

Why did the Church of the East in China disappear?

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From a Western point of view, the establishment of a church in China in the seventh century by the isolated Persian church has often been seen as a great heroic missionary endeavour, and its vanishing so completely serving only to add to its mystery. However, it was as refugees from Persian persecution that the church fled across the Oxus, where it found itself part of the vibrant western hub of the Central Asian stretch of the Silk Road. Then it was only a matter of time before economic forces would speed the faith eastwards. The church, once established in China, concentrated on serving non-Chinese merchants and keeping the emperor as a friend. As soon as economics or politics failed it — and both did — it was gone.

Christianity, or *Jingjiao*¹ the Luminous Religion, is first mentioned in Chinese sources in the seventh century, during the reign of the Tang Emperor Taizong (reigned 626–649). However, it seems likely that the religion had made its first, tentative move into China earlier. Tang sources show a rudimentary knowledge of Christianity from the beginning, suggesting that Christianity was not entirely new to them.

Manichaeism and Christianity seem often to have been grouped together in Chinese understanding of ‘foreign religions’, with Zoroastrianism and Buddhism sometimes considered together. There is also indication that Manichaeism, Christianity and Mahāyāna Buddhism influenced each other on contact in north-western India (for example, the similarity between chapter four of the Lotus Sutra and the Parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15 is striking, with the biblical text transmitted either by Christians or Manichees). All of these religions spread into China along the Silk Road through Central Asia, and their respective distribution was closely interdependent. Buddhism became established in China during the sixth-century Nanbeichao period² as the land became more stable and international trade flourished. There are traces also

¹All Chinese names are presented in the Hanyu-pinyin system of transliteration for consistency within the essay and with modern standards. Many works on the subject use the older Wade-Giles system.

²Also known as the period of the Southern and Northern Dynasties (420–589).

of Zoroastrian and Manichaean activity in China during the latter part of that period. As Christianity preceded Manichaeism in the evangelization of Central Asia in every other instance, it seems highly likely that Christianity was present in China before the Tang period began.

During the fifth century, with persecution of Christians on the rise in Persia, many moved eastward. It was during this period that the metropolitan sees of Merv and Samarqand were established, and the Eastern Iranian Sogdian language mastered for evangelization and translation. A thriving Christian community across the Oxus with good knowledge of Sogdian was the key to eastern expansion. Sogdian was the *lingua franca* of Central Asia, thus Christian merchants and monks were well positioned to peddle their wares into the east. Also, the young Tang Dynasty had established a prosperous and stable state in China based on cooperation with the neighbouring Eurasian confederacies, who in turn honoured the Tang Emperor as their *Tiankehan*, or Heavenly Khan. The Tang capital, Chang'an (modern Xi'an), was a cosmopolis. Sogdian was widely understood and Turkic dress and culture widely practised.

How ever much the door was open to Christianity in China, translating the tenets of the religion into Chinese language and cultural context proved more difficult. The Christians, who had encountered Buddhism throughout Central Asia and had encountered Buddhist texts in Sogdian, first began to translate their texts into Chinese by using Buddhist calques. The earliest Chinese document to mention Christianity, of 635, uses the Buddhist term *xukong*, literally meaning 'emptiness', to refer to the Christian God, which perhaps demonstrates early difficulties in translating Christian thought for a Chinese audience. As Buddhism had established itself with a large output of translations from Indian languages and Sogdian as well as new compositions in Chinese, it won the war of words. Manichaean texts in Chinese are often difficult to distinguish from Buddhist texts as almost all technical religious vocabulary is pure Buddhist. The Christians also used Buddhist Chinese calques, many at first (including *buddha* to refer to the persons of the triune God in Aluoben's³ *Jesus Messiah Sutra*) before developing a more nuanced vocabulary (he had changed it for *yishen*, meaning 'one god', in his later *Discourse on Monotheism*). However, Buddhist linguistic influence is present in every text of the Church of the East in China.

The imperial edicts of 638 (Emperor Taizong) and 745 (Xuanzong) give more full accounts of the state of Christianity in China. The former involves an audience of a Persian, perhaps Sogdian (as his language was apparently understood at court), monk called Aluoben with the emperor. Aluoben brought Christian religious texts for the emperor to peruse, and the emperor, finding nothing but good in them, ordered the religion to be allowed and a monastery built in the Yining quarter of Chang'an for twenty-one monks. Even though Aluoben's audience is about the formal introduction of Christianity into China, it is clear that there is already some familiarity on both sides. The emperor's verdict on the acceptability of Christianity was based on the perception that it may have a calming influence on the populace, in accordance with Confucian principles, and that it was a true manifestation of the mystical *Dao*.⁴

³Older books romanise Aluoben's name as 'Alopen'.

⁴*Dao* is translated best as 'right path'. In older transliteration schemes it is written *Tao*, and thus is the basic principle of Taoism, and Chinese mystical religion.

Emperor Xuanzong's edict of 745 discusses the confusing way that Christian monasteries are called 'Persian monasteries' in Chinese, probably because Zoroastrian and Manichaean monasteries were also so named. The edict tells us that, as the religion originated in *Daqin*, the monasteries should be called '*Daqin* monasteries' instead. The term *Daqin* is an imprecise one, literally meaning 'Great Qin' after the founding dynasty of the Chinese Empire, used to refer to a cosmic balance to China in the west, and thus roughly the Roman or Byzantine Empire. The edict goes on to say that the monasteries in Chang'an and Luoyang should thus be renamed, and that the monasteries in the provinces should follow suit. In the previous year, the emperor had given each monastery a tablet to show imperial approval.

The supplication of Aluoben and the title *Daqin Jingjiao* (approximately the 'Roman luminous religion') is also mentioned by the famous *Jingjiaobei*, often known in the West as the Nestorian Stele. The stele's inscription consists of more than two-thousand Chinese characters with a small amount of Syriac in *Estrangelā* script. In style it resembles Buddhist inscriptions, in that its lengthy prose is summarised at the end in verse. The inscription, after opening remarks, relates a potted Christian *Heilsgeschichte* followed by the history of the Church of the East in China, which latter begins with Aluoben. The stele was erected in 781 (near the beginning of the reign of Emperor Dezong) either at the *Daqin* monastery in Chang'an or at that in Wuzhun near Zhouzhi, north-west of Chang'an. The Syriac remarks mention the author as being a Persian chorepiscopus called Adam, and the honoured donor as Yazdbuzid from Balkh in Tokharistan. In the Chinese, the former is referred to as Jingjing, and the latter is Yisi, a married monk who was lieutenant to General Guo Ziyi. From this and other writings (those found in the grottoes of Dunhuang) it is clear that the church was run by monks from Persia, Bactria and Sogdiana still a century and a half after the time of Aluoben.

Doctrinally, the stele is obscure. It begins with an awkward description of the Trinity, then discusses creation, the fall of humanity and Satan. It then discusses the life of the Messiah (*Mishihe*) with no mention of the crucifixion, and a rather vague wave at the resurrection

"Widely opening the Three Constant Gates, He brought Life to light and abolished Death. Hanging up the bright Sun, He swept away the abodes of darkness. All the evil devices of the devil were thereupon defeated and destroyed."⁵

The Christian texts found at Dunhuang also exhibit such vagueness and omissions of key theological principles. Further they show profound influence by Buddhist and Taoist principles, and encourage the Chinese traditional customs of ancestor and emperor worship. Christianity is referred to constantly as the *Dao* for which the Messiah is the master or revealer. Thus, emphasis is removed from the person of the Messiah to the following of the way that he revealed.

Throughout the Tang period, Christianity had remained a foreign religion in China. The major, urban monasteries existed to serve the needs of Persian, Sogdian and Turkic Christians, and the minor, more remote monasteries for monastic solitude. Although much Christian literature was translated into Chinese and some texts originally composed in the language, the native Chinese element in the church appears to have been marginal. Syriac remained the liturgical

⁵Translation after Saeki as quoted in Frits Holm's *My Nestorian Adventure in China*.

language and Sogdian the general language of Christians in China. The church was structured around its monasteries, that while not as introverted as those of the Zoroastrians, still must have had some of the feel of an enclosed embassy.

The church was clearly dependant on imperial support for its existence. Such support was warmly given by the early Tang emperors, perhaps for political and economical reasons. The emperors also supported Christianity in so far as it fitted into Confucian and Taoist ideals. Perhaps this then explains a pressure on Christian leaders in China to highlight these ideals in their texts even to the detriment of doctrine. In fact, the extant Chinese texts may have been intended to be read more by Chinese officials rather than converts. Reliant on imperial sanction in semi-secluded, foreign groups, Christians were vulnerable to the slightest change in imperial favour. As the ninth century began, the openness and freedom of the early Tang Dynasty began to fade. The emperors had become incompetent puppets and the Uyghur Khanate was pressing hard on the north-western borders of China. Emperor Wuzong (reigned 840–846) set about wresting power from the palace eunuchs, countering the Uyghur threat and reforming the country. A devout Taoist in need of funds for his government, Wuzong closed Buddhist monasteries, confiscating their property. In 845, he issued an edict extending this move to the other ‘foreign religions’. Christian monks were laicized and, if they were not Chinese, deported. The decree says that more than three-thousand Christian (*Daqin*) and Zoroastrian (*Muhufu*) monks were so treated. The persecution was swift and efficient, from which the church never recovered.

At the end of the tenth century, the Arabic writer Ibn al-Nadin spoke with a monk in Baghdad who had been sent on a mission to China by the Catholicos and found only one Christian. In spite of this, small Christian communities remained on the South China coast, especially in Zaitun (modern Quanzhou), sustained by the maritime Silk Road (linked via Melaka and India to the Red Sea), and Christianity remained strong among the Eurasian confederations. This last factor led to Christianity rising to some prominence once again in China under the Mongol Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368). However, under Mongol rule, Christianity was still considered a foreign religion, and when the Mongols were supplanted by the Han Ming Dynasty, such foreign influences were quickly expunged.

Although the Church of the East’s mission in China was dictated by circumstance in both its origin and its demise, it was, perhaps unexpectedly, imaginative and innovative in its interaction with other cultures, languages and religions. Therefore, it was perhaps rightly called the Luminous Religion that shined brightly if only for a short period.

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