang'an) through to the *apparent* demise of the churches under communism in the second half of the twentieth century, China has always been an attractive open prospect for conversion. However, such a people were always going to be a difficult ground in which to sow the seeds of salvation: such a vast populace and country, and such a relatively enclosed culture and body politic. If we are to distinguish, rightly or wrongly, between the Gospel on the one hand and religion on the other, then, Christianity and Chinese culture were always going to be regarded as discordant and mismatched, an incompatibility.

The efforts of missionaries, of paramount eschatological importance, to preach salvation and draw people into the Kingdom, were considered hostile and damaging by Chinese leaders through the centuries, and recently by many Enlightenment-led Western academics. The evidence of home-grown churches, despite the expulsion of essentially American and European missionaries by the Marxist government from the 1950s, demonstrates the strength of evangelization driven by covert Bible distribution in generating *indigenous* churches. This contradicts the politically correct Western view that missionary endeavours were “foreign” and “alien.” The Gospel has been shown to be trans-cultural, indeed beyond culture: it challenges *all*, while adopting and then generating new cultural forms. The churches in China

are now growing, changing, within a burgeoning Chinese wealthy consumer middle class for whom the old forms of Chinese religion and culture hold very little value or truth. In addition there have been vast changes since the communist revolution sixty-five years ago. These two books represent the background to these changes, the often tumultuous history of missionary endeavours in China: the first is from a Protestant perspective; the second while purporting to be trans-denominational is a broadly Roman Catholic perspective.

Robert Morrison and the Birth of Chinese Protestantism, written by Christopher Hancock, former Dean of Bradford Cathedral, and Director of the Centre for the Study of Christianity in China (King's College London), delivers the first new biography of Morrison and his contribution to Protestant Chinese Christianity since the mid-twentieth century. This is also a contextual history, which steers clear of the hagiography that dominated books on Morrison in the past. Robert Morrison whose life spanned the end of the eighteenth and into the nineteenth centuries, translated and produced the first Chinese Bible, supplemented by further Christian texts and complemented by a dictionary of Mandarin. He established much of the groundwork by founding the Christian College in Malacca. Hancock opens with an introduction to Morrison and his work in China, set very much in the context of the Chinese church today. The first chapter, "1. Preparation: 1782-1807," deals with his childhood and education, his family background, and, crucially, his conversion (embedded in which was *the call* to China). The second chapter, "Arrival: 1807-1808," focuses on his attempts to establish a missionary base in China after his long journey via the United States. This leads into, "3. Consolidation: 1808-1813," which examines the translation and printing of the Chinese Bible. The fourth chapter, "4. Making a Life," focuses on Morrison's marriage, son, and his colleagues, and thereby his relationship to and adoption of Chinese culture, and his relationships with other missions. Hancock then moves into assessment mode: "5. Reputation: 1819-1823" explores the formation and development of the Christian College at Malacca, and his achievement in the publication of the Chinese New Testament, this allows a digression on Morrison's evangelistic method, but also upon international tensions, and the situation created by his wife's sickness. Therefore we move next into Morrison's return to England: "6. Furlough: 1823-1826." Morrison's latter years of service in China are referred to by Hancock as amongst the most poignant and painful, the most powerful episodes in his life. Therefore, in, "7. Finale: 1826-1833," Hancock compares Morrison's late years in Macao with the return of his wife and younger children to England. The last chapter, "8. Death and Beyond: 1834-," deals with Morrison's weakening grip on his work, and inevitably his death.

Christopher Hancock draws all these threads together in the conclusion evaluating Morrison's life, work and legacy. Morrison was in danger of being forgotten or only remembered as the stereotypical portrait found in light-weight Victorian hagiographic schoolroom books:

I said at the start that my aim was simply to retell a forgotten story. As we have seen, Robert Morrison's years were filled with an extraordinary admixture of conflicting realities, which he managed, or did not manage, in his own deliberate, Christian way ... Why study Morrison? Certainly, for his life and legacy in scholarship and mission, cultural understanding, and literary endeavour. But his biography also contains events which encourage us to gaze beyond the immediate to the transcendent, where service and personal satisfaction, struggle and accomplishment, humility and influence, cultures and faiths, converge and coexist productively and lastingly.¹

Christopher Hancock weaves together academically respectable scholarship with first-hand knowledge and experience of the churches in China, and the complex socio-political maelstrom that has been China in recent years. His reassessment of Robert Morrison is highly pertinent. This is well-researched, scholarly illustrated, and in the context of Sino-Christian studies reads well as a biography and as a theological analysis of Western missionary endeavours from two hundred years ago. Ironically the fruits of Morrison's efforts are only now beginning to show in the Marxist-Westernized secular China of the twenty-first century as the Bible-driven house-churches grow regardless of State scepticism and interference. Hancock's biography is timely as there is today, generally, a desire to reassess the legacy of Chinese missions: "In re-evaluating Morrison we join with others inside and outside China who engage in the tricky task of charting the truth and falsehood, the benefits and problems of Christian mission to China, as in every country of the world."²

Jean-Pierre Charbonnier's, *Christians in China A.D. 600 to 2000*, is a revised and expanded second edition of his seminal work *Histoire des Chrétiens de Chine*, translated from the French by M.N.L. Couve de Murville, Archbishop Emeritus of Birmingham, (UK). A priest of the Missions Etrangères de Paris Society (MEP), Charbonnier served in East Asia for more than thirty years and is now the Director of the China Service of the Paris Foreign Missions Society. A large volume, over 600 pages—200,000 words in length—with 32 colour plate photographs, and also numerous greyscale illustrations and maps, the work claims to be about *Christians* in China, however, this is essentially a history of the presence of the Roman Catholic Church in China.

1. Hancock, *Robert Morrison and the Birth of Chinese Protestantism*, 256-7.
2. Hancock, 2.

Contextual reference is given to some nineteenth and twentieth centuries Protestant missions, but the treatment is disappointingly brief, imprecise, though accurate and fair. Notwithstanding this denominational bias within a work purporting to universality, Charbonnier's volume is meticulous in its research, well balanced and—especially in this translated second edition—forms a yardstick and touchstone on the history of Christianity in China. Charbonnier's narrative style flows well, which complements the telling of a thirteen hundred year story, where the interaction between missionaries and those with a vested interest in the socio-cultural body politic often generated a violent reaction and oppression *on both sides*. This left the ordinary Chinese Christians in the centre whose voice is perhaps drowned-out beneath the tide of history represented by empire building and power politics, by status and wealth. China's history is essentially about competing dynasties, of the struggle for power by various factions, tribes, in an attempt to hold this vast country together and maintain something called Chinese identity—a situation that continues today with the communist party's grip on power. Charbonnier therefore examines how the interaction between Western imperialism, indigenous powers and religions, and the Gospel, has fared. He quite correctly defers an answer, even though this long volume recounts what can at times be seen as a clash of cultures, as the answer must be seen as teleological and eschatological: "There is no need to conclude because the history of Christians in China is ongoing."³ Charbonnier chronicles the lives of Chinese Christians who through the centuries have been accepted and rejected, by the *status quo*, welcomed and martyred. Inevitably he examines the attempt to live the faith and give witness to Christ in a vast country against the unique religious and political situations in which Christians not just in China but the world over have struggled. Although one comes away with a clear picture of this cultural clash, on the question (especially pertinent in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the time of the Jesuit missions) of ethics and personal morality, many of the confrontations are reminiscent of the churches today in West Africa—tackling polygamy and a culture of mistresses ("prohibitions on even only one concubine,"⁴), or the evangelization of North-Western Europe in the centuries after the fall of the Roman Empire.

Charbonnier opens his study with the question, is Christianity inherently alien to the Chinese culture? Given that the very nature of the Gospel message is *the* revelation of the one true transcendent God who is crucified for sinful humanity, then an affirmative answer is inevitable. As both the Taoist and Confucian Chinese religious traditions are a search for the ritual harmony

3. Charbonnier, *Christians in China A.D. 600 to 2000*, 541.

4. Charbonnier, 168.

between heaven and earth, then a history of salvation often appeared alien to such philosophical “lifestyle” concerns in the here-and-now. Eschatological concerns contradicted the harmony that was sought and that filtered into all aspects of Chinese life. In addition, “to Confucians, the commandment that requires human beings to love God above all things seems to disrupt the right order required by filial piety.”⁵ Yet for better or for worse, the church has been preaching the Kingdom and saving souls in China since 635 AD:

Is Christianity a foreign religion as far as China is concerned? One could say yes, because of the very nature of the Gospel message, which is a revelation of the transcendent God who saves sinful humanity. A history of salvation seems in many ways alien to the Chinese religious tradition, both Taoist and Confucian, which is a search for the ritual harmony between heaven and earth. But one can also say no, because Christianity has been rooted in Chinese soil since the Tang dynasty, more than thirteen centuries ago. The monks of the Syrian Church who came from Persia in the seventh century, although they were few in number brought with them the message of God’s kingdom.⁶

Therefore Charbonnier does handle from the start and throughout what becomes a theologically existential history, rather than a socio-cultural religious history. The work is in five broad parts (in total 30 chapters): “I. Relics from China’s Past: Traces of Christianity in China from the Seventh to the Fourteenth Centuries;” “II. The Friendship of Wise Men: The Meeting of Catholicism and Confucianism in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries;” “III. Witnesses on the Run: The Gospel Preached to Poor Peasants in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries;” “IV. The Colonial Period: Ambivalent Expansion — Advantages and Disadvantages of Foreign Protection, 1840-1949;” and “V. Death and Resurrection: 1949-2002 Communism and the Attempt to Destroy Religion, the Attempt to Integrate Religion into Politics.”

Is Charbonnier’s work sensitive enough to the complex tapestry of human aims and desires, of political aspirations and the comings-and-goings of the body politic that characterise such a vast country and people? On 1st October 2000, 120 Catholic Christians—87 Chinese people and 33 foreigners—were canonised, Chinese martyrs from the years 1648 through to 1930 (though most were killed as a result of the Boxer Rebellion in 1899-1901). The Vatican authorities organising the ceremony were unaware that 1st October was National Day in China. Predictably the Communist authorities condemned the ceremony. The canonization was followed a few days later by at least 20 Chinese academics denouncing the crimes committed by the canonised

5. Charbonnier, 204.

6. Charbonnier, 19.

foreign missionaries. This was a harking back to the Boxer Rebellion, they argued that the missionary expansion in China, was inseparable from foreign aggression, missionaries were, from a Communist perspective, imperialist agents. These are standard criticisms which Charbonnier deals with fairly and justly as an historian, but his Roman Catholic perspective actually limits how he assesses the relationship between indigenous Chinese culture and Western Christianity, and then between indigenous Christians and the Gospel. Besides, is not Marxist rhetoric, ably pronounced from the Party's *apparatchiks* and academics, is not communism a nineteenth-century Western political thought system *imposed* on the Chinese? What is left of this indigenous Chinese culture after twenty years of rampant Western capitalism and globalization driven by the Communist Party, with scant regard for people, culture, tradition or the environment?

This dichotomy goes deeper: Charbonnier weakens any argument against Chinese cultural isolationism by effectively marginalizing the work of Protestants in China in the twentieth century (though he does admit in the conclusion that, to use his words, there has been spectacular growth in Protestantism). There are therefore glaring omissions which dent the claim of the title to be about *Christians* in China. For example, the British woman Gladys Aylward who worked in Northern China from the mid-1930s. She dressed, ate, learnt to speak Chinese, took Chinese citizenship, and lived with the poorest of the poor. She was outside of all Western missionary organizations, and famously marched over 100 children to safety across mountains to get them away from the Japanese invaders (celebrated in the film, *The Inn of the Sixth Happiness*⁷). Aylward then went to work with Baptist and Evangelical missionaries in Western China (Tibet) after the Second World War, where she witnessed the martyrdom of over 200 indigenous Chinese Christians by the Maoists. These martyrs had no links with foreign agencies or missionary societies. They were 17-20 year old students who became Bible-based “house” Christians whilst studying on campus, who were paraded into the public square by the communists, ordered to recant their faith in Jesus Christ or die—one by one they were all publicly beheaded.⁸ Books on Aylward have seen a resurgence in recent years both in the West, and in China amongst the secretive house churches: she is providing something of an ecclesial model.

There are no *specific* accounts of Protestant/Evangelical martyrdom, from

7. The film has been much criticized by politically correct liberals during the last 40 years as an example of cultural imposition: a Western missionary teaching Chinese orphans Western children's songs. However, contrary to the film, they did not sing an English-Irish nursery rhyme, “This Old Man...” as they crossed the mountains but indigenous Chinese Christian hymns and praise choruses! See: Alan Burgess, *The Small Woman*. London: Evans, 1957.

8. Gladys Aylward, *The Little Woman*. Chicago: The Moody Press, 1970, Chapter 15 “Even Unto Death”).

indigenous house churches outside of Rome's (or any Western) ecclesial authorities in Charbonnier's work; these accounts if included would have severely weakened the claim by Chinese authorities that all Christian missionaries are imperialist cultural destroyers. A wider more accurate representation of the trans-denominational Christian activities would have strengthened Charbonnier's work, allowing him to be more assertive in countering the foreign, essentially Western, religion of Marxism: has not the Communist Party done more to destroy Chinese culture and identity than any other belief system? These criticisms notwithstanding, nonetheless, this is an excellent, seminal volume, well-constructed and a well-written history, thankfully without any concessions to Postmodern confusion and relativity—Charbonnier believes clearly in preaching the Gospel to all peoples and converting them. Charbonnier's understanding and knowledge, his attention to the minutiae in the sweep of history that can cause empires to fall, dynasties to rise, is truly breath-taking. He is not afraid to assert that, yes, the Gospel actually does cut across, challenge, all cultures and nations. This is an excellent and pleasurable book to read, by one who has long been fascinated by Chinese Christianity. Although it has its difficulties this is probably as good as a single volume history covering more than 1300 years of interaction between the Church and China as you will find. The translation reads well, the several appendices, bibliography and index complement a volume of this nature.

And the future?—declared dead during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), the Chinese churches now flourish. Christianity is the fastest-growing religious group in China. Unofficial statistics indicate a growth from one million in 1949 to sixty million in 2010: *Jidujiao Re* (Christianity Fever) has gripped the Chinese. China has the second largest Evangelical population after the United States. But the extent that growth will mirror the Parable of the Seed and the Sower is an eschatological question.