Christoph Gottlieb von Murr, *Twenty-eight Letters on the Abolition of the Jesuit Order* (1774)

Abstract

Protestant publisher Christoph Gottlieb von Murr (1733–1811) highlights the scientific achievements of Jesuits from the Society of Jesus and defends them against attacks stemming from the Chinese Rites Controversy. This controversy, which lasted from 1610 to 1744, was a dispute between Jesuit missionaries in Asia (mainly China, Japan, and India), other orders, and the Roman Catholic Church itself. Since the beginning of the seventeenth century, Jesuit missionaries had favored the method of "accommodation," whereby newly converted Chinese Christians were allowed to retain their traditional rites and practices, such as ancestor worship and Confucianism. When the Dominicans and Franciscans arrived in Asia, they criticized the Jesuit missionaries for their lax approach to Catholicism and called for a ban on Chinese rites. In 1704, Pope Clement XI responded by prohibiting Chinese rites. Catholicism eventually declined in China and was forbidden by the emperor.

In this excerpt, Murr points to the Jesuits' contributions to astronomy, mathematics, and sinology, and names some central figures in the Jesuit mission to Asia, such as Francis Xavier, Matteo Ricci, Michael Ruggieri, and Johann Adam Schall. With their scientific talents and their scholarly work at the Imperial court, the Jesuits contributed mightily both to the history of science and to diplomatic relations between China and Europe.

Source

Fourteenth Letter.

The fiercest and most unreasonable enemies of the order will never be able to deny the great achievements of the missionaries in *China* [*Sina*] for Christianity and for the sciences, and all friends of higher mathematics must be infinitely grateful to the Jesuits. We have them, and them alone, to thank for knowledge of the greatest and oldest empire on our earth.

Francis Xavier was just about to have himself brought to Canton [Guangzhuo] when he gave up the ghost [i.e. died] in 1552. The Fathers *Matteo Ricci* and *Michael Ruggieri* were the first to be so happy to be able to build a house and church for themselves in Zhaoqing in 1583. Both went together with Father Diego de Pontoja to Beijing at the beginning of 1601. By 1610, when Father Ricci died, five churches had already been built. He became very popular because of his mathematical knowledge, both with the people, who had fiercely persecuted him in the beginning at Guangdong, and with the emperor and the Mandarins; he left behind various folios printed in Chinese which were sent to *Rome*. *Johann Adam Schall*, along with *Jacob* [Giacomo] *Rho*, began to improve the Chinese calendar[1] and earned endless credit for spreading the Christian religion. He produced a Chinese elucidation of splendidly portrayed images of our Savior's life that the Duke of Bavaria, *Maximillian*, had delivered to him by *V. Nikolaus Trigault*, and presented it to the Chinese monarch. He composed more than 140 Chinese works; of which fourteen quartos are preserved in the Vatican book collection. One can only be astonished by the number of Chinese works published by the missionaries *Giulio Aleni, Lazzaro Cattaneo, Martino Martini, Niccolò*

Longobardo, Rodrigo de Figueiredo, Sabbatino de Ursis, and Ferdinand Verbiest, among others.

All the cathedral canons, all the other types of canons, and the Franciscans combined have written fewer useful books in Latin than the Jesuits have in Chinese—and in the most difficult sciences at that. The Emperor *Kangxi* showed the Jesuits the greatest favor that could be desired. In 1678 he was not satisfied with making *Father Verbiest* president of the mathematics college in Beijing, which is an Imperial tribunal; he also had a patent of nobility issued for him and even for the parents and grandparents of this learned monk. For in *China*, it is customary to extend nobility to an individual's ancestors (only the descendants of *Kong fu Tse* [Confucius] have inherited nobility), about which I have written in greater detail in another publication. Of course, *Verbiest* submitted a petition to the emperor, seeking to refuse any position of honor that would elevate him to the high rank of Imperial Mandarin (the same honor already granted previously to *Father Johann Adam Schall*). However, the emperor held firm to his decision not only to reward achievements but also to make them resplendent. The emperor had Verbiest instruct him in all the mathematical sciences, even algebra, as [Gottfried Wilhelm] Leibniz affirmed when he wrote to *Johann Bernoulli* in 1707: *Ante aliquot dies locutus sum cum missionario ex China reduce, qui medicum illic utcumque egit.* [A few days ago, I spoke with a missionary returned from China, who practiced medicine there in some fashion.] (It was Father [Nicola Agostino] *Cima*, an Augustine, who spoke with him at *Hildesheim*. [Christian] Kortholt, Vol. I, p. 390.) *Is mihi, inter alia, dixit, Imperatorem sinensem etiam Algebrae rudimenta a Patre Verbiestio didicisse, eaque re fuisse inprimus delectatum* [He told me, among other things, that the Chinese emperor had learned the basics of algebra from Father Verbiestius, and that he had taken a particular delight in that subject]."

In the book listed below, I provided an extensive report, on the occasion of the Portuguese diplomatic mission to China in 1727, about how the missionaries in *China* were also useful to the *European* monarchs.

In our time, Father [Ferdinand Augustin] *Hallerstein* made outstanding contributions in astronomy and became popular under the present Emperor *Qianlong* at the court in *Beijing*, as did several others, in other sciences and arts, for example, *Fathers* [*Jean-*]*Damascèn*[*e Sallusti*], [*Jean Denis*] *Attiret,* [*Giuseppe*] *Castiglione,* [*Ignaz*] *Sickelbarth,* [*François*] *Bourgeois*, among others. From the latter we only very recently have the following: *Lettre au P. Ancemot, contenant la relation de son voyage à la Chine* [Letter to Father (Jean) Ancemot, containing the account of his voyage to China], 1767.[2] What will these missionaries say about the suppression brief? They will set it aside with contempt. And who will publish it for them in *Beijing*?

In addition to the well-known work of [Jean-Baptiste] *du Halde* and the *Lettres édificantes*, the following special works, which are almost completely unknown to us Protestants, address the Chinese mission:

Historica narratio, de ignition & progressu missionis Societatis Jesu apud Sinenses [Historical Account of the Beginning and Progress of the Jesuit Mission among the Chinese]. Vienna, Austria, 1665, 8. Compiled from the letters of Father *Schall*.

Nic[olas] Trigault, *De christiana expeditione apud Sinas suscepta a Societate Jesu* [On the Christian Expedition among the Chinese Undertaken by the Society of Jesus]. Vol. V. Augsburg, 1615, 4; Trigault, Cologne, 1617, 8; *French*, 1616, 8; *Spanish*, 1621, 4.

Martino Martini, *Brevis relatio de numero & qualitate Christanorum apud Sinas* [Brief Report on the Number and Quality of Christians among the Chinese]. Rome, 1654, 4.

Traitez [sic – Traité] *sur quelque Points importants de la mission de la Chine* [Treatises on Several Important Points

regarding the Chinese Mission]. Paris, 1701. 12. One treatise is by *Father Nicolao Leonardi* [Nicolò Longobardi], the other by the Franciscan *Antoine de Sainte Marie* [Antonio Caballero de Santa Maria], which he wrote to the Jesuit *Luis de Gama* in 1668 from *Guandong* (Canton). *Leibniz* made several notes on the subject, which *Kortholt* had published in the second volume of his letters with the text itself and with the last work of this great man, *Lettre sur la Philosophie Chinoise à Mr. de* [Pierre] *Rémond* [de Montmort]. His *Novissima Sinica* [The Latest about China] and Father [Joachim] *Bouvet's Con* [sic – Icon] *regia Monarchae Sinarum nunc regnatis ex Gallico versa* [Portrait of the Current Emperor of China, translated from the French] also belong here. Leibnitz published this work in 1699 and accompanied it with a preface that is unknown even to the editor of these works, Mr. *Dütens*.

Postscript

One more thing about what I told you in my previous letter about Scioppius [Caspar Schoppe]. I find that, in a German work from 1616 that he published under a pseudonym,[3] he defends the Jesuits *Christoph Rosenbusch* and *Martin Becanus*, and on page 42, among other things, he calls their organization an excellent Society of Jesus of great merit to the church of God. In another work, entitled *Lermen blasen* [To Sound the Alarm], which was published that same year in Dielingen, he defended, on page 14 and the following pages, these very same fathers, as well as *Adam Conzen*. One can see, then, that his anti-Jesuit works published after 1630 were based on personal hatred.

NOTES

[1] I am writing *China* [*Sina*] throughout, in keeping with the correct pronunciation. For we have our *China* from the Portuguese, who pronounce it *Tschina*. The French even say *Schina*, and the Welsh *Kina*.
[2] *Lettres édifiantes*, Vol. 29, Paris, 1773, p. 12. In the same book, in an excerpt from a strange letter by Father [Giovanni] *Laureati*, from *Fuqing*, 1714, one can also read an unpleasant message for tea drinkers. In China there are a number of tea houses (*Tschaqwan-tse* [*Chaguan*]), which are plentiful in all populous cities. In such a teahouse the tea intended for us sweet-toothed Europeans is often boiled two or three times, then dried again, and sold to us at a high price. The Chinese could justifiably call out to us: Oh, European naiveté!
[3] Mr. *Christoff von Ungersdorf, Erinnerung von der Calvinisten falschen, betrüglichen Art und Feinseligkeit gegen dem heiligen römischen Reich. Item. Wiederholung der katholischen Scribenten, sonderlich der Herren Jesuiter Lehr und Meynung vom Religionsfrieden*. Mainz, 1616, p. 4.

Source: Christoph Gottlieb von Murr, *Eines Protestanten, Herrn Christoph Gottlieb von Murr, der Reichsstadt Nürnberg Zollamtmanns, und Mitglieds des königlichen historischen Instituts zu Göttingen, und der naturforschenden Gesellschaft in Berlin* [*et*]*c. Acht und zwanzig Briefe über die Aufhebung des Jesuiterordens*. [S.l.] 1774, pp. 64–72. Available online at: http://mdz-nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:bvb:12-bsb10568809-6

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