

Dealing with Difference

Christian Patterns of Response to Religious Rivalry
in Late Antiquity and Beyond

Edited by

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ISBN 978-3-16-161071-4 / eISBN 978-3-16-161072-1
DOI 10.1628//978-3-16-161072-1

ISSN 1436-3003 / eISSN 2568-7433 (Studien und Texte zu Antike und Christentum)

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliographie; detailed bibliographic data is available at <http://dnb.dnb.de>.

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The book was typeset by Martin Fischer in Tübingen using Minion typeface, printed by Laupp & Göbel in Gomaringen on non-aging paper and bound by Buchbinderei Nädele in Nehren.

Printed in Germany.

Table of Contents

Preface	V
List of Abbreviations	IX

Geoffrey D. Dunn and Christine Shepardson

Introduction	1
--------------------	---

Part One: Strategies of De-escalation

Silke-Petra Bergjan

From Rivalry to Marginalisation: <i>Tomus ad Antiochenos</i> and the Paulinus Group in Antioch	19
---	----

Maijastina Kahlos

Heresy Test and the Barbarian Other	41
---	----

Jesse A. Hoover

“A City Founded in a Brother’s Blood”: Connecting Augustine and the Donatist Church	57
--	----

Geoffrey D. Dunn

Ecclesiastical Rivalry between Rome and Constantinople in the Early Fifth Century: Boniface I’s Diplomatic Efforts to De-escalate the Competition and Conflict about Perigenes of Corinth	77
---	----

Wendy Mayer

Using the Past to Reconcile the Present: The Diplomatic Correspondence Presented in Theodore of Trimithous’ <i>Vita Iohannis</i>	99
---	----

Chiara Tommasi

Early Christianity in the Celestial Empire: A Foreign Religion between Acceptance and Competition	117
--	-----

*Part Two: Strategies of Escalation**Chris L. de Wet*

Cain's Disease: Murder, Medicine, and Pedagogy in John Chrysostom's
Reading of the Cain and Abel Story 131

Pauline Allen

Post-mortem Polemics: The Literary Persecution of Severus
of Antioch (512–18) 155

Bronwen Neil

Rivalries in Rome: *Damnatio memoriae* and Forbidden Books
in the Letters of Pope Hormisdas (514–23) 167

Christine Shepardson

Remembering the Saints: John of Ephesus' *Commentarii* and the
Polarisation of the Chalcedonian Conflict 185

Hajnalka Tamas

Hagiography, Liturgy, and Christian Identity in Aquileia
from the Sixth to the Eighth Centuries 201

Alan H. Cadwallader

The Devil's Rap-Sheet: Protean Descriptions in the Story
of St Michael of Chonai 217

Bibliography 237

List of Contributors 279

Index 281

 Scriptures 281

 Modern Authors, Editors, and Translators 282

 Subjects 290

Early Christianity in the Celestial Empire

A Foreign Religion between Acceptance and Competition

Chiara Tommasi

This essay discusses some questions involved in the early diffusion of Christianity in China during the Tang dynasty (618–907). Investigating the first phase of the spread of Christianity in China can provide an excellent example of the dynamics between religion and politics, with particular concerns for the issues raised by the introduction of a new and foreign religion, as Christianity actually was (and was often considered as such in Chinese recordings). Although the different geographical setting, at first glance, may arouse the impression of something extraneous to the main focus of the other essays in the volume, the discursive strategy and the actors involved offer confirmation to some tendencies likewise attested to in the Graeco-Roman world of late antiquity. The points of comparison, if not links, between the Mediterranean world and East Asia are not to be overlooked. At the same time, the missionary impulse towards the East represents a lesser known, albeit interesting, case of shaping self-identity on the part of a minority, whose universalistic agenda led them to interact with the deeply distinctive Chinese culture and society within the frame of religious competition.

Whereas the mention of the *Seres* among the peoples already Christianised in Arnobius,¹ or other references to Christian missions in the Far East on the path of St Thomas are wrapped in legend,² it is under the Tang dynasty that Chris-

¹ Arnobius, *Adu. nat.* 2.12 (C. Marchesi, ed., *Arnobii adversus nationes libri vii*, Corpus Scriptorum Latinorum Pavarianum, vol. 62, 2nd edn [Turin: Paravia, 1953], 79).

² The term, with its implied reference to silk and silken garments is the current, although quite vague and in some respects exotic, denotes in Greek and Latin the inhabitants of central Asian regions such as Sogdiana or Transoxiana and, probably, China too. See J.-M. Poinssotte, “Les Romains et la Chine, réalités et mythes,” *MEFRA* 91 (1979): 431–79, a useful discussion about the few known data on the relationship between the Chinese empire and the Roman. As far as religious matters are concerned, it seems worth mentioning the curious statement of Origen, *C. Cels.* 7.62 (SC 150.160), a probable reference to Confucianism and its ethics; Bardaisan, *Liber legum regionum* (H. J. W. Drijvers, ed., *The Book of the Laws of Countries: Dialogue on Fate of Bardaisan of Edessa*, Semitic Texts with Translation, vol. 3 [Assen: Van Gorcum, 1966], 41); and also in the sections of Eusebius, *Praep. euang.* 6.10 (SC 266.212–32). Ps-Clement, *Recogn.* 9.19 (GCS 51.270), traces an extremely idealised portrait of the *Seres*. For recent attempts (either successful or unsuccessful) at detecting traces of Christianity prior to the Tang dynasty

tianity actually began to spread in the Celestial empire,³ therefore predating the better known efforts of Franciscan and Jesuit missionaries in the modern age.⁴ The diffusion of Christianity in the Tang period also pre-dates the numerous accounts of medieval voyagers, ambassadors, and writers of chronicles, who mention, often in surprised tones, the presence of Nestorian or Christian en-

see J. Ferreira, "Did Christianity Reach China in the Han Dynasty?" *Asia Journal of Theology* 21 (2007): 124–34. An introduction is provided by M. Deeg, "Along the Silk Road: From Aleppo to Chang'an," in *A Companion to Religion in Late Antiquity*, ed. N. J. Baker-Brian and J. Lössl (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2018), 233–53. For a more general perspective see A. Y. Reed, "Beyond the Land of Nod: Syriac Images of Asia and the Historiography of 'The West,'" *History of Religions* 49 (2009): 48–87; and R. Conte, "Tommaso e l'Oriente: la questione dei cristianesimi cinesi," *Rivista di Studi Indo-Mediterranei* 3 (2013): 1–20.

³ For a thorough discussion we rely on the publication of the stele in Xi'an, the most important document of this epoch, on which see some details *infra*. Besides the still excellent work by P. Pelliot, ed. with A. Forte, *L'inscription nestorienne de Si-ngan-fou* (Kyoto and Paris: Scuola di Studi Asia Orientale-Institut des Hautes Études Chinoises, 1996), see the recent English translation of the stele and other documents provided by L. Tang, *A Study of the History of Nestorian Christianity and its Literature in Chinese together with a New Translation of the Dunhuang Nestorian Documents* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2004); and J. Ferreira, *Early Chinese Christianity: The Tang Christian Monument and Other Documents*, Early Christian Studies, vol. 17 (Strathfield, NSW: St Pauls Publications, 2014). Very useful in particular for the Italian reader is also the translation (with a rich introduction) provided by M. Nicolini-Zani, *La via radiosa per l'Oriente* (Magnano: Qiqajon, 2006). I wish to thank Max Deeg for having allowed me to read, when still unpublished, his edition and invaluable commentary of the stele, which is now available as *Die Strahlende Lehre. Die Stele von Xi'an*, *Orientalia-Patristica-Oecumenica*, vol. 12 (Vienna: LIT Verlag, 2018). See also the previous versions by A. Wylie, "On the Nestorian Tablet of Se-gan Foo," *JAOS* 5 (1855–6): 275, 277–336; J. Legge, *The Nestorian Monument of Hsi-an Fû in Shen-hsi, China, Relating to the Diffusion of Christianity in China in the Seventh and Eighth Centuries; with the Chinese Text of the Inscription, a Translation, and Notes, and a Lecture on the Monument with a Sketch of Subsequent Christian Missions in China and their Present State* (London: Trübner, 1888); and P. Y. Saeki, *The Nestorian Monument in China* (New York: Macmillan, 1928). Among secondary literature, reference can be made to some miscellaneous volumes edited by D. W. Winkler and L. Tang, in particular *Hidden Treasures and Intercultural Encounters: Studies on East Syriac Christianity in China and Central Asia*, *Orientalia-Patristica-Oecumenica*, vol. 1, 2nd edn (Vienna: LIT Verlag, 2014); *From the Oxus River to the Chinese Shores: Studies on East Syriac Christianity in China and Central Asia*, *Orientalia-Patristica-Oecumenica*, vol. 5 (Vienna: LIT Verlag, 2013); and *Winds of Jingjiao: Studies on Syriac Christianity in China and Central Asia*, *Orientalia-Patristica-Oecumenica*, vol. 9 (Vienna: LIT Verlag, 2016).

⁴ After the classic study by A. C. Moule, *Christianity in China before the Year 1550* (London: SPCK, 1930), see N. Standaert, *Handbook of Christianity in China*, vol. 1: 635–1800, *Handbook of Oriental Studies*. Section 4 China (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2001); and the survey by D. H. Bays, *A New History of Christianity in China*, Blackwell Guides to Global Christianity (Chichester and Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012). A recent inquiry about Catholic missions to China in modern times is provided by L. M. Brockey, *Journey to the East: The Jesuit Mission to China, 1579–1724* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007). A good and captivating introduction (although non-specialised) to Matteo Ricci is provided by J. D. Spence, *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci* (London: Penguin, 1985). For further information see D. E. Mungello, *Curious Land: Jesuit Accommodation and the Origins of Sinology* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1989).

claves in different parts of Mongolia and China. Even allowing sometimes for a confusion with Manichaean communities (for example in the famous passage of Marco Polo),⁵ an actual Christian presence is corroborated by archaeological remnants, particularly inscribed crosses in the regions of Mongolia and Fujian.⁶ Many scholars think that this was made possible because of the fondness showed by the ruling dynasty for foreign usages and 'exotic' practices. It is for this same reason, namely the forsaking of the Sinocentric attitude that had usually characterised the relationship with other countries and would also characterise them later on, that, under the Tang, Buddhism and Manichaeism spread significantly in China as well.⁷

As is well known, contacts between Christians – or, analogously, Manichaeans – and Chinese culture were possible by means of the dense network of trade routes currently known as the 'Silk Road'.⁸ This implies that Christian missionaries belonged to the Assyrian (or Persian) church, whose official liturgical language was Syriac, and whose doctrinal position can be considered in many respects close to that of Nestorius and his followers,⁹ although the Chinese texts

⁵ S. N. C. Lieu, "Nestorians and Manichaeans on the South China Coast," *VC* 34 (1980): 71–88, esp. 79.

⁶ See A. C. Moule, "The Use of the Cross among the Nestorians in China," *T'oung Pao* 28 (1931): 78–86; W. R. Taylor, "Nestorian Crosses in China," *The American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures* 55 (1938): 56–60; and more recently, P. G. Borbone, "I blocchi con croci e iscrizione siriana da Fangshan," *OCP* 72 (2006): 167–87. For other aspects of early Christian art see M. Cecchelli, "Note sul primo cristianesimo in Cina," in *L'officina dello sguardo. Studi in onore di Maria Andaloro*, ed. G. Bordi et al. (Rome: Gangemi, 2014), 649–59. See also T. Ertl, "Repercussions from the Far East: A Comparison of the Catholic and Nestorian Presence in China," *Transcultural Studies* 2 (2015): 38–63.

⁷ For some general references see D. Twitchett and J. K. Fairbank, eds, *The Cambridge History of China*, vol. 3: *Sui and Tang China, 589–906 AD*, part 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979); and M. E. Lewis, *China's Cosmopolitan Empire. The Tang Dynasty* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

⁸ The term, which is nowadays in great favour and has been further popularised thanks to the attempts at reviving the ancient trade routes on the part of the Chinese government (through the so-called 'one belt-one road' project), was introduced into scholarly literature during the nineteenth century by the geographer Ferdinand von Richthofen. Traces of the propagation of Christianity towards the East along these routes are witnessed to by archaeological remains disseminated along the most important places and by a corpus of religious texts that also include apocryphal literature written in Middle Persian or in Sogdian.

⁹ As stated by Christine Shepardson at the beginning of her contribution in the present volume, "anti-Chalcedonian Christians have traditionally been marginalized in western scholarship, initially because westerners considered them 'heretics' and later because few could read the languages in which their histories were preserved". Although mainly dealing with Monophysite sources, that is the opposite pole of christological controversies, the essay has the merit of outlining how these alternative traditions were meant to shape a communal memory and to canonize their past. On the recent scholarly debate about Nestorianism, in particular as far as its inappropriate labelling as 'heresy' is concerned see S. P. Brock, "The 'Nestorian' Church: A Lamentable Misnomer," *BJRL* 79 (1996): 23–35, according to whom the threefold representation of heretical Nestorian, orthodox Chalcedonian, and heretical Monophysite (on the opposing

do not bear any trace either of the supposed heretical character of Nestorianism, or, more generally, of doctrines related to Nestorianism. Such an absence can be explained easily on the basis of their compendious nature, and of the difficulty of presenting to an untaught audience the sophisticated subtleties of the controversies of Greek theology (with the further intermediation of Syriac). Indeed, our knowledge of the first penetration of Christianity in China relies on a scanty and elusive documentation, which is represented by the famous inscribed stele of Xi'an and by some writings found in the caves of Dunhuang (in northwestern China) at the beginning of the twentieth century.¹⁰ These texts feature some differences, the first and foremost of which is their character: whereas the stele is an official document, the Dunhuang manuscripts are meant for private use and are not exempt from difficulties. Collected by private owners after their discovery, a trustworthy edition is still badly needed, and in some cases even their authenticity has been questioned, mainly on external evidence and paleographic grounds. If some pieces appear to be later transcriptions of older material, nonetheless, the majority of these documents are surely genuine and their author is credited to be the same priest named Jingjing, who is the author of the stele. In addition, the recent discovery of a quite remarkable inscribed pillar in Luoyang (not far from Xi'an, and also capital city for a short period) offers a further confirmation of the authenticity of the Dunhuang documents, because the engraved text is consonant with the 大秦景教宣元至本經 (*Dàqín jǐngjiào xuān zhì běn jīng*) or *Book of the Luminous Religion from Da Qin on the Disclosing of the Origin and the Reaching of the Root*.¹¹

side) is to be rejected in favour of a multifaceted and broadened spectrum, which can be divided into seven different positions ranging “from the Antiochene pole, with its emphasis on unity and the desire to stress the full reality of the incarnation ...” (25); M.V. Anastos, “Nestorius was Orthodox,” *DOP* 16 (1962): 117–40; N.N. Seleznyov, “Nestorius of Constantinople: Condemnation, Suppression, Veneration with Special Reference to the Role of his Name in East-Syriac Christianity,” *Journal of Eastern Christian Studies* 62 (2010): 165–90. The Chinese case is analyzed by E. Kazuo, “The Nestorian Christianity in China in Mediaeval Times according to Recent Historical and Archaeological Researches,” in *Problemi Attuali di Scienza e di Cultura*, vol. 62, *Atti del convegno internazionale sul tema L'Oriente cristiano nella storia della civiltà* (Roma: Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, 1964), 45–81, and, more recently, G.W. Thompson, “How the Jingjiao became Nestorian,” in Winkler and Tang, *From the Oxus River*, 417–39. More generally, a good example to understand the complexities and subtleties of the christological debate after Chalcedon is provided by Pauline Allen's analysis in this volume, who deals with some polemical works written against Severus of Antioch, where the patriarch is blamed for endorsing dyophysite positions.

¹⁰ For a discussion of the problems raised by these manuscripts and their editorial vicissitudes see the aforementioned works by Li Tang, Max Deeg, and Matteo Nicolini-Zani. See also M. Deeg, “Towards a New Translation of the Chinese Nestorian Documents from the Tang Dynasty,” in *Jingjiao: The Church of the East in China and Central Asia*, ed. R. Malek (Sankt Augustin and Nettetal: Steyler, 2006), 115–31.

¹¹ L. Tang, “A Preliminary Study on the Jingjiao Inscription of Luoyang: Text Analysis, Commentary and English Translation,” in Winkler and Tang, *Hidden Treasures*, 109–33; M. Nicolini-Zani, “The Tang Christian Pillar from Luoyang and its Jingjiao Inscription: A Preliminary

All the Chinese Christian documents of the period (both the private and the official ones) represent a remarkable example of interaction between Christianity and other religions, such as Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism. This is achieved by means of a highly refined literary stylisation and figurative iconography, especially in an official document like the stele, but also thanks to a deep interpenetration of theological concepts. Because of the strong adaptation to Chinese culture and imagery, it is possible to surmise that these texts were directed either to an audience of Chinese converts who needed to be taught the basic tenets of the new faith, or to immigrants from the Persian diaspora who had adopted Chinese culture. It seems that their authors were faced with the urgency and the effort required to superimpose or to accommodate Christian terms on pre-existing concepts, because they “came into a society with a highly literate culture and a long cultural tradition in which they could only gain access through an adoptional process.”¹² Far from being indiscriminately syncretistic, however, this attitude is to be compared with an idea we are more familiar with, that of a *chresis*, namely the ‘right usage’ of profane literature and the opportune choice of literary models, which was so widespread among the cultivated Greek and Latin Fathers.¹³ This is mostly true for the theological compendium outlined in the first part of the inscription and in most Dunhuang documents, which provide a refined work of inculturation and represent the desire on the part of the author to express Christian concepts by means of a terminology that could be understood by a Chinese audience.

Together with doctrinal elements, a glance at the actual diffusion of Christianity might reinforce the idea that, according to a universalistic agenda, Christian missionaries possessed a “sensitive awareness of the political environment within China,” so to move “with considerable acumen to secure the best possible

Study,” *Monumenta Serica* 57 (2009): 99–140; and M. Nicolini-Zani, “A New Christian Stone Inscription of the Tang Dynasty from Luoyang, China,” *SMSR* 76 (2010): 267–74. As happens in the more famous Xi’an inscription, the pillar also is followed by a historical section that casts light on the purpose that led to erect and engrave it in 814 and to transfer it to another place in 829.

¹² M. Deeg, “‘Brilliant Teaching’: The Rise and Fall of ‘Nestorianism’ (Jingjiao) in Tang China,” *Japanese Religions* 31 (2006): 99. See also T. Billings, “Jesuit Fish in Chinese Nets: Athanasius Kircher and the Translation of the Nestorian Tablet,” *Representations* 87 (2004): 20 and 24; S. Eskildsen, “Parallel Themes in Chinese Nestorianism and Medieval Daoist Religion,” in Malek, *Jingjiao*, 57–91, who, *inter alia*, deals with the authenticity of some documents of the *Corpus Nestorianum Sinicum*, defending their authenticity on linguistic grounds; and C. Huayu, “The Connection between Jingjiao and Buddhist Texts in Late Tang China,” in Malek, *Jingjiao*, 93–113.

¹³ Cf. C. Gnllka, *Der Begriff des “rechten Gebrauchs”* (Basel: Schwabe, 1984). For some examples see C. O. Tommasi, “‘Nestorians’ on the Silk Road: Some Notes on the Stele of Xi’an,” in *La teologia dal V all’VIII secolo fra sviluppo e crisi* (xli Incontro di studiosi dell’antichità cristiana, Roma 9–11 maggio, 2013), *SEAug*, vol. 140 (Rome: Institutum Patristicum Augustinianum, 2014), 645–70, with further bibliographic references.

position for themselves within it.”¹⁴ The picture emerging from such an elusive documentation, however, suggests that Christians were not openly faced with polemic or opposition, at least for three centuries. Unsurprisingly, the imperial law, rather than taking into account dogmatic issues, is totally concerned with the ethical dimension of Christianity, stating that it works for the fundamental needs of human life and for its progress: for, everyone, indistinctly, can benefit from that doctrine. Likewise, insistence on the ethical dimension is present also when mentioning the congruence between the eight principles of the sage government and Christian virtues.

Therefore, on one hand, the sensitive attitude revealed by Christian missionaries in adapting themselves to the local culture and to the new environment, which closely resembles the one displayed almost ten century later by the Jesuits, allowed them a certain success and secured a position for their religion for at least three centuries.¹⁵ In this regard, the aforementioned contribution by Shepardson provides a useful touchstone when discussing that the memorialization of the past, because of its diverse and selective reconstruction, becomes a political enterprise and a discursive negotiation wavering between the framework of the past and the needs of the present, which are moulded in accordance with the historian’s intentional construction of an authoritative and influential model.

On the other hand, it should not be forgotten that Christianity was a foreign cult and therefore regarded as heterodox.¹⁶ Therefore, the subtle rhetorical strategy of the Xi’an inscription witnesses to the fact that had such a propagand-

¹⁴ T. H. Barrett, “Buddhism, Taoism and the Eighth-Century Chinese Term for Christianity: A Response to Recent Work by A. Forte and Others,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 65 (2002), 560. A remarkable example is provided by the name chosen to designate the land from whence the new ‘luminous religion’ (景教, jǐngjiào) originated. Some later documents, among which the famous stele preserved in Xi’an, call Christianity the brilliant teaching from 大秦, Dàqín, which is the usual designation of the Roman empire, whereas earlier it was known as the religion from Persia (波斯, Bōsī). The decision to change the name was the result of an edict of 745, probably because the links with the Persian empire had been flagging, whereas there had been increasing contacts with the Byzantine one (culminating in an official mission in 742). On the difficulty of a precise understanding of the words 大秦 (referring either to Rome, or to the Roman state, or even to western territories in general), especially in sources dating from the Han period, see E. G. Pulleyblank, “The Roman Empire as known to Han China,” *JAOS* 119 (1999): 71–79.

¹⁵ Such an extremely open-minded approach is nowadays in high esteem as foreboding a new paradigm for ecumenical dialogue and for relationships: see M. Nicolini-Zani, “Il Cristianesimo nella Cina dei Tang di fronte alla diversità religiosa,” in *La Storia delle religioni e la sfida dei pluralism*, ed. S. Botta, M. Ferrara, and A. Saggiore, *Atti del Convegno della Società Italiana di Storia delle Religioni*, Roma, Sapienza, 8–9 aprile 2016, *Quaderni di SMSR*, vol. 18 (Brescia: Morcelliana, 2017), 239–48, with further references to concepts such as hybridization (more appropriate than ‘syncretism’). Conversely, the attempt at finding a sort of ‘new age’ syncretism suggested by M. Palmer, *The Jesus Sutras: Rediscovering the Lost Scrolls of Taoist Christianity* (Wellspring: Ballantine, 2001), is to be rejected.

¹⁶ See *infra*.

distic agenda “been uttered in a plainer and more direct way, would have caused quite a deal of problems to a religious group which was definitely seen as being of foreign origin and which could be ignored in the power play of Tang politics, especially after the fall of the Sassanian empire.”¹⁷

Notwithstanding the repeated statements in the inscription, that emperors favoured Christianity, having it in great esteem and letting it free to propagate, it is possible to surmise that Christianity did not succeed in establishing a powerful and organised church in China for different reasons. The decadence that progressively undermined the Tang dynasty negatively impacted on the penchant towards all the factors that come from the outside. It is possible to understand this closure as an indirect consequence of the An Lushan rebellion and its fall-outs, notwithstanding the fact that the stele explicitly records the ties between a Christian monk named Yisi and the general Guo Ziyi. At the same time, the Islamisation that progressively affected central Asia contributed to breaking the contacts between the church of Persia and the extreme provinces of the East, thus provoking the disappearance of Christian communities or their paucity. The very circumstances of the burying of the Xi’an inscription in the middle of the ninth century might point to a persecution that affected foreign religions, as is testified by an edict against Buddhists issued by Emperor Wuzong in 845, which followed the previous one against the Manichaeans.¹⁸ Probably the same measures affected the Christians, who were likely to be confused with such groups and whose clergy was for the most part composed of foreign people, an aspect that has been advocated as a reason to explain the unsuccessful attempt at constituting a Chinese church. Furthermore, whereas Buddhists were greater in number and better organised, therefore better able to recoup and re-establish their position, and Manichaeans were more proclive to a syncretistic assimilation towards Buddhism,¹⁹ Christians were doomed to disappear,²⁰ or, in any case, to

¹⁷ M. Deeg, “The Rhetoric of Antiquity: Politico-Religious Propaganda in the Nestorian Stele of Chang’an 安長,” *JLARC* 1 (2007): 30.

¹⁸ The text can be read in Ferreira, *Early Chinese Christianity*, 311.

¹⁹ Lieu, “Nestorians and Manichaeans.” See also Pelliot, *L’inscription nestorienne*, 209, on the fact that Christian vocabulary is less impregnated by Buddhist terms than that of the Manichaeans. H.-J. Klimkeit, “Jesus’ Entry into Parinirvāṇa: Manichaean Identity in Buddhist Central Asia,” *Numen* 33 (1986): 225–40. The study emphasises the marked tendency on the part of eastern Manichaeism to adapt to Buddhist parlance and, moreover, to transpose Gnostic concepts into those of the Indian religion. This could be accomplished with a good conscience, since the Manichaean religion had much in common with Buddhism. In some respects, it was easier to achieve such an intermingling for Manichaeans than for Christians, mainly because of the negative assessment of the body and of corporeality in general, which is typical of Manichaeans and Buddhists. On Buddhism as seen by the Christian Fathers (the first reference in Clement of Alexandria) see D. Scott, “Christian Responses to Buddhism in pre-Medieval Times,” *Numen* 32 (1985): 88–100.

²⁰ P. Pelliot, “Les Nestoriens en Chine après 845,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 1 (1933): 115–16. A summary of the factors that allegedly undermined Chris-

seek refuge in other, more tolerant, regions, such as those of the South or those of the interior (like Mongolia). Thus, the question of the vanishing of Christianity after the Tang period is a thorny one and is far from being solved.

Although most studies emphasise how early Chinese Christianity enjoyed endorsement, thanks to its efforts towards an integration into Chinese culture, and therefore it might be surprising to find a discussion of this subject in a volume dedicated to religious rivalry or disputes, in the text of the inscription a brief passage alludes to the fact that the ‘luminous religion’ was perceived as a potential competitor.²¹ These few lines are part of the historical eulogy on the propagation of Christianity, which is contained in the second half of the inscription, whose careful stylisation redolent of the official Tang prose and rhetorical patterns have been the object of an insightful essay by Max Deeg.²² After the recalling of the missionary travel of the Syriac priest Aluoben (阿罗本) and his meeting with the emperor Taizong, who officially allowed the propagation of the new religion in 638,²³ the inscription mentions the development achieved in the following decades, when emperors like Xuanzong (712–56), Suzong (756–62) and Daizong (762–79) supported the church.

Leaving aside the events of the ninth century, which are not recorded in the inscription (dated 781), and, conversely, are responsible for its interment, the text suggests that only during the reign of Wu Zetian and the years that followed her forced abdication did the Christian faith undergo some difficulties, however

tianity in China is provided by Ferreira, *Early Chinese Christianity*, 314–15. Some of them do not seem convincing, such as the syncretistic attitude or the Chinese character, naturally inclined towards atheism. It is, conversely, possible to consent with the fact that Christianity was weakened by the loss of support from the ruling house and, most of all, by the lack of an indigenous clergy that could replace the priests who were forced to exile after 845. See also Deeg, *Die strahlende*, 50–55.

²¹ Some passages in the Dunhuang manuscripts, for example in 天论第 (Tiān lùn dì), *Treatise of the One God (Number 1)*, feature doctrines that are susceptible to be interpreted as polemic against Buddhist tenets, such as the triple sphere in which each world is divided or the doctrine of the impermanence. Nicolini-Zani, *La via radiosa*, pp. 65–74, from whom I derive these observations, discusses other passages of the Chinese Manichaean texts, where Jesus is described as 法王 (fǎwáng, “king of the doctrine”) or 大圣 (dà shèng, “great holy man”), concluding, however, that the lexicological assimilation is selective and not indiscriminate.

²² Deeg, “The Rhetoric of Antiquity,” stresses the broader meaning of a citation as the historical context which is alluded to, by means of superimposing exemplary rulers of the past with the present ones (such as the mention of the Zhou dynasty, whose splendours were revived under the Tang, and the metaphor of the blue-greenish ox and the chariot fleeing towards the West to indicate the mysterious disappearing of Laozi). For further examples see C. O. Tommasi, “La via non ha un nome immutabile, il santo non ha un’apparenza immutabile: Echi letterari nella stele cristiana di Xi’an tra diplomazia e propaganda,” in Botta, Ferrara, and Saggiore, *La Storia delle religioni*, 320–28.

²³ In all likelihood, there were already Christians in China and Aluoben’s mission acquired therefore an official character, fostered as it was, also on the part of the Sassanians and the *naïveté* of its description is to be considered only apparent. See G. W. Thompson, “Was Alopen a Missionary?” in Winkler and Tang, *Hidden Treasures*, 267–78.

fated to be soon recovered thanks to the efforts of some missionaries of noble temperament and the support of the rulers:

聖曆年，釋子用壯，騰口於東周；先天末，下士大笑，訕謗於西鑄。

有若僧首羅含，大德及烈并；金方貴緒，物外高僧。共振玄綱，俱維絕紐。

玄宗 至道皇帝，令寧國等五王親，臨福宇，建立壇場。

法棟暫橈而更崇，道石時傾而復正。²⁴

The reference to Wu (here hinted at by the indication of her regnal year 聖曆 (shèng lì), that is 698–700) is directly linked to the Buddhist priests (釋子, shìzǐ, whose first character refers to Shijiamouni, the Chinese name of Buddha Sakyamuni) and to their arrogant attitude. Although in this period, probably because of an illness, Wu seemed to loosen the power and influence of Buddhist clergy and abandoned her Buddhist titles, the empress' penchant for this religion was well known and Buddhism had been in great favour during the previous years, especially thanks to her favourite, the monk Xue Huaiyi.²⁵ It seems not surprising, therefore, that her name is openly linked to Buddhism and also to the mention of her moving the capital city to Luoyang (here indicated with a reference to the Zhou dynasty and to the fact that the emperor Pingwang, of whom Wu pretended to be offspring, had moved the capital there).²⁶ It must be said that Wu herself in the last phase of her life weakened her penchant for Buddhism and inclined towards Daoism;²⁷ moreover, it seems worth remem-

²⁴ (Shèng lì nián, shìzǐ yòng zhuàng, téng kǒu yú dōngzhōu; xiāntiān mò, xiàshì dà xiào, shàn bàng yú xī hào. Yǒu ruòsēng shǒu luóhán, dà déjí liè bìng; jīnfāngguì xù, wù wài gāosēng. Gōngzhèn xuán wǎng, jù wéi jūe niǔ. Xuánzōng zhì dào huángdì, líng níngguó dēng wú wáng qīn, lín fú yǔ, jiànli tán chǎng. Fǎ dòng zàn ráo ér gèng chóng, dào shí shí qīng ér fù zhèng.) “During the period of Shengli, Buddhist presbyters used their strength and raised their voices in the Eastern Zhou. And at the end of the Xian Tian period some low-ranking scholars ridiculed it. They vilified and defamed the Luminous Religion at Western Hao. But then there came the head presbyter Luohan and the bishop Jilie, as well as other distinguished people from the Golden Regions, great presbyters who have renounced all. Together they restored the heavenly net. Unitedly they retied the broken knots. The most principled Emperor Xuanzong commanded the prince of Ning and the other princes five altogether to visit personally the blessed houses and to rebuild and establish the places of worship. The religious structures which were temporarily disregarded were again revered. And the doctrinal tablets which were overthrown for a time were restored.” English translation in Ferreira, *Early Chinese Christianity*, 177–78.

²⁵ Wu is also recorded to have written a preface to the Chinese translation of *Avatamsaka* in 699. See Pelliot, *L'inscription nestorienne*, 252. See also A. Forte, “Buddhismus und Politik. Die Kaiserin Wu Zetian und der Famen-Tempel,” in *Xian. Kaiserliche Macht im Jenseits. Grabfunde und Tempelschätze aus Chinas alter Hauptstadt*, (Mainz: Philipp von Zabern, 2006), 109–19 (*non vidi*); and M. Deeg, “Der religiöse „Synkretismus“ der chinesischen Kaiserin Wu Zetian – Versuch einer Staatsreligion?” in *Zwischen Säkularismus und Hierokratie. Studien zum Verhältnis von Religion und Staat in Süd- und Ostasien*, ed. in P. Schalk, M. Deeg, O. Freiberger, and C. Kleine (Uppsala: University Library, 2001), 119–42.

²⁶ Pelliot, *L'inscription nestorienne*, 252; and Deeg, *Die strahlende*, 143–45.

²⁷ For a thorough discussion see R. W. L. Guisso, “The Reigns of the Empress Wu, Chung-tung and Juitsung (684–712),” in *The Cambridge History of China*, vol. 3: *Sui and Tang China*,

bering that in an earlier period, she even had promoted the construction of the so-called axis of the sky, a huge tower with astronomical functions, in whose erection many non-Buddhist foreigners were involved.²⁸ Wu's religious politics is therefore to be regarded as complex and, in some respects, wavering. Thus, in addition to the actual likelihood that Christianity was faced with some hostility especially on the part of Buddhists, it might be also surmised that the emphasis on the negative mention of Buddhist clergy representatives and of Empress Wu fits into the more general propagandistic agenda of the stele, aimed as it is at delegitimising a person who had been considered a usurper: "the inscription of 781 betrays an acute awareness of rivalry with Buddhism, whereas Daoism, the imperial faith, is not criticized."²⁹

A reference to Daoism is probably detectable, however, in the allusion to the "low-ranking scholars" who ridiculed and laughed at the Christian faith in the passage that immediately follows the mention of Buddhist priests. Scholars have long since recognised in these words an expression employed in chapter 41 of *Daodejing*, where sages are divided into three groups and their attitude towards the Dao is described.³⁰ The chronological indication refers to some years later (the 先天, xiāntiān, year corresponds to the year 712–13), that is after the regency of Ruizong, whose sister Taiping, together with other princesses, showed an inclination towards Daoism, before the new emperor Xuanzong eventually seized the throne. It can be surmised that the negative evaluation of Daoism in this passage is influenced by the particular circumstances: it does not seem casual that the name of the sovereign is passed under silence; at the same time, as sug-

589–906, ed. D. C. Twitchett, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 290–332; and Deeg, *Die strahlende*, 141.

²⁸ This episode is discussed by A. Forte, "On the So-called Abraham from Persia: A Case of Mistaken Identity," in Pelliot, *L'inscription nestorienne*, 375–428, who rightly rejects previous attempts at identifying this Abraham/Aluohan with the Luohan mentioned in the Xi'an inscription. He is also doubtful in considering Abraham/Aluohan a Christian.

²⁹ As acutely stated by Barrett, "Buddhism," 560. Wendy Mayer's contribution in this volume offers another example of historical and religious narratives intertwined with diplomatic purposes, outlining how such salutary narratives are to be intended as an oblique way to hint at current events, especially the church-state relations of their times, and therefore the memory of the past is carefully crafted to suit the present.

³⁰ 上士聞道，勤而行之。中士聞道，若存若亡。下士聞道，大笑之。不笑不足以為道 (shàng shì wén dào, qín ér xíng zhī. Zhōng shì wén dào, ruò cún ruò wáng. Xià shì wén dào, dà xiào zhī. Bù xiào bù zài yǐ wéi dào) "Scholars of the highest class, when they hear about the Dao, earnestly carry it into practice. Scholars of the middle class, when they have heard about it, seem now to keep it and now to lose it. Scholars of the lowest class, when they have heard about it, laugh greatly at it. If it were not (thus) laughed at, it would not be fit to be the Dao." Translation by J. Legge. The image that follows is derived from another Daoist work, *Guanyinzi*, HDC II 39a: 不可以輕忽道己，不可以訕謗德己 (bù kěyǐ qīnghū dào yǐ, bù kěyǐ shàn bàng dé yǐ) "do not neglect morality, do not defame duty," as stated by Deeg, *Die strahlende*, 143–44, who rightly rejects Pelliot's attempt at considering these base scholars as Confucians.

gested by Deeg, the oblique parallelism between Wu and Taiping implies an unexpressed misogyny.

It was under Xuanzong's rule, unanimously considered as one of the most splendid periods of the Tang dynasty, that Christianity could regain the previous grandeur. In particular, emphasis is put on the reconstruction of altars and cultic places, as well as the Scriptures. In this respect, it is worth stressing the extremely accurate stylisation of the text, which puts the accent on the excellency of the two priests coming from 'the West' (according to the usual meaning implied in the exotic and somewhat mysterious 金方, *jīn fāng*): the term 高僧 (*gāosēng*) is a highly honorific title already employed for Buddhist clergy, while the 物外 (*wù wài*) stresses the extraordinary talent of these two priests, Luohan and Jile.³¹ Their activity spans over twenty years, for Luohan had reached China in 714, while Jilie was active in 732, yet the inscription seems to associate them. This can surely be understood as an example of using communal ancestors and recalling their personal qualities and deeds to embody and self-shape the essential qualities of the actual members of the community: it comes therefore very close to the cases discussed by Shepardson à propos of some Syriac martyrial hagiographies, notwithstanding the different geographical and historical contexts, which is reflected in the skilfully chosen metaphors witnessing to a learned prose and careful imitation of classic Chinese literature and therefore so different from the imagery employed in Greek or Latin accounts.

This is shown, for example, in the words about the repaired threads (already hinted at in the word 緒, *xù*), 并金方貴緒。物外高僧。共振玄綱。俱維絕紐 (*bìng jīnfāngguì xù. Wù wài gāosēng xuán wǎng. Jù wéi jué niǔ*), provide a patent example of a *chresis* from a similar inscription of about three centuries earlier located in the Dhuta monastery and recorded in *Wenxuan*, however with some precise alterations;³² in any case, the reference to a momentary difficulty experienced by the monks is clear, as is clear the optimistic hopes of restoration and recovery process endorsed by the legitimate successors.

A final episode ought to be taken into consideration, namely the famous 'translation incident' of 786–7, which involved the monk Adam/Jingjing, who dictated the text of the stele,³³ and a Buddhist monk called Prajña, who came

³¹ What the actual names of the two priests, here concealed by their 'Sinisation', were has been matter of discussion. Scholars have suggested Abraham and Gabriel respectively, whereas recently Deeg, *Die strahlende*, 147, suggests, for the first one, the Persian name Raham (he is, however, imprecise in stating that Forte, "On the So-called Abraham," 384, accepts the identification with the aforementioned Abraham/Aluohan, for the Italian scholar suggests Vahram as the original Persian name of Aluohan).

³² See Deeg, *Die strahlende*, 151, and, previously, A. Forte, "A Literary Model for Adam: The Dhuta Monastery Inscription," in Pelliot, *L'inscription nestorienne*, 473–87.

³³ A. Forte, "The Chong fu-Si 崇福寺 in Chang'an: A Neglected Buddhist Monastery and Nestorianism," in Pelliot, *L'inscription nestorienne*, 442–48; and M. Deeg, *Die strahlende*, 42–50: "Der „Verfasser“ des Stelentextes, Jingjing 景淨 / Adam, und das Problem der Sinisierung." A

from northern India. According to the report in 真元釋教, *Zhēnyuān shìjiào* (*Buddhist Record of the Zhenyuan Period*), the two cooperated to the translation of an esoteric text, 大乘理趣六波羅蜜多經, *Dàchéng lǐ qù liù bōluómì duō jīng* (*Sūtra of the Six Mahāyāna Pāramitās*),³⁴ for Prajña did not know the Chinese language and, conversely, Jingjing, although speaking Chinese, did not understand Sanskrit, nor was aware of the Buddhist doctrines. The attempt at a joint translation, probably through the intermediation of an Iranian language (perhaps Sogdian), however, was unsuccessful, for the two “could not obtain half its [*i. e.* of the sutra] pearls” (未獲半珠, *wèi huò bàn zhū*). Moreover, the cultivated and philo-Buddhist emperor Dezong, to whom they presented the work, recognised its bad quality and, on the ground that the two religious traditions were so different in customs and doctrine, stated that “Jingjing should propagate the teaching of the Messiah, and the Buddhist monk should elucidate the Buddhist texts,” adding that the two teachings had to be separated, because “orthodoxy and heterodoxy are different things and the rivers Jing and Wei have a different course.”³⁵

This episode should not be interpreted, however, as a witness to the syncretistic attitude of Chinese Christians, nor, in spite of its being recorded in a somewhat biased source, which tends to emphasise the unsuccessful result as the proof of the impossible intermingling of the two faiths, as a demonstration of the impossible accommodation of Christianity in China. In fact, it must be said that Prajña attempted again some years late at cooperating with Adam/

detailed reconstruction of the translation episode is provided by R. T. Godwin, “Eunuchs for the Kingdom of God: Rethinking the Christian-Buddhist Imperial Translation Incident of 787,” in Winkler and Tang, *Winds of Jingjiao*, 267–82, with further references. This essay emphasises the role of the court eunuchs in favouring Christianity and offers some considerations about the loyal attitude displayed by esoteric Buddhism and Christianity towards the emperor: “the Tang Empire is seen to be embodied, quite literally, in the emperor’s person, whose very body is linked to the elements of the cosmos. The Church of the East’s leaders are shown having helped to preserve and sustain the empire and having been cocreators of the emperor’s imperial charisma since the first establishment of the church with Aluoben’s visit to the court in 638. This can be thought of in connection to the rituals for rain for the empire’s crops performed by Esoteric Buddhist masters in the late Tang period. This made use of already existing elements within Chinese imperial ideology in which religious institutions and institutions of statecraft had long been fused.”

³⁴ For connections between esoteric Buddhism and Christianity see H. Chen, “The Connection between Nestorian and Buddhist Texts in Late Tang China,” in Malek, *Jingjiao*, 93–113; and H. Chen, “The Encounter of Nestorian Christianity with Tantric Buddhism in Medieval China,” in Winkler and Tang, *Hidden Treasures*, 195–213, who highlights and compares some common patterns between the two traditions, considering the translation of some terms in the Dunhuang documents and widening the inquiry to a general cultural context.

³⁵ 景淨應傳彌尸訶教, 沙門釋子弘闡佛經。欲使教法區分, 人無濫涉。正邪異類, 涇渭殊流。(Jing jing ying chuan mi shi he jiao, shamen shizi hongchan fojing. Yu shi jiao fa qufen, ren wu lan she. Zhengxie yilei, jing wei shu liu.) The whole passage, which refers to p. 892, a7–15, can be read at http://tripitaka.cbeta.org/T55n2157_017 (retrieved September 2018). Deeg, *Die strahlende*, 45, suggests that the account is quite negative in order to demonstrate the correct practice of translating Buddhist texts, that is in private circles and among devotees.

Jingjing to translate another text, *Avatamsaka sutra*, but eventually was aided by a Chinese Buddhist monk of Luoyang. On a more general level, the important Chongfu monastery, originally founded by Empress Wu, where Prajñā worked, in the following years functioned as a centre for translations and as a dynastic institution, exerting a great influence on the religious policy of the imperial house towards foreign religions, such as Buddhism in the first instance and Christianity as well. In addition, it was located very close to the Daqin (i. e. ‘Roman’, that is Christian) monastery, and probably it came to occupy the same site after 845.³⁶

The ‘translation episode’ may be considered, conversely, as representative of a dynamic encounter between Christianity and Buddhism, where competition and rivalry are certainly present, but are often superseded by cooperation or by common interests, without implying an indiscriminate mix-up, thus providing a good example of the de-escalation of religious competition or rivalry meant as a comprehensive aim of this volume. Moreover, in some periods, and surely at a different degree, the two faiths received official endorsement and also economical support from political authorities: the scarcity of our documents does not allow outlining more than mere speculations, yet it might be concluded that Christianity had been able, throughout the Tang period, until its final dissolution, to become respected thanks to an acute diplomatic sensitivity and cunning political awareness.

³⁶ For these conclusions I am indebted to Forte, “The Chong fu-Si”, whereas the idea of a dynamic attitude is mediated from Chen, “The Encounter.”