Protestant Christianity in China: Perspectives from the History of Chinese Religions and Early Christianity in the Roman World

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Abstract

The first and longer part of this article is a survey of the Chinese religious context when Protestant Christianity arrived in the early nineteenth century. The religious traditions that were active at that time, other than Islam, were local community traditions of ritual and belief, popular religious sects, Daoism and Buddhism. Of these, local community traditions were by far the most numerous and widespread, based on family and temple worship in villages and urban neighbourhoods. They were not sectarian, but involved all who lived in the local area. However there were sectarian religions in China as well, with their own founders, members, scriptures and worship centres, including indigenous popular religious sects, Daoism, Buddhism and Roman Catholic Christianity. Summaries of their histories and activities are provided, together with comments about their relationships with Protestants.

The second part of this article is a brief comparison of Protestant Christianity in the Chinese empire with that of the early Christian...
movement in the Roman world. Though there were many differences, in both situations the majority tradition was of polytheistic cults of gods represented by images and paintings in homes and temples; gods worshipped for practical goals by families and communities. The article ends with a few suggested reasons for the success of Christianity in the Roman Empire, with implied parallels for the Protestant movement in China centuries later.

Protestant Christian missionaries first arrived in the China mainland in the early nineteenth century, but did not make much progress until China was forced to open up to foreign trade by Britain and France in the 1840s and 1850s. From then on mission work increased and Chinese churches eventually developed. This essay attempts to look at this development from two perspectives: that of other religious traditions already established in China, and that of the situation of the early church in the ancient Roman world. In both of these contexts the Christians represented a new kind of sectarian organization and belief.

Though Roman Catholics had arrived in China long before, the first Protestant missionaries in China were Dutch Reformed clergy affiliated with the Dutch colonial administration in Taiwan in the period 1624–1661, who succeeded in converting several hundred aboriginal tribesmen in a period when few Han Chinese lived on the island. This work continued until the Dutch were evicted by the Chinese General Zheng Chenggong 鄭成功 (Koxinga; 1624–1662). The first Protestant missionary in the China mainland was the Presbyterian Robert Morrison (1782–1834), who arrived in Guangzhou from England in 1807. Aided by Chinese assistants, Morrison began to translate Christian tracts into Chinese, and with the help of the Scotsman William Milne completed translating the Bible in 1819. His first convert was his assistant, Tsae A-ko (1788–1818), who was baptized in 1814. A more important early convert was Liang A-fa, educated in a Christian school set up by Milne in Malacca; he helped in the translation of tracts, some of which he wrote himself, and took such tracts from Guangzhou to other parts of China. During the first decades of the nineteenth century foreigners were allowed to live only in Guangzhou and Macao and could not travel in China, so the work of Chinese converts was vital.

Despite these early efforts, by 1840 there were still only about twenty Protestant missionaries in China from Britain and the United States and less than a hundred Chinese converts, but the mission