

# Manichaeism, Buddhism and Christianity in Marco Polo's China

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# MANICHAISM, BUDDHISM AND CHRISTIANITY IN MARCO POLO'S CHINA

BY LEONARDO OLSCHKI

One of the most important passages in the rediscovered version of Marco Polo's *Description of the World* is devoted to an alleged Christian congregation of Foochow, the busy seaport and capital of Fukien province in southern China<sup>1</sup>. There is no other evidence of the existence of a large Christian community in that town at that period<sup>2</sup>. Chinese sources of the Yüan era give only scanty and mostly indirect information about religious groups and matters. The existence of such a community cannot be denied, however, just because it is not mentioned in Chinese documents or in the reports of other Western travellers. Friar Odoric of Pordenone is the only one of the early Franciscan missionaries in China who mentioned the town of Foochow: "a mighty fine one", as he says, "and stands upon the sea"<sup>3</sup>. Impressed as he was by "the biggest cocks in the world" which he saw there, and even more by some "hens ... white as snow", he overlooked what Marco Polo described as a substantial Christian group in that town.

The Venetian traveller did not take his discovery lightly. He was so deeply impressed that he gave an unusually circumstantial report of the event and a detailed description of the people and things observed in that environment. No less impressed were the readers of that passage when it first appeared in Benedetto's critical edition.

Rev. A. C. Moule, the well-known historian of old Chinese Christianity, was inclined to see in that community a survival of the first

1. Cf. Marco Polo, *Il Milione*, ed. L. Foscolo Benedetto, Firenze, 1928, pp. 157 ff. and Marco Polo, *Description of the World*, ed. and transl. by A. C. Moule and P. Pelliot, London, 1938, Vol. I, pp. 348 f. and II (the Latin text of the Toledo Manuscript Z), pp. LIII f.

2. Cf. A. C. Moule, *Christians in China before 1500*, London, 1930, p. 143.

3. Cf. *Sinica Franciscana*, ed. by A. van den Wyngaert, Quaracchi (Florence), Vol. I, 1929, p. 461. Engl. translation by H. Yule, *Cathay*, 2nd ed., Vol. II (London, 1913), p. 186.

Nestorian Christians who settled in China in the seventh century; but he also expressed the "uncomfortable suspicion" that they may have been worshippers of the "San Chiao" or "Three Teachings" whom Marco Polo hastened into the Christian church<sup>4</sup>.

Almost at the same time Paul Pelliot expressed the opinion that these pretended Christians of Foochow, in whom Marco and his uncle Maffeo took so much pride and interest, were in reality Manichaeans<sup>5</sup>. This suggestion is the more notable as Pelliot had already given conclusive evidence of the persistence of Manichaean groups in Fukien as late as the seventeenth century<sup>6</sup>. Unfortunately the great scholar confined his view to a few words, as he frequently did, and therefore it is appropriate for us to discuss now in greater detail the fascinating report which is little known even among Orientalists and represents one of the most vivid documents of religious life in medieval China<sup>7</sup>.

Marco Polo narrates that in the said city of Foochow "a certain wise

4. A. C. Moule, *Christians in China*, p. 143.

5. Review of Benedetto's edition of Marco Polo's *Milione*, in *Journal des Savants*, January, 1929, p. 42.

6. Cf. "Les traditions manichéennes au Foukien" in *T'oung Pao*, Vol. XXII, 1923, pp. 193 ff. A. B. Duvignan, "L'expansion nestorienne en Chine d'après Marco Polo" in *Le Bulletin Catholique de Pékin*, XXI, 1934, pp. 416 ff. still believes that the community of Foochow was a Christian one and composed by Nestorians of Persian origin. The episode was, of course, unknown to J. Witte, *Das Buch des Marco Polo als Quelle für die Religionsgeschichte*, Berlin, 1916.

7. In a "debunking" article published in *Revue d'Histoire Ecclésiastique*, Vol. XLII, 1, 1947, pp. 110 ff. L. Dieu declared the newly rediscovered version of Marco Polo's book (ms. Z) valueless and without interest for the reconstruction of the authentic or original text. No evidence is given for this arbitrary conclusion which ignores or minimises the studies of Benedetto, Denison Ross, Pelliot, Moule and other scholars. M. Dieu has even overlooked the discovery and publication of the Toledo manuscript described at length in the Introduction to Moule-Pelliot's monumental edition of that text (Vol. I, pp. 47 ff.), published in 1938 (cf. above n. 1). There is a general and well founded agreement among well informed and more conscientious scholars that, despite some omissions and abridgments, the text is authentic and reliable. The marginal notes, written by the same scribe, mostly refer to religious matters mentioned in the text. Most probably this version has been compiled from a lost revised edition of Marco Polo's book and may be attributed to a monk or cleric interested in missionary work and in the religious situation of medieval Asia, with special regard to the Far East.

Saracen'' called the attention of the two Venetian travellers to a number of people whose religion no one understood, because it was neither Buddhism nor worship of fire, neither the cult of Mohammed nor the Christian rule. When Marco and Maffeo went to see these people in order to inquire about their faith and life, the members of that unidentified community feared that the two strangers had been deputed by the great lord Kublai Khan to make an investigation which would lead to the suppression of their religion or the punishment of its adherents. But after repeated visits and conversations the two Venetians were able to gain their confidence and "to make themselves at home with them", particularly after they found that these people held to the Christian religion. As evidence for this assumption Marco mentions a Psalter found among their books which he and his uncle began to translate "from word to word and from tongue to tongue". Moreover, they discovered in one of their temples three painted figures "who had been three apostles of the seventy who had gone preaching through the world". Of their religion and rites the members of that congregation only revealed that they held them from their predecessors and were ignorant of the chief things, confining themselves to doing reverence to the three apostles according to their books.

"Then Masters Mafeu and Marc said, 'You are Christians and we are likewise Christians. We advise you to send to the great Kaan and explain to him your state, that he may come to know you and you may be able freely to keep your religion and rule.' For because of the idolaters they did not well dare to express or to hold their religion openly. And so they sent two of them to the great Kaan; Masters Mafeu and Marc instructed them that they should present themselves first to a certain man who was the head of the Christians at the court of the Great Kaan, that they might declare their case in the presence of the lord. And the messengers did so. But what? He who was head of the Christians was before the great Kaan declaring that these were Christians and that they ought to be confirmed in his dominion as Christians. And he who was



head of the worshippers of idols, perceiving this, raised a question on the opposite side saying that this ought not to be, for the aforesaid were idolaters and have always been, and were reckoned as idolaters. And thus there was a great argument over this in the presence of the lord. Finally the lord being angry, making all go away, ordered the messengers to come to him, asking them whether they wished to be Christians or idolaters; who answered that if it should please him and were not contrary to his majesty, they wished to be Christians as their predecessors had been. Then the great Kaan ordered privileges to be made for them, how they must be addressed as Christians and be able to keep the law of Christianity, all who are included under this rule. For it was found that through the province of Mangi, here and there, were more than seven hundred thousand families who were following this rule<sup>8</sup>.”

Every episode, even every sentence of this passage contains some striking details and puzzling problems worth closer consideration. The first thing for our purpose is to discuss the elements in Marco Polo's report which seem to speak in favor of Christianity on the one hand, and of Manichaeism on the other. According to Rev. A. P. Moule, the mention of the three apostles and the Psalter seems “definitely to point to Nestorian Christians”<sup>9</sup>. Furthermore, the almost contemporary mention in Chinese sources of an active Christian community in Wenchow, an important center in the neighbouring province of Chêkiang<sup>10</sup>, could well support Marco Polo's impression and the conclusions of his modern interpreter.

Yet the assertion of a local Mohammedan informant, well acquainted with the same community of Foochow, excludes its being Christian or belonging to other religions openly professed at that time in the Chinese empire. But the most striking evidence against Marco Polo's identification is the strong secrecy in which such an important congregation is said to have subsisted for a long time among people of different faiths and apparently ignored by the officials of the Yüan administra-

8. Moule-Pelliot, *op. cit.*, pp. 349 f. 9. *Christians in China*, loc. cit. 10. *Ibid.*, p. 222 ff.

tion. It is indeed this very secrecy that reveals those people as Manichaeans rather than Christians.

For the correct appreciation of this fact and the better understanding of the whole narrative, it may be recalled that of all the foreign cults suppressed in China after the famous imperial edict of 843 A.D., the religion of Mani was never restored in the country with official recognition<sup>11</sup>. While Christianity, Judaism and Mohammedanism were admitted and reorganized under imperial supervision during the Yüan era, there is no evidence of an open revival of Manichaeism in China after its temples, books and images were destroyed by the order of Wu-tsung, the T'ang emperor, and its priests and adherents secularized, executed or exiled.

Apparently some groups were secretly reconstituted and subsisted in disguise in faraway provinces, such as mountainous and conservative Fukien<sup>12</sup>. The same happened in the Christian West after imperial edicts, pontifical proscriptions and attempts at wholesale extermination failed to suppress the sect and its subtle and tenacious influence in many fields of religious and intellectual life<sup>13</sup>. The regroupment of survivors and reorganization of underground communities went on everywhere much in the same way, with the adherents of the sect simulating to profess one of the dominant or tolerated religions. In the Christian West they pretended to be Christians, in China they passed themselves off for a Buddhist sect. This is what Emperor Hsüan-tsung had to stigma-

11. Cf. E. Chavannes et P. Pelliot, *Un traité Manichéen retrouvé en Chine* (Extrait du *Journal Asiatique*), Paris, 1912, espec. pp. 246 ff. Moreover T. A. Bisson, "Some Chinese Records of Manichaeism in China" in *The Chinese Recorder*, Vol. LX, 1929, pp. 413 ff. and F. S. Drake, "Foreign Religions of the T'ang Dynasty" in *The Chinese Recorder*, LXXI, 1940, pp. 675-688.

12. Besides the contributions mentioned above cf. Wang-Kuo-wei, *Kuan T'ang Wai-chi*, Hou-pien, pp. 6b-14b, where Manichaean temples of the T'ang and Sung epochs are mentioned for Yangchow, Hungchow, Canton and other towns of Central and Southern China. Evidence of the existence of a Manichaean community in Fukien will be given by Professor Edward H. Schafer of the University of California in a forthcoming article on the « History of the Empire of Min » to be published in the *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*.

13. Steven Runciman, *The Medieval Manichee*, Cambridge, 1947.

tize already in 732, when for political reasons he granted them some protection against popular protest and Buddhist accusation<sup>14</sup>.

Manichaeans were always and everywhere organized as a secret society. Ten centuries of persecution in Rome, Byzantium, Iran, the Mohammedan Middle East and China had improved their ability to profess outwardly any religion. They told "the Christians they were the only Christians. They persuaded the followers of Zoroaster that they were the only true Zoroastrians and the Buddhists that they were the same Buddhists, while at the same time they were trying to undermine all these faiths<sup>15</sup>." Conversely, they took over from their environment whatever could be adjusted to their doctrines and habits.

This ambiguous attitude of the Manichaeans in their struggle for survival and expansion can be explained, on the one hand, by the dominant position granted to Jesus in their doctrines and rituals<sup>16</sup>, and, on the other, by the inspiration Mani himself might have drawn from Buddha's teachings<sup>17</sup>. The Asiatic congregations of the sect and their polyglot literature agreed in considering Buddha a spiritual predecessor of Mani, and Mani himself a reincarnation of Buddha<sup>18</sup>. The world-wide expansion of Manichaeism in many versions of its dualistic principles caused its Western sects to accept Buddhist influence<sup>19</sup> and its Eastern ramifications to assimilate some Christian elements<sup>20</sup>.

14. Chavannes-Pelliot, *op. cit.*, p. 178 f.

15. Cf. Francis Legge, "Western Manichaeism and Turfan Discoveries" in *Journ. of the Roy. Asiat. Soc.*, 1913, p. 87.

16. Cf. E. Waldschmidt and W. Lenz, «Die Stellung Jesu im Manichaeismus» in *Abhandlungen der Preuß. Akad. d. Wissenschaften*, 1926, Philos.-Hist. Klasse, No. 4.

17. This influence once strongly asserted by F. Chr. Baur, *Das Manichäische Religionssystem*, Tübingen, 1831, is now somewhat controversial (cf. the article "Manichaeismus" by H. J. Polotsky in Pauly-Wissowa's *Real-Enzyklopädie der klass. Altertumswissenschaft*, Suppl. VI, 1935, col. 240 ff.) although undoubtedly Mani founded his first community in Northern India and acknowledged Buddha as one of his predecessors (cf. A. V. Williams Jackson, *Researches in Manichaeism*, New York, 1932, p. 7, and Polotsky, *art. cit.*, col. 268).

18. Chavannes-Pelliot, *op. cit.*, offer many examples of this aspect of Oriental Manichaeism.

19. Runciman, *op. cit.*, p. 149, 172, 186 f., and Polotsky, *art. cit.*

20. Chavannes-Pelliot, *op. cit.*, p. 160, and G. Messina, *Cristianesimo, Buddismo, Manicheismo nell'Asia Antica*, Roma, 1947, p. 235.

In that way the congregation of Foochow was able to fool the two Venetian travellers as well as the imperial Board of Rites, as is dramatically described in the final episode of Marco Polo's narrative. Asked by the emperor to solve the question by themselves, the representatives of the community (probably two of its Elects) did not reveal their true religious affiliation and accepted Christianity as the lesser of the two evils.

This was a move of great ability on the part of the two messengers. In the years of Polo's wanderings in the South, Kublai Khan had shown an increasing coolness toward Buddhist institutions in China to the advantage of Lamaistic doctrines and influence embodied in the person of his Tibetan protégé, the famous Phags Pa. This prelate of the Lamaist church was officially proclaimed the spiritual master of the country. With that the emperor weakened the position of the national Buddhist church of China, after having rendered powerless the Confucian literati and ordered the destruction of all Taoist books except the *Tao Té Ching*<sup>21</sup>.

He never failed, however, to give protection and privileges to the Nestorian Christians who lived in all parts of China in considerable number and were never disturbed in the open practice of their religion<sup>22</sup>. Its adherents were almost exclusively immigrants from the northwestern borderlands and loyal to the emperor who, as the son of a Nestorian princess, remained sentimentally attached to a creed considered a national Mongolian religion and highly influential among the aristocracy of leading Turkish and Mongolian tribes. The Christians took advantage of this situation to the point that once the Buddhist and Taoist authorities of Wenchow, in the neighbouring province of

21. These events and developments in the religious and cultural history of the Yüan empire have been considered with special care by: C. d'Ohsson, *Histoire des Mongols*, 1835, Livre III, ch. 2 and more recently by O. Franke, *Geschichte des Chinesischen Reiches*, Vol. IV, Berlin, 1948, pp. 480ff. Cf. also the brief survey of E. Haenisch, "Die Kulturpolitik des Mongolischen Weltreiches" in *Preuß. Akad. der Wissenschaften, Vorträge und Schriften*, No. 17, Berlin, 1943; R. Grousset, *L'Empire des Steppes*, Paris, 1948 (reprint of the 1939 edition), pp. 365ff.

22. Cf. A. C. Moule, *Christians in China*.

Chêkiang, filed a protest with the imperial Board of Rites because those foreigners had succeeded in usurping the power and authority of the national churches of the country<sup>23</sup>.

The representatives of the Foochow community, hard pressed by the competent and competing authorities, and finally angrily addressed by the emperor himself, took sides with the Christians in order to extricate themselves from an embarrassing alternative and to put their co-religionists under imperial protection.

Kublai's attitude in this affair is in line with the traditions of the Genghiskanides in similar circumstances. It recalls Möngke Khan's reaction to the first recorded public debate between a Catholic and a Buddhist monk at Karakorum, in 1253<sup>24</sup>. It also corresponds with Marco Polo's impression that "these Tartars do not care what God is worshipped in their lands. If only all are faithful to the Lord Kaan and quite obedient, and give therefore the appointed tribute, and justice is well kept, thou mayest do what pleaseth thee with the soul<sup>25</sup>."

The congregation of Foochow had evaded the control of the state by garbing themselves as members of an authorized religious body. The underground existence of these isolated groups explains the fear of the two messengers and the reluctance of their fellow-believers to reveal the secret of their faith. This fear was perfectly justified because as late as 1166 one of the most active Chinese literati of that brilliant period of Sung civilization, the official man of letters Lu Yu from Chêkiang, denounced the Manichaeans of southern China as responsible for the calamities of his time and asked Emperor Hsiao-tsung to take radical measures against the sect<sup>26</sup>.

23. Ibid., p. 222 ff.

24. Cf. *Sinica Franciscana*, I, pp. 297 ff. and W.W. Rockhill, *The Journey of William of Rubruck*, London, 1900, pp. 235 ff.

25. This passage is preserved in the Z version only (cf. Moule-Pelliot, I, p. 96) and very characteristic of Marco Polo's style and attitude.

26. Chavannes-Pelliot, *op. cit.*, pp. 301 ff. As to Lu Yu, cf. H. Giles, *Chinese Biographical Dictionary*, under that name, p. 552.



Manichaeans were not officially proscribed by the following Yüan administration, but simply ignored and never mentioned in its annals and files. Yet failure to register with its Board of Rites was in itself an offense against the authority of the state in its political, fiscal and religious jurisdiction. Moreover, unlike the Christians, Mohammedans and Jews of the empire, the Manichaeans were not foreigners but prevailingly natives, converts or descendants of the early Chinese members of the sect. They could even boast among their adherents some high officials, literati, wealthy men and noblewomen all active in the religious practice and clandestine propaganda of the "Luminous Religion"<sup>27</sup>.

This circumstance would have aggravated the fate of the congregation because of the suspicious attitude of the Mongol authorities towards intellectual undercurrents among the native population. With the incorporation of the community of Foochow into the Christian sodality, its members escaped danger and persecution on the one hand; and on the other hand came automatically under the special board created by the emperor, under the name of *Ch'ungfu szu*, entrusted with the supervision of Christian affairs in the Chinese empire<sup>28</sup>. This may be the reason why Manichaeans never appear in the documents of the Yüan dynasty.

Marco Polo's report contains the only example of the procedure adopted by the Board of Rites in such controversial cases. Despite some emotional exaggerations and his ignorance of the truth behind the facts, his account is trustworthy and bears witness to the authenticity of the whole passage contained in the newly discovered version of his book. No profession of faith was forced upon the envoys of the Foochow congregation. It was the task of the presidents of Buddhist and Christian boards to decide on doctrinal and ecclesiastical evidence to which one of the respective churches that community actually belonged. In defending his cause, "the head of the worshippers of idols", that is, in

27. Chavannes-Pelliot, *op. cit.*, p. 304.

28. For the organization of this Board cf. A. C. Moule, *Christians in China*, pp. 225 ff.



Marco Polo's words, the president of the Buddhist board, pretended that "the aforesaid ... have always been and were reckoned as idolaters", that is, as members of the Buddhist church. In fact, as Manichaeans had always been suspect to the Chinese authorities and only tolerated out of laxity or for political reasons, they screened themselves behind a Buddhist ceremonial and terminology which became essential aspects of their doctrines and rites.

To a certain extent the Christians did the same in different periods of their existence in the Far East, but rather through a natural adjustment to the environment, as, for instance, by the congregation of Sianfu in the eighth century<sup>29</sup>, or with calculated purpose as in the case of Pater Matteo Ricci who, at the end of the sixteenth century, wore the costume of the Chinese Buddhist monks for six years before starting his missionary activity in Nanking and Peking<sup>30</sup>. But in the Manichaean literature of China the Buddhist spirit and phraseology are incomparably more evident and influential than the Christian ones, to an extent that the doctrines of that sect often appear to be paraphrases of the sacred books of Buddhism<sup>31</sup>. Shākyamuni was, like Jesus and Zoroaster, one of the "messengers of light" who preceded Mani in his attempts at universal salvation. The mythology developed by Mani and his followers upon the basic dualism of their articles of faith had been interpreted in the Central Asiatic and Chinese diaspora with Buddhist and Taoist myths, symbols and tenets<sup>32</sup>.

While the natives could take an indigenous Manichaean community for a Buddhist sect, the Christians of China and their chief in the Mongol administration could easily insist, as the Polos did, on claiming the

29. Cf. P.Y. Saeki, *The Nestorian Documents and Relics in China*, Tokyo, 1937.

30. Cf. L. J. Gallagher, S. J., *The China That Was* (from the Latin of P.N. Trigault), Milwaukee, 1942, p. XII.

31. Cf. the material collected by Chavannes-Pelliot, *op.cit.*, and the contributions of Legge and Bisson quoted above.

32. The affinities between the three religions became so strong that Taoists and Buddhists considered Manichaeism a heresy rather than an independent creed.

congregation of Foochow for themselves. Their attitude was justified by the worship of Jesus in the Manichaeic system and his importance in the fundamental doctrines of Mani himself<sup>33</sup>. In the form *I-shu*, Jesus is mentioned in the Chinese Manichaeic treatise written in the tenth century and preserved in the National Library of Peking<sup>34</sup>. His name and figure are omnipresent (in an uncanonical function, it is true) in many of the sacred books of the "Luminous Religion". In Manichaeic writings and traditions Mani appears as an apostle of Jesus.

For that reason the ecclesiastical authorities of Peking could not come to an agreement. And while a Mohammedan layman of Fukien rightly noticed that the congregation was neither Buddhist nor Christian, the Polos failed to recognize in frequent discussions with their informants their doctrinal affinity with the Italian heretics of the same period. This failure is very curious because Marco applied to Buddhist and Hindu sectarians the same epithet used by his contemporaries to designate the Cathars and other heretical groups of his native country<sup>35</sup>. Some of these Patarins, already exterminated in southern France during the short and bloody Albigensian Crusade, still existed during Marco Polo's youth in northern Italy, where small fanatic groups lived in secrecy and in Christian disguise very much like the Manichaeans of Fukien<sup>36</sup>. A few years before the latter were discovered by the Polos, around sixty of those "Patarins" were found in Sirmio on Lake Garda

33. Waldschmidt-Lenz, *op. cit.*, with many quotations from Chinese texts. Frequent mention of the transcendent rather than the crucified Christ in the *Manichaeic Homilies* publ. by H. J. Polotsky, Stuttgart, 1934, and the *Manichaeic Psalmbook*, ed. by C. R. C. Allberry, Stuttgart, 1938.

34. Chavannes-Pelliot, *op. cit.*, p. 70 (*I chou*).

35. Marco Polo reports (Yule, *Travels*, I., p. 303) that the Buddhists of Eastern Asia despise the Taoists as heretics "Patarins as we should say", and so did the adherents to India's leading sects with regard to the "Govis", or Paryah, who "are looked on much as we look on the Patarins" (*Ibid.*, II, p. 342).

36. Cf. Felice Tocco, *L'eresia nel Medio Evo*, Firenze, 1884, and S. Runciman, *op. cit.*, pp. 116 ff., esp. pp. 128 ff.

and burned alive in a public place in Verona, seventy-odd miles distant from Marco's home in Venice<sup>37</sup>.

Not even his uncle, Master Maffeo, who had spent many years travelling in Eastern Europe before settling down in the Far East, found out that the pretended Christians of Foochow shared with the Bogumils of the Balkans, the Cathars of Languedoc and the Patarins of Italy the dualistic doctrines and the Messianic beliefs characteristic of the Manichaean religion and its Zoroastrian or Gnostic antecedents. It was this dualism, developed in all its sects and groups throughout the Old World which determined the popularity of Manichaeism in medieval China. In all its congregations Jesus was worshipped equally with Mani as a divine being and as the instrument of divine redemption. It was the idea of the metaphysical coexistence of God and evil as cosmic and moral forces that caused the irreconcilable antagonism between these sects and the Christian orthodoxy, to a point where their heresies became the starting point for new and independent ecclesiastical organizations.

Of the spiritual background and the organization of the Foochow church Marco Polo seems to have understood as little as the members of the Board of Rites. Making themselves at home with some members of the congregation, the Polos must have had intercourse with its Elects who probably still lived according to the rules and had passed through the different phases of an elaborate initiation. These precepts and customs they said had been preserved for seven centuries, handed down from their ancestors without any other guidance than their books<sup>38</sup>.

This is another example of the stagnant hereditary traditionalism characteristic of Oriental Nestorianism, Zoroastrianism and Judaism, also of Mohammedanism and every religion disconnected from its ordinary center and condemned to a spiritual inbreeding among the overwhelming number of Chinese of other and different faiths. Since Mani-

37. The event is recorded by a Mantuan chronicle under 1276. Cf. Yule, *Travels*, etc., I, p. 321.

38. Cf. Moule-Pelliot's edition of Marco Polo's *Description of the World*, I, p. 349.

chaeism was introduced in China by Iranians at the end of the seventh century, there is only slight exaggeration in the age attributed by Marco's informants to the community, which lingered on in the same way and place for another five hundred years<sup>39</sup>.

In fact, some Manichaeian groups escaped the persecution of 843. The community of Foochow might have been one of those secretly reconstituted in southern China and preserved under the mild religious policy of the Sung and Yüan dynasties. Its adherents must have been comparatively few if they could pass unnoticed for the duration of the Yüan dynasty. The 700,000 families Marco Polo included, with overenthusiastic exaggeration, "under this rule", probably were an estimate of the Christians in China, certainly embracing the numerous Nestorians living in compact groups in other provinces as well as the diaspora of recent immigrants from Armenia, Alania and other Western Asiatic countries under Mongol sway<sup>40</sup>.

The evidence that prompted the two Venetians to discover a Christian church in Foochow was fallacious and misleading. Among the books owned by the congregation the Polos were able to identify only a Psalter which they say to have read and interpreted word by word. This remark is surprising and problematic in many respects. The existence of temple libraries in every Manichaeian congregation of China is con-

39. Five hundred and ninety years had elapsed from the introduction of Manichaeism in China (694) to Marco Polo's passing through Foochow on his way to or from India, in 1289. According to O. Franke, *Geschichte des Chinesischen Reiches*, IV, pp. 477f. it was in this same year that the *Ch'ung fu szu* was organized for the supervision of Christian affairs, so that the case of the supposed Christians of Foochow would have been one of the first ones debated in that institution. Nevertheless it should be remembered that the Board of Rites existed since Kublai's accession to the throne, in 1259. Soon afterwards the emperor appointed as a president of this board one of the highest officials of his court, an Ongut highly praised in the *Annals of the Empire* for his skill and devotion to the dynasty. Cf. Saeki, *op. cit.*, pp. 489 ff.

40. A. C. Moule, *Christians in China*, p. 143, supposes that "we may have here Marco Polo's account of the institution of the *Ch'ung fu szu*" according to the 72 local offices for the management of the Christian affairs in China.

firmed by several allusions in Chinese texts and documents<sup>41</sup>. Lu Yu insists on the great number of Manichaeian books circulating in the country and printed from wooden blocks for purposes of propaganda<sup>42</sup>. Most of these texts cloak Mani's doctrines in Buddhist terms and phraseology, and some of them were included in the Taoist canon<sup>43</sup>. But there is no trace of Biblical books in the Manichaeian literature of medieval Asia.

It is quite obvious that the Psalter was known in thirteenth-century China among the Christians and Jews settled in many important centers of the country. William of Rubruck reports that the Nestorians of Mongolia "used to recite I know not what verses of a psalm according to them" when making their incantations<sup>44</sup>. In telling the story of Genghis Khan's war against Prester John, that is, the Ong Khan of the Keraites, Marco Polo reports that the Christian astrologers of the future emperor "read a psalm out of the Psalter" when proceeding to their magic practice<sup>45</sup>. The text was probably in Syriac as was most of the Nestorian liturgy, but no longer understood by the indigenous clergy<sup>46</sup>.

Although Manichaeism had rejected the Old Testament with horror as a book inspired by the God of Darkness, it is certain that an exception was made for the Psalter, a book that evidently inspired the Manichaeian hymns sung in the old Iranian and Central Asiatic congregations of the sect<sup>47</sup>. Some passages of the Psalter had passed verbatim into the Manichaeian liturgy as the only quotation from the Old Testament to be found in their books<sup>48</sup>. The fact that the Psalter was the only Biblical

41. Chavannes-Pelliot, *op. cit.*, pp. 302, 310 and *passim*.

42. *Ibid.*, p. 313. The burning of these books and printing blocks was suggested by this author in a memoir sent to the Sung emperor, in 1166.

43. L. Wieger, *Taoisme*, 1911, does not list the two treatises mentioned by Chavannes-Pelliot, *op. cit.*, p. 289, soon suppressed by the Taoist orthodoxy.

44. Rockhill, *op. cit.*, p. 195; *Sinica Franciscana*, I, p. 268.

45. Yule, *Travels*, etc., I, p. 274.

46. Rockhill, *op. cit.*, p. 158; *Sin. Franc.*, I, p. 238.

47. On the Manichaeian liturgy cf. the literature mentioned above, n. 33.

48. These passages are listed in Allberry's edition of the *Manichaeian Psalmbook*, quoted above n. 33.



text the Polos found in the temple library of Foochow supports the idea that it belonged to a Manichaean rather than a Christian congregation<sup>49</sup>. It is even possible that they took for a Psalter what might have been a collection of Manichaean hymns, which, even if developed on other than Biblical traditions, still have a touch of religious fervor, of inspired devotion and poetical ecstasy that approaches King David's songs. A literary appreciation of these hymns, psalms and homilies, handed down in Coptic, Iranian, Turkish and Chinese versions, has not yet been critically and systematically undertaken<sup>50</sup>.

Be it as it may, the "Book of King David" had been translated into Chinese nearly five hundred years earlier by the same priest who composed, in 781, the famous inscription of Sianfu<sup>51</sup>. This active Nestorian missionary seems to have translated also some Buddhist and Manichaean treatises. He must have done the job as a professional scholar and author, equally versed in the Syrian and Persian languages and contemporary literary Chinese. This "monk of great virtue", Ching-ching by name, had a sponsor in Emperor Tê-tsung, whose great interest in religious matters turned out to the benefit of all foreign creeds, including Manichaeism and Zoroastrianism<sup>52</sup>.

That Chinese Psalter could have been very well adopted by the Manichaean communities then flourishing in China and handed down from generation to generation among "the sacred books of the religion of light". But in that case were the Polos able to read it "word by word" and to translate it with a correct understanding of the text? In the pro-

49. The Christian congregations in Asia possessed the Old and New Testament in a Syriac version and liturgical books in the same language. Cf. on this subject G. P. Badger, *The Nestorians and Their Rituals*, London, 1852, and E. Tisserant, in Vacant-Mangenot's *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique*, Vol. XI, col. 158 ff. (1931).

50. Something of this kind has been recently attempted by Torgny Säve-Söderbergh, *Studies in the Coptic Manichaean*, Uppsala, 1949, and for the Zoroastrian Gāthās by F. Altheim, *Literatur und Gesellschaft im ausgehenden Altertum*, Halle a. d. Saale, 1950, Vol. II, pp. 143-158.

51. Chavannes-Pelliot, *op. cit.*, p. 160; Saeki, *op. cit.*, pp. 80 ff., 250 ff., etc.

52. Cf. Saeki, *op. cit.*, p. 463 ff., and for that emperor O. Franke, *op. cit.*, Vol. II (1936), pp. 474 ff.



logue of his book Marco asserted that he knew several languages of Asia "and four sundry written characters"<sup>53</sup>. He was certainly trained in reading Persian, then the *lingua franca* of foreigners living in China and travelling in Asia<sup>54</sup>. As a functionary in the Mongolian administration he must have had a good knowledge of the Uighur-Mongolian script in which the orders of the emperors of the Yüan dynasty and the letters of the Ilkhans were usually written. He might have been familiar with the official script contrived on Kublai's order by the "highly venerable" Phags Pa, the first Pope of Tibet<sup>55</sup>. This script supplanted, after 1269, the Uighur alphabet and Chinese characters in the drafting of state documents and in the Mongolian translation of the sacred books of Lamaism promoted by the emperor. Obviously this literature did not include a Psalter or Manichæan hymns.

But there is no evidence that Marco Polo learned any Chinese during the seventeen years he spent in the Far East<sup>56</sup>. As a member of the Yüan administration and of Kublai's court he could have lived all those years in China without becoming familiar with the languages of the natives. But in travelling throughout the Far East as an emissary of the emperor and a functionary of the government, he must have had interpreters and informants well acquainted with both colloquial and literary Chinese<sup>57</sup>. The same kind of people that made the Venetian traveller acquainted with a more or less poetical description of Hang-

53. Yule, *op. cit.*, I, p. 27, and n. 1. 54. *Ibid.*, II, p. 5 n.

55. On this script cf. H. H. Howorth, *History of the Mongols*, Part IV, London, 1927, p. 129 f.; Franke, *op. cit.*, IV, pp. 7, 276, 352. Kublai Khan's edict on the reform of the official script appeared in 1269 and inaugurated its substitution for "the usual Chinese characters and the Uigur" alphabet, as reported in the *Yüan shih*, ch. 6, fol. 17 r, and ch. 202, fol. 2 r. (Franke).

56. Yule, *op. cit.*, Introduction, p. 110 and II, p. 183, n. 4.

57. This must have been the case during Marco's long stay in the newly conquered provinces of the South in which there were comparatively few foreigners and where the Mongolian administration was slow in substituting its official idiom for the elaborate Chinese language of the Sung. Without the mediation of skilled interpreters Marco Polo could not have spent three years as a governmental official in Yangchow, one of the oldest and most famous great cities of China. Cf. Yule, *op. cit.*, II, p. 154.

chow<sup>58</sup> might have helped him to decipher the Psalter of Foochow which he translated word by word.

All this is conjectural and there the matter must rest, as far as the Psalter is concerned. Fortunately, in the case of the three figures painted on a wall of the temple we are on firmer ground. A. P. Moule thought that they could have represented Addaeus, Mares, Aghaeus or other apostles of the Nestorian sect mentioned in its old records<sup>59</sup>. Yet there is no evidence of the Nestorians ever having adorned their churches with wall paintings of this kind. The scanty remains of a Nestorian iconography in Central Asia and the Far East show that it was confined to scenes of the Nativity and Baptism<sup>60</sup>. The dualistic concept of Christ as God and Man, characteristic of that sect, prevented the development of a consecrated iconography of the Saviour<sup>61</sup>. The first record of wall paintings in a Nestorian church of China mentions a picture of the Adoration of the Magi seen, in 1245, by the Armenian Prince Sempad in the Western border province of Hsi Hsia, the Tangut of Marco Polo<sup>62</sup>. Half a century later Friar John of Montecorvino adorned the first Catholic church of Peking with "six pictures illustrating the Old and New

58. Cf. A. C. Moule, "Marco Polo's Description of Quinsai" in *T'oung Pao*, XXXIII, 1931, pp. 105 ff.

59. *Christians in China*, p. 143. A complete list of the seventy apostles recognized by the Oriental church in Sir E. A. Wallis Budge's edition of *The Book of the Cave of Treasures*, London, 1927, pp. 253 ff. and 262 ff.

60. Cf. the scene of baptism (?) discovered in a ruined Nestorian church at Chotcho in Eastern Turkestan (Saeki, *op. cit.*, p. 417 f.) and the tomb-stones with the scenes of the Nativity discovered at Ch'ien Shan in Manchuria (*ibid.*, p. 412).

61. Cf. the author's book on *Guillaume Boucher: A French Artist at the Court of the Khans*, Baltimore, 1946, pp. 19 ff.

62. Cf. Assemani, *Bibliotheca Orientalis*, Roma, 1728, Vol. III, 2, p. 500. This representation of the Biblical episode gives evidence of its popularity in Asiatic Christianity (cf. the author's articles on "The Crib of Christ and the Bowl of Buddha" in *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, LXX, 1950, and "The Wise Men of the East in Oriental Traditions" in *Semitic and Oriental Studies in honor of W. W. Popper*, University of California Press, 1951). The pictorial representation of the Adoration of the Magi in that Nestorian church certainly had a dynastic rather than religious function. Prince Sempad heard there that "per illos tres reges Cham et omnes sui modo facti sunt christiani". A portrait of Sorhahtani, the Nestorian mother of Kublai Khan, probably fulfilled the same function in a Christian church of Kan-

Testament for the instruction of the ignorants", provided with "some explanations engraved in Latin, Tarsic and Persian characters"<sup>63</sup>.

Contrary to Nestorian traditions, painting was since Mani's day one of the most cherished manifestations of the Manichaean faith. His early followers developed an extensive iconography in illustrating their books with colorful miniatures and their temples with conspicuous paintings<sup>64</sup>. Like Saint Augustine, the Chinese Emperor Wu-tsung promoted the destruction of the images used in the Manichaean cult<sup>65</sup>. The fragments of frescoes and miniatures discovered in Central Asia, showing Chinese influence as well as Iranian features, still bear witness to the skill and devotion of those congregations along the overland routes through eastern Turkestan<sup>66</sup>. Yet nothing has survived of that early flowering of Manichaean art in China. The last allusion to Manichaean images in Foochow is contained in Lu Yu's passionate denunciation of that community<sup>67</sup>. Marco Polo's report has the advantage of giving some information about such images and of containing enough data at least for their partial identification.

One of the three figures certainly represented Mani himself. It is well known that his image existed in every temple of the sect. The usual designation of Mani as an *Apostle of Jesus* determined Marco Polo to pick up a term he probably heard from his informants in the temple and to extend it to the other portraits. We know too little about Manichaean iconography to be able to recognize the other two figures. In its early stages the religion of Mani acknowledged the twelve apostles as dis-

chou in Kansu mentioned in the *Yüan shih* (cf. A. C. Moule, *Christians in China*, p. 224n., and R. Grousset, *L'Empire Mongol*, Paris, 1941, p. 544).

63. Cf. *Sinica Franciscana*, I, p. 352.

64. St. Augustine and several Mohammedan authors mentioned Mani as a painter or inspirer of wonderful picture books. The passages are cited in the biographies of Mani quoted above.

65. Cf. *Contra Faustum*, ch. 13, and Wu-tsung's edict in L. Wieger, *Textes Historiques*, 3rd edit., 1940, Vol. II, pp. 1846 ff.

66. Cf. A. von Le Coq, "Manichäische Miniaturen" in *Die Buddhistische Spätantike in Mittelasien*, Berlin, 1923, Vol. II.

67. Chavannes-Pelliot, *op. cit.*, p. 313.

ciples of Jesus the Saviour and as models for its organization and expansion<sup>68</sup>. But as the Jesus of the Manichaeans is not the Christ of the Christian, so his apostles were not the same as those of the Gospel.

For Mani and his adherents all over the world they reflected and embodied the cosmic order represented by the constellations of the Zodiac, just as Jesus personified the redeeming light of the Sun and the Moon. Manichaeism acknowledged in its later development seventy *Magistri*, evidently registered in competition with as many disciples of Christ<sup>69</sup>. Marco Polo was misled by his Christian zeal to take the one for the others. Unfortunately the only extant Manichaean wall paintings, found by Von Le Coq in the ruine of a temple in Chotcho and executed before 1036, do not contribute to the identification of the images of Foochow<sup>70</sup>. There Mani is represented towering over a group of Elects dressed in characteristic sacerdotal costumes of the sect.

The three figures of Foochow seem to have been all of the same dimension and consequently of equal dignity and importance. In all probability they showed the three Messengers of Light recognized by the "Luminous Religion" in the persons of Mani, Buddha and Zoroaster. This interpretation is supported by orthodox Manichaean traditions as well as by Chinese authors who consider the Religion of Mani as a Buddhist heresy or an offspring of the Zoroastrian faith<sup>71</sup>. According to the characteristic syncretism of the Manichaean doctrines, all three religious leaders could well have passed for apostles of Jesus, the cosmic redeemer of the world never worshipped as a corporeal and historical figure, and therefore never represented by Manichaean painters in his human traits.

However it may be, it seems certain that the three "apostles" of

68. Cf. Baur, *op. cit.*, pp. 298 f.; Polotsky, *art. cit.*; G. Widengreen, "The Great Vohu Manah and the Apostle of God" in *Uppsala Universitets Årsskrift*, 1945, No. 5, where the Manichaean concept of apostleship is frequently discussed.

69. Cf. Baur, *op. cit.*, pp. 298. 70. Cf. above n. 66.

71. Chavannes-Pelliot, *op. cit.*, p. 170 and *passim*. The Magians themselves did not adorn their shrines with portraits of Zoroaster whose cult persisted in China into the Sung dynasty. Cf. on this point F. S. Drake, *op. cit.*, *The Chinese Recorder*, LXXI, 1940, pp. 343 ff.

Foochow were represented in a way that reminded of the Buddhist trinities usually painted in the temples of the Mahāyāna sects<sup>72</sup>. The “Three Precious Ones” appeared side by side on the wall of a temple’s main hall as the hypostases of Shākyamuni Buddha, just as the three images seen by the Venetian travellers in Foochow’s Manichaeon sanctuary. The doctrinal and iconographical entanglements of all Oriental creeds during half a millennium of Far Eastern religious life may serve as a historical justification of the fact that the very same images could have represented, alternatively or successively, the Manichaeon messengers of light, three Christian apostles and the Buddhist triad of Amithāba, Kuanyin and Ta-shih-chih.

It is possible that the ambiguous attitude taken over by the Manichaeans of Foochow when talking with the Venetians or discussing with the emperor’s officials was not dictated by sheer opportunism but also by the doctrinal insecurity of people who did not know what they were. In any case Marco Polo’s description of this community of Chinese Manichaeans is the most lively in the history of the sect, despite the lacunae and misinterpretations in his report. It does not offer theological discussions or angry indictments but a picture from life and a report of personal experiences.

In this form the episode shows a striking affinity with the circumstances that led, more than three hundred years later, to the discovery of a forgotten Jewish community in China. In this event a few printed books and three misinterpreted religious images played the same role as the Psalter of Foochow and the wall paintings in the temple. Although well known and frequently mentioned, a few passages from Pater Ricci’s famous letter of the 25th of July, 1605, seem to be the best

72. Examples of the representation of Buddhist trinities in Chinese temples are given by William Cohn, *Buddha in der Kunst des Ostens*, Leipzig, 1925, and R. Grousset, *The Civilization of the East*, engl. transl. by Catherine A. Phillips, New York, 1934, Vol. III, p. 194. In general Shākyamuni or Amitābha appear flanked by Maitreya or Ta-shih-chih on the right side and Kuanyin on the left. These images were particularly cherished by the adherents of the “Pure Land” sect. On supposed Christian influences cf. K. L. Reichelt, *Der Chinesische Buddhismus*, Basel, 1926.



illustration to Marco Polo's misunderstandings. Shortly before that date the learned Jesuit had been visited by a Jew from K'ai-fêng, the capital of Honan, who had come to Peking on business and revealed to him the existence of some Christians and Jews living in his home province and elsewhere in the Chinese empire. "We learnt this – Pater Ricci reports – from a Jew in religion, race and features, who came to see me the other day, attracted by what he had heard and by one of the many books which have been printed about our affairs ... He called in the octave of St. John Baptist and we had put on the altar a beautiful large image of our Lady with the child Jesus on the one side and St. John Baptist on the other. He did not know the name of Jew but called himself Israelite. And seeing these figures he thought that they were the two children Jacob and Esau, and so he said: 'Though I do not worship images, I want to show respect to these my forefathers'; and so he bowed and did reverence. And when he said at first that the founder of his religion had twelve sons, I thought that he was a Christian and was talking of the twelve Apostles, but in the end I found that he was not a Christian but was not much averse from Christianity<sup>73</sup>."

At that time Nestorian Christianity had already died out in the Far East, leaving behind some documents in stone and paper. Manichaeism was in its last gasp in the same place where Marco Polo had discovered it three hundred years before; and Judaism was so much advanced in its process of disintegration that, according to Pater Ricci's informant, "they could not keep their law in China". All these creeds and peoples had dissolved in the oceanic multitudes of China, swept away by the tide of her national life and history.

73. There are several versions of this report, slightly differing in wording, but all agreeing in the facts related. English translations of the report by A. C. Moule, *Christians in China*, pp. 1 ff.; Gallagher, *op. cit.*, p. 174; W. C. White, *Chinese Jews*, 3 vols., Toronto, 1942, I, pp. 8 f.; R. Löwenthal, "The Early Jews in China" in *Folklore Studies*, Catholic University of Peking, Vol. V, 1946, p. 394. On Ricci's informant cf. P. Pelliot, "Le Juif Ngai" in *T'oung Pao*, 1921, pp. 38 ff. and for the whole episode P. M. D'Elia, S. J., *Fonti Ricciane*, Vol. II (Rome, 1949), pp. 316 ff.