

# The Rites Controversies in the Early Modern World

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# Contents

Acknowledgments	XI
List of Maps and Figures	XII
List of Frequently Used Abbreviations	XIII
List of Contributors	XIV
Maps	XIX

<b>The Rites Controversies in the Early Modern World: An Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<i>Ines G. Županov and Pierre Antoine Fabre</i>	

## PART 1

### *Chinese Rites and Jesuit Missions*

<b>1 Chinese Voices in the Rites Controversy: From China to Rome</b>	<b>29</b>
<i>Ronnie Po-chia Hsia</i>	
<b>2 Chinese Voices in the Rites Controversy: The Role of Christian Communities</b>	<b>50</b>
<i>Nicolas Standaert</i>	
<b>3 Atheism: A Word Travelling To and Fro Between Europe and China</b>	<b>68</b>
<i>Michela Catto</i>	

## PART 2

### *Malabar Rites between Mission and History*

<b>4 Śivadharma or Bonifacio? Behind the Scenes of the Madurai Mission Controversy (1608–1619)</b>	<b>91</b>
<i>Margherita Trento</i>	
<b>5 Revisiting the Malabar Rites Controversy: A Paradigm of Ritual Dynamics in the Early Modern Catholic Missions of South India</b>	<b>122</b>
<i>Gita Dharampal-Frick</i>	

## PART 3

*Mission and Inquisition*

- 6 Rites and Inquisition: Ethnographies of Error in Portuguese India  
(1560–1625) 145  
*Giuseppe Marcocci*
- 7 Jesuits and Oriental Rites in the Documents of the Roman  
Inquisition 165  
*Sabina Pavone*

## PART 4

*Rites Controversies: Far and Near*

- 8 Accommodationist Strategies on the Malabar Coast: Competition or  
Complementarity? 191  
*István Perczel*
- 9 Orthodoxy and Politics: The Patriarch Nikon of Moscow, the  
Prince Mihnea III Radu of Walachia and the Great Church of  
Constantinople 233  
*Ovidiu Olar*

## PART 5

*Idols, Idolatry and Catholic Mission*

- 10 Writing Rites in the Borderlands: Appropriation, Mimesis and  
Interaction between Jesuits and Indians in Colonial South  
America 267  
*Guillermo Wilde*
- 11 Secularizing the Andes: The Effects of Transcultural Processes on  
Colonial Andean Rituals 301  
*Claudia Brosseder*

- 12 *Dios, Dio, Viracocha, Tianzhu: “Finding” and “Translating” the Christian God in the Overseas Jesuit Missions (16th–18th Centuries)* 322  
*Ana Carolina Hosne*

## EPILOGUES

### *Rites Controversies as Cultural Resources*

- 13 *A Cross Concealed Among Flowers: Interpreting a Secret Ritual in Seventeenth Century Chinese Christian Communities* 345  
*Pierre Antoine Fabre*
- 14 *Against Rites: Jesuit Accommodatio as Pietist Preparatio Evangelica in Eighteenth Century South India* 364  
*Ines G. Županov*
- Index 397

## Atheism: A Word Travelling To and Fro Between Europe and China

*Michela Catto*

The issue of Chinese atheism surfaced early in the Chinese rites controversy: in the discussions and conflicts about the translation of the name of God, and over the value or significance to be assigned to the veneration of ancestors and of Confucius. The atheism of Confucian scholars—whether enabling or hampering the conversion of China—was used to establish the inner intent of the Chinese rites.<sup>1</sup> Were they social and political, corresponding to the atheistic nature of the Chinese government, or were they religious, and therefore idolatrous and superstitious? And how could they be idolatrous and superstitious when they were practiced by atheists? The question was how to draw the line, in China's case, between *fides* and *mores*.<sup>2</sup> A lengthy debate officially took place at a theological or polemical level, with pamphlets, brochures, treatises and accusations exchanged between the Jesuits and the other religious orders that moved into China. At the same time, the debate permeated the cultural foundations of modern Europe and helped shape the Enlightenment concept of atheism.<sup>3</sup>

1 Pierre-Antoine Fabre, "Pour une histoire spirituelle des savoirs dans l'espace du monde moderne. Esquisse d'un point de vue," in *Missions d'évangélisation et circulation des savoirs. XVI<sup>e</sup>–XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, ed. Ch. de Castelnau-L'Estoile, M.L. Copete, A. Maldavsky and Ines G. Županov (Madrid: Casa de Velázquez, 2011), 445–458, 455.

2 On the Society of Jesus' role in defining this relationship, see Paul Nelles, "Du savant au missionnaire: la doctrine, les mœurs et l'écriture de l'histoire chez les jésuites," *XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle* 59/4 (2007): 667–689.

3 See Sergio Zoli, *Europa libertina tra Controriforma e Illuminismo. L'«Oriente» dei libertini e le origini dell'Illuminismo. Studi e ricerche* (Bologna: Cappelli editore, 1989); Virgile Pinot, *La Chine et la formation de l'esprit philosophique en France (1640–1740)* (Paris: Librairie Orientaliste Paul Geuthner, 1932). See also David E. Mungello, "Confucianism in the Enlightenment: Antagonism and Collaboration between the Jesuits and the Philosophers," in *China and Europe: Images and Influences in Sixteenth to Eighteenth Centuries*, ed. Thomas H.C. Lee (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1991), 99–127; Walter W. Davis, "China, the Confucian Ideal and the European Age of the Enlightenment," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 44/4 (1983):

China came to represent atheism, at least for some, and, according to Voltaire, became synonymous with an atheist country.<sup>4</sup> In the additions to the 1761 edition of *The Age of Louis XIV*, Voltaire scoffs at the plainly logical contradiction of the French Rigorists “who had blamed [Pierre Bayle] so much for saying that a society of atheists could subsist, who had written so much that such an establishment is impossible,” before he himself claimed “that same establishment prospered in China under wiser governments” ruled by Confucian morality.<sup>5</sup>

The question of atheism among the Confucian Chinese and in the Chinese government was officially raised by Charles Maigrot (1652–1730), the apostolic vicar of Fujian and a member of the *Missions Étrangères* of Paris. In 1693, while in China, he issued the most powerful condemnation of the method of Jesuit accommodatio, which until then had been practiced in order to evangelize the country, albeit subject to a great deal of discussion among religious orders. Going well beyond any papal decree, Maigrot’s *Edictum seu Mandatum* had indicted the entire Chinese culture and the whole “*systema Patrum Societatis Iesu*.”<sup>6</sup> Rites and ceremonies, the translation of the name of God, and any use and interpretation of Chinese culture were considered sources of superstition, idolatry and atheism.

The apostolic vicar not only condemned the concessions concerning rites, but for the first time during the Chinese rites controversy, declared that it was impossible to claim that Chinese philosophy, even if correctly understood (*si bene intelligatur*), could be consistent with Christian law. With this statement he threatened to ban all the writings of Matteo Ricci—who was accused of

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523–548; J.A.G. Roberts, “L’image de la Chine dans l’Encyclopédie,” *Recherches sur Diderot et sur l’Encyclopédie* 22 (1997): 87–108.

- 4 Voltaire, *Dictionnaire philosophique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), 83: “Let us say a word on the moral question set in action by Bayle, to know ‘if a society of atheists could exist?’ Let us mark first of all in this matter what is the enormous contradiction of men in this dispute; those who have risen against Bayle’s opinion with the greatest ardor; those who have denied with the greatest insults the possibility of a society of atheists, have since maintained with the same intrepidity that atheism is the religion of the government of China. Assuredly they are quite mistaken about the Chinese government; they had but to read the edicts of the emperor of this vast country to have seen that these edicts are sermons, and that everywhere there is mentioned of the Supreme Being, ruler, revenger, rewarder.”
- 5 Voltaire, *Le Siècle de Louis XIV*, ed. Jacqueline Hellegouarc’h and Sylvain Menant (Paris: Librairie Générale de France, 2005), 1117.
- 6 Claudia von Collani, “Charles Maigrot’s Role in the Chinese Rites Controversy,” in *The Chinese Rites Controversy. Its History and Meaning*, ed. David E. Mungello (Nettetal: Steyler Verlag, 1994), 149–183.

inventing a new religion in China and of opening the door to atheism and superstition—and more generally to put an end to the Jesuit method of adaptation. For the first time, not only was the practice of rituals condemned, but ancient China, Confucian morality and the “exemplary” value of Chinese civilization were reassessed.

In the *Historia cultus Sinensium* Charles Maigrot quoted a long list of Jesuit authors in order to prove Chinese atheism.<sup>7</sup> The same list, expanded to include new publications, was added as an appendix to *Entretien d'un philosophe Chrétien et d'un philosophe chinois sur l'existence et la nature de Dieu* by Nicolas Malebranche (1708).<sup>8</sup> The propaganda of the *Missions Etrangères* in China went so far that, in addition to using Jesuit treatises and that of the French philosopher, it also included the insertion of an *Avis (Advice)* in a book without its author's consent.<sup>9</sup> This is also one of the many examples of the type of knowledge produced and circulated by the missionaries and of their role in shaping public opinion.<sup>10</sup>

The missionary narrative about China triggered a rediscovery of the “Far East,” an event “designed to react decisively” with the modern European, “with all his life, his culture, his awareness of himself and of his destiny.”<sup>11</sup> The dia-

7 *Historia cultus sinensium seu varia scripta* (Coloniae, 1700), 356–357.

8 See “Témoignages de plusieurs Jésuites touchant l'Athéisme des Chinois,” in Malebranche, *Entretien d'un philosophe chrétien et d'un philosophe chinois*, ed. André Robinet. Vol. 15 of *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Librairie J. Vrin, 1986), 57–59. The long list ran from Matteo Ricci to Louis Le Comte and his *Mémoires sur l'état présent de la Chine* (published in 1696 and condemned by the Sorbonne in 1700), by way of Niccolò Longobardo, Martino Martini, Alvarez Semedo, Le Gobien and his *Histoire de l'édit de l'empereur de la Chine en faveur de la religion chrétienne avec un éclaircissement sur les honneurs que les Chinois rendent à Confucius et aux morts* (1698 and condemned by the Sorbonne as well) and Jacques Le Favre and his *De Sinensium ritibus politicis acta*.

9 Malebranche apparently asked the publisher to omit the *Avis* in the next edition: see Malebranche, *Entretien d'un philosophe chrétien et d'un philosophe chinois*, xviii. Malebranche had been driven to write the *Entretien* by Artus de Lionne (1655–1713), the bishop of Rosalia, a stark opponent of the Jesuit position on Chinese rites, who in 1702 had come back to Paris from China where he had spent thirteen years of his life. About de Lionne see David E. Mungello, “Malebranche and Chinese Philosophy,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 41/4 (1980): 551–578.

10 On the circulation of knowledge, see Antonella Romano, “Classiques du Nouveau Monde: Mexico, les jésuites et les humanités à la fin du XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle,” in *Missions d'évangélisation et circulation des savoirs*, 59–85.

11 Eugenio Garin, “Alla scoperta del ‘diverso’: i selvaggi americani e i saggi cinesi,” in Eugenio Garin, *Rinascite e rivoluzioni: Movimenti culturali dal XIV al XVIII secolo* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 1975), 327–362, 331–332.

logue between the missionaries' stories and European culture had been intense and continuous, although not always obvious or stated.<sup>12</sup> The news from China started a revolution in the thought and belief system of Europe, and caused changes so radical as to bring into question the value of the doctrine of original sin or the meaning of revelation for humanity. The meaning of the word "atheism" itself, while travelling to and fro between Europe and China, underwent deep transformations: at first the concept was used to support the possibility of a dialogue with the Confucian mandarins, then to deny any form of honest cooperation between Christianity and Confucianism. In many respects this change was influenced by the debate that developed in Europe, based in large part on missionary accounts. Whereas for the missionaries in China the concept of atheism was used to annul the attribution of rites as superstitious and idolatrous, for the people living in Europe atheism by definition lacked morality, was evil and perfidious, and its representatives were to be absolutely excluded from social and political life.

### The Word "Atheism" Between China and Europe

Among the ideas from China that aroused much debate in Europe, I will address here the presumed Chinese atheism. From the beginning of the mission, the content and the meaning of this attribution were different for Matteo Ricci and for his successor, Niccolò Longobardo. The word atheism, used by the early Jesuits to describe Chinese Confucianism, had an astonishing range of meanings. It was halfway between the political atheism which in Europe defined the doctrines of Machiavelli and later of his "disciple," Jean Bodin,<sup>13</sup> and the atheism as used in Roman culture to describe the Jews and later the Christians, who as heirs of the Jewish tradition wanted to distinguish themselves in habits and

12 About the non-explicit presence of Jesuit writings on Bayle's work, see Gianfranco Cantelli, *Teologia e ateismo: Saggio sul pensiero filosofico e religioso di Pierre Bayle* (Firenze: La Nuova Italia, 1969), 161–163.

13 On the literature against Machiavelli which was to be produced from 1589 onwards, Robert Bireley, *The Counter-Reformation Prince: Anti-Machiavellianism or Catholic Statecraft in Early Modern Europe* (Chapel Hill, NC; London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1990) and Michel Sénellart, *Machiavélisme et raison d'Etat: XII<sup>e</sup>–XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris: PUF, 1989). See, for the *longue durée*, Christiane Frémont, "Le machiavélisme et l'antimachiavélisme confondus par l'athéisme: Critique de la doctrine du pouvoir chez d'Holbach," *Problèmes d'histoire des religions* 8 (1997): 55–69.



customs as a separate community.<sup>14</sup> In Roman times, the word did not convey an “outrage” or a denial of God. It was linked to the political use of religion and did not imply a negative view of the atheist or of his morality. The European Wars of Religion in the sixteenth century fostered the image of the atheist as unreliable both socially and politically, the state’s worst foe, whose lack of a faith rendered him unable to respect the covenants, since he was not bound by an oath to a deity. Atheism was therefore incompatible with society.<sup>15</sup>

Matteo Ricci, who had arrived in China in 1578, instead deemed the Confucian atheists ideal interlocutors, whose moral and ethical values held in common with Christianity had somehow survived thanks to “natural light.” As we shall see, Longobardo disagreed and thought that speculative atheism, supported by natural law theory, was a positive atheism and that Christianity should be wary of its pitfalls. Pierre Bayle used the two Jesuit interpretations and juxtaposed them in his *Dictionnaire historique et critique* in order to highlight their irreconcilable contradictions. In a lengthy quotation, the Calvinist Bayle underscored the total confusion in the missionary reports about Chinese Confucianism.

“The most able missionaries of China, some of whom are of your Society, maintain that the greatest part of literati there are atheist and that they are idolatrous only through dissimulation and hypocrisy, like many of the pagan Philosophers who adored the same idols as the common people, tho’ they did not believe in any of them, as may be seen in Cicero and Seneca.” Like the ancient pagans, “these literati do not believe anything to be spiritual and that the King above, which your Matthew Ricci took for the true God, is nothing but the material Heaven; and that what they call the spirits of the earth, rivers, and mountains are nothing but the active virtues of those natural bodies.” Some, like Ricci, “say that they fell into this Atheism some age ago, by having suffered the great discoveries of their Philosopher Confucius to be lost,” but others “who have studied these matters with greater care, as your Father Longobardi, maintain that this Philosopher said many fine things about morality and politics, but, as to the true god and his law, he was as blind as the rest.”<sup>16</sup>

14 Adolf von Harnack, *Mission et expansion du christianisme dans les trois premiers siècles* (Paris: Cerf, 2004), 342–351, 342–43 (German ed. 1924). See also Jan N. Bremmer, “Atheism in Antiquity,” in *The Cambridge Companion of Atheism*, ed. Michael Martin (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 11–26.

15 See Vittorio Frajese, *Le categorie della Controriforma: Politica e religione nell'Italia della prima età moderna* (Roma: Bulzoni, 2011), 299–308.

16 Pierre Bayle, “Maldonat,” in *Dictionnaire historique et critique*, vol. 3 (Amsterdam: J. Wetstein et G. Smith, 1740), 296, (5a ed.). English version in Pierre Bayle, *The Dictionary Historical and Critical*, vol. 4 (London, 1737), 81.

Shortly before its re-definition in the European context, the word atheism was sent to China still without a very negative meaning. It would return to Europe, together with the myth of China, to fuel discussions about atheism in a completely changed cultural context. The word was ready to join the great debate on the relationship between morality and religion, started by the publication of Pierre Bayle's *Pensées diverses sur la comète* (1682) and kindled by his *Continuation des Pensées diverses* (1704), concerning the existence of morality without any religious belief or faith.

The term atheism, used by the first missionaries to describe Confucianism, and more generally China's religious system, entered and fed the European debates, and at the same time influenced the attitude of the Jesuits. They were the first to claim the existence of Chinese atheism, and to object when the term was enriched with new considerations in the European context,<sup>17</sup> including the dangerous connection between Chinese philosophy and the theories of Baruch Spinoza,<sup>18</sup> an atheist by definition, and of those materialistic Europeans "who follow a system which looks very much like the one of the new Chinese commentators."<sup>19</sup>

In his *Lettre sur le monothéisme des Chinois* of 1728 (only published in 1861) the Jesuit Prémare wrote that Chinese atheism was but a chimera and tried to show that modern Chinese had "the same notion of Divinity, as the Christians," and that their physical system of matter and nature had nothing to do with Spinoza's impieties, contrary to what "two or three Europeans" maintained. Pémare wanted to dispel any suspicion of atheism surrounding ancient and modern Confucians, because "I shall never believe that the Church cannot approve that European libertines be deprived of the biggest pretext for condoning their *credulité* and their depravations, that atheism cannot be a detestable monster since the most ancient and wise nation that there is in the world makes a public profession of atheism."<sup>20</sup> By then the definition of

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- 17 See for instance Jean-Baptiste Du Halde's position in Isabelle Landry Deron, *La preuve par la Chine: La 'Description' de J.-B. Du Halde, jésuite, 1735* (Paris: Editions de l'EHESS, 2002), 337–348 and more generally on the Jesuits of the *Mémoires de Trévoux* dismantling the concept of the existence of an atheist people, Sergio Landucci, *I filosofi e i selvaggi* (Laterza: Roma-Bari, 1972), 198–207, 227.
  - 18 See on this subject Yuen-Ting Lai, "The Linking of Spinoza to Chinese Thought by Bayle and Malebranche," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 23/2 (1985): 151–178 and Weststeijn Thijs, "Spinoza sinicus: An Asian Paragraph in the History of the Radical Enlightenment," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 68/4 (2007): 537–561.
  - 19 Jean-Baptiste de Boyer, marquis d'Argens, *Lettres chinoises*, ed. Jacques Marx, vol. 1 (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2009), 266, Letter 14.
  - 20 *Lettre inédite du P. Prémare sur le monothéisme des Chinois*, ed. G. Pauthier (Paris: Benjamin Duprat, 1861), 5–6. About the figurist's position on Confucian texts see Knud Lundbaek,

Confucianism as atheism was a matter that did not strictly pertain to the question of the Chinese rites, their authorization or prohibition, but referred to a European context and to criticisms of religions as the origin of fanaticism and backwardness. The main source of this debate was China, whose real or presumed atheism could undermine the foundation of European religion and society. The debate was not always linear: Enlightenment thinkers, libertines and Jesuits (or at least most of them) seemed to share interpretations and ideas and still occasionally find themselves on opposite sides. The Society of Jesus was always in the middle because its missionaries were precisely those who had contradicted themselves about Chinese atheism.

### Confucianism as an Expression of Political Atheism: From Matteo Ricci to *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus*

Matteo Ricci's part in the development of Jesuit missions in China needs no emphasis.<sup>21</sup> The Macerata-born Jesuit shaped the "Chinese" model for proselytising pursued by the Jesuits in China throughout the early modern period and after the rehabilitation of the Chinese rites in 1939. Of interest here is his articulate description of Chinese religions, the first made for European audiences, in his controversial *Della entrata della Compagnia di Giesù e Christianità nella Cina* (a diary), published posthumously in 1615 in a Latin translation much altered by his fellow Jesuit, Nicolas Trigault, who renamed it *De Christiana Expeditione apud Sinas suscepta ab Societate Iesu*. Ricci's book came at a crucial moment for several reasons. First of all, the definition of religion in China had already been made when Ricci, with the help of his friends and Confucian scholars in the context of reflection on Confucianism in China, decided to drop the Buddhist robe for the Confucian habit. Secondly, at the time Chinese religions were being defined for the Europeans and were taking on an identity of their own within the patterns of Western culture and history. Such an identity is the archetype of Ricci's construction, an identity which came about through debate and by comparison between Chinese culture and the European pagan

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"Joseph de Prémare and the Name of God in China," in *The Chinese Rites Controversy*, 129–145.

21 For the bibliography, see Ronnie Po-chia Hsia's recent studies, *A Jesuit in the Forbidden City: Matteo Ricci 1552–1610* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) and Mary Laven, *Mission to China: Matteo Ricci and the Jesuit Encounter with the East* (London: Faber & Faber, 2011).

world in which ancient Christianity had been born and in which it had finally triumphed.

The Pauline and apostolic view<sup>22</sup> of history that accompanied the Jesuits in China, and more generally, their missionary experience,<sup>23</sup> together with the apparent analogies between Chinese history and the history of pagan Europe, could only inspire confidence in the outcome of the mission. Therefore Ricci described Chinese religions using Chinese books, assisted in their interpretation by Chinese scholars, and retranslated the result in a language that could be understood by Europeans. When he used one word here and a different one there, he chose an interpretation which, as in any translation, was not merely linguistic.

In *Della entrata della Compagnia di Giesù nella Cina* (chapter x. *Di varie sette che nella Cina sono intorno alla Religione*),<sup>24</sup> there is a clear desire to portray the Chinese favourably, as the closest to Christianity now and in the past.<sup>25</sup> “Romans, Greeks and Egyptians,” wrote St. Augustine in *The City of God*,

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- 22 On the identity of the first Society see Guido Mongini, “*Ad Christi similitudinem*”: Ignazio di Loyola e i primi gesuiti tra eresia e ortodossia (Alessandria: edizioni dell’Orso, 2011), 7–21.
- 23 On the persisting apocalyptic myth in the Jesuit tradition, see Marjorie Reeves’ interesting considerations in *The Influence of Prophecy in the Later Middle Ages: A Study in Joachimism* (Notre Dame, IN; London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993), 274–290 (orig. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969) and *Joachim of Fiore and the Prophetic Future: A Medieval Study in Historical Thinking* (Stroud, UK: Sutton Publishing, 1999), 116–135 (orig. London, 1976). On prophetism in the New World see Adriano Prosperi, “Attese millenaristiche e scoperta del Nuovo Mondo,” in *Il profetismo gioachimita tra Quattrocento e Cinquecento*. Atti del III congresso internazionale di studi gioachimiti, ed. Gian Luca Potestà (Genova: Marietti, 1991), 433–460, 454.
- 24 Matteo Ricci, *Della entrata della Compagnia di Giesù e Christianità nella Cina*, ed. Maddalena Del Gatto (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2000), 90–106. Recent studies have questioned the authenticity of this text, and attributed it to Niccolò Longobardo himself: see Gaetano Ricciardolo, *Oriente e Occidente negli scritti di Matteo Ricci* (Napoli: Chirico, 2003), 176.
- 25 On this point and more or less in the same period, José de Acosta (ca. 1540–1600), the Spanish Jesuit missionary in Peru and Mexico, is quite explicit. In *De promulgando evangelio apud barbaros sive de procuranda Indorum salute* he classifies the new people in a pyramidal structure on top of which are people who do not depart excessively from sound reason and human common sense: “[T]hose who have a stable government, public laws, respected magistrates and, most important of all, a use and knowledge of letters, since everywhere there are books and written monuments, people are more human and political.” I used the edition published in Lyon by Laurentii Anisson, 1670, a4r-v. See Joan-Pau Rubiés, “Theology, Ethnography, and the Historicization of Idolatry,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 67/4 (2006): 571–596 and Girolamo Imbruglia, “The Invention of Savage

“we Christians consider them superior to the others since they agree with us on the doctrine of one God, author of the universe, not only immaterial because He transcends all material beings but also because He transcends all indestructible souls, our beginning, our light, our goodness.”<sup>26</sup> In relation to ancient Confucianism, Ricci seems to use Augustine’s words and to broaden their scope: Chinese philosophers are superior to the pagan philosophers, they never “believed such filthy things as our Romans, the Greeks, the Egyptians and other strange nations believed.” Ricci even writes that “of all the civilities our Europe has heard about, I know of none that had fewer errors concerning religious things than China in its early antiquity.” Evidence of such faultless ways, he continues, is their belief in a “supreme deity they call the King of Heaven, or of Heaven and Earth.”

In Ricci’s description, Buddhism and Taoism are religions of a superstitious and idolatrous nature, while Confucianism becomes the religious “law” that Christianity can address. It is not just a tactic, not just the idea of conquering the elite first. According to Ricci, Confucianism is the ancient law that rules China; it is valued, it has books and no idols. This positive view leads him to believe that many ancient Chinese are saved “in the natural law.” Confucianism, more importantly, has some elements that bring it closer to Christianity. In ancient times, Confucians believed in “Divine Punishment,” in the “rewards to be given to the bad and the good,” and in the immortality of the soul. Even the rites performed for ancestors and Confucian rites, not all of which Ricci considers religious, bring the Chinese closer to the Christians: they are practiced more for the living than for the dead, they satisfy the need to respect the hierarchy—the weak defer to the powerful, the children to their fathers, the wives to their husbands. “Honor your father and mother” is true both for Chinese Confucianism and Christianity.

These cults are neither idolatrous nor superstitious, although it would be better to change them into “alms to the poor for these departed souls” when the Chinese have been converted to Christianity.<sup>27</sup> In his letters, Ricci reiterates the principle of “temporary” *accommodatio* and summarizes it as wanting to “draw to our opinion the founder of the literati’s sect, that is Confucius, by interpreting in our favour some of the things he had left dubiously written. In this manner our side gains much grace with the literati who do not worship

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Society: Amerindian Religion and Society in Acosta’s Anthropological Theology,” *History of European Ideas* 40/3 (2014): 291–311.

26 Agostino, *La città di Dio*, VIII, 10 (Roma: Città Nuova, 2010), 376–377.

27 Ricci, *Della entrata della Compagnia di Gesù*, 96–97.

the idols.”<sup>28</sup> The strategic use of Chinese philosophical texts is, almost in an instrumental way, the basis of his missionary plan for Christianity’s adaptation. Accommodate and adapt, the themes of Ignatian spirituality since the *First Principle and Foundation* of the *Spiritual Exercises*,<sup>29</sup> were the theological, cultural and political devices adopted by the Society of Jesus in its missionary work among the infidels, the heretics, the people of other faiths, just as they were for St. Paul in the Areopagus.<sup>30</sup> Thus the primitive Church and the apostles returned among the protagonists as Europe lost its religious unity, fractures within Christianity multiplied, and new churches were born: justified by the need to return to Christianity’s origins and authentic traditions.

Some of the Tridentine debates, although developed in an anti-Protestant key (*sola scriptura*), were important in defining the *fundamenta* of faith and what was not substantial; the immutable traditions and rituals and the changeable elements of religion.<sup>31</sup> Those debates necessarily delved into the value, which was almost hierarchical, assigned to the sources of Christianity, and redefined the relationship between tradition and scripture. They contributed to some of the choices that Christians had to make in the evangelization of the Far East, many of which concerned the meaning and value of the rites. However, they also included an intriguing discussion of the Chinese sources that had to be studied and understood in order to classify Chinese religions, and more generally to define the value and nature of Chinese culture and philosophy. From this point of view, the Chinese rites were acceptable as secular and political practices made for men, not for god. Like the Catholic ceremonies for Erasmus or Luther, those practices were “indifferent,” *adiaphora*, and could be used as long as they were not granted the value of works necessary for salvation.<sup>32</sup>

28 Ricci, *Della entrata della Compagnia di Giesù*, 455.

29 Michela Catto and Guido Mongini, “Missioni e globalizzazioni: l’adattamento come identità della Compagnia di Gesù,” in *Evangelizzazione e globalizzazione: Le missioni gesuitiche nell’età moderna tra storia e storiografia*, ed. Michela Catto, Guido Mongini and Silvia Mostaccio (Roma: Società Editrice Dante Alighieri, 2010), 1–16.

30 See for example Nadal’s *Apologia exercitorum* (1554–1556) as quoted in Mongini, “*Ad Christi similitudinem*,” 131–154, 152.

31 See Nelles, “Du savant au missionnaire,” 672–682 and Michela Catto, “The Tridentine Decrees Interpret the Chinese Rites,” in *Trent and Beyond: The Council, other Powers, other Cultures*, ed. Michela Catto and Adriano Prosperi (Turnhout: Brepols, 2017), 501–518.

32 See Catto and Mongini, “Missioni e globalizzazioni: l’adattamento come identità della Compagnia di Gesù,” 5–6 and also Ines G. Županov, “Le repli du religieux: Les missionnaires jésuites du XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle entre la théologie chrétienne et une éthique païenne,” *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 51/6 (1996): 1201–1223.



Ricci's attraction to Confucianism, which led him to abandon the *apparentamento* (affinity or association) with Buddhism, did not arise from its religious values, but from its non-religious nature, from its social and ethical values.<sup>33</sup> For Ricci, Confucianism was a sect established by the government of the Republic, endowed with an exclusively political and moral function, and therefore it was possible to be Confucian and to adhere to Christianity, because "in its essential it contains nothing against the essentials of the Catholic faith; nor does the Catholic faith prevent anything, on the contrary it helps very much the quiet and peace of the Republic that its books claim."<sup>34</sup> The theory could lead to acknowledging an ancient Chinese monotheism which had been forgotten, and this road was taken by the Jesuits belonging to the so-called *Figurism*, committed to finding in neo-Confucian writings the ancient vestiges of Christianity.<sup>35</sup>

In his description of Confucianism—sometimes the distinction between ancient and modern is not clear—Ricci twice uses the word atheism. The first time early in chapter x, he states that the "natural light" has been reduced and that "corrupt nature, when it is not helped by divine grace, by itself always runs to the low, then those miserable men little by little extinguished that first natural light and granted themselves such liberty that they say and do right and wrong as they want without any fear; and among those who in these times flee Idolatry, there are few who do not fall into atheism." At the end of the chapter, he writes that common opinion mostly considered the three religions as the "same thing" (a body and three heads, he would say in his Chinese Catechism), since "in this matter of religion the more ways of saying there are, the more usefulness they bring to the Kingdom." Because of this religious tolerance, the Chinese "get to remain without any, as they follow none with their heart. And others clearly confess their disbelief, others deceived by the false persuasion to believe, the major part of these people get to stay in the Depth of Atheism."

33 José Antonio Cervera Jiménez, "La interpretación ricciana del confucianismo," *Estudios de Asia y África* 37/2 (2002): 211–239, 221.

34 Ricci, *Della entrata della Compagnia di Giesù*, p. 98. See Ana Carolina Hosne, "Los letrados confucianos y la consumación de la República Platónica: Matteo Ricci en la misión jesuítica," in *Saberes de la conversión: Jesuitas, indígenas e imperios coloniales en las fronteras de la cristiandad*, ed. Guillermo Wilde (Buenos Aires: Editorial SB., 2011), 465–488.

35 On this subject see Claudia von Collani, *Die Figuristen in der Chinamission* (Frankfurt am Main-Bern: Verlag Peter D. Lang, 1981); David E. Mungello, "The Reconciliation of Neo-Confucianism with Christianity on the Writing of Joseph de Prémare, S.J.," *Philosophy East and West* 26/5 (1976): 389–410; Michael Lackner, "Jesuit Figurism," in *China and Europe*, 129–149.

In Ricci's mind, because atheism is characterized by an instrumental openness to other religions, customs and rituals (and therefore by disbelief and a kind of religious indifferentism), its adherents tend to consider religion a mere tool in the management of the State's social, moral and ethical life. Ricci does not want to convert pagans, idolaters or superstitious people, but atheists. The latter are not those who deny the existence of God, but those who have a certain religious attitude (they practice the rites), although they do not ask themselves about God. The Chinese are indeed "Epicurean" or "Pythagorean,"<sup>36</sup> but the battle against the pagans has already been won in past Christian history. Ricci chooses to evangelize and to convert—as boosted by Trigault's translation<sup>37</sup> (the only text known to Europeans until the twentieth century)—an atheist, albeit an atheist who does not object to the rituals of religion, a learned unbeliever for whom religion is a mere tool of government and atheism a totally inner attitude.<sup>38</sup> In the Jesuit tradition, Ricci's definition

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- 36 Matteo Ricci, *Lettere (1580–1609)*, ed. Francesco D'Arelli (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2001), 100, letter to Claudio Acquaviva, October 20, 1585: "I do not want to consume paper for a report on the sects of China that would be lengthy. Briefly I tell you that all the great belong to the Epicurean sect, non in name, but with laws and opinions; the lower others, who profess the immortality of the soul, are pythagorean, because they have scruples in eating the meat of animals and fish, saying there is a transmigration of animals in men and also in animals."
- 37 Published in Augsburg in 1615, the Latin translation was repeatedly reprinted in 1616, 1617, 1623 and 1684 and translated in the main European languages: French (1616, 1617, 1618), German (1617), Spanish (1621) and Italian (1622). In his translation Trigault favoured important changes, additions and omissions, to provide a more reassuring view of China. In the description of Confucianism, to give just one example, he suppressed passages in which Ricci attributed to China a "natural light," and hoped that "many of the ancients would be saved in natural law" (even if they had not known the Christian Revelation). Unlike Ricci, Trigault also distinguished Chinese literati from philosophers in order to have two different audiences, and in describing Mandarins he used the term *philosophi*. Ricci's "true literati" (the term for those who opposed any interpretation of the classics through Buddhism and Taoism) become the philosophers opposed to the idols and faithful to Confucius. On this issue see Luca Fezzi's important essay "Osservazioni sul *De Christiana Expeditione apud Sinas suscepta ab Societate Iesu* di Nicolas Trigault," *Rivista di storia e letteratura religiosa* (2000): 541–566, a theme picked up with new considerations in Jacques Gernet, "Della Entrata della Compagnia di Gesù e Christianità nella Cina di Matteo Ricci (1609) et les remaniements de sa traduction latine (1615)," *Comptes-rendus des séances de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres* 147/1 (2003): 61–84.
- 38 On the evolution of the term atheism in the Western cultures controlled by the Inquisition, see Vittorio Frajese, "Ateismo," in *Dizionario storico dell'Inquisizione: Per Adriano Prosperi*, ed. Guido Dall'Olio, Adela Malena and Pierroberto Scaramella, vol. 1 (Pisa: Edizioni della Normale, 2010), 114–118.



is perfected in *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus*, published in 1687 and written by a group of Jesuits (Prospero Intorcetta, Christian Herdtrich, Philippe Couplet and François Rougemont) in which the Confucian scholars are called “atheopolitici.”<sup>39</sup> The term atheism, with its negative connotations, is restricted to Buddhism<sup>40</sup> and applied to Confucianism with the attenuating addition of “political” as was already happening in Europe.<sup>41</sup> Once again Ricci’s line is followed and the religious aspects of Confucianism, at least as practiced by the elite, are “neutralized.”<sup>42</sup>

The treatise of the four Jesuits is of great importance. It was to spread the knowledge of the works of Confucius in the West with dramatic effect. China, with its presumed atheism and civilization, would burst into European culture, pushing the word atheism to a negative meaning, although Ricci had freely used it to define the missionary constituency that was closer to Christianity in terms of ethics and morals. Atheism was apparently not as negative as it would become in seventeenth century Europe, when, from the condemnation of Machiavelli (placed on the Index of prohibited books in 1564) to Pierre Bayle, the relationship between morality and religion was redefined through the addition of nuances and accents to the same debates.<sup>43</sup>

For Ricci and the authors of *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus*, the adjective “atheist” still had a negative connotation. However, it was the least pejorative and was used to define the best civilization the Europeans had ever met and the people they considered closest to Christianity. In the tradition of Plutarch, an author the educated Jesuits were surely familiar with,<sup>44</sup> superstition and

39 *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus* (1687): *The First Translation of the Confucian Classics*, ed. Thierry Meynard (Monumenta Historica Societatis Iesu-Nova Series. 6), (Rome: IHSI, 2011), 167, 200, 209, 212, 229, 230, 242.

40 Thierry Meynard, “Chinese Buddhism and the Threat of Atheism in Seventeenth-Century Europe,” *Buddhist Christian Studies* 31 (2011): 3–23.

41 Federico Barbierato, *Politici e ateisti: Percorsi della miscredenza a Venezia fra Sei e Settecento* (Milano: Unicopli, 2008), 138 where the author states the “substantial identity implicitly established between the ‘politicals’ and the ‘atheists’: both exclusively addressing human concerns, interpreting reality not in God’s light anymore but as a mere human product of which God was part and the existence of which was to be exploited in terms of the people’s social control and discipline.”

42 Guy G. Stroumsa, *A New Science: The Discovery of Religion in the Age of Reason* (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 2010), 148.

43 See in general the collection of essays *Filosofi e la società senza religione*, ed. Marco Geuna and Giambattista Gori (Bologna: il Mulino, 2011).

44 *Ratio studiorum: Plan raisonné et institution des études dans la Compagnie de Jésus*, ed. Adrien Demoustier and Dominique Julia (Paris: Belin, 1997), 179.

atheism are both negative, both a deviation from the right path, both an evil born of ignorance and ingratitude of the soul; however the effects are different. Atheism is a false judgement that does not alter the hardened soul, while superstition enters the frail and sensitive soul, changes its nature, wounds it and causes unspeakable evil. Although atheism is wrong, it is superior to superstition because the atheist looks to reason to find a solution for the difficulties of life. Superstitions, on the other hand, only see and read in those difficulties the intervention of an evil god and thus paralyze all effort. No god is better than false and inconsistent gods, indifference is better than reason inhibited by the belief that gods generate evil.<sup>45</sup>

### Speculative Atheism and Its Dangers for Christianity

Upon Ricci's death on May 11, 1610, Niccolò Longobardo succeeded him as the head of the mission until 1622.<sup>46</sup> As we know, his was the first attempt to dismantle Ricci's method. His *Treatise on Some Points of the Religion of the Chinese* was known in Europe in Domingo Fernández Navarrete's edition, printed in Madrid in 1676 (*Tratados históricos, políticos, ethicos y religiosos de la monarquía de China*).<sup>47</sup> The work reached its greatest fame when the French edition by the Abbott de Ciré of the Missions Etrangères was published in 1701 as *Traité sur quelques points de la religion des Chinois*, right in the middle of the Parisian controversy over the Chinese rites. There are discussions and doubts about the authorship of the work, but it is important to emphasize that it was not written for a European audience, but as a kind of internal report of the mission.

45 Plutarch, *Superstizione*, ed. Renato Laurenti and Carlo Santaniello (Napoli: M. D'Auria editore, 2007), 103–104; also, 119: “Or, *in fine*, atheism is an indifferent feeling toward the Deity, which has no notion of the good, and superstition is a multitude of differing feelings with an underlying notion that the good is evil”; and also, 121: “If he be moderate in general, you will note that he takes his present fortune without a word, and tries to procure for himself means of help and comfort [...]. This, however, is not the way of the superstitious man; but if even the slightest ill befall him, he sits down and proceeds to construct, on the basis of his trouble, a fabric of harsh, momentous, and practically unavoidable experiences which he must undergo, and he also loads himself with fears and frights, suspicions and trepidations, and all this he bitterly assails with every sort of lamentation and moaning. For he puts the responsibility for his lot upon no man nor upon Fortune nor upon occasion nor upon himself, but lays the responsibility for everything upon God [...].”

46 Elisabetta Corsi, “Longobardo Niccolò,” in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, vol. 65 (Roma: Istituto per l'Enciclopedia Italiana, 2005), 716–720.

47 The Spanish text comes from António de Sancta Maria's Latin version of 1661.

It played a leading role as an anti-Jesuit weapon, made even stronger by its alleged attribution, in the attack against the Jesuit method of evangelization in China.

Longobardo—I am using Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz's annotated edition of his treatise<sup>48</sup>—wanted to consider the religious system and particularly Confucianism, the “religio” chosen by Ricci, in his effort “to seek only the truth and not to say anything that relies on travesty and lies.”<sup>49</sup> This was a surreptitious accusation against the Society of Jesus and his predecessor, Matteo Ricci, of falsely representing the Chinese system.<sup>50</sup> Longobardo goes into the philosophical complexity of China's religious system and, contrary to Ricci, believes that all Confucians, ancient and modern, are atheists: “To prove that the ancients were atheists, it is enough to say that the moderns are; the latter are only the echo of the former, on whom they rely and whose authority they invoke to give weight to what they say in matters both of science and of religion.”<sup>51</sup>

Longobardo too compared Confucianism to the European pagan world, but only to underline the common errors, the fruit of the Devil's same deception.<sup>52</sup> His interpretation came from a new way of reading Confucianism, which was not the culmination of something very similar to monotheism, as it was for Ricci. Extending the notion of dual teaching to all Chinese schools (Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism), Longobardo thought that there were two levels of knowledge of which the Chinese scholars were fully aware: esoteric and exoteric. Confucianism was thus a religious doctrine and a science based on twin paths, one false and one true: a secret knowledge reserved for a few adepts, and a belief system for all and sundry;<sup>53</sup> an external Confucianism of rites and piety (superstitious) and a materialistic doctrine. According to Longobardo, many ancient philosophers, from Pythagoras to Plato and up to Aristotle, had practiced dual teaching in order “not to give the public all the mysteries of Philosophy or to give them under dark veils.”<sup>54</sup>

48 Niccolò Longobardo, *Traité sur quelques points de la religion des chinois*, in Gottfried W. Leibniz, *Opera omnia*, vol. IV/1 (Genève: de Tournes, 1768), 89–144.

49 Longobardo, *Traité*, 91.

50 Longobardo, *Traité*, 135–136: “[A]s to me, with the leave of the good Father [Ricci] and of those among the Fathers who are of his opinion, I am of the opposite opinion and I believe that the ancients were atheist as well.”

51 Longobardo, *Traité*, 136.

52 Longobardo, *Traité*, 96–97.

53 “They have two kinds of doctrines, a secret one they consider true and that only the literati understand and teach in the form of figures; the other a vulgar one, a figure of the first the literati hold false, in the natural sense of the words.” Longobardo, *Traité*, 103.

54 Longobardo, *Traité*, 103.

In Longobardo, the analysis of Chinese philosophy prevails over the Chinese “political” atheism, and he could thus argue that the Chinese “have not known a distinct spiritual substance of matter as we conceive it and consequently they have known neither God nor the Angels nor the rational Soul.”<sup>55</sup> Atheism was in his opinion a physical and moral doctrine. His criticism of the Confucian system, which in many ways reflected similar debates within Confucianism itself, was based first of all on important remarks on Confucian texts, a quarrel that seems to echo the traditional opposition between the ancients and the moderns.<sup>56</sup> Ricci had interpreted the ancient Confucian classics, leaving out the Chinese tradition that had been deposited in the *Commentaries*; Longobardo totally disagreed and proposed a new reflection on the literary sources of Confucianism. In what we can consider the first detailed study of Chinese atheism, Longobardo wonders what value is assigned to the ancient Chinese texts. But which texts? Should Confucianism be assessed and analyzed through the earliest texts, sometimes corrupted (in a philological and archival sense), or is it possible to interpret them in the light of the *Commentaries*, which had developed over the centuries to facilitate the interpretation of the earlier texts?

His assessment criticizes in depth Ricci’s choice, and more generally is a departure from the Pauline tradition which had been so important for the missionary activity, and specifically for the Society of Jesus. In fact, he thinks that to follow the texts, as Ricci did, instead of their commentaries is the simpler operation, because it highlights the links between Christianity and Chinese culture (i.e., of the Chinese literati). The same method was applied in the Apostles’ distant past, he writes, by the Saints who “took advantage of the smallest things they found among the Gentiles, like Saint Paul particularly did when he quoted in the *Areopagus* sermon the words of a poet: ‘*Ipsius enim et genus sumus* (we are his offspring).’”<sup>57</sup> But Longobardo shuns this apostolic tradition: “[The] examples of the Saints, I say, are to be followed when there are good reasons to do so.”<sup>58</sup>

According to Longobardo, the Pauline and apostolic ways cannot be applied to the Chinese ancient texts, which have an obscure interpretation and are full of mistakes due to unreadable or “superfluous” words, as the scholars themselves acknowledged. To propose an explanation that differs from the

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55 Longobardo, *Traité*, 93.

56 See Jacques Gernet, *Chine et christianisme: La première confrontation* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991) (1a ed. 1982), 45–58.

57 Longobardo, *Traité*, 98.

58 Longobardo, *Traité*, 102.

*Commentaries* is counterproductive; the missionaries might be considered ignorant: “[The] Chinese will imagine that we have not read all their books or that we did not grasp their true meaning.”<sup>59</sup> Longobardo also criticizes the resort to Chinese literati to interpret Chinese texts since “they do not understand how important it is to avoid the smallest mistake in the matters we are dealing with,” and in order “to protect themselves from the possible rebuke of having embraced a foreign law, they enthused whenever they find in our religion some conformity with their sect. The missionaries must have higher views. Others are not to be their guides; they [the missionaries] are to guide the others and judge what is fitting and what is not.”<sup>60</sup>

Confucianism is thus an instrument in the hands of a selected few who hold the true secret of the doctrine and “[use] it as a principle of politics, to rule the customs, govern the people and establish the divine cult.”<sup>61</sup> According to Longobardo, the risk is missing the secret, so to speak. For their knowledge of Confucianism, the Jesuits and Christianity as a whole rely on what the literati choose to disclose, possibly a “powerful poison.”<sup>62</sup> By participating in the debate with the literati on their own terms, that is, by using their ambiguous and “amphibolous” words, Christianity is prone to reinforcing Chinese atheism.<sup>63</sup> In Longobardo’s view, the political atheism of Ricci’s version of Confucianism morphs into a complex knowledge of its doctrine and into a speculative atheism for which the Jesuits should show neither tolerance nor adaptation. The danger of becoming part of the Chinese system is too great; it would be to suffer its “fraud,” and be conquered, instead of winning China to the Gospel.

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59 Longobardo, *Traité*, 99.

60 Longobardo, *Traité*, 101–102.

61 Longobardo, *Traité*, 103.

62 Longobardo, *Traité*, 132–133.

63 Longobardo, *Traité*, 143.

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