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Protestantism as a “Bridge” for Interaction Between Western and Chinese Cultures

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Abstract

Introduction. The article examines the role of Protestantism in the interaction between Western and Chinese cultures. It is of interest to analyse the goals and objectives of Protestant missionaries in China. Protestantism and the missionary activities of Protestant missionaries are assessed by both Western and Chinese researchers, which provides a more complete picture of the essence of these activities and their impact on bilateral relations.

Materials and Methods. This research employs general scientific methods of research as historicism, comparison, description, dialectical approach. The materials are based on historical, scientific and philosophical works of domestic and foreign authors on the topic of the study.

Results. It is shown that the factor of the presence of Christianity in the cultural space of China is assessed both positively and negatively. In addition, it is demonstrated that due to the activities of Protestant missionaries and the process of cultural interaction, Christianity has become an integral part of Chinese culture.

Discussion and Conclusion. The basis for the interaction between Western and Chinese cultures is Christianity, which opened China to European science, religion, philosophy, etc. In Chinese scholarship, Christianity is perceived as a factor of colonisation and humiliation of China. However, despite the fact that the interaction of cultures was confrontational, the opening of China to the world and the world to China has become an undeniable fact.

Keywords: Protestantism, missionary activity, interaction of cultures, China, Western culture, Chinese culture

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Оригинальное теоретическое исследование

Протестантизм как «мост» для взаимодействия западной и китайской культур

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Аннотация

Введение. Рассматривается роль протестантизма во взаимодействии западной и китайской культур. Интерес представляет анализ целей и задач, которые ставили перед собой протестантские миссионеры в Китае. Оценка протестантизма и миссионерской деятельности протестантских миссионеров дается как западными, так и китайскими исследователями, на основании чего складывается более полная картина сути данной деятельности и ее влияния на двусторонние отношения.

Материалы и методы. Применяются общенаучные методы исследования. Используются методы историзма, сравнения, описания, диалектический подход. В качестве материалов за основу взяты исторические, научные и философские работы отечественных и зарубежных авторов по теме исследования.

Результаты исследования. Показано, что фактор присутствия христианства в культурном пространстве Китая оценивается как с положительной, так и с отрицательной стороны. Кроме того, продемонстрировано, что благодаря деятельности протестантских миссионеров и процессу взаимодействия культур христианство стало неотъемлемой частью китайской культуры.

Обсуждение и заключение. Базисом для взаимодействия западной и китайской культур является христианство, благодаря которому Китай открылся для европейской науки, религии, философии и т. д. В китайской науке христианство воспринимается как фактор колонизации и унижения Китая. Однако несмотря на то что взаимодействие культур происходило в условиях конфронтации, открытие Китая миру и мира Китаю стало неоспоримым фактом.

Ключевые слова: протестантизм, миссионерская деятельность, взаимодействие культур, Китай, западная культура, китайская культура

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Introduction. Religious activity is one of the main elements of intercultural communication. Thanks to the dissemination of religious ideas, the dialogue of cultures begins, which results in interaction in various spheres of activity, since religious contacts are not limited to only one local sphere of activity, but penetrate into all other social spheres of society. In this case, religion and accompanying missionary activity become a bridge between interacting cultures. Nevertheless, the interaction of cultures will always be accompanied by the connection between 'one's own – correct, understandable' and 'alien – wrong, distant, strange', in these categories the difference between the interacting cultures is defined. In order to stop associating the notion of 'alien' with the notion of 'other', the donor culture should not be perceived by the recipient culture as an adversary.

Materials and methods. General scientific methods of research are applied, using the methods of historicism, comparison, and description. The method of historicism helped to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the missionary activity of Christian missionaries; the methods of comparison and description, i. e. the peculiarities of Protestant missionary activity, as well as the peculiarities of interaction and conflict between Western and Chinese cultures. A dialectical approach is used, which allows to reveal the phenomena and processes under study in a comprehensive and interrelated way. The materials are based on historical, scientific and philosophical works of domestic and foreign specialists in the field under study: D.B. Dubrovskaya, N. Standaert, V.G. Datsyshen, Shen Shuyu. E. Ukhtomsky, A. Baron, etc.

Results. Missionary activity in preaching should take into account the existing social and social realities of a particular cultural environment in a given society, i. e., missionaries need to find the most favourable ground for spreading their religious ideology. It should also be noted that missionary activity should be carried out taking into account the basic principles of adaptation, the basis of which are two important points: learning the language of the country to which the missionaries are going to go and respect for the culture of the host country. It is necessary to recognise the fact that these principles were initially put into practice by the Jesuits, for which they were often attacked by their co-religionists. As D.V. Dubrovskaya writes, nowadays the requirement to learn the language of the natives seems to be an obvious necessity, and yet this first law of cultural adaptation was previously completely ignored: the usual practice of missionaries in distant countries was to instruct in the faith through interpreters [1, pp. 66–68]. Despite this, the introduction of these two principles into missionary activity has produced tremendous results in cultural-religious, philosophical, scientific, and social aspects.

If we talk about Russia and China, the specifics of the evangelisation of the two nations was that it came from the top down. In Russia, Christianity was first adopted by the ruling class; in China, Christianity was spread through Confucian scholars, who enjoyed the greatest authority and respect in Chinese society.

The most intensive spread of Christianity on the territory of China began with Catholic missionaries in the 17th century, which allowed Protestants who appeared in China to use scientific foundations for their activities in the Celestial Empire. When spreading Protestantism, the main conditions for missionaries were, firstly, translation activities (translation of Christian literature, the Holy Scriptures into Chinese and local dialects, publication of special commentaries, as is customary in the Chinese literary tradition, on certain parts of the Holy Scriptures, development of basic tools for learning the Chinese language, etc.).

Secondly, the interaction between Chinese and Western culture in the form of Protestantism could not take place without conflict, which gave rise to the need to study the main philosophical schools of China, as well as the most ancient literary monuments and commentaries on them, etc. It should be noted that the leading philosophical school of China

has always been the Confucian school, although in a rather modified form, if we compare it with the school founded by Confucius himself. At the same time, as Nicholas Standaert notes, Christianity, perceived as a marginal religion, had to prove its right to be adapted and integrated into Chinese traditional culture, because as a religion that came from outside, it could not correspond to ‘the deep structure of Chinese religious life’ [2].

All the difficulties of adapting and penetrating Christianity into the structure of Chinese culture were coped by Catholic missionaries. Matteo Ricci realised that the embedding of Christianity in Chinese culture depended on how Christianity, its liturgical practices, and the very possibility of preaching Christianity in China would be viewed by the highest echelons of power, as well as on the compatibility of Christianity and its practices with Confucianism, its norms and values.

The first Protestant missionary to China was Robert Morrison in 1807. Robert Morrison, a major Chinese scholar and an outstanding translator, made a significant contribution not only to Chinese studies but also to the dialogue of cultures. Thanks to Robert Morrison, a Chinese dictionary was compiled, the Bible was translated into Chinese, a systematic grammar of the Chinese language, a three-volume Chinese-English dictionary, many English-language works on China, the first English-language school in Canton and an English-Chinese college in Malacca [3, p. 66].

V.G. Datsishen notes that at first Protestantism was characterised by a certain uncompromising attitude towards Chinese traditional culture [4, p. 71], which did not allow Protestant preachers to assess Chinese spiritual culture more objectively and, based on its positive aspects, to turn towards Christianity, thus attracting more Chinese to their side. This fact of uncompromisingness could not but affect the Chinese belief that Christian and Chinese cultures are complete antagonists.

At the same time, it should be noted that if in the 19th century the main spheres of preaching of Protestantism, according to Richard S. Bush, were medicine, pedagogy and politics [5, p. 82], then today, without being able to penetrate into these spheres, Protestantism, as the Chinese researcher Shen Shuyu notes, carries out active missionary activities, and also has a tradition of charity, which has created:

- 1) a positive image of Protestantism in Chinese society;
- 2) a good reputation for Protestantism;
- 3) a certain attractiveness [6].

Shen Shuyu categorises these causes as internal causes. He also identifies external causes. To the external causes of Protestantism development, Shen Shuyu also includes social causes [6]. Starting from domestic and international historical reasons, the huge development of religion at a certain stage of history has often been accompanied by great social changes or transformations. In China, after the opening-up reform, the social development of Chinese society has changed greatly since the late 1970s. Such radical changes have had a profound impact on people’s values and behaviour [6]. As a result of such changes, great development has occurred, but also many socially undesirable phenomena have emerged. All these contributed to a great extent to the development of Protestantism.

In particular, firstly, from the point of view of beliefs, people had and have a need for religion. In modern society with its developed economy, the number of natural and man-made disasters has not decreased, people are as susceptible to diseases as before, experience a sense of helplessness and insecurity in front of society, etc. All this further strengthens people’s religious feelings. All this further strengthens people’s religious feelings. Secondly, in terms of social attitudes, people’s religious attitudes have changed after reform and openness. The concept of ‘religion is an opium for the people’ has become obsolete, and religion has become a worldview and culture. With the deepening of reform and opening up, Western culture has penetrated into China [6].

Some Chinese intellectuals are increasingly interested in Western thought, especially Christianity. In the past twenty years, various books on Christianity have been published, which have objectively promoted the spread of Christianity in society [6]. In addition, after the openness reforms, Protestantism has become the symbol and embodiment of Western civilisation. Christianity’s philosophy of equality, freedom and tolerance, as well as the democratic style of church governance were attractive to the society.

Thirdly, in terms of social environment, after the III Plenum of the XI Central Committee, people’s living standards have improved significantly. At the same time, the difference between the rich and the poor has increased. Compared with the high-income group, the disadvantaged groups are relatively helpless and confused. In addition, competition and the pursuit of financial gains have also led to the destruction of traditional morality, such as lust for profit, indifference to human kindness and corruption. After the III Plenum of the XI Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, the policy of religious freedom was put into practice and the restoration of religious sites began [6].

In 1982, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China issued a document comprehensively and scientifically explaining and clarifying the Party’s basic views on religious issues, which confirms and enriches the policy of religious

freedom. With the advent of the 1990s, various laws and regulations have been issued one after another, the 'Regulations on Religious Affairs' was officially promulgated in 2004, and religious administration was put on the path of legalisation [6]. It can be seen from this that a free and reasonable political environment provides an appropriate political space for the development of Protestantism.

In this regard, it is significant that the interaction between Western and Chinese cultures has given rise to the concept of 'Chinesisation of Christianity' (the term refers to all three branches of Christianity). The concept stems from a well-established feature of East Asian culture, i. e. syncretism of thought. This peculiarity, including Chinese thinking, is not understandable and does not correspond to the European ideological-religious view. In the present case we are talking about the fact that East Asian thinking is characterised by the breadth of religious views, i.e. the possibility of reading the Gospel, keeping the Cross, honouring Jesus Christ as God, without cancelling the possibility of honouring Buddha, worshipping ancestors, etc. This peculiarity of East Asian thinking was emphasised by E.E. Ukhtomsky [7, p. 30]. This is the essence of the conflict in the interaction of Western and Chinese cultures, which was inevitable.

In addition, two views on the traditional religious and ritual system of China were formed in the Protestant environment. As V.G. Datsishen notes, on the one hand, Protestant missionaries assessed Chinese culture from extremely negative positions [4, p. 71], on the other hand, Protestant missionaries sought to compromise with Chinese culture [ibid.].

Protestants paid the main attention in their missionary activity to two things: 1) education, because missionaries perceived school first of all as a place for preaching, and then as a place for receiving education [8, pp. 86–99]; 2) medicine, because through medicine it was possible to attract the population and at the same time to preach Christianity [ibid.].

Despite the construction of various educational and medical institutions, as well as temples, prayer houses, etc., Chinese researchers assess this only in terms of attempts to colonise China and the desire to replace Chinese culture with European culture. However, thanks to the activities of missionaries, the achievements of European scientific thought began to penetrate into China, and the construction of hospitals and schools contributed to the fact that education and medicine became available to the general population. In addition, various charitable institutions appeared in China, temples were reconstructed, and religious communities were founded.

It is also important to take into account the fact that conflict inevitably arises when cultures interact. The desire of European powers to trade with China, to open diplomatic and religious institutions throughout China, and to conduct more active preaching activities were all perceived by the Chinese as an encroachment on their sovereignty and independence, which led to a violent confrontation between China and Europe that resulted in two Opium Wars, in which China lost and effectively became a semi-colony.

Many Chinese researchers still consider Christianity to be a symbol of the loss of independence. In addition, Christianity in general, and Protestantism in particular, is perceived as a way of obtaining exclusive rights for foreigners, their desire to occupy a privileged position in the Chinese state, and the cause of opium expansion is associated with Christianity [3, p. 66]. This opinion of Chinese researchers is based on the clauses of the 'Beijing' and 'Tianjin' treaties, which the Qing government was forced to sign [9, p. 169]. 'Tianjin' and "Peking" treaties were of great importance for the spread of Christianity not just in the trading cities of China, but, most importantly, within the country. Especially the fact of giving Christianity equal rights on a par with the traditional beliefs of China contributed to this [10, p. 235; 11, p. 17].

In addition, the signing of the 'unequal treaties', in which the position of Christianity was stipulated in separate clauses, meant that Christianity became an integral part of the religious and social life of China, which the Chinese government has to reckon with to this day. In addition, the presence of Christianity meant the introduction of great changes in all spheres of Chinese society.

As Nicholas Standert writes, Christianity for the connection between Western and Chinese cultures was one of the unique types of cultural interaction because, firstly, from the point of view that both Catholic and Protestant missionaries made a lot of efforts for the successful cultural adaptation of Christianity into Chinese culture [2]. Secondly, Nicholas Standert understands the dialogue between Chinese and European cultures as a dialogue between equals, since the socio-social structure of the Chinese Empire and the European powers of that time were culturally, economically, intellectually and materially much more developed than other non-European states that Europeans had to face at that time [12, pp. 602–604]. For example, if we talk about the difference in approaches to the enlightenment of aborigines, the culture of Peruvian Indians, as well as the representatives of this culture themselves, were not perceived by Europeans as equal [13, p. 13]. Despite the fact that Chinese culture interacted with Christian culture for quite a long time, and there were quite severe contradictions, nevertheless, Chinese culture was able to preserve and not lose its cultural identity.

Discussion and conclusion. When referring to the peculiarities of interaction between Western and Chinese cultures, one cannot but speak about Christianity (all three branches), since this factor, on the one hand, was of great importance for

the opening of China to European science, religion, philosophy, European thinking and worldview, etc. On the other hand, the factor of the presence of Christianity in China is assessed by Chinese specialists as a factor of colonisation, loss of power and sovereignty. Special attention is paid to the relationship with traditional Chinese culture, most often Confucianism, i. e. to what extent Christianity and Confucianism harmonise with each other, to what extent they complement each other and whether Christianity can be superior to Confucianism. Despite the negative attitude of Chinese scholars towards Christianity in general, and Protestantism in particular, it is impossible to deny the merits of Christian and Protestant missionaries in the process of cultural interaction. It should be emphasised that in the process of interaction, which took place under conditions of confrontation, China opened up to the world, and the world opened up to China.

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