

Ecumenical Cooperation and Inter-religious
Dialogue in 20th Century Catholic History:
Legacies of the Past and Prospects for the Future

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二十世紀天主教史中的宗派合作與宗教對話：
過去的遺產與將來的希望

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[ABSTRACT] In the early 20th Century, China was an important birthplace of modern ecumenism and inter-faith dialogue among liberal Protestants; but because of the condemnation of modernism by Pope Pius X, Chinese Catholic theology long remained frozen in the strongly anti-modernist pre-Vatican II stance. Under Communist rule, the division between official and unofficial (or “underground”) segments of the Catholic Church sapped away energies that could have gone toward more creative outreach to other communities. In the restrictive environment of the Mainland there are continuing difficulties in gaining access to the latest ecumenical theology. Catholics on the Mainland are often rural, where religion is a marker of an exclusive identity with little openness to other communities. In Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan, there have been important Catholic initiatives, including the Matteo Ricci Institutes

and the Justice and Peace Commission of Hong Kong, which has worked with activists from many different faiths to promote social justice. However, some other Chinese Catholics have vigorously protested against these initiatives. Changes in society strongly shape the level of ecumenical and interreligious openness to new ideas: Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macau are urban societies with broad, mobile middle classes where members of different faiths work and study together and often become friends and marriage partners. This contact often inspires a need to learn from one another. Catholics in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macau have greater possibilities for theological speculation and greater opportunities to learn from traditional Chinese religious culture. It is difficult to predict the degree of mutual future influence between Mainland China and other Chinese areas.

In the early 20th Century, China was an important birthplace of modern ecumenism and inter-faith dialogue. Many Western Protestant missionaries were inspired to develop ecumenical inter-denominational church councils because they became aware that denominational divisions weakened the credibility of Christianity and undermined the effectiveness of their work.¹ Also as Lian Xi argues in his book “The Conversion of Missionaries”, many important Protestant missionaries in the first half of the 20th century came to deeply respect the richness and profundities of Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist traditions and began to ask serious questions about the uniqueness and universality of Christianity. Some were moved to develop theologies that combined concepts from Western Christian and indigenous Chinese traditions. Others experimented

¹ Daniel H. Bays, *A New History of Christianity in China* (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), pp. 92-111.

with forms of worship that drew from practices of all traditions. Some indeed began to hold that Christianity was not the only path to salvation and to doubt that Christianity was necessarily superior to indigenous Chinese beliefs.²

But this was a Protestant rather than a Catholic phenomenon. In this article I will explain the theological, sociological, and political reasons why this was so throughout most of the 20th century. I will, however, conclude by showing how changing theological, sociological, and political contexts could lead to a greater degree of Catholic ecumenism and interfaith dialogue in the early 21st century.

Theological Context

The Protestant missionaries who took the lead in ecumenism and inter-faith dialogue were supported by liberal Protestant theology of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It was a theology that saw Jesus mainly as a great moral teacher rather than the Son of God who performed miracles and rose from the dead. Because of their experiences in China, however, some liberal Protestant China missionaries pushed the implications of the theology to new limits. Others, like Pearl Buck, who began as a conservative evangelical missionary, had conversions to theological liberalism. Indeed, some prominent missionaries pursued this view so enthusiastically and so articulately that they provoked a backlash in the American Protestant community, which was the origin of the modern "fundamentalist" movement.³

² Lian Xi, *The Conversion of Missionaries: Liberalism in American Protestant Missions, 1907-1932* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997).

³ Lian Xi, pp. 25-128; 207-228.

Catholics meanwhile were immune to such theological debates. Movements toward re-interpretations of the Catholic tradition were strongly condemned in the 19th century by Pope Pius IX and Pope Leo XIII. Finally, in 1907 Pope Pius X put decisive halt to theological development with his long encyclical against “modernism,” which he called the “synthesis of all heresies.” To fight modernism, Pius X decreed that all priests and laity who followed its theologies be purged from any institutions of Catholic education. A special commission was established to ferret out modernist heresies. Bishops were instructed to censor any books or publications and to forbid any assemblies that espoused modernist ideas. All priests and candidates for the priesthood were to swear an “oath against modernism”, which declared in part: “I sincerely hold that the doctrine of faith was handed down from the apostles through the orthodox Fathers in exactly the same meaning and always in the same purport. Therefore I entirely reject the heretical misrepresentation that dogmas evolve and change from one meaning to another different from the one which the Church held previously.”⁴

The condemnation of modernism and the ecclesiastical apparatus constructed to root it out ensured that Catholic missionaries to China were trained to avoid anything that suggested theological or moral relativism. The Catholic missionary encounter produced its own kind of soul searching and accompanying ecclesiastical controversies, but they were about control rather than doctrine. The Belgian Vincentian Vincent Lebbe was in the forefront of missionaries criticizing the domination of the Chinese Catholic Church by foreigners, who all too often worked hand in hand with the political powers of their home countries. Lebbe was indeed

⁴ Pope Pius X, “*Pascendi Dominici Gregis*, Encyclical on the Doctrines of the Modernists, 8 September 1907,” *Acta Apostolica Sedis*.

ostracized by members of his own congregation and forced by ecclesiastical authorities to leave China in 1920 (returning in the 1927 to establish his own congregation of Chinese priests), but a letter of his to Pope Benedict XV had prompted the 1919 apostolic letter *Maximum Illud* calling for the establishment of a native clergy and hierarchy.⁵ Over intense active and passive resistance from foreign missionaries, especially the French, a first group of six Chinese bishops were ordained by Pope Pius XI himself in 1926.

To promote an indigenous clergy and hierarchy, Pope Benedict XV had called for educating Chinese clergy up to the same level as foreign clergy. This meant among other things a Chinese seminary education that would condemn theological modernism as rigorously as European seminaries. For their part, Chinese bishops were eager to prove that they were every bit as orthodox as their Western counterparts. While calling for the establishment of an indigenous Church, Pope Benedict XV defined the missionary calling as one to save the souls of "the numberless heathen still sitting in the shadows of death."⁶ This meant that there would be no movements for inter-religious dialogue or even ecumenical dialogue within the Chinese Catholic Church.

In a way, the struggles within the Chinese Catholic church over indigenous versus foreign control were more relevant to the contemporary May Fourth historical moment in China than were the struggles among Protestant churches over ecumenical theology. The popes who strongly criticized the alignment of missionary work with imperial power and called for the establishment of an

⁵ Jean-Paul Wiest, "The Legacy of Vincent Lebbe," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* Vol. 23:1 (January, 1999), pp. 33-37.

⁶ Pope Benedict XV, "Maximum Illud, Apostolic Letter on the Proclamation of the Faith throughout the World, 30 November 1919."

indigenous Chinese clergy and hierarchy placed themselves on the side of modern Chinese nationalism. In embracing the wisdom of Daoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism, liberal Protestant missionaries were affirming traditions that nationalistic Chinese modernizers considered remnants of a past culture, which had to be superseded if China was to gain modern wealth and power.

Sociological Context

But while the papal determination to indigenize the Chinese Church's leadership helped to align the Church hierarchy with nationalistic modernizing elites (eventually leading to a very close association between Nanjing Archbishop, later Cardinal, Yu Bin and Chiang Kai-shek), the social circumstances of most Catholics aligned the Church with conservative elements of traditional culture. After the debacle of the Rites Controversy in the 17th century, Church focused on developing communities of poor rural peasants rather than educated elites. Life in rural communities was intertwined with a diffuse polytheistic religiosity punctuated by festivals that gave the communities meaning and solidarity. Catholic converts were forbidden to take part in these festivals, forbidden to possess images or symbols of the traditional pantheon, and forbidden from conducting the traditional funeral rites for their deceased family members. However, rural Catholics maintained the social structures that had sustained the traditional practices. Typically their faith was embedded in large extended patrilineal families and the faith was passed down from parent to child through the generations. The forms of life in these communities mimicked that of non-Christian communities – family centered worship, community centered festivals. It was just the content that was different: instead of local gods, the Catholics were under the protection of Mary and the saints.

Instead of worshiping the ancestors through Confucian ritual, the Catholics prayed to them on All Saints and All Souls day. Catholic families brought in brides from other Catholic villages, but followed the same procedures as non-Catholics in selecting mates and brokering marriages. Since the actual lifestyles of Catholics and non-Catholics were so similar, it was all the more important that Catholics maintain formal markers of their particular identity – and that meant rejecting Daoist, Buddhist, and Confucian beliefs and rituals. It was indeed their clinging to distinctive markers of identity that enabled local Catholic communities to withstand tumultuous social change and persecution.⁷

Political Context

In the 1920s, the efforts by the Vatican to indigenize the Chinese Catholic Church did indeed lead it to align its native hierarchy with nationalist political leaders. But this was coupled with the Vatican’s definitive condemnation of Communism in the 1930s.⁸ Thus the Church became firmly committed to the KMT regime, which led to militant suppression of the Church by the victorious Communists after 1949. This had important consequences for ecumenical cooperation and inter-faith dialogue. Domination by the Communist regime kept the Church from participating in the Second Vatican Council. As a result, Chinese Catholic theology remained frozen in the strongly anti-modernist pre-Vatican stance. At the same time, in its effort to control and contain and eventually

⁷ Richard Madsen, *China’s Catholics: Tragedy and Hope in an Emerging Civil Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), pp. 50-75.

⁸ The definitive condemnation came from Pope Pius XI in his 1937 encyclical “*Divini Redemptoris*.”

strangle religion, the Communist regime linked the five recognized religions (Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Protestant Christianity, and Catholicism) to bureaucratically organized “patriotic associations”, supervised by the Party’s United Front Department.

As is well known, a few bishops cooperated with this arrangement, but most Catholics did not because the Vatican strongly rejected it. The bishops who did join the Catholic Patriotic Association became alienated from the great majority of Catholic believers. But one role imposed on those Patriotic Bishops was a kind of ecumenism. Under government control, they were supposed to cooperate with the patriotic leaders of the other religions in issuing statements of support for government policies. This politicized ecumenism-from-above by bishops who had lost their legitimacy must have been deeply offensive to most Chinese Catholics. Meanwhile, it was rural Catholics’ strong identification with distinctive doctrines that gave them an indelible identity that maintained and even strengthened itself under political persecution. The political context during the Maoist era thus thoroughly inoculated most Chinese Catholics from any inclination to engage in ecumenism or inter-religious dialogue.⁹

Beginning in 1979, Deng Xiaoping’s Reform Era opened new opportunities for partial religious freedom. Under the overall supervision and control of the Religious Affairs Bureau (now called the State Administration for Religious Affairs), clergy were returned to service, seminaries were re-opened, religious communities were enabled to function publically. But as is well known, millions of other believers who found these arrangements inadequate have developed their own “underground” communities. The division between official and unofficial (or “underground”) segments of the

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 25-49.

Catholic Church has been particularly vexing and has sapped away energies that could have gone toward more creative outreach. There are continuing difficulties in a restrictive environment of getting access to the latest ecumenical theology, and the sheer pressure of rebuilding basic seminary education in such a challenging environment leaves little time and energy for potentially controversial modern theological initiatives. Furthermore, insofar as underground portions of the Church rightly or wrongly want to differentiate themselves from the government supervised portions of the Church, they would reject what passes for ecumenism now – the top-down state-directed efforts to bring religious leaders to promote a “harmonious society.”

Ecumenical Outreach in Greater China

This is by no means to say that creative outreach to Protestants and dialogue with other religions cannot take place within Chinese Catholic culture. Such ecumenism has indeed developed outside of Mainland China, in Taiwan and Hong Kong-Macau, on both theological and pastoral levels. This is because of differences in the theological, sociological, and political contexts of these societies.

Study of and dialogue with non-Christian religions has been carried out most notably by Jesuits (and associated lay scholars) in the Matteo Ricci Institutes in Taipei and Macau. From the time of its establishment by Fr. Yves Raguin in 1966, the Ricci Institute in Taipei has supported ground breaking studies of Chinese popular religion. The tradition has continued with successor Jesuits at the Ricci Institutes in Taipei and Macau, fostering first-rate research on

both Confucianism and Buddhism.¹⁰ Very important work has also been done by SVD scholars in Taiwan's Fu Jen University on Catholic efforts to engage with Confucianism. The Jesuit Fr. Gerald Martinson has carried out widely watched dialogues on Taiwan's Kuangchi television station with Buddhist leaders like the late Venerable Sheng Yen.

Such scholarly research and public dialogue can provide the material for deep theological reflection. This work has enriched theological studies in seminaries and divinity schools around the world, from Berkeley to Leuven. It has influenced training in Taiwan and Hong Kong seminaries, although due to a relative lack of resources, not as much as might have been expected.

On a pastoral level, clergy, religious, and lay Catholics in Taiwan and Hong Kong-Macau have engaged in wide-spread cooperative networks with both Protestants and non-Christians to promote social justice and charity. Since the 1970s, members of the Justice and Peace Commission of Hong Kong have worked with activists from many different faiths to promote social justice.¹¹ Throughout the past decade, Cardinal Zen has usually marched at the head of the annual parade on July 1 to advocate for greater freedom, transparency, inclusivity, and equity in Hong Kong.

Although Catholics have long had their own hospitals and social welfare services, they also engage in regular cooperation with Protestant and Buddhist groups to carry out works of mercy. Catholic nuns have been especially active in this regard, but the Catholic hierarchy has demonstrated respect and encouragement to all major efforts to feed the poor and comfort the afflicted. In 2009, the late

¹⁰ <www.riccibase.com>

¹¹ <www.hkjp.org>

Cardinal Shen of Kaohsiung was one of the first signatories (together with President Ma Ying-jeou and the president of Indonesia – a Buddhist and Muslim respectively) of the nomination of Venerable Master Cheng Yen of Tzu-chi for the Nobel Peace Prize.¹²

Such active ecumenical engagement has not always developed smoothly. From the 1970s until now, there have been theological debates and different approaches to resolving pastoral dilemmas over such issues as inter-faith marriage. As for cooperation over Justice and Peace issues, there have been predictable controversies as to how far Catholic clergy and religious should ally with “leftist” Christian and secular activists in challenging the government. Often this has been exacerbated by differences in perspective between a younger generation of foreign missionaries and an older generation of Chinese clergy and religious. When three Maryknoll priests joined with Presbyterians in Taiwan in 1978, attending an ecumenical prayer service to pray for the protection of human rights, they provoked a letter of denunciation signed by 215 local Chinese priests: “You are destroying the work of the Church. We ask you to leave our country and go to anywhere else where you could make your ideals come true.”¹³ Yet the result in Chinese Catholic areas outside of the mainland has been a great churning of ideas and practices that has enabled Catholics to engage actively in a religiously pluralistic society.

¹² Personal communication. I signed the letter too.

¹³ Richard Madsen, “The Spectacular Growth and Precipitous Decline of the Catholic Church in Taiwan”, published in Chinese in *Taiwan Xuezhì* 6 (October, 2012), pp. 53-76. Quotation is from p. 71.

Theological and Sociological Contexts of Ecumenism

A first condition enabling Catholic ecumenical and interreligious outreach in Taiwan and Hong Kong was the access both societies enjoyed to the vision of the Second Vatican Council, especially in the Declaration on Religious Freedom and the Constitution on the Church in the Modern World. This was facilitated by the ability of Catholics to travel abroad and also by the influx of a younger, “Vatican II generation” of priests and nuns in the 1960s and 1970s. There are of course ongoing controversies over the meaning and relevance of the Vatican II documents. Some Catholics think the documents allow them to leave behind the restrictive orthodoxy imposed by Pius X’s denunciation of modernism. Others, concerned about moral and ontological relativism, see Vatican II as maintaining continuity with the earlier papal pronouncements, while simply making the absolute truth more accessible. Although these controversies have been strongest in Europe and North America, they do find echoes in Asia.

Openness to new ideas, as well as controversy over them, is grounded in changing sociological realities. Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macau are urban societies with broad, mobile middle classes. Members of different faiths work and study together and often become friends and marriage partners. This mixing not only exposes them to a wide variety of religious ideas and practices, but also often inspires a need to learn from one another. At the same time, life in such cities presents new ethical dilemmas and new searches for the meaning of life. Religiously sensitive persons who are concerned about the materialism and competitive individualism of hyper-developed world cities are inclined to look for allies broadly among the serious heirs to all of the spiritual traditions of the world, and they seek out religious leaders who share such concerns.

There are of course opposing tendencies in the modern city. To escape isolation, individuals can seek out exclusive enclaves of the like-minded who see themselves pitted against the outside world. One does find such enclaves in the more open cities outside Mainland China, for example among some evangelical Christians and among sectarian religious societies like Falungong. Yet there are few such quasi-sectarian enclaves among Catholics, a tribute perhaps to the leadership of the Church in this part of Asia eager to make their relatively small Catholic communities be seen as good citizens of a wider pluralistic society.

The potential sectarian forces can however be exacerbated by political manipulation. The Hong Kong SAR government gives each of the major officially defined religions – Catholicism, Protestant Christianity, Buddhism, Daoism, and Islam a particular voice in the political process. For example, they can each select electors to the commission that elects the Chief Executive (but never enough to overturn the preferences of the majority of the electors promoted by Beijing). In return for such recognition, the designated leaders of the major religions have been relatively compliant with the Hong Kong government – with the notable exception of Cardinal Zen who has led protests against policies that would for example diminish church control over its Catholic schools. The effect of government attempts to subsume the various religious communities under a politically constructed civic framework is to divide religious communities from one another when they perceive different costs and benefits from cooperation with the government. This may indeed be the intention of the Hong Kong government.

Urbanized Asian societies thus provide fertile soil for the growth of ecumenism as well as some potential for sectarian religious conflict. Whether the more ecumenical or more conflictual

tendencies will predominate is largely dependent on religious and political leadership. Catholic Church leadership takes its cues from the Vatican, of course. But even though Pope Benedict XVI was somewhat cooler than his immediate predecessors about ecumenism, Asian Catholic leaders have remained ecumenically active. Now, Pope Francis brings with him a reputation from Argentina for being relatively open about inter-faith dialogue, and one might predict a continuation, even a deepening of such tendencies in Taiwan and Hong Kong-Macau. Uncertainty comes from the role that may be played by the governments of Hong Kong and Macau, which combine external promises to maintain civic freedoms with a tendency to suppress religious as well as political pluralism through subtle suppression and the divide and rule tactics that they like to use on the Mainland.

Conclusion and Prognosis for Mainland China

The context of urban Chinese Catholic societies on the periphery of Greater China bears some similarities to the context that pushed liberal Chinese Protestant Christians in the early 20th century to undertake inter-religious dialogue and ecumenical cooperation. For Catholics in Taiwan and Hong Kong-Macau there are now greater possibilities for theological speculation and greater opportunities to learn from traditional Chinese religious culture. There is a need to band together with other people of faith against the materialism and social injustices of a globalized capitalist economy. There is the need for people uprooted from older forms of religious community to find new affiliations. There is enough of an analogy to suggest that there will be movement within some portion of the Catholic Church toward similar forms of theological and pastoral

ecumenism – and to predict counter-reactions similar to earlier fundamentalist reactions to liberal Protestantism.

But the analogies to the earlier period are only partial. Catholics are still more constrained by a centralized doctrinal discipline. Meanwhile the global Catholic Church is facing internal struggles that keep it on the defensive and push many Catholics to turn inward. Finally, the pressures of an uncertain political context sometimes produce more division than cooperation. Nonetheless we can predict modest moves forward in Chinese Catholic ecumenism in Taiwan and Hong Kong-Macau.

Will the more open posture of Catholics on the periphery of Greater China transform the ways that Catholics on the Mainland live their faith? This partly depends on large geopolitical factors that cannot be predicted. It is entirely possible that the Mainland could transform Hong Kong-Macau and Taiwan rather than vice versa. But even if the religious atmosphere of these peripheral societies does influence the Mainland, the process will be slow. Much of the Chinese Catholic church is still embedded in local rural communities for whom their faith is a marker of an exclusive identity. Even in the big cities like Shanghai, old Catholic communities consist of something like urban villages that take some pride in staying aloof from the larger society.¹⁴ Such sociological conditions will change gradually and for now they are still inhibited by a government that prefers to keep Catholics divided and isolated.

¹⁴ The sociological composition of the "old Catholics" of Shanghai and the legacy of persecution from the 1950s is detailed in Paul P. Mariani, *Church Militant: Bishop Kung and Catholic Resistance in Communist Shanghai* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), pp. 172; 206-227.

[摘要]二十世紀初期，在豁達的基督新教徒間中國是一個重要的現代大公主義及跨宗教對話的誕生地。但由於教宗庇護十世對現代主義的譴責，中國天主教神學仍維持在反現代主義及梵二會議前的立場。在共產主義管治下，官方及非官方(或地下)天主教會，兩者的分野加重以致元氣大傷，令教會無法更有建設性地伸展到其他社群。而在內地嚴格管制下，信眾很難獲得最新的大公神學理論。在中國內地，天主教在鄉郊地區比較流行。宗教在這些地方有標籤身份的作用，以致對其他社群抱持不開放態度。香港、澳門及台灣有重要的天主教倡動者，包括利氏學社及香港天主教正義和平委員會。他們聯同來自其他宗教的活動家推動社會公義，但也有其他在中國的天主教徒對這些倡動者有激烈抗議的情緒。社會變遷令人對不同層次的大公及跨宗教新的思想更開放。台灣、香港及澳門都是以城市為主的社會，有流動性的中層階級。不同信仰的人士經一起工作及互相學習，也結交為朋友或結成夫婦。這類接觸經常啟發人們互相學習。在台灣、香港及澳門的天主教徒有較大機會作神學的探究及學習中國傳統宗教文化。現時難以估計中國內地與其他中華地區之間的相互影響能去到什麼境界。