

philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University • Loyola Heights, Quezon City • 1108 Philippines

Missions Appraised:

Asia and Western Dominance - A Survey of the Vasco da Gama Epoch of Asian History, 1498-1945

by K. M. Panikkar

H. de la Costa

Philippine Studies vol. 4, no. 1 (1956): 95–106

Copyright © Ateneo de Manila University

Philippine Studies is published by the Ateneo de Manila University. Contents may not be copied or sent via email or other means to multiple sites and posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's written permission. Users may download and print articles for individual, noncommercial use only. However, unless prior permission has been obtained, you may not download an entire issue of a journal, or download multiple copies of articles.

Please contact the publisher for any further use of this work at philstudies@admu.edu.ph.

<http://www.philippinestudies.net>

Book Reviews

MISSIONS APPRAISED

ASIA AND WESTERN DOMINANCE: A Survey of the Vasco da Gama Epoch of Asian History, 1498-1945. By K. M. Panikkar. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1953. Second Impression, 1954. Pp. 530. ₹16.65.

The period with which this book deals has been surveyed often enough by Western historians, usually under the rubric of "the expansion of Europe." The special interest of the present work is that it is written from an Asian point of view, although the author's claim that "this is perhaps the first attempt by an Asian student to see and understand European activities in Asia for 450 years" (p. 19) is a little too sweeping.

Whether it is particularly helpful to designate a long and complex historical process with the name of a Portuguese navigator who was definitely an instrument rather than a principal in that process is a minor point not worth discussing here. At any rate Mr. Panikkar sees in the Da Gama epoch three essential characteristics which give it a "singular unity." They are, first, the "dominance of maritime power over the land masses of Asia;" second, "the imposition of a commercial economy over communities whose economic life in the past had been based not on international trade but mainly on agricultural production and internal trade;" and third, "the domination of the peoples of Europe, who held the mastery of the seas, over the peoples of Asia" (p. 12).

Mr. Panikkar devotes the major portion of his work to the development of this thesis. He brings to it a wide range of reading, a real talent for simplification, a determination not to

be overwhelmed by the facts, and an ironical wit which lightens considerably what might have been a merely learned volume. No general assessment of the work will be attempted in this review. It might be noted in passing that Mr. Panikkar makes out a truly formidable case against Western imperialism in Asia. One is reminded of the wistful remark of the Lion to the Man in Cardinal Newman's parable, after the Man had shown him how the Lion was portrayed in human art: "Lions would have fared better, had lions been the artists." Here is the wish fulfilled with a vengeance: Western Man, a ferocious portrait in oils (and rubber, spices, silks, opium and gunboats) by the Asian Lion. That is the strength of the book—and its weakness. It is a case, not a narrative; a brief for the prosecution, not an opinion from the bench. It might have been more accurate to call it an interpretation rather than a survey.

Mr. Panikkar mentions a fourth characteristic of the Da Gama age, namely, "the attempt made during the time by European nations to Christianize Asia," but warns that it would be a mistake to consider this an essential characteristic, because, taking the period as a whole, missionary enterprise occupied a very minor place in European plans and policies for Asia (p. 14).

Still, the Christian missions were not without their importance, and Mr. Panikkar devotes a whole section of his book—the seventh of eight parts—to them. It is this section that the present review proposes to examine with some detail. Mr. Panikkar begins a very brief survey of the medieval missions to the Mongols with the startling statement that these missions "arose from other than religious motives" (p. 376). Friar John of Plano Carpini's mission (1246), for instance, was by no means a religious one. "It was an attempt, under the cloak of religion, to gather information about the Mongols, about their strength and resources—in fact it was a mission of espionage" (*ibid.*).

It is difficult to share the assurance with which Mr. Panikkar makes these categorical statements. Friar John and his companions made no secret of the fact that they were Franciscan religious and that they carried letters from Pope Innocent IV to the Grand Khan. In one of these letters the Pope formally accredited Friar John as a missionary and went on to give a brief resumé of the Catholic Faith. In the other, he lodged a strong protest against the ravages and massacres perpetrated by the Mongols in Eastern Europe, and called upon them in the name

of God to desist or to inform the friars plainly what they were about: "quid ulterius intendatis, per eosdem Fratres plenarie intimetis" (L. Wieger, ed., *Textes historiques* [Hien-Hien, 1923], II, 1669).

They showed these letters to Batu, the Mongol commander stationed at the Volga, who had them translated into Mongol, Russian and Arabic. He then sent the party on to Karakorum accompanied by a Tartar guard. They arrived at Karakorum in time to witness the election of Kuyuk to the Grand Khanate. Friar John presented his credentials and the Pope's letters to the new generalissimo. While waiting for a reply, he tried to sound out the members of Kuyuk's entourage, among whom were some Nestorian Christians, as to the prospects of Kuyuk becoming a Christian. He concluded that the prospects were not very good, and was confirmed in this opinion by Kuyuk's arrogant reply to the Pope's message. Seeing that the Grand Khan and his vassals "had raised their standards against the Roman Church and all Christian kings and princes" (*ibid.* II, 1670), he felt that there was nothing more he could do at Karakorum and returned to Europe.

Now there is not the slightest indication in all this that Carpini was a spy. It is even difficult to see what opportunities he could have had for espionage. He crossed Asia under guard. He was under continual surveillance at Karakorum, both by the Mongols (whose language was unknown to him) and the Nestorians (who, as heretics, were jealous of him). And he ruined any chances he may have had of picking up confidential information by delivering a provocative papal message to a highly explosive potentate. There is nothing in the available evidence to suggest that he ever acted otherwise than as a duly and openly accredited missionary and papal envoy.

True enough, he kept his eyes and ears open on his travels, and his report upon his return was the first accurate information about the Mongols to reach medieval Europe. But Mr. Panikkar is himself a diplomat. As Indian ambassador to China and Egypt, he has doubtless sent reports to his government embodying his observations in these foreign countries. Would he consider it a fair inference from his submitting such routine reports that he was in reality a spy; that his mission was not a diplomatic one, but rather an attempt, under the cloak of a friendly embassy, to gather information about the Chinese and the Egyptians, about

their strength and resources—in fact, that his was a mission of espionage?

Upon such slight foundation—or lack of it—Mr. Panikkar places the entire weight of the following truly massive generalization: “Europe, or Christendom, as it preferred to call itself, had no doubt in its own mind as to the rectitude of using religion for political purposes and, though in the time of Carpini the distinction may not have been clear, the tradition, then begun, of subordinating religion to the interests of the State continued in varying forms and degrees to the time of the final collapse of Christian missionary activity in the East” (pp. 376-377). The judicious reader will know what value to give to statements of this nature.

Carpini's namesake and fellow Franciscan, John of Montecorvino (1246-1328), fares no better. Mr. Panikkar admits, somewhat grudgingly, that Montecorvino “carried on his work with zeal and devotion,” but adds that “it is difficult to judge the amount of his success, for his letters to Europe are untrustworthy in this matter and could not be checked” (p. 378). If they could not be checked, it would be interesting to know how Mr. Panikkar can be so positive that they were untrustworthy. But of course it is necessary that doubt be cast on Montecorvino's veracity as a suitable preparation for another of Mr. Panikkar's soaring generalizations: “Like missions in later times also, it is numbers that mattered to him [Montecorvino], and whether the conversions were by purchase or by rice, so long as it could be reported to Rome that the number of believers was increasing daily, he felt that his mission was achieving success” (p. 379).

The reference to “conversions by purchase” is based on a statement in Montecorvino's report of 1305 (one of his “untrustworthy” letters to Europe) that he had acquired by purchase (*emi*) forty or so boys, children of pagan parents, all of them less than seven years of age, whom he baptized and to whom when they were old enough he taught Greek, Latin and liturgical chant (Wieger, *op. cit.*, II, 1724). No great familiarity with the history of Chinese society is needed to understand the nature of this transaction. It is unfortunately a long-standing custom in China for poor families to sell their infant children in time of famine, and Montecorvino merely followed the practice of modern mission orphanages in similar circumstances—he purchased

those whom he could (Wieger says 150 altogether) in order to save them from being abandoned.

Mr. Panikkar, however, by a slight turn of phrase which one hopes was not intentional, succeeds in giving a totally different impression of the affair. Montecorvino, he says, "bought forty boys *as slaves* and baptized them;" and then he goes on to remark, with a properly shocked air, that of course this shows Montecorvino up in his true colors—"the very fact that his proselytization began with the purchase of boys *as slaves, for purposes of baptism*, clearly shows what his idea of conversion was" (p. 378, italics added). The implication is clear: Montecorvino made slaves of these hapless boys, forced baptism on them, and sent the padded statistics gleefully to Rome.

No other conclusion is open to the ordinary reader, since Mr. (p. 378, italics added). The implication is clear: Montecorvino Panikkar omits to mention that these boys were in reality infants who had not yet reached the age of reason, and hence, as Montecorvino was careful to point out, had not yet learned *any* religion—"nullam adhuc cognoscebant legem"; there was therefore no question of proselytization or forcible conversion, and, as has already been suggested, Montecorvino's "purchase," far from reducing these infants to slavery, saved them from an untimely end and provided them with an education to which few Chinese children of the time could have aspired. However, if the reader is a Catholic, he might possibly notice the inconsistency between the impression Mr. Panikkar is trying to make and his own unguarded admission that the boys "were in due time promoted to be catechists *and priests*" (p. 378, italics added), since the Catholic priesthood is never conferred on slaves. But of course these embarrassing inconsistencies can always be ironed out by saying that poor Montecorvino's letters to Europe—which, by the way, are our only source of information regarding his mission—"are untrustworthy in this matter." The same convenient device of prejudicing the court against the accused is employed in the case of Christian missionaries in general; thus, the Bibliographical Note at the end of Section VII blandly asserts that "most of the books, reports and periodicals which deal with the activity of Christian Missions in the East present only a biased view, *as they are written by the missionaries themselves*" (p. 456, italics added).

There is one notable exception to the generally shabby record of the European missionaries in Asia. Where St. Francis Xavier

is concerned, Mr. Panikkar is truly generous with his praise. Xavier is "the greatest figure in the history of Christianity in Asia after St. Thomas the Apostle" (p. 381); "he towers above all who followed him by his sympathy for the poor and the lowly, by his energy of spirit, by his utter fearlessness in the face of dangers and his supreme faith in his mission" (p. 389); and his success as a missionary was in direct proportion to "his charity, kindness and gentleness of disposition" (p. 388). We are asked to believe, however, that Xavier possessed these heroic qualities in spite of his religion. It is really too bad that he was a Catholic at all, since the effect upon him of his "blind faith" was merely to make him arrogant, dogmatic and intolerant (p. 389). In other words, had Xavier not been a Christian, he might conceivably have been a greater figure than he was in the history of Christianity in Asia.

No such unresolved contradictions mar Mr. Panikkar's character portrait of the Jesuit missionaries to China. Ricci, Schall, Verbiest, Gerbillion and their companions were simply unscrupulous and dishonest men who did not hesitate to compromise the most essential tenets of their faith to achieve the personal triumph of converting an empire. If they attained a certain measure of success, it was only at the price of "dubious practices, compromise with conscience . . . and servility;" no need to wonder, then, that the pretentious edifice of that success should "crumble at the moment of its greatest triumph" (p. 403).

Fortunately for the Jesuits, Mr. Panikkar's attempts to substantiate these charges are of a piece with his brief but disastrous excursion into the history of the Mongol missions. It is curious, for instance, that Mr. Panikkar should have nothing but praise for Robert de Nobili's missionary methods in India, and yet look upon the application of essentially the same methods to China by Ricci and his successors as nothing but a "sordid intrigue" (p. 411).

According to Mr. Panikkar's own account, De Nobili "after a period of observation . . . reached the firm conclusion that Christianity could have little success in India if it kept to its Western garb and refused to understand the mind and thought of the people of the country" (p. 383). For this reason he undertook, with the approval of his Jesuit superiors, a thorough study of Hinduism, "in the course of which he acquired a fair mastery of Sanskrit the classical language of Hindu scriptures, and a familiar-

ity with the doctrines of Hinduism" (*ibid.*). On the basis of this knowledge De Nobili claimed that Christianity could be explained to the Indians "in terms of Upanishadic thought," and could even be upheld as a new *marga*, or way, which was "in the true line of Indian religious evolution" (*ibid.*). This he proceeded to do; and in order to make himself more acceptable to his prospective converts, he assumed the distinctive garb of an Indian ascetic and "lived among the Brahmins as a Brahmin, strictly observing the taboos and practices of that caste" (*ibid.*). Mr. Panikkar finds nothing that savors of compromise in these concessions to Hindu customs and culture. On the contrary, he is quite positive that De Nobili was "orthodox in his proceedings" and remained firm on "issues of dogma" (p. 411).

And yet, were the methods of the Jesuits in China so different from the orthodox proceedings of their illustrious brother in India? Ricci's object was, in Mr. Panikkar's own words, "to show that Confucian doctrine did not conflict with Christianity" (p. 394); why should this be condemned as "sordid intrigue," if De Nobili's explanation of Christianity in terms of Upanishadic thought, which had exactly the same object in view, was "*both orthodox and in the true line of Indian religious evolution*" (p. 383, italics added)? By arbitrarily labelling Ricci's procedure a "tactic," a "trick," Mr. Panikkar endeavors to suggest that Ricci did not really believe that an approximation of Christianity to Confucianism was possible, but merely pretended to do so in order to win for himself and his companions "a temporary popularity with the Confucian officials" at Peking (p. 394). But this is to assume gratuitously precisely what has to be proved, namely, that Ricci was dishonest. Mr. Panikkar might have known better, had he read with a little more attention the Protestant authorities upon whom he chiefly relies. Professor Rowbotham, for instance, would have informed him that

Ricci spent many hours in earnest conversation with Chinese scholars before he even attempted to broach the subject of religion. He went through a real apprenticeship, during which he became deeply imbued with the Chinese point of view. He must have been honestly convinced that in Confucian and ancestor worship there was, in essence, nothing fundamentally in opposition to the Christian ideas of God and the immortality of the soul, and with this conviction it would have been easy for him to accept certain ceremonies which wounded the susceptibilities of his less

expert brethren (*Missionary and Mandarin* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1942], p. 63).

And to Professor E. R. Hughes, the Jesuit policy, far from being a mere tactic, sprang from a reasoned conviction that there must be a great deal of truth imbedded in a system of thought which had for so long supported the great civilization of China. That is why

to Matteo Ricci and his fellow Jesuits the situation admitted of an open mind. The teaching of the great Jesuit Cardinal, John de Lugo, had visualized a grace of God already at work in non-Christian lands, working through religious and philosophical systems in which God had revealed Himself (*The Invasion of China by the Western World* [London: A. & C. Black, 1937], p. 65).

Ricci and his successors may have been mistaken; but it is surely ungenerous to brand them as hypocrites merely because they believed, after patient and prolonged study of the Chinese classics, that it was possible, in Professor Latourette's words, "for one reared in the Confucian tradition to become a Christian without being disloyal to two institutions esteemed by the Chinese as basic," namely, the family and the state (*History of the Expansion of Christianity*, III [London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1939], 341).

It is well known that Fathers Ruggiero and Ricci made use of their knowledge of mathematics and astronomy, and even of mechanical devices such as clocks, to capture the interest of Chinese officials and thus win admission into the Empire. Mr. Panikkar finds this infuriating. He notes sourly that when Ricci went up to Peking in 1598 "he carried with him not many copies of religious books, but an assortment of watches, clocks, scientific instruments and other rarities with which he hoped to convince the court of his learning and usefulness" (p. 392). Further on (p. 394), he quotes the great missionary's last words to his brethren—"I leave you facing an open door"—and sneers, "The door was undoubtedly open for clocks, mathematics, astronomy and charts, but hardly for Christianity." But the Jesuits were persistent, and in high dudgeon Mr. Panikkar notes that with Schall's arrival in Peking (1629), "the work of smuggling religion into China through mathematics and astronomy" began to be seriously attempted (p. 396).

It is difficult to see what Mr. Panikkar finds objectionable in this. If the Chinese were interested in Western science, was

it not simply courtesy on the part of the Jesuits to satisfy their interest? And if clocks and charts, mathematics and astronomy set their feet on the road to Peking, if their training as scientists promised to win them a hearing as missionaries, was it not simply common sense to grasp the opportunity when it was offered? If it should come to the knowledge of the Indian government that a scholar of Mr. Panikkar's stature would be most acceptable as ambassador, say, to France, can any conceivable blame attach to the Indian government for appointing him to that position? Would anyone think of calling this use of scholarship in the service of diplomacy dubious practice, compromise with conscience, servility, sordid intrigue, as Mr. Panikkar, for reasons best known to himself, has chosen to call the Jesuits' use of scholarship in the service of religion?

But—clocks! Mr. Panikkar seems to consider it contemptible that the Jesuits should interest the Chinese in clocks. If so, it is strange that he does not consider the Chinese equally contemptible for being interested in them. Possibly Mr. Panikkar has become so completely westernized as to take clocks for granted; but he should at least have the imagination to realize that in the seventeenth century a clock was still a thing of wonder, and not yet beneath the notice of men with pretensions to intelligence. One might mention in passing that the Emperor Ch'ien Lung, for whose clear-sighted statesmanship Mr. Panikkar has a high regard, kept four thousand clocks and watches in his palaces, and was always pestering the Jesuits for more.

One of Ricci's successors as head of the Jesuit mission in Peking was Johann Adam Schall von Bell. Schall came to China as a missionary in 1619. He labored first at Singanfu in Shensi Province, whence he was summoned to the capital to assist in the reform of the Chinese calendar. In 1634, he was appointed President of the Imperial Board of Mathematics. In 1664, he was cast into prison on trumped-up charges of high treason and propagating an evil religion, but was released the following year. Broken by his labors and sufferings, he died in 1666, having consecrated forty-five of his seventy-five years to the Chinese missions.

Mr. Panikkar brings this dedicated priest and scientist into his narrative chiefly in order to accuse him, first, of casting cannon for the Chinese government, and second, of aiding and abetting the practice of astrology. The first charge is easily disposed of. Schall did, indeed, supervise the casting of cannon in

the imperial family foundry at the request of the last Ming emperor; but why Mr. Panikkar considers this service unChristian and a compromise with conscience does not appear. To make good his claim, Mr. Panikkar would have to show either that guns are evil things in themselves, or that these particular guns were intended for some evil purpose. But the first of these propositions is clearly false and the second demonstrably so, since the guns were to be used in the defense of the imperial capital. It does not help Mr. Panikkar's reputation as a scholar to make accusations he cannot prove.

The second charge, that of dabbling in astrology, is equally unfounded. It is true that the Chinese calendar, whose accuracy Schall helped to restore, was used to determine lucky and unlucky days. But Schall had nothing whatever to do with that, and this can be proved in a very decisive way. When Schall stood trial for his life before the Regents who governed China during the Emperor K'ang Hsi's minority, one of the charges brought against him was that he had chosen an inauspicious day for the burial of an imperial prince. The Regents had no love for Schall; in fact, they subsequently condemned him to death; but they acquitted him of this particular charge because it was found upon investigation that he had never, in all the thirty years that he was President of the Board of Mathematics, meddled in the determination of lucky and unlucky days.

In short, Schall's function as imperial astronomer was simply to draw up an astronomically accurate calendar; it was the Chinese officials, chiefly of the Board of Rites, who put in the astrological additions. In fact, the possibility of the Peking Jesuits cooperating in superstitious practices even remotely and unintentionally was pretty thoroughly gone into at Rome, first by the superiors of the Society, then by a special commission, and finally by the Pope himself. Pope Alexander VII's decision was that there was nothing whatever to fear on this score, and accordingly he authorized the Jesuits in China, *vivae vocis oraculo* (3 April 1664), "to exercise the office and dignity of mandarin and imperial mathematician" (cf. *Catholic Encyclopedia*, XIII, s.v. Schall). In view of these facts, one wonders whether there is anything behind Mr. Panikkar's repeated sneers at the Jesuit "astrologers" except a blind unreasoning prejudice.

If we now turn to what Mr. Panikkar has to say about the early Christian missions in Japan, we find that here, too, we are

presented not with an objective account, but with a series of unproved assertions in support of a previously prepared position which must be defended at all costs. Thus, Hideyoshi's bloody persecution of Christianity can only have one explanation: Christianity was subversive of Japanese society and government and the missionaries were deeply implicated in political intrigue. There is not the slightest hint that Hideyoshi was in reality a power-mad dictator who with his successor Ieyasu imposed on the Japanese people one of the most ruthless forms of totalitarian government known to history; and that the foreign missionaries and their Japanese converts were tortured and killed for no other crime than that of claiming for themselves the freedom to worship God according to the dictates of conscience. Mr. Panikkar cites with evident approval Hideyoshi's reply to the Governor of the Philippines that "the Spaniards had no more right to introduce their religion in Japan than the Japanese had to preach their religion in the Philippines" (p. 415). It is to be hoped that Mr. Panikkar will not be too vocal in his advocacy of this drastic limitation of the First Freedom at international gatherings.

The section on Christian missionary enterprise in Asia during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries may be more briefly treated. Mr. Panikkar is quite right in deploring the evil effects of the political patronage extended to the Chinese mission by European governments. But he might have avoided giving the impression that this patronage was normally sought or even welcomed by the missionaries themselves. Contrary to a widespread belief, priests and nuns are not completely naive; and the priests and nuns in China must have realized that the French government, which was the most aggressive in "protecting" the missions,

took over this role from no particular zeal for the faith. Indeed, during much of the time after the establishment of the Third Republic (1871), in its own territories, domestic and colonial, the French administration was anti-clerical. However, French commerce with China was much less important than that of Great Britain and in the diplomatic support of Roman Catholic missions of whatever nationality France found a means of asserting herself (*Latourette, op. cit.*, VI, 266).

Seeing that a protectorate with extraterritorial rights, while affording them and their Chinese congregations a necessary measure of external liberty, tended to place Christianity in a false position, the missionaries sought to disassociate themselves from

it as far as possible, and, as Professor Latourette observes, "beginning at least as early as the 1880's, various synods endeavored to discourage [Chinese] Christians from feeling that they enjoyed any special privileges" (*ibid.*, VI, 268).

In general it may be said that the objectivity of Mr. Panikkar's account of the impact of Christianity on Asia suffers from his preconceived notion that Christianity is a form of Western aggression—the running dog, if we may borrow an urbane communist phrase, of Western imperialism. Yet Mr. Panikkar's profound knowledge of the religious traditions of his own country should warn him against any such facile identification of politics and religion. Buddhism, for instance, originated in India, yet its diffusion beyond the borders of India was neither the consequence nor the cause of political domination. And certainly this "foreign" religion is today as much a part of the highly individualized cultures of China and Japan as Taoism and Shinto, which are of native growth.

Islam was conceived in the Near East, whence, incidentally, Christianity also sprang; yet who shall say that Islam is "foreign" to India or Indonesia, or that a Pan-Islamic movement is necessarily the prelude to the political domination of Asia by Egypt? This being the case, will not Mr. Panikkar concede at least the possibility that the religion founded by a Galilean Jew might, as Robert de Nobili and Matteo Ricci hoped, become as native to Asia as it is to Europe? In fact, this possibility is already, at least in part, a reality in one Asian country; and it is perhaps, a rough indication of the limitations of Mr. Panikkar's remarkable work that it has very little to say about the Philippines.

H. DE LA COSTA

ENGLISH CROSS SECTION

THE LITERARY APPRENTICE '55. Edited by Elmer A. Ordoñez and Ernesto V. Epistola. Published for the U.P. Writers' Club by the College of Liberal Arts, University of the Philippines, Quezon City. 1955.

This collection of literary pieces in many genres will interest Filipino readers for various reasons. It furnishes a fair sampling of the work of modern Filipino writers showing very commend-