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# RELIGIOUS PLURALISM AND INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE IN CHINA: STRATEGY AND EDUCATION IN THE CONTEXT OF THREE TEACHINGS DISCOURSES

Edmond Eh\*

## ABSTRACT

In the history of religions in China, Three Teachings discourses develop the case for a harmonious relationship between Buddhism, Confucianism and Daoism. These discourses represent a traditional Chinese strategy for the management of interreligious relations. In his apostolic letter *Maximum Illud* Benedict XV reminds missionaries that Christianity must not be presented as the religion of a foreign nation. The relevance of his warning is evident in the contemporary Chinese context where Christianity is widely seen as a foreign religion while Confucianism is understood to be a native cultural tradition. For the sake of the *missio ad gentes*, it is argued that Catholic missionaries should engage the Confucian tradition in intercultural dialogue. The paper then evaluates three main responses to religious pluralism, namely relativism, assimilation and interculturality. The paper ends with some brief remarks on the efforts at intercultural dialogue with China by a Catholic higher education institution in Macau.

Keywords: China; Intercultural Dialogue; Macau; *Maximum Illud*; Religious Pluralism; Three Teachings

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\* Edmond Eh obtained the doctorate in philosophy and religious studies from the University of Macau. He is currently Assistant Professor at the University of Saint Joseph, Macau. He teaches philosophy and academic writing at the Faculty of Religious Studies and Philosophy.

## THE THREE TEACHINGS

Confucianism, identified as a school of thought, began to exist during the earlier part of the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE). Confucian thought idealises the golden age of ancient China when sage emperors ruled as outstanding models of virtue. In this worldview, it is believed that historical events were under the guidance of *tian* 天 (Heaven). This means that the operations of the universe manifest a moral system inherent within itself. On this account, the moral system is governed by a principle called *tianming* 天命 (mandate of Heaven). Benevolent emperors were successful because they received the mandate from Heaven while malevolent emperors failed because they lost this heavenly support.<sup>1</sup>

Institutional Confucianism is characterised by a canon of sacred texts and official rites. Chinese state orthodoxy is represented by religious Confucianism in terms of *rujiao* 儒教 (literati teaching). This body of teaching was tested by examinations administered by the state and celebrated in ceremonies performed on behalf of the state.<sup>2</sup>

Daoist thought emphasises the pre-historical period of ancient China before the advent of civilisation. It was a time when human beings led simple lives in close contact with nature. On this interpretation, *dao* 道 (the Way) refers to ultimate reality of an amoral nature. The Way manifests itself in all things in the universe and gives everything their own *de* 德 (virtue or power). The Way mysteriously guides the operations of the universe by means of *wuwei* 無為 (non-action) and shows no partiality to anybody or anything in the universe.<sup>3</sup>

Daoism, identified as a form of organised religion, began to exist during the latter part of the Han dynasty. Religious Daoism is characterised by its mystical and liturgical dimensions. Daoist masters taught various techniques of meditation which enable one to obtain direct experience of supreme reality. One sought to tap into the power found in the universe for the purpose of nourishing one's biological life. Daoist priests offered to perform rituals on behalf of the people for their intentions. In this worldview, it is believed that priests are able to communicate with the gods and their divine power can be called upon for the benefit of the people.<sup>4</sup>

Buddhism entered China during the latter part of the Han dynasty. Buddhist thought characterises life in the world as the experience of human cravings that lead to the great problem of suffering. *Karma* (action or deed) is the law that governs the effects produced by action and it is the cause of the cycle of death and rebirth experienced by all sentient beings. The practice of Buddhist teachings enables one to escape this universal suffering through the attainment of *nirvana*

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<sup>1</sup> Christian Jochim, *Chinese Religions: A Cultural Perspective* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1986), 6.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

(extinction), which refers to a state of bliss after one's attachments have been extinguished.<sup>5</sup>

Chinese Buddhism teaches that involvement with social life is crucial in terms of preaching for the conversion of people's attitudes towards the world and their relationships with one another. The primary means of this conversion lie in the cultivation of wisdom and compassion. On the one hand, one who is wise will understand the true nature of reality as impermanent so as not to be caught up by it. On the other hand, one who is compassionate will grasp the importance of remaining in the world in order to help others escape their suffering.<sup>6</sup>

Buddhism made a tremendous impact on the Chinese religious worldview, especially by its metaphysical and liturgical dimensions. Enlightened beings of the Buddhist tradition were accepted as deities by the people. The Buddhist conception of various levels of heaven and hell became part of the Chinese view of the afterlife. Buddhist rituals were also widely received as funeral ceremonies by ordinary Chinese people.<sup>7</sup>

Given that this paper presents a discussion of intercultural dialogue and religious pluralism, an explanation of the relationship between the key concepts of 'culture' and 'religion' must first be provided. Firstly, culture is understood to refer to all the factors that affect human life and action. According to Jochim:

Another way of explaining this is simply to say that religion is part of *culture*: the sum of all the various influences on human behaviour (beliefs, customs, knowledge, values, etc.) which are not simply biological, that is not simply due to our genes or instinctual interactions with the natural world. Thus, becoming hungry and eating is a biological matter, whereas eating with forks and knives instead of chopsticks, for example, is a cultural one.<sup>8</sup>

Secondly, religion is understood as the component of culture which is of supreme importance to human beings. Jochim explains:

This is why those seeking to distinguish religion from other dimensions of culture have frequently stressed the idea of *ultimacy*. Religion has been defined, for example, as a "belief in ultimate reality," a "state of ultimate concern," a "means of ultimate transformation," and a "set of symbolic forms and acts that relates us to the ultimate conditions of existence."<sup>9</sup>

At this juncture, it is appropriate to highlight the fact that this way of conceiving the relationship between culture and religion is also found in official Church documents. For instance:

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

Culture is broader than religion. According to one concept religion can be said to represent the transcendent dimension of culture and in a certain way its soul. Religions have certainly contributed to the progress of culture and the construction of a more humane society. Yet religious practices have sometimes had an alienating influence upon cultures. Today, an autonomous secular culture can play a critical role with regard to negative elements in particular religions. The question is complex, for several religious traditions may coexist within one and the same cultural framework while, conversely, the same religion may find expression in different cultural contexts.<sup>10</sup>

Therefore, for the purposes of this paper, 'culture' is taken in a broad sense. The meaning of culture does not merely involve its material and artistic dimensions, but also and more importantly, its philosophical and ethical dimensions: "culture does not consist primarily of the concrete products of human endeavor (buildings, works of art, music, literature) but rather of the patterns of abstract knowledge and customary behaviour that make their creation possible."<sup>11</sup> In light of the above, it is now possible to grasp the intimate connection between culture and religion. The study of religious doctrines and rituals often yields a penetrating understanding of the cultural tradition under investigation. In a similar way, the study of the lifestyles and customs of a social group usually produces deep insights into the nature of a religious tradition. Jochim writes:

This means that two things can be observed in studying religion in China, or anywhere for that matter. On the one hand, one can see its various beliefs, practices, and social forms as yielding clues to the distinctive nature of a specific culture. On the other hand, one can see these beliefs, practices, and social forms as data relevant for understanding religion as a universal dimension of all human culture.<sup>12</sup>

By way of application to this paper, the study of the Three Teachings facilitates knowledge of the roots of traditional Chinese culture in terms of its ideas and values. In turn, the investigation of the lifestyles and customs of the Chinese people produces insights into their understanding of religious theory and practice.

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<sup>10</sup> "Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue; Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, Instruction *Dialogue and Proclamation: Reflection and Orientations on Interreligious Dialogue and the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ*," 1991, 45, accessed September 30, 2021, [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/interelg/documents/rc\\_pc\\_interelg\\_doc\\_19051991\\_dialogue-and-proclamatio\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interelg/documents/rc_pc_interelg_doc_19051991_dialogue-and-proclamatio_en.html).

<sup>11</sup> Jochim, *Chinese Religions*, 4.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

### THREE TEACHINGS DISCOURSES

*Sanjiao heyi* 三教合一 refers to “the unity of the Three Teachings” or to the idea that “the Three Teachings form one whole.” The term captures a type of discourse found in Chinese history that argues for the harmony between Buddhism, Confucianism and Daoism. The Three Teachings discourses can be traced back to the Eastern Jin dynasty (317-420 CE). When Buddhism was first introduced to China, it was thought by many to be a branch of Daoism. As a result, a number of Buddhist scholars felt the need to present their tradition as being distinct from other traditions. They produced apologetic texts to confront the reality of religious pluralism.<sup>13</sup>

The concept of ‘various ways to one destination’ in China is said to originate from a quotation from the *Yijing* 易經 (Book of Changes): *shutu tonggui* 殊途同歸 “different paths lead to the same goal.” The quotation is from the “Xici” chapter, and its authorship is attributed to Confucius. As scholarly converts to Buddhism were often trained in the Confucian and Daoist classics, they referred to the quotation to justify their attempts to show that the three traditions are not only comparable but similar as well.<sup>14</sup>

When Daoism became politically influential during the Liu-Song dynasty (420-479 CE), a common rhetorical strategy found in the discourses began to develop. The unity of the Three Teachings is first asserted at the beginning of the work. Arguments are then produced to support the teachings of a particular tradition. The writer concludes with the assertion that one tradition is superior to the other traditions. For instance, Daoism is introduced as being identical to Buddhism. It is important to note that the primary purpose is not to harmonise Daoist teachings with Buddhist teachings. Rather the main purpose is to present Daoism as being analogous to Buddhism. The Confucian concept of a foreign culture is sometimes invoked. The conclusion is that Daoism is suitable for people of Chinese culture while Buddhism is meant for people of foreign culture.<sup>15</sup>

Coupled with a movement towards Indianisation, Buddhists started to resist the trend towards the identification of the Three Teachings during the Southern Liang dynasty (502–557 CE). For instance, they characterised Buddhist teachings as being *chushijian* 出世間 “other worldly”, while Confucian and Daoist teachings were characterised as being *shijian* 世間 “worldly”. Some Buddhist writers also

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<sup>13</sup> Joachim Gentz, “Religious Diversity in Three Teachings Discourses,” in *Religious Diversity in Chinese Thought*, ed. Perry Schmidt-Leukel and Joachim Gentz (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 123. The tendency in Chinese thinking to reconcile and harmonise differences is explained in Hajime Nakamura, *Ways of Thinking of Eastern Peoples: India, China, Tibet, Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1971), 284–94.

<sup>14</sup> Gentz, “Religious Diversity in Three Teachings Discourses,” 124. For details on the Confucian contributions to the Three Teachings discourses, see Xinzhong Yao, “Confucian Approaches to Religious Diversity,” in *Religious Diversity in Chinese Thought*, 65–79.

<sup>15</sup> Gentz, “Religious Diversity in Three Teachings Discourses,” 124–25. For details on the Daoist contributions to the Three Teachings discourses, see Livia Kohn, “One Dao – Many Ways,” in *Religious Diversity in Chinese Thought*, 53–63.

considered Confucianism and Daoism to be *shijiao* 世教 “worldly teachings”. When debates between Buddhism and Daoism took place, scholars discussed if Buddhist monks should show reverence to the emperor and if the soul would continue to exist after human beings die. But the underlying issue being debated was whether a certain tradition was compatible with Confucianism.<sup>16</sup>

With an interest to promote cultural unity in the form of Sinicisation, state officials were concerned about whether Buddhist and Daoist teachings would help or hinder social integration. Public debates were held by the state with representatives from both traditions invited to take part. Buddhist monks and Daoist priests were given opportunities to demonstrate the relative superiority of their own teachings. Although these debates were doctrinal in nature, they produced important social and political consequences. Debate results determined things like policies for religious affairs and funding for religious projects. They also decided the fate of the teaching of certain doctrines, the practice of certain rituals and even the survival of certain institutions.<sup>17</sup>

Eventually, at the official level, Chinese emperors began to play a significant role in religious affairs. Zhou Wudi 周武帝 (who reigned 560-578) ordered Daoism and Buddhism to be banned in 574. The ban was later revoked by Sui Wendi 隋文帝 (who reigned 581-604) in 589. Subsequently, a wave of imperial participation in Three Teachings discourses began as emperors started writing their own commentaries to texts from the three traditions.<sup>18</sup> Gentz explains the nature and purpose of these commentaries:

The imperial interest in the Three Teachings discourse was strategic and political. The emperors' contributions to the discourse on religion were mainly formulations of precepts on religious policy. Although the status of Daoism and Buddhism could depend strongly on an emperor's individual preference, most Chinese emperors after Sui Wendi aimed at an integrative balance of the Three Teachings on the basis of a Confucian state ideology while ignoring, rejecting, or even prohibiting other religious traditions as unorthodox and heretic.<sup>19</sup>

It is worth mentioning that there were periods of religious inclusion at the official level. In 635, an imperial edict lists Nestorianism along with the Three Teachings as *jiao* 教. The edict contains an account of teaching that includes Nestorian doctrines. Variations in religious doctrines are explained by the difference in their places of origin. In 1309, tax exemptions were granted for institutions associated with Buddhism, Daoism, Nestorianism and Islam. On this account, the state itself was considered a Confucian institution. Although there were these noteworthy instances of inclusion in Chinese history, it must be stressed that official acts which

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<sup>16</sup> Gentz, “Religious Diversity in Three Teachings Discourses,” 125. For the Buddhist contributions to the Three Teachings discourses, see Zhiru Shi, “Contextualizing Buddhist Approaches to Religious Diversity,” in *Religious Diversity in Chinese Thought*, 82–98.

<sup>17</sup> Gentz, “Religious Diversity in Three Teachings Discourses,” 126.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.



included traditions other than the Three Teachings were exceptions rather than the rule.<sup>20</sup>

There is a common misconception that Buddhism, Confucianism and Daoism are somehow harmonious and inclusive by their very nature as cultural and religious traditions. The reality is that Three Teachings discourses were motivated by the problem of religious pluralism and the resulting potential for social conflicts. In many cases, these discourses served important political purposes. Gentz writes:

...the impulse to talk about and create harmony among the Three Teachings is not an inherent feature of these religions, as is so often wrongly assumed; rather it is driven by the problem of interreligious polemics and aims to create a unified identity among the different traditions for reasons of inclusivist suppression or the struggle for survival or as part of a political program.<sup>21</sup>

In addition, the Three Teachings discourses reflect a strategic approach to managing interreligious relations. Put in contemporary terms, they indicate a politically correct way of showing that the doctrinal claims of the various traditions are consistent with each other. This establishes the vital framework for regulating religious pluralism and securing the peaceful co-existence of the different traditions. According to Gentz:

There is no evidence, either from historical sources or from empirical fieldwork, that a harmonious unity of the three traditions as envisioned by the discourse on the harmony of the Three Teachings (*sanjiao heyi* 三教合一) has ever existed in practice. *Sanjiao heyi* is merely a discourse that has no *institutionalized* reality as counterpart. Yet this strategy aims at neither eliminating the other religions nor setting up a monopoly. It rather appears as a typical feature of this special case of a *regulated pluralism*. The unity discourse appears as the voice of regulation and expresses the idea of dominance within a regulated model of tolerated diversity. This controlled diversity becomes possible in the context of a specific contradiction between monopoly and pluralism inherent in the regulated pluralism found in China.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 127.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 130.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 134.

## RELIGIOUS PLURALISM IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA

The continuing influence of Three Teachings discourses is manifest in contemporary China. For example, an immersion course in Confucian culture for religious leaders was conducted at Qufu, Jining, Shandong province in May 2019. The place is noteworthy as it is the hometown of Confucius. Participants included the President of the Chinese Daoist Association, the Vice-president of the Chinese Islamic Association, the Chairman of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association, and the President of the Chinese Christian Association. Organised by the United Work Front Department of the Chinese Communist Party, the stated objective of the course is to uphold traditional Chinese values. In the official press release, the participants publicly professed their intention to “cultivate the Chinese cultural character of our nation’s religions so that our nation’s religions are rooted in the fertile soil of excellent traditional Chinese culture, and to ceaselessly and deeply advance the Sinicization of our nation’s religions.”<sup>23</sup>

The Chinese government continues to view Christianity and Islam as foreign religions but Confucianism as a native tradition. Officials in charge of religious affairs require that the doctrines and scriptures of both Christianity and Islam must be understood “in conformity with the demands of modern Chinese development and excellent traditional Chinese culture.”<sup>24</sup> At the official level, the position of Confucianism has been steadily elevated in recent years. It is widely reported and commonly understood that Confucianism is attractive to the Chinese government because it tends to promote social mobility through education, submission to hierarchical authority and social cohesion through familial relations. The figure of Confucius is also seen to represent the best of Chinese tradition as evidenced by the use of the name ‘Confucius Institute’ for the educational organisations that promote Chinese language and culture all over the world.<sup>25</sup> It is worth mentioning that emphasis on education, respect for hierarchy and concern for the family is reflected in the teachings of the Catholic Church. The documents of the second ecumenical council held at the Vatican highlight the universal human right

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<sup>23</sup> “Gov’t Deploys Confucius in Bid to Boost Religion Controls,” May 29, 2019, accessed September 18, 2021, <https://macaudailytimes.com.mo/govt-deploys-confucius-in-bid-to-boost-religion-controls.html>.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

toeducation,<sup>26</sup> the hierarchical constitution of the church,<sup>27</sup> and the dignity of marriage and the family.<sup>28</sup>

The study of Three Teachings discourses reveals how the Chinese people have dealt with the question of religious pluralism in their history. When state officials were concerned to promote cultural unity in the form of Sinicisation, the key question was whether the *religious* teachings found in Buddhism and Daoism would be compatible with the *philosophical* teachings found in Confucianism. On this account, the development of the Three Teachings discourses is understood as a process of dialogue between cultures. The evidence from the news report presented above suggests that present day Chinese government officials largely retain a similar outlook. The study of these discourses sheds some light on the kind of strategy for intercultural dialogue that needs to be employed by missionaries of the Catholic Church in China today.

Based on the lessons from history, it is argued that Confucianism remains the ideal interlocuter for dialogue with Catholicism in order for it to gain greater acceptance in Chinese society. Objections to this proposed strategy could be posed by questioning why dialogue between Catholics and Buddhists or Daoists should not be explicitly encouraged instead. Chinese Muslims could also be suitable interlocuters for dialogue with Catholics since they share the similar religious worldview of monotheism. The People's Republic of China officially recognises five religious traditions, namely Buddhism, Daoism, Protestantism, Catholicism and Islam. It is worth clarifying that Catholic dialogue with Buddhism, Daoism or Islam would be *interreligious* in nature. The Catholic dialogue with Protestantism would be *ecumenical* in nature. In this paper, it is argued that Confucianism is the ideal interlocuter for *intercultural* dialogue with Catholicism.

### APPLYING *MAXIMUM ILLUD* TO THE CHINESE CONTEXT

In the introduction of his apostolic letter, Pope Benedict XV makes a brief mention of the *missio ad gentes* in China. He notes that Pope Gregory X initiated the first wave of missionaries to be sent there. The second wave consisted of a group of

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<sup>26</sup> See: Second Vatican Council, "Declaration on Christian Education *Gravissimum Educationis*," 1965, 1, accessed September 17, 2021, [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decl\\_19651028\\_gravissimum-educationis\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_gravissimum-educationis_en.html).

<sup>27</sup> See: Second Vatican Council, "Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*," 1964, 18-29, accessed September 17, 2021, [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19641121\\_lumen-gentium\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html).

<sup>28</sup> See: Second Vatican Council, "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*," 1965, 47-52, accessed September 18, 2021, [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19651207\\_gaudium-et-spes\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html)

Franciscan missionaries who successfully founded a group of Christian converts. But this community did not survive the subsequent persecution.<sup>29</sup>

It is important to note that Benedict XV insists on evangelisation by local missionaries. He instructs the superiors of the missions to make sure to identify suitable native vocations to be formed for the priesthood. Ensuring the presence of local clergy gives the highest chance of success to the missions. Native vocations are in a good position to understand how their own people think and this allows them to attract others to belief. Coming from the same background as their own people, local clergy know what their people are sympathetic to and the things that they aspire towards. Additionally, a local priest will know how to convince his fellow citizens and enjoy freedom of movement compared to a foreign priest.<sup>30</sup>

Benedict XV then writes about the characteristics of good missionaries. He stresses the inherently spiritual nature of the missionary vocation. Missionaries should be concerned with their heavenly allegiance instead of their earthly allegiance. They should not actively try to glorify their own countries of origin as this would result in the loss of their own credibility among the people they preach to. Suspicions arise when missionaries work for the benefit of their own countries instead of the spiritual welfare of the people they serve.<sup>31</sup> In the pope's own words: "such a situation could easily give rise to the conviction that the Christian religion is the national religion of some foreign people and that anyone converted to it is abandoning his loyalty to his own people and submitting to the pretensions and domination of a foreign power."<sup>32</sup> This warning, which was issued over a hundred years ago, remains as relevant as ever in the context of China where Christianity is still perceived as a foreign religion.

It is certainly true that the necessity of sanctity cannot be overlooked. Benedict XV reminds missionaries that holiness is absolutely essential for their vocation because witness is of greater value than words. Non-believers are more likely to be persuaded by a missionary's behaviour than by a missionary's *preaching*. Without the condition of holiness, the missionary will be in a state of danger in the ministry.<sup>33</sup> The pope writes: "Give the missionary, if you will, every imaginable talent of mind and intellect, endow him with the most extensive learning and the most brilliant culture. Unless these qualities are accompanied by moral integrity they will be of little or no value in the apostolate. On the contrary, they can be the cause of disaster, both to himself and to others."<sup>34</sup>

But it is also true that the importance of training and proficiency in learning cannot be underestimated. Benedict XV addresses the issue of formation and

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<sup>29</sup> Pope Benedict XV, "Apostolic Letter *Maximum Illud*," 1919, 3, accessed September 17, 2021, [http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xv/en/apost\\_letters/documents/hf\\_ben-xv\\_apl\\_19191130\\_maxim-um-illud.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xv/en/apost_letters/documents/hf_ben-xv_apl_19191130_maxim-um-illud.html).

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

emphasises that all missionaries need to receive a high standard of education. Breadth of learning will prove to be extremely helpful for the purpose of the mission. Working with non-believers on a regular basis, the missionary is often faced with objections to the faith. The highly cultured missionary will enjoy the esteem of the people in the ministry. He will also be respected for his teaching authority, especially among people who value learning.<sup>35</sup> Thus the seminarians engaged in theological studies must develop competence in all disciplines of knowledge during their time of formation. In addition to the knowledge of languages, competence has to be developed in all the areas of sacred and secular sciences which are necessary for the missions.<sup>36</sup> The pope notes that missionaries do get opportunities to meet with officials and to interact with scholars of the region where they work.<sup>37</sup> His acute observation is particularly apt in the context of China where education has always been highly regarded as a means of self-cultivation and moral development under the influence of the Confucian tradition.

## RELIGIOUS PLURALISM AND INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE

Cultural pluralism refers to the variety of lifestyles and hierarchy of values as a result of the way things are used, work, self-expression, religious practice, customs, law making, and artistic and scientific development.<sup>38</sup> Three main responses are available and are being pursued when it comes to facing the reality of cultural and religious pluralism. They are categorised as relativism, assimilation and interculturality.

Relativism is based on the notion that the human situation is contingent in the sense that it is shaped by historical events. It pays great respect to cultural variations by granting different traditions autonomy because they have an absolute status. A relativistic approach seeks to foster a neutral attitude towards all cultures by considering them incommensurable. This attitude is attractive as it seems to let human beings become more tolerant and accepting of each other. The relativistic approach is also the basis for the socio-political philosophy known as multiculturalism. It is limited to the recognition and uncritical acceptance of differences for the sake of communal living. In the long run there is little prospect for an increase in knowledge of and love for neighbour. For this attitude of neutrality and tolerance actually leads to disinterestedness in the identity and values of others. The extreme of relativism can be found in its emphasis on maintaining the differences among cultures.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>38</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, 53.

<sup>39</sup> "Congregation for Catholic Education, *Educating to Intercultural Dialogue in Catholic Schools: Living in Harmony for a Civilization of Love*," 2013, 22–23, accessed September 20, 2021,

Assimilation is based on the notion that the members of a foreign or minority culture must change themselves so as fit in with the members of the local or majority culture. It is not respectful towards cultural variations and traditions different from one's own are accorded a low status. An assimilative approach seeks to foster unity at the cost of diversity. This attitude is attractive as it seems to be an efficient means to manage complex social relations. In reality this approach is founded on the belief in the superiority of one's native culture. Like the attitude of tolerance, this attitude of superiority also leads to disinterestedness in the identity and values of others. The extreme of assimilation can be found in its emphasis on removing the differences among cultures. While relativism seeks autonomy, assimilation seeks hegemony: "the assimilation approach is advanced by a culture with universal pretensions, which seeks to impose its own cultural values by means of its economic, commercial, military and cultural influence."<sup>40</sup>

Interculturality is based on the notion that diversity is an asset instead of a liability. A pluralistic community contains precious resources for discovering potential answers to questions regarding human relationships, societies, and histories. An intercultural approach is respectful towards cultural variations because culture is seen with its own dynamism. Cultures are not fixed to the extent that they are unchangeable. Since cultures are changeable, they can be enriched by encountering other cultures. This attitude is attractive as it ensures the very possibility of genuine dialogue for the sake of mutual understanding and enrichment. In the long run this approach is the most plausible as only the path of dialogue can help human civilisations deal with the ever-present danger of cultural clashes. Unlike relativism, interculturality avoids the extreme of overemphasising *diversity*. Unlike assimilation, interculturality avoids the extreme of overemphasising *uniformity*.<sup>41</sup> Given that human beings already live in a pluralistic cultural and religious setting in contemporary societies, it is imperative to seek a response that can begin and sustain the process of cultural integration among peoples. This response must be based on respect for the dignity of the human person with a view to pursue the common good for the human race.<sup>42</sup>

At this point, it is timely to recall Benedict XV's injunction: "The Church is not an intruder in any country; nor is she alien to any people."<sup>43</sup> Together with the immense progress their country has made with their economy, military and international relations in recent decades, the Chinese people have been developing a strong sense of national identity and cultural pride. As Confucianism is on the rise as a cultural tradition while Christianity continues to be seen as a foreign religion, the real danger of *assimilation* by the dominant culture needs to be recognised. In the face of the current situation in China, there is the ongoing temptation to adopt an attitude of relativism for the sake of winning tolerance for

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[http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc\\_con\\_ccatheduc\\_doc\\_20131028\\_dialogo-interculturale\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_20131028_dialogo-interculturale_en.html).

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 24–25.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 27–28.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>43</sup> *Maximum Illud*, 16.

the Church. In light of the above analysis on the three possible responses, the most viable option is an *intercultural* approach coupled with an effort by Catholics to engage Confucians in dialogue. It is the most promising way to address the impression that the Church is an intruder in China and that she is alien to the Chinese people.

## CATHOLIC HIGHER EDUCATION AND INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE

The reciprocal relationship between religion and culture needs to be stressed. Religion is always practised in a particular cultural context. When religious values penetrate a culture, the culture enriches the experience of being human and people find their relationships with God and neighbour transformed.<sup>44</sup> At the same time, the religious component is essential in any dialogue between cultures and the cultural component cannot be ignored in any religious practice.<sup>45</sup>

A major purpose of intercultural dialogue is to look for the moral principles that different religions can agree upon. The continuing quest for a global ethic can greatly contribute to world peace.<sup>46</sup> It must be made clear that dialogue does not require the interlocutors to compromise on their own beliefs. Instead, dialogue is a platform for the interlocutors to bear witness to their own religious beliefs to others. Dialogue is also an occasion for members of one tradition to become personally acquainted with members of another tradition. It promotes a profound form of knowledge that is the result of friendship. This is because there is an understanding of how one's ethical behaviour flows from one's religious beliefs.<sup>47</sup>

Given the intimate relationship between religion and culture, it can now be clearly seen why the Catholic university that provides religious education has a crucial role to play in providing formation for intercultural dialogue. A truly comprehensive education includes knowledge of one's own tradition without neglecting knowledge of other traditions. Formation for dialogue is urgently needed in the context of educating students on Chinese soil. It is the responsibility of Catholic teachers to adopt the proper attitude and acquire the necessary skills to provide this form of cultural education.

All children and young people must have the same possibilities for arriving at the knowledge of their own religion as well as of elements that characterize other religions. The knowledge of other ways of thinking and believing conquers fears and enriches ways of thinking about the other person and his or her spiritual traditions. Therefore, teachers are duty-bound always to respect the human person who seeks the truth of his or her own being, as well as to appreciate and spread the great

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<sup>44</sup> *Educating to Intercultural Dialogue in Catholic Schools*, 7.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

cultural traditions that are open to the transcendent and that articulate the desire for freedom and truth.<sup>48</sup>

The most valuable contribution that the Catholic university can make to education is not merely the creation and transmission of knowledge. It is the gift of wisdom by cultivating in others the capacity for critical thinking and the ability to grasp the greater scheme of things. “It has been said that we live in a knowledge-based society. However, Catholic schools are encouraged to promote a wisdom-based society, to go beyond knowledge and educate people to think, evaluating facts in the light of values.”<sup>49</sup> In a similar way, the need for the cultivation of wisdom is deeply felt by students who experience confusion in the face of cultural and religious pluralism. Teaching people to develop the intellectual skills for reasoning and understanding must be included in the pedagogical strategies developed by Catholic teachers. “In teaching the various academic disciplines, teachers share and promote a methodological viewpoint in which the various branches of knowledge are dynamically correlated, in a wisdom perspective.”<sup>50</sup>

During a trip to Beijing in January 2020, Peter Stilwell and Stephen Morgan met with representatives of the episcopal conference of China to discuss the possibility of allowing diocesan seminarians from mainland China to study in Macau. It was revealed that the central government is in principle willing to give permission for mainland Chinese students to study at the University of Saint Joseph (USJ). During the final session of the *Maximum Illud* Lecture Series, Morgan explained to the audience: “What the Catholic Church does is to propose Jesus Christ. It does not impose Jesus Christ. In part, what we did during this visit to China was to propose the University of Saint Joseph to the Chinese authorities. We told them that USJ is and will be at the service of China.”<sup>51</sup>

Thus, it is fitting to conclude this paper with some pertinent observations of how USJ has been at the service of China over the past decade, especially in terms of its academic research output, which are in accordance with its Catholic identity. The section that follows contains concrete examples that illustrate the cultural contributions of a higher education institution in Macau.

Education for intercultural dialogue in the Catholic university includes the following elements:

(1) “The criterion of Catholic identity”: Having a clear identity in faithfulness to the mission to promote the salvation of peoples. This is accomplished by providing an education guided by evangelical values.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>51</sup> Marco Carvalho, “USJ. Peter Stilwell to Say Farewell at the end of this Academic Year,” *O Clarim*, February 21, 2020. At the time of the *Maximum Illud* Lecture Series, Stilwell was Rector of the University of Saint Joseph while Morgan was Dean of the Faculty of Religious Studies.

<sup>52</sup> *Educating to Intercultural Dialogue in Catholic Schools*, 63.



(2) “Building up a common vision”: Promoting dialogue in order to bring about greater unity between peoples. This aims at helping people to become open to recognising universal human values.<sup>53</sup>

(3) “Reasoned openness to globalisation”: Students are educated to appreciate the state of pluralism in the world and to manage the reality that cultures are all connected to each other.<sup>54</sup>

Firstly, two projects can be mentioned that manifest USJ’s *Catholic identity* in terms of its contributions to the Church in China.

A research project dealing with the interaction between architecture, culture and tourism was conducted in the city of Wuxi, Jiangsu, involving a historic site of the Catholic Church. The study included the urban landscape and the character of the architecture. The project is a collaboration between the Schools of Design of Jiangnan University (JNU) and USJ. The project was carried out in 1–15 July 2011 and the researchers studied the rehabilitation of the San-Li-Bridge Cathedral historic site in Wuxi.<sup>55</sup>

A symposium on the role of the Church in Chinese society was held at USJ on 5–8 June 2012. The meeting brought together scholars from mainland China, Hong Kong, and Macau. They discussed matters like religious policy in China, Catholic social commitment, economic development and moral decline, global trends in the Catholic Church and their repercussions in China, as well as topics relating to dialogue and the health of Chinese Catholic clergy. The stated objective is to discuss how the Catholic Church can contribute to a harmonious social, cultural, and spiritual development in China. The symposium was jointly organised by the School of Christian Studies of the University of Saint Joseph and the Institute for the Study of Christian Culture of Renmin University of China.<sup>56</sup>

Secondly, two projects can be highlighted that show USJ’s efforts to foster a *common vision* for humanity by contributing to ecological and geographical knowledge.

A study was conducted on the mangrove forests as part of the marine flora of Macau. It brings to the forefront this important form of vegetation that is beneficial to coastlines and valuable to coastal flora and fauna. The mangrove is endangered due to rapid urbanisation and so they are in need of attention for conservation purposes. The scientific study was a collaborative project between USJ and the

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> The project report has been published in Zhu Rong and Filipe Bragança, *Design Thinking for Cultural Tourism: Wuxi Workshop 1* (Macau: Saint Joseph Academic Press, 2011).

<sup>56</sup> Anna Chan and Annie Lam, ed., *Transformation and Adaptation: The Social Role of the Catholic Church in China* (Macau: University of Saint Joseph, 2012). This is a publication of the proceedings of the Macau symposium that analyse the conference on the situation of the Catholic Church in China at the Renmin University of China, Beijing April 2011.

Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK). It is a major contribution to ecological awareness and environmental protection.<sup>57</sup>

Spatial data refers to the information collected about an object of study from various locations. The area of spatial statistics is at the cutting edge of statistical research. The major application of this form of statistics is to the disciplines of geology and geography. Research articles on the use of spatial statistics in geographical information systems (GIS) were collected and published. Topics discussed include the use of static images on the internet, software platforms for analysis of spatial statistics as well as principles for GIS.<sup>58</sup>

Thirdly, two projects can be used to display how USJ has worked to aid China in its efforts at *globalisation* by using Macau as a platform.

An international conference on BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India, and China) was held in Macau on 26–28 November 2009. The meeting brought together scholars and former diplomats from the four countries, including researchers from Macau. They discussed the important contributions Brazil, Russia, India, and China made to help the world economy during the 2008–2009 global financial crisis. A stated objective is to discuss how Macau can serve as a platform for exchange and discussion among Brazil, Russia, India, and China. The conference was jointly organised by USJ and the Macao Association for the Promotion of Exchange between Asia-Pacific and Latin America (MAPEAL).<sup>59</sup>

An international conference “China-Africa: New Types of Exchange, Cultural Identity and Emerging Relations in a Globalized World” was held in Macau on 24–25 May 2010. The meeting brought together sixteen academics and researchers from the two regions, including mainland China, Macau, Nigeria, and Tanzania. Some discussed topics like Chinese foreign aid and investment in African countries. Others discussed topics like Sino-African relations and the role of Africans working in China. Again, a stated objective is to discuss how Macau can serve as a platform for exchange and discussion between the two regions. The conference was organised by the USJ Center for African Research and Development Studies (CARDS).<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Karen Araño Tagulao, Chan Shek Kiu, Susana Wong, Put O. Ang and Karen Kam, *Macao's Mangroves* (Macau: University of Saint Joseph, 2013).

<sup>58</sup> João Garrott Marques Negreiros, Fernando Aguilar Torres and Manuel Aguilar Torres, *Lectures on Spatial Statistics for GIS* (Macau: Saint Joseph Academic Press, 2011).

<sup>59</sup> The proceedings of the conference are published in Gary Ngai and Ivo Carneiro de Sousa, ed., *BRIC in Macau* (Macau: Saint Joseph Academic Press, 2011).

<sup>60</sup> The proceedings of the conference are published in Ivo Carneiro de Sousa, Ansoumane Douty Diakite and Ojo Olukayode Iwaloye, ed., *China-Africa: Emerging Relations* (Macau: Saint Joseph Academic Press, 2011).