

Modern History Sourcebook:

The Chinese Rites Controversy, 1715

One of the religious debates in 18th century Catholicism focused on the issue of "Chinese rites." The Society of Jesus (Jesuits) was successful in penetrating China and serving at the Imperial court. They impressed the Chinese with their knowledge of astronomy and mechanics, and in fact ran the Imperial Observatory. Other Jesuits functioned as court painters. The Jesuits in turn were impressed by the Chinese Confucian elite, and adapted to that lifestyle.

*The primary goal of the Jesuits was to spread Catholicism, but here they had a problem. The Chinese elite were attached to Confucianism which provided the framework of both state and home life. Part of Confucian practice involved veneration of the ancestors. The Jesuits tried to argue, in Rome, that these "Chinese Rites" were social, not religious, ceremonies, and that converts should be allowed to continue to participate. [The debate was **not**, as is sometimes thought, about whether the liturgy could be in Chinese rather than Latin]. This claim by the Jesuits may have been disingenuous. Although in later European commentary on China it has continued to be claimed that Confucianism is a "philosophy" and not a "religion" - because it does not conform to the model of western religions, the pope was probably correct in his assessment that the Confucian rituals were indeed in conflict with Christian teaching. As a result, he gave up a very good opportunity to convert a significant part of the Chinese elite to Catholicism.*

The Kangxi emperor, one of China's greatest, was at first friendly to the Jesuit Missionaries working in China. By the end of the seventeenth century they had made many converts.

From Decree of K'anghsi (1692)

The Europeans are very quiet; they do not excite any disturbances in the provinces, they do no harm to anyone, they commit no crimes, and their doctrine has nothing in common with that of the false sects in the empire, nor has it any tendency to excite sedition . . . We decide therefore that all temples dedicated to the Lord of heaven, in whatever place they may be found, ought to be preserved, and that it may be permitted to all who wish to worship this God to enter these temples, offer him incense, and perform the ceremonies practised according to ancient custom by the Christians. Therefore let no one henceforth offer them any opposition.

From S. Neill, *A History of Christian Missions* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books 1964), pp. 189-190.

From Decree of Pope Clement XI (1715)

The Jesuits claim Chinese terms could be used to designate the Christian God and that the Confucian ceremonies were merely civil rites that Christians could attend and that Chinese ancestor worship was compatible with Christianity was condemned by Pope Clement XI in 1715.

Pope Clement XI wishes to make the following facts permanently known to all the people in the world....

I. The West calls *Deus* [God] the creator of Heaven, Earth, and everything in the universe. Since the word *Deus* does not sound right in the Chinese language, the Westerners in China and Chinese converts to Catholicism have used the term "Heavenly Lord" for many years. From now on such terms as "Heaven" and "Shangti" should not be used: *Deus* should be addressed as the Lord of Heaven, Earth, and everything in the universe. The tablet that bears the Chinese words "Reverence for Heaven" should not be allowed to hang inside a Catholic church and should be immediately taken down if already there.

II. The spring and autumn worship of Confucius, together with the worship of ancestors, is not allowed among Catholic converts. It is not allowed even though the converts appear in the ritual as bystanders, because to be a bystander in this ritual is as pagan as to participate in it actively.

III. Chinese officials and successful candidates in the metropolitan, provincial, or prefectural examinations, if they have been converted to Roman Catholicism, are not allowed to worship in Confucian temples on the first and fifteenth days of each month. The same prohibition is applicable to all the Chinese Catholics who, as officials, have recently arrived at their posts or who, as students, have recently passed the metropolitan, provincial, or prefectural examinations.

IV. No Chinese Catholics are allowed to worship ancestors in their familial temples.

V. Whether at home, in the cemetery, or during the time of a funeral, a Chinese Catholic is not allowed to perform the ritual of ancestor worship. He is not allowed to do so even if he is in company with nonChristians. Such a ritual is heathen in nature regardless of the circumstances.

Despite the above decisions, I have made it clear that other Chinese customs and traditions that can in no way be interpreted as heathen in nature should be allowed to continue among Chinese converts. The way the Chinese manage their households or govern their country should by no means be interfered with. As to exactly what customs should or should not be allowed to continue, the papal legate in China will make the necessary decisions. In the absence of the papal legate, the responsibility of making such decisions should rest with the head of the China mission and the Bishop of China. In short, customs and traditions that are not contradictory to Roman Catholicism will be allowed, while those that are clearly contradictory to it will not be tolerated under any circumstances.

From *China in Transition, 1517-1911*, Dan. J. Li, trans. (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1969), pp. 2224

From Decree of Kangxi (1721)

The Kangxi emperor was not happy with Clement's decree, and banned Christian missions in China.

Reading this proclamation, I have concluded that the Westerners are petty indeed. It is impossible to reason with them because they do not understand larger issues as we understand them in China. There is not a single Westerner versed in Chinese works, and their remarks are often incredible and ridiculous. To judge from this proclamation, their religion is no different from other small, bigoted sects of Buddhism or Taoism. I have never seen a document which contains so much nonsense. From now on, Westerners should not be allowed to preach in China, to avoid further trouble.

From *China in Transition, 1517-1911*, Dan J. Li, trans. (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1969), p. 22.

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halsall@murray.fordham.edu