

Bringing “the True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven” to Unreached People

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Introduction

Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) was an Italian Jesuit and one of the first Christian missionaries to China in the modern era. He arrived in China during the Ming Dynasty in 1582 and remained for almost thirty years. When he died in Beijing in 1610, his mission was “flourishing” (Neil 1979, 188) and thousands had become Christians. His legacy continues today, as many of the 12-13 million Catholic Christians in China can trace links in their spiritual heritage back to Ricci.

While Matteo Ricci offers much to the study of missiology, many evangelical missiologists seem to miss the depth of his contribution. His work, and that of his fellow Jesuits, went far beyond “accommodating to the local culture, taking their cue from local ... forms and customs.” His “success” in China was due to more than merely learning languages and making “friends with influential people” (Beaver 2013, 230), simply “finding Chinese equivalents for Christian terms” (Neil 1979, 163-165), or presenting Christian “teaching in a way that did not necessarily offend” the Chinese (Sundquist 2013, 242). His missional approach was more profound than using “Confucian ideas to assist in making the Christian faith acceptable” (Moreau, 2015, 113). Unfortunately, it’s not uncommon to hear some evangelicals suggest that Ricci promoted idolatrous ancestor worship. Our evangelical reflections on Ricci need greater scrutiny. The mere history of one individual can certainly be amended, but I wonder if this consistent deficiency in our assessments of Ricci exposes a superficial understanding of missiology among evangelicals.

Successful missionary activity, the kind demonstrated by Ricci and the Jesuits, requires a rigorous understanding of the philosophies of the people, the ancient undercurrents of their modern thought. It also requires a painstaking comprehension of the Christian faith and how it regularly uses the best philosophy available. Most

importantly, and rarely mentioned by any evangelical missiologist, Ricci's successful missionary strategy exhibits a deep fidelity to Christian orthodoxy. His cultural sensitivity, creative writings, and ground-breaking missional work consistently demonstrate an awareness of the boundaries of ecclesial confession. Our outreach to unreached people will benefit if we examine these deeper causes of Ricci's "success."

Matteo Ricci was a genuine polymath. He was one of the first westerners to master the Chinese language. He translated many western texts, including Euclid's *Elements*, into Chinese. He also translated several Confucian texts into Latin. He was renowned in China for his works as a cartographer, having created the first world map in the Chinese language. He was also remembered as a mathematician, astronomer, and musician. He created the first self-chiming, mechanical clocks in China, and even gifted the Chinese emperor with one. Today, more than four hundred years after his death, the Beijing Center for Chinese Studies identifies Matteo Ricci as "the most outstanding cultural mediator between China and the West of all time" (The Beijing Center for Chinese Studies. n.d.). Above all, however, Matteo Ricci was a missionary for the gospel. As we briefly examine Ricci's seminal work, *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven* (Ricci 2016), written in 1603, our hope is that we, as evangelical educators, will perceive some of the deeper principles necessary for our own missionary work among unreached people.

Matteo Ricci's Context and Approach

Matteo Ricci's *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven* is a text directed to a Confucian audience. In his journals, he identifies three primary religious systems in sixteenth-century China: the Confucians, also called the Literati because of their academic erudition; the Buddhists; and the Daoists, also called the Lauzu. To Ricci, Confucianism provided the best conversation partner to bring the gospel into China.

For Ricci, the Confucianists represented classic Chinese thought. He described them as "proper to China," because they were the most ancient, they wielded contemporary political rule, and they were the most celebrated (Ricci 1953, 94). Though the Confucians claimed to be academic and not part of any religious sect, Ricci recognized Christian principles in their teachings. He said their teachings were directed to ends in conformity with "the light of conscience" and "Christian truth" (Ricci 1953, 97-98). In his text, he attempts to show the Chinese people the connections between Confucianism and Christianity and that Confucianism finds its proper completion in the Christian faith (Ricci 1953, 97-98; also Lew 2000, 18; Neill 1979, 414).

In *The True Meaning*, Ricci does not often reference the Bible or church dogma though he was committed to both. Instead, he frequently cites Confucian and other sacred Chinese texts and engages in theoretical philosophy. He was convinced that reorienting the Chinese people to their heritage and reflecting on Natural Law would help prepare them to listen to the Christian gospel. Ricci writes that “to abandon principles affirmed by the intellect and to comply with the opinions of others is like shutting out the light of the sun and searching for an object with a lantern” (Ricci 2016, 25:45). Despite the corruption of sin, Ricci believed that the human intellect was capable of grasping objective reality, including the existence of a personal Creator God. When people go wrong, it’s because they have abandoned “intellect” in favor of “opinion.” Instead of thinking for themselves, they believe what seems right to them, what they wish is true, or what the culture tells them. This was what happened with Confucianism. It began as a monotheistic tradition, correct but incomplete, but was then corrupted by Buddhist ideas.

Ricci has a twofold mission in his text. First, he aims to clear away the corruption and get back to pristine Confucian belief, which he thinks is compatible with Christianity. Second, he shows how Confucianism, even when correct, is profoundly incomplete, leading his listeners to desire what completes it—the gospel. To complete this mission, Ricci uses the best resources available from the European and Chinese philosophical traditions to build an intellectual bridge across cultures.

Building Bridges and Identifying Roadblocks

Ricci’s successful connection between the Christian faith and Chinese thought required familiarity with both traditions while maintaining faithfulness to Christian orthodoxy. Ricci associated two areas of Chinese thoughts with Christian teaching.

Self-Cultivation

Self-cultivation lies at the heart of Confucianism. A superior person is one who nurtures virtue (inner vigor) within himself to such a degree that his inner life is aligned with the natural order of the universe. In the Chinese classic *The Great Learning*, Confucius’ disciple Zengzi describes the “cultivation of the person as the root of everything” (Zengzi 2016, 4). Since ancient times, Confucians and others often used the term Dao, which means way or path, to describe the practice of holistically aligning one’s daily life with the essential energy and overriding principle of the universe. Acknowledging this central tenet, Ricci opens his *The True Meaning* with an emphasis on self-cultivation (Ricci 2016, 16-17:41-42). It is a good which all people should pursue. Though Ricci

avowed this primary pathway, he exposed Confucianism as inherently incapable of guiding people to its admirable goal.

First, Ricci led his Chinese audience to recognize that only through belief in God, the one supreme “Lord of Heaven,” could someone truly practice self-cultivation (Ricci 2016, 28-64:47-71). No God is worshipped in Confucianism. To Ricci, this makes self-cultivation impossible. To make his point, Ricci pursued Natural Law, found both in Thomas Aquinas and within Confucianism, to argue for God’s existence. His goal was for his Confucian reader to again “see the great Way” and be “returned to the Supreme Source of all phenomena” (Ricci 2016, 63:71). Ricci also appealed to the ancient Chinese philosopher Mencius to support his claim of an innate “untutored” knowledge of God within every person. Mencius, the pupil of Confucius’ grandson (Ricci 2016 29:47 n.), had said, “If you fully explore your mind, you will know your nature. If you know your nature, you know Heaven” (Mencius 2019, 7A; Mencius 2016, VII:1:1, 275.). Ricci showed that ancient Chinese sages “recognized and worshipped one supreme being” but that the modern Confucians had moved away from that practice (Ricci 1952, 93). Honoring the one true God is therefore fundamental to any self-cultivation (Ricci 2016, 13-15:37-39).

To Ricci, the lack of clarity regarding God’s existence in Confucianism made its adherents vulnerable to using “despicable” terms of “voidness” and “nothingness” to describe the source of all things (Ricci 2016, 67-76:73-81). Here, scholars recognize that Ricci misinterpreted Buddhist and Daoist doctrines of voidness and nothingness as nihilistic (Ricci 2016, 72:77 n.). Technically, Buddhist emptiness is not nihilism. Instead, it means being empty or void of independent existence. To the Buddha, there is no independent existence; nothing is beyond this realm of dependent things. Things exist for sure, but everything is dependent on something else.

Despite his technical inaccuracies, Ricci and other Jesuits saw the pernicious nature of the teaching. If everything is empty of independent existence, then the existence of God as a prime mover is not possible. Ricci recognized that this belief contradicted ancient Chinese opinion and destroyed any chance for Christianity to take hold among the literati. His text convinces the Confucians that one can only achieve self-cultivation if he is united to the one Creator and true Lord of Heaven.

Second, Ricci underscored that self-cultivation cannot occur without regard to the afterlife. Confucianism had no dogma about future rewards or punishments. The literati were focused on this earthly life and only possessed an opaque image of any future life. Ricci’s Chinese interlocutor represented them well when he said, “Now, where does the

way of self-cultivation lead us? Although it is somewhat clear where it takes us in this world, I have no idea what it leads to after death” (Ricci 2016, 17:41-43). We should only trouble ourselves with matters before us (Ricci 2016, 354:249).

Ricci countered that this is a superficial way to look at things, not worthy of honorable human thought. If pigs or dogs could speak, he said, then they would say the same (Ricci 2016, 355:249-251). Instead, Ricci argued, humans are to consider deeply the future life if they hope to cultivate the present.

To Ricci, eternal bliss and punishment are consistent with a supreme Lord of Heaven. And, they should be foundational motivations for self-cultivation. Ricci argued that people naturally demonstrate a desire to “enjoy unlimited goodness” and “perfect blessedness,” which includes “an unlimited life” (Ricci 2016, 382-383:263-265). The Confucian who desires self-cultivation must therefore open himself to contemplate a hope for eternal life.

To Ricci, the lack of clarity regarding future life in Confucianism made its adherents vulnerable to synchronization with Buddhist and Daoist teachings on reincarnation. Ricci highlights six specific problems with reincarnation (Ricci 2016, 258-284:197-211). First, the process of self-cultivation is halted by ignorance of our previous lives (Ricci 2016, 258-268:197-203). How can we know that misfortune in this life is due to past sin, and therefore amend our ways, if we have no memory of our previous existence? Few people claim to remember anything from previous existences. While the devil might deceive some to imagine such recollections, the vast majority of people make no such claims. One would naturally think that if our souls were transferred to new bodies, our intelligence from previous existences would be retained. Further, the human soul is spirit and distinct from its body. It does not need a new body to cultivate itself.

Second, advocates of reincarnation forget that the Sovereign on High first created both humans and animals, with their respective souls (Ricci 2016, 269:203). There’s no indication that animals today are more intelligent than in the past. Instead, it appears that the Creator’s obvious purpose was for living things to remain in their separate species.

Third, Ricci uses the Aristotelian concept of the distinction between three classes of souls—vegetative, sentient, and intelligent—to argue that one class cannot migrate to another (Ricci 2016, 270-275:203-205). The soul of a person cannot migrate to that of a plant, or even a bird. He considers the Buddhists’ claim that birds and animals have intelligence like humans to be “irrational.”

Fourth, the distinct physical appearance of living things demonstrates that their souls are of different types, making transmigration impossible (Ricci 2016, 275-276:207).

Fifth, there's no evidence that human souls are transformed into animals. Actually, wouldn't such transformation be desirable, not a punishment? "The cruel man who is habituated to slaughter" would be thrilled to grow "sharp claws and saw-like teeth" (Ricci 2016, 277-279:207-209).

Sixth, belief in reincarnation is not livable (Ricci 2016, 280:209). It is inconsistent for those who believe in reincarnation to forbid the killing of animals, for fear it might be their family members, and yet to be comfortable forcing animals to bear yokes and plow fields.

Yin and Yang and Dàfùmù

At the end of chapter 2 of *The True Meaning*, Ricci coins a brilliant new name for God, which encapsulates how he uses natural theology as a bridge to Chinese culture. He calls God 大父母 (dàfùmù), Great Father-Mother. For Ricci, calling God dàfùmù has little to do with gender. Rather, he is identifying a vital point of contact between the Chinese and western philosophical traditions and using the term as a bridge to correct false ideas about God prevalent among the Chinese.

To understand the significance of Ricci's new name for God, we need to sketch out Chinese beliefs concerning the origin of reality. We begin with 太極 taijí, "the Supreme Ultimate," the origins of the universe. Lacking transcendence, Taijí is not God; it is more like the raw material of the universe. Taijí then splits into two principles, 陰 Yīn and 陽 Yáng, which introduce duality and contrast into the world. Yin and Yang are the passive and active or female and male aspects of reality. When these two aspects mix, they form all the phenomena we observe in the universe.

Ricci argues that the distinction between Yin and Yang is the same as the distinction between matter and form in western philosophy. In Ricci's time, any first-year seminary student would know what matter and form were. According to Aristotle and most Christian theologians in history, everything in physical reality has matter and form. Form is active because it makes things exist and behave in a certain way. Matter is passive because it receives form into physical reality. On that basis, Aristotle said that the distinction between matter and form in physics is analogous to female and male in biology. Matter is the passive or female aspect of reality, and form is the active or male

aspect. Thus Ricci argues that form and matter are another way of talking about Yin and Yang.

As a helpful illustration, we can think about a program on a phone or computer. Aristotle would say the software is the program's form and the hardware is its matter. The software on a phone or computer makes it display certain things on its screen and respond to input in a certain way. It is the form or structure that makes a thing what it is and makes it behave the way it does. It is the active component of reality. Software is the form of a computer program. But the matter of a computer program is hardware. Software can't just float in the cloud. Besides an active component—form or structure—we also need a passive component that receives the form and instantiates it in physical reality. The form has to be downloaded onto the matter of hardware.

Once Ricci identifies Yin and Yang with form and matter, he borrows arguments from Aquinas to say that Yin and Yang require a cause outside of themselves. Unlike a principle like *Taijǐ*, this must be a transcendent cause and an actual being such as the person of God. First, Ricci argues that matter cannot acquire a new form unless an external agent acts on it (Ricci 2016, 34:51-52). He gives the example of an astrolabe cast in bronze. The original lump of bronze could never have shaped itself into a complex astronomical tool. The bronze is passive matter in itself that can only get a new form (such as the shape of an astrolabe) if a craftsman provides the new form (Ricci 2016, 34:51-52). Second, anything that lacks intelligence, but has structure, receives that structure from outside of itself. The metal letters in an old print shop are the raw material of literary works. But they can't form Confucius' *Analects* or the *Gospel of John* by themselves. A human has to put them in the right order. Likewise, the order that we see in the material cosmos indicates the existence of intelligence beyond the cosmos (Ricci 2016, 34:51-52). Matter and form or Yin and Yang, exist only because they have a transcendent cause.

The ultimate principle of reality, then, is not the stuff out of which Yin and Yang emerge. It is something external or, in technical western philosophical language, transcendent. In Chinese, one way to express this idea of being transcendent or external is with the word 大 *dà*, which means "big" or "great." So the ultimate principle of reality is a person who is the transcendent origin of the active or male principle of reality and the passive or female principle of reality—大父母 *dàfùmù*, the Great Father-Mother.

Matteo Ricci's approach to missions here is instructive for evangelicals today. Using familiar Chinese concepts of self-cultivation and Yin and Yang, he was able to build

bridges for Christianity into Chinese culture. He was able to affirm core Chinese concepts, correct them when necessary, and open the people to new ideas that would prepare them for Christianity. In all of this, he displayed an astute comprehension of Chinese thought and a thorough understanding of Christian theology, using the best philosophy available to him. Importantly, Ricci displayed fidelity to established ecclesial faith which had been passed down to him. His missional innovations in creating a Chinese name for God did not contradict his church. As evangelicals, our attempts to connect with unreached people must seek to discover common ground. To do this, we must grasp the foundation of Christian thought as well as those of the people we are trying to reach for Jesus.

Crossing Over to Revelation

Matteo Ricci's missional strategy included bringing his Chinese friends to the awareness of the need for divine revelation. He brought philosophies to their logical ends of ineffectuality which created a desire for transcendent truths. In his journals, Matteo Ricci said that "save in some few instances" the teachings of the literati, the Confucians, were "far from being contrary to Christian principles." Yet, he saw Confucianism as inadequate. It pointed beyond itself because it could not find the True Lord of Heaven. Ricci saw "Christianity" as the means by which Chinese thought could transcend itself and be "developed and perfected" (Ricci 1953, 97-98). After cultivating a desire for transcendent truth within his interlocutor, he used revelation to explicitly preach Christianity (Lopez 2017, 8).

Fall and Incarnation

Ricci transitioned from a general, monotheistic God discoverable in natural theology to an incarnate God, accessible only through revelation. This is wonderfully seen in his dialogue with his Chinese interlocutor. Once he has shown, through reason, that the ultimate source of existence is not an abstract principle like *Taijǐ*, but an agent, a person, the Confucian character in his book points out a problem (Ricci 2016, 574-575:361):

(The Chinese scholar says): I have now received instruction from you on numerous occasions and therefore regard the Lord of Heaven as omnipresent and omniscient. Since he is the compassionate father of mankind, how can he bear to allow us to live in darkness for so long? Why does he not come down to earth himself and personally lead the masses who have lost their way?

The Western scholar says: I have long hoped that you would ask just such a question.

After hundreds of pages of discussing natural theology, Ricci's non-Christian character brings up the Incarnation. Instead of simply informing his interlocutor about the Incarnation, the western scholar lets the Confucian come to the right conclusion himself after being prepared by philosophy. Ricci is recasting an idea for his Chinese people that goes back to Thomas Aquinas and forward to C.S. Lewis: that human reason is self-transcending. Natural reason, or philosophy, can tell us a lot about God apart from revelation and the Bible and does not necessarily contradict revelation. Yet, it is incomplete in itself and points to something beyond itself. It is precisely when we push our natural capacities to their limits that we conceive a desire for something beyond them. By doing philosophy, we acquire a taste for something beyond philosophy. And that's just what happened to the Chinese scholar in the story.

Ricci's answer to the Chinese character's challenge of "Why does he not come down to earth himself" displays another bridge he built between western and Chinese thought. There is a debate among Confucians going back thousands of years on whether human nature is good or evil. One group taught that human nature was good. People demonstrate an intrinsic tendency towards virtue. Another group taught that human nature was bad. People demonstrate a natural tendency to be selfish and violent, and we need things like government and rituals to chasten and control our desires. Here, Ricci brings in two resources from the West to solve this Chinese debate—Aristotle and the Bible. Aristotle taught that besides our first nature as humans, we can also develop a second nature through our habits. For example, humans cannot naturally read. But through practice and training, we acquire that ability and develop it until it becomes second nature. Aquinas used this idea to explain the human tendency towards evil. Human beings were created good. But at a certain point in history—in the Garden of Eden—the entire human race had a second nature, sin nature, overlaid on top of its first nature. And that becomes the explanation for evil and ignorance of God that Ricci offers. We were created good, but through historical sin, we have added to our nature a propensity for evil.

In doing this, Ricci squared the circle that ancient Chinese philosophers never could, because the answer to the problem lies outside of philosophy. It has to do with a historical event, the Fall of Adam and Eve, given in revelation. It's not something one can just discover by contemplating human nature; it has to be revealed in history. And since the problem of human nature is rooted in a historical event, the answer to that problem must not lie in a philosophical theory like Confucianism or Buddhism, but in

another historical event, one in which God himself takes action and comes down to heal our nature.

Ricci's method is instructive for evangelical missiologists. While affirming the good in the peoples' cultures we are trying to reach and the common ground we share, we must patiently lead them to see the inadequacies of their belief systems and bring them face-to-face with the need for transcendent truth and revelation. We will hinder our missional effectiveness among unreached people if we fail to do the nitty-gritty preparatory work of basic philosophy or abort our fidelity to the revelation of faith "once for all time handed down to the saints" (Jude 3).

Conclusion

Matteo Ricci's attempt to perfect Confucianism by Christianity imitates an early Christian form of missional pedagogy. Bishop Augustine taught his priests that whatever has been rightly said by the heathen should be appropriated by us "for the just use of teaching the gospel." Egyptian gold should be converted for the worship of the true God of Israel (Augustine 1997, II:40:60:75). It's what John's Gospel did with the Stoic Logos and what Paul did with the shadows and reality in Platonism. In a different but related sense, it's what the New Testament did with the Law and Old Testament. The Old Testament is good and from God, but it is incapable of making anyone "perfect" (Heb 7:19). It needs the perfect mediator to come and "fulfill" it (Matt 5:17).

Matteo Ricci illustrates the arduous work needed for successful missionary work among unreached people. He meticulously learned Chinese thought and culture, rigorously examined the deeper theological and philosophical bases of Christianity, creatively connected East and West, and displayed fidelity to traditional, ecclesial faith through it all. His ministry is exemplary for evangelicals today.

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