

The Early Church in China: A Case Study of an Insider Movement

by David G. Cashin

The concept of reaching people within their cultural and religious contexts is a biblical one. Indeed, the incarnation of Jesus provides the primary example for reaching mankind in his context. What that means for us in Christian mission has been tried and tested throughout history. This paper is one more historical case study of contextualization which gives focus to the missional adaptation of the Church of the East in China to the Taoist school at Da Qin beginning in the 7th century. It should offer perspective to the debate regarding one type of adaptation known today as “insider movements” (hereafter abbreviated IM).¹ There are now insider movements and their advocates within peoples who identify with Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, African tribal religions, and indeed, probably any religious identity. There are different types of IMs in Christian history,² and this article will attempt to supplement the broader historical record by giving further illustration to adaptive efforts that tend towards syncretism and an unfaithfulness to God and his revealed Word.

The Church of the East

Kenneth Scott Latourette, in his foundational work on the history of Christianity, mentions the arrival of “Nestorian”³ missionaries in China under the leadership of Alopen in 635 AD. Alopen led a mission to China that was positively received in the court of the Chinese Emperor. Latourette notes their spread, the coming of persecution in 835 AD, and that the movement had entirely vanished by 980 AD.⁴ Over roughly a 200-year period this Christian mission effort was able to establish itself in the epicenter of China. This article is primarily an analysis of the Jesus Sutras, early Christian documents of this movement and of the commentary and translation provided in the groundbreaking work of Martin Palmer in *The Jesus Sutras: Rediscovering the Lost Scrolls of Taoist Christianity*.

Three preliminary observations are in order as we begin to evaluate the strategic efforts of this church movement, and particularly the characteristics of these Jesus Sutras.

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First, the movement was dependent on state support, and one of the reasons for its downfall was when state support was finally withdrawn.⁵ This approach involved building the central Christian monastery on the site of Lou Guan Tai, the Taoist monastery where Lao Zi supposedly wrote his classic work, the Tao Te Ching:

The significance of the Christian influence in this Taoist stronghold would be comparable to a new religion being allowed to build a temple within the precincts of Canterbury Cathedral in the Middle Ages, or a new faith being given financial aid and support to build a monastery on the grounds of the White House today.⁶

Later documents from the 10th and 14th centuries seem to indicate that segments of the Church survived underground and experienced something of a revival in the time of the Mongols.⁷ All the texts we will use in this case study were hidden in a cave around 1005 AD, so clearly Christianity was still extant at that time. But, as you will see in this study, its form was so similar to Taoism that Christian travelers to the area during this period (and later) would perhaps not have recognized followers of this “religion” as distinctively “Christian.”

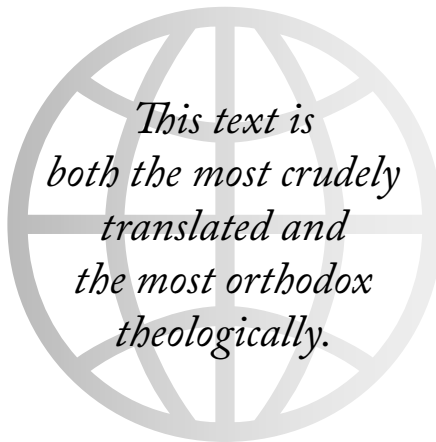
Secondly, this movement was also dependent on secondary literature and did not have the New Testament in Chinese. The first copies of the New Testament reached China perhaps in either 719 or 742,⁸ but these texts were in Syriac and do not seem to have been translated into Chinese (as were the earlier documents we will examine here).

Thirdly, another aspect to these early documents is that they are essentially philosophical treatises. There is no historical narrative of the coming of Jesus and his teachings as presented in the New Testament. Without a strong historical record of an authoritative scripture these teachings are de-contextualized (or de-historicized), and they can become primarily expressions of any local culture.

They are relevant to the issues of this Chinese context and eras but, as you will see in my analysis, are less than faithful to the transcendent message of the gospel.

The Translation of the Jesus Sutras

I would like to focus most of this case study on the work of Martin Palmer. In his book, *The Jesus Sutras*, he both translated and revised earlier translations of Chinese Christian documents of that period and examined archeological evidence (which includes the famous stone stelae and ruins of the central Christian monastery in China).⁹ He suggests that these documents and archeological evidence



indicate that this Christian approach virtually became a new school of Taoism. It is this corporate sense of identity that distinguishes this movement as a certain type of insider movement. With regard to the Christian documents discovered from this period, Palmer states:

These scrolls were Christian books written in Chinese, telling a story of Christianity that is unique and surprising... The best way to describe these books is collectively, with the term they themselves use: the Jesus Sutras.¹⁰

In Palmer's opinion these early Christian books

united the wisdom and moderation of Taoism and the humanism and

compassion of Christianity—the Path of the Buddha and the Way of Jesus.¹¹

This fusion appears to have been a deliberate strategy by the Church of the East at the epicenter of Chinese Taoism from its earliest Christian sutras (dating between 640–660 CE).

The earliest sutra is entitled the Sutra of the Teachings of the World-Honored One (hereafter referred to as STW). It borrows a title from a translation of a text called the *Teachings of the Apostles*.¹² Palmer considers this text to be both the most crudely translated and yet also the most orthodox theologically. The second sutra, entitled the Sutra of Cause, Effect, and Salvation (hereafter abbreviated SCES) presents Christian ideas in the light of Buddhist thought and parallels a popular Buddhist text of the time. The third sutra, entitled the Sutra of Origins (hereafter abbreviated SO) is indeed concerned with origins, but also utilizes Taoist terminology in describing the spirit of life (*qi*) and the “way” of Christianity (*Tao*).¹³ The final book from this early period is entitled the Sutra of Jesus Christ (hereafter abbreviated SJC), is “Buddhist in tone” and borrows ideas from Tibetan Christianity and Hinduism.¹⁴

The World-Honored One

Adaptations of a theological nature are apparent from the beginning in these texts. In the earliest sutra, the Christian writers relate the teachings of Christ in Mt. 6:26 and God's provision to the birds of the air by adding:

At birth everyone is given a heavenly soul and the Five Attributes and at the appropriate time food, drink or clothing is provided.¹⁵

These “Five Attributes” are a clear reference to the five Buddhist *skhandas* or “aggregates” that lead to consciousness. Montalvo states, “the five aggregates present a comprehensive typology of experience,” and this leads to the desire for material goods and meeting physical needs.¹⁶ In Buddhism

this experience creates the original sin of desire. STW cleverly connects this desire for material goods to Jesus' teaching concerning the birds which neither sow nor reap but are provided for (Matt. 6:26). There is an appeal to Buddhist conceptions here.

This concept of "five qualities" seems also to be related to the Buddhist idea of "conditioned arising." Through these five attributes consciousness arises and with it desire. Another portion of the text also refers to Jesus' teaching on taking the log out of your own eye, stating, "Be aware of your own qualities and how they relate to others." These "qualities," which are a by-product of conditioned arising, seem to correspond to the concept of "the flesh" in New Testament thinking.

Is this example a legitimate and appropriate theological bridge between Christ and the Buddha, or is it syncretism? It's clear that the text does not draw a one-to-one correspondence between Buddhist and Christian theological concepts as in the example above. It also displays Christian discernment, for it rejects Buddhist conceptions like *anatma* (or "no-self") by stating "everyone is given a heavenly soul." In a manner quite foreign to Buddhism, the text is thoroughly ontological with God at the center of the text as the "World-Honored One."¹⁷ He is also called "the One Sacred Spirit," "Father," and "the Compassionate One." The Christian concept of "forgiveness" is primary to the message of this sutra rather than the Buddhist wheel of *samsara* and *karma*.

There is also an implicit critique of the Chinese temple with its gods of prosperity, progeny, and longevity. The text intones that "people think there are two important things under Heaven. The first is God and the second is money"¹⁸ reflecting again on the birds of the air from Matthew 6. God as "Compassionate" and as "Father" sometimes does not give what we ask because "you cannot be given

In a manner quite foreign to Buddhism, the text is thoroughly ontological with God at the center as the "World-Honored One."

things that are wrong for you."¹⁹ There is a relational component here that is absent in Buddhism.

One may also note the format of these reflections. They are proverbial adaptations from the teachings of Jesus that bear a strong resemblance to the Analects of Confucius. The resemblance of Proverbs in the Old Testament to the Analects has been noted²⁰ and Jesus often follows that literary pattern in his teaching. This would actually be cutting edge missiology in our modern era with our increasing emphasis on wisdom traditions in the scriptures and their relevance in other cultures.²¹

Some portions of STW show the influence of monophysite Christology. Without going into the details, monophysite Christology posited the "single nature" of Christ, tending to downplay his human nature. After dealing with the story of the crucifixion of Jesus, the text reads:

Anybody who says "I am a god" should die. The Messiah is not the honored one. Instead, through his body he showed the people the Honored one.²²

This is also referred to as "the one sacred Spirit took a body."²³ The text goes on to explain "what he brought was not being human, but came directly from the Honored One." This clearly denies the concept of the dual nature of Christ which characterizes Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant Christology. This hints also towards the reincarnation of the Buddha, who is often spoken of as the "provisional manifestation" through an illusory body or *nirmanakaya*.²⁴ In this text Christ's death on the cross is presented as a release from "his five attributes," a statement that seems to associate Buddhist nirvana with Christian atonement and salvation. Consider this statement in its longer context:

Out of love he suffered so that what Adam had caused should be changed

by this. While his Five Attributes passed away, he did not die but was released again after his death. Thus it is possible for even those who fail to live after death.²⁵

Thus the body that died on the cross was not God but merely a manifestation through which the divine nature was revealed. This seems to be an intentional bridge to Buddhism, but a heretical one. Jesus did not really die; his resurrection was merely a further manifestation. Monophysite Christology is combined with Buddhist conceptions of the unreality of the body. Though this is the most orthodox of the texts according to Palmer, it has a fatal weakness at its core. It goes one step beyond the "use of the analogy of the union of soul and body to explain the unity of the Godhead and humanity in Christ."²⁶ This becomes the doorway to Buddhist conceptions controlling the Christology rather than scripture being determinative. This is Buddhist contextualization flowing into Christianity. This has relevance to the culture but lacks faithfulness to the scriptures.

STW goes on to say that through this union of soul and body we receive qi (the Taoist "life force") as the Holy Spirit. This is an interesting contextualizing bridge, but is "life force" synonymous with the Holy Spirit and what issues does this connection raise?

The concept of the three treasures—jing, qi and shen (are) an internal alchemy... A well-known concept basic to Daoism as well as Chinese culture in general, the three treasures are differently interpreted in various contexts, and the specific ideas associated with each of them shape the views of human nature and immortality in which they play a central role.²⁷

Two important aspects of this Taoist conception come to mind. First, qi is an impersonal force related to the natural

origin of the universe. Second, it is something progressively gained and cultivated through occult practices. Any association with the gospel message can introduce some significant distortions, for it indicates that human effort based on the use of occult rituals rather than a relationship with God can lead to immense personal power. An example of this kind of thinking is found in a medieval Chinese text:

... (the) Secret Instructions of the Jade Bedchamber, which explains how the Spirit Mother of the West, originally an ordinary human being like anyone else, devoured the life [Qi] force of numerous young boys by copulating with them, and thereby transformed herself into a famed goddess.²⁸

The potential for misunderstanding when the Holy Spirit is viewed as a life force is immense.

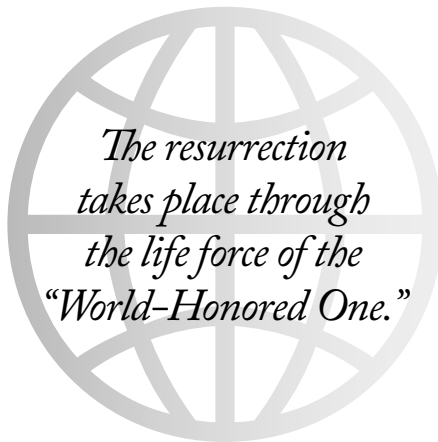
The text goes on to state that the message of salvation is that “through the holy wonders of the Messiah all can escape becoming ghosts.”²⁹ The concept of the “hungry ghost” was common to both Buddhism and Taoism in China. Those who died having lived an unfulfilled life could return to haunt the living. This was particularly true of children and young men and women who had died having never married and their ghostly nature is described as:

Phantom-like creatures with withered limbs, grossly bloated bellies, and long, thin necks, the Hungry Ghosts in many ways represent a fusion of rage and desire. Tormented by unfulfilled cravings and insatiably demanding of impossible satisfactions, the Hungry Ghosts are searching for gratification for old unfulfilled needs whose time has passed.³⁰

This raises some very interesting questions about what sort of salvation the STW text anticipates or if it even understands what indigenous concepts it has related to the Christian message by using this terminology. When Buddhism came to China it utilized the Taoist concept of hungry ghost to make

the point that desire is the original sin. This actually did fit quite well into the Buddhist concept of samsara and reincarnation. Desire is not the original sin in biblical Christianity, but rather rebellion. Further, associating deliverance with the release from “hungry ghost” status takes us far afield from biblical notions of the soul and judgment.

The remainder of STW tells the story of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus and concludes with a rendition of the Great Commission. The resurrection itself takes place through the qi or life force of the “World-Honored One.” Again, this is deeply problematic, for it plays upon impersonal occult concepts of power attained by human effort.



Some of the STW material is enigmatic and possibly refers to the distant context of the Near East where a great war had just concluded between the Byzantines and the Persians, a war that was “throwing everything to the ground, destroying everything that had been gained.”³¹ This is reinforced at the end of the text where the author states that “in Bethlehem and in Persia the believers were killed.”³² This does help to establish the time frame of the text.

Amidst the creative use of Buddhist and Taoist terminology, the STW also evinces a strong exclusivist sentiment when it states that “there is no other true way that people can walk. Any other way is judged to be false.”³³

Secondly, heaven is presented as a place where “nothing will pass and nothing change.”³⁴ The Buddhist worldview, to the contrary, posited change as the essential reality of this world and this impermanence was their justification for denying ontological permanence since the Buddhist believed no permanent unchanging self could be identified. Thus, Buddhism maintains: “This is the goal of Human beings—to have no existence.”³⁵ By contrast, STW introduces what is an interesting and, I think, effective apologetic point against Buddhism. The realm of the spirit in heaven is unchanging and not subject to samsara, thus it constitutes a permanent ontological reality. STW concludes with a picture of the universal fires of the “earth prisons” for those who reject the message. This vision of hell is also common to Buddhist conceptions of the afterlife in this period.

Cause, Effect, and Salvation

The second sutra, entitled the Sutra of Cause, Effect, and Salvation, is clearly a Christian reflection upon Buddhist notions of karma and reincarnation.³⁶ Palmer states of SCES:

It uses no classical Christian terminology or imagery, but weaves a Christian message through Greek and Buddhist philosophy.³⁷

As the sutra describes creation, Taoist ideas of yin and yang are apparent:

Everything under heaven has these two qualities created by the Sacred Spirit. The one Sacred Spirit made the two. Everything under heaven has two natures, and everything is united under heaven. The two natures are body and sacred spirit. These two reside in all existence under heaven.³⁸

The bodily form is described as resulting from the “five skhandas,” a Buddhist concept, but these five skhandas “will be perfected” in the heavenly kingdom in permanent “complete happiness.” This SCES apologetic is a radical departure from the Buddhist concept of nirvana, where the skhandas

and all desires are ultimately deconstructed and extinguished.³⁹ Heaven in the SCES is conceived of as a union of perfected soul and body that “creates happiness,” not suffering. This seems to turn away not only from Buddhism but from the Manichaeic/gnostic dualism of pure spirit/evil body which Palmer posits as a primary influence (monophysite) within the Church of the East.⁴⁰ SCES denies this Buddhist dualism and seems fully in keeping with a Hebrew doctrine of both body and soul as creations of “the Sacred Spirit.”⁴¹ This is essential to the biblical view of the surpassing value of the suffering of Christ. “That the world is full of suffering is recognized everywhere, but Buddhism denies that suffering has any relevant role.”⁴² The biblical position affirms the value of suffering as a means of redemption, and the actual physical body of Christ as a means of redemption is affirmed in this text.

The text conceives of Jesus as “the Visitor” who “brought the five skhandas and the soul together.”⁴³ The Soul is seen as the “sculptor” refining the five skhandas of the body like modeling clay, and human life can be “enhanced if the soul is rich with karma.” The text affirms that “whatever you do in life will have its karmic impact upon your soul.” Karma here seems to reflect the contrast within a humankind made in the image of God that is both capable of refinement yet affected by the evil karma of sin. But, on this matter of karma we must pay attention to the historical context. Early Buddhism in China sought to popularize its own viewpoint by connecting the idea of karma with a more *positive* impact on the physical body:

The motivations for being involved in the accumulation of karmic merit in early medieval China were diverse, but one frequently mentioned goal was the health of the physical body.⁴⁴

While the perfected karma is declared to be “eternal,” and the transformation of karma to something positive occurs

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through being “born again,” this positive experience (salvation) is attained “by living properly in this world.” Here the text departs radically from the gospel message. “All creatures should know that the karmic consequences of what is done in this life will shape the next life.”⁴⁵ The section concludes, “do good in this world to enter the next. It cannot be done elsewhere.”⁴⁶ Is this “next life” reincarnation or heaven? The text simply asserts that “This world is the only place to decide your next birth.”⁴⁷

The SCES text falls short of a biblical viewpoint on three counts: first, it seems to affirm reincarnation; second, it affirms a thoroughly works-based salvation. Thirumalai, in his study of Buddhism and Christianity, affirms one great difference in the latter, that “*doing good works does not lead to salvation; neither does it ensure a better life in the future.*”⁴⁸ Third, the text affirms the improvement of the body which is not an important aspect of the Christian message.

The next section of SCES expounds on works salvation and then introduces the story of the sufferings of Christ. But the “sufferings” become a means to complete the good deed: “A benevolent act done in the knowledge of this suffering is the only truly benevolent act.”⁴⁹ The reader is encouraged to “be grateful for the grace you have received.” But exactly what that grace is or how it is received is not clear other than that one must strive to do what is right.⁵⁰

The final section notes the yin/yang balance of sacred time and calls people to worship God. People are led astray from the true path by “evil spirits” or “ghosts” which “oppose their good nature.” Those who are led astray by the evil spirits will be “trapped in the 10,000 kalpas from which there is no escape from rebirth.”⁵¹

SCES offers a remarkable apologetic opposing certain Buddhist ideas of karma and nirvana and uses a terminology very familiar to Taoists. However, rebirth through reincarnation is assumed to be true, rather than final judgment. Contrast this with Paul’s message to the Stoics in Acts 17. The Stoics were cyclic pantheists who believed in a form of reincarnation. Paul’s message of good news to them was that reincarnation would not occur but rather the final judgment that Christ would accomplish (Acts 17:31). Further, the message of the cross of Christ is muted, spoken of solely as “sufferings” of the “visitor” and conceived as a means primarily to sanctify good deeds. The “sufferings” do not seem to be the means of deliverance from the “evil spirits.” The message, aside from a strong works theology, lacks the kind of clarity on the salvation message which is available in the New Testament. It is clearer on Buddhist thought than it is on Christian.

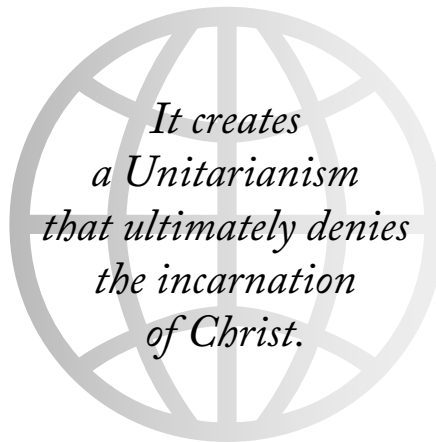
Origins

The third work, the Sutra of Origins (SO), follows a similar pattern, though it is much shorter. The text follows a Romans 1 style argument that the universe indicates the reality of an unchanging God behind it. It seems to attack the Buddhist idea that the transitoriness of the world is an indication of the unreality of the world. The world *is* because of the unchanging nature “of the ‘One Sacred Spirit’ who made it.”⁵² This phrase, “Great Holy Intelligence is as the Void” is synonymous with the Buddhist concept of *śūnya* (Void), which is “emptiness and thus invisible.” “The view that everything is empty (*śūnya*) is a central metaphysical plank of Buddhism.”⁵³ Priest argues that there is a potential ontological value to this Buddhist conception.⁵⁴ In this text the

nature of this omnipresent unchanging “being” turns the void concept back to ontology, which despite Priest’s argument, seems a clear denial of Buddhist teachings. “Heaven and earth are stable and nothing changes.” But associating the reality of a thoroughly ontological God (who brings stability to the world) with this Buddhist philosophy of “emptiness” is problematic. “Creation is like this also—no beginning and no end.” This is really a major departure from biblical notions of creation and bends the text towards monism—a thoroughly unitary view of the universe. The text associates this monism with *Wuwei* (non-action) and this ultimately negates the possibility of relationship. For instance, it asserts that there is no differentiation between the first and second spirit (the latter I take to mean Christ). “The other spirit came but with nothing to differentiate it from the One Sacred Spirit—like hands and feet.”⁵⁵

The constant emphasis on “One” Spirit and “not two or three” in the text, actually creates a Unitarianism that ultimately denies the incarnation of Christ. This would fit monophysite conceptions of the “Spirit” putting on a body in Jesus. It also fits the Taoist view of the void. The text seems to find its framework primarily in Taoism, and is reacting against Buddhism. In the SO text the Taoist concept of *Wuwei* is specifically mentioned as the nature of the Sacred Spirit: “the One Sacred Spirit is the embodiment of *Wuwei*, originless origin and unsubstantial substance.”⁵⁶ The concept of *Wuwei* is normally translated “non-action” but it could also mean unchanging. Moon explains, “a sage leader should take and explicate the paradox of non-action: By not doing, everything is done.”⁵⁷ The unchanging nature of *Wuwei* is in distinct contrast to the Buddhist concept of “Void.” The appeal to Taoism and finding fault with Buddhism is clearly stated: The Sacred Spirit which is “existing in *Wuwei*” is “never extinguished into non-being.”

The SO text fits the missionary strategy of working within the Taoist movement, native to China, and rejecting Buddhist ideas that were not native to China. Taoist monism is thoroughly ontological, whereas Buddhism denies the reality of ontology. SO affirms Taoist monism maintaining a strongly unitary view of God. Further, it raises the issue of whether the God of the Bible is truly an ideal of actionless action. This state is really an expression of a monistic reality where “actions” are ultimately absurd. Quiescence is the pathway to salvation. All of this is very sophisticated philosophy and clearly these early Christian writers were deeply acquainted with the philosophical viewpoints of their



interlocutors. But almost every line of what they write raises issues concerning their grounding and faithfulness to the biblical revelation.

Jesus Christ

The final document, the Sutra of Jesus Christ (SJC), is a catechism dealing with various aspects of Christian faith and living. It is borrowed fragmentarily from various sources so I will focus mostly on its points of contact with Buddhism and Taoism as well as its theological innovations. The book opens with Christ in the heavenlies “orbited by the Buddhas and Arahats” and looking down on earth. Moved by the sufferings of “all that have been

born” he begins to teach.⁵⁸ People “call upon the Buddha’s name” and “it is in the Buddha’s nature to bestow grace.”⁵⁹ Thus, “all existence is an act of grace.”

The sacred Boddhisattva of Chinese Buddhism was *Guanshiyin* who

illuminates the Dharma Realm, where she sees all beings; she protects them and brings them to resolve upon Awakening, she teaches them to keep in mind the perfect spiritual mantra.⁶⁰

Christ is presented in a very similar way as one who teaches to bring about “awakening” which is the nature of his compassion. It should be noted that *Guanshiyin* is female, so the imagery is confused. The imagery is Buddhist but the content is Christian. “Only the virtuous can enter into the presence of God.”⁶¹ From here the text begins to reflect on the nature of sin.

The “disobedience of the fruitful garden” has led to the result that “all that lives is affected by the karma of previous lives.”⁶² But “God suffered terrible woes so that all should be freed from karma, for nobody is beyond the reach of this Buddha principle.”⁶³ This text seems much more in dialogue with Buddhism than the previous three and seems to be contextualizing the gospel for a Buddhist audience.

The concept of karma is pervasive and is closely connected to salvation; “someone who fears punishment does what is right.” Fear of God is essential to this salvation: “If you do not fear God, even if you live by the law of the Buddha, you will not be saved.”⁶⁴ The name Buddha seems to be a cipher for either God or Christ. This attitude is then illustrated through the story of the Ten Commandments. The text concludes with the story of the conception, birth, ministry, execution, and resurrection of Jesus. He is referred to as Messiah and it is unclear in SJC what the relationship of Messiah to Buddha is. Having described Jesus’ early teaching and miracles the text opines, “those who do evil and do not recognize the true

way . . . can never be truly saved.” This leads into an extensive description of the judgment of Jesus, Pilate washing his hands and killing the Messiah. “The Messiah gave up his body to the wicked ones for the sake of all living beings.”⁶⁵ He was hung “upon a wooden scaffold . . . on the sixth cleansing vegetarian day.”⁶⁶ This final phrase is obscure and seems to combine concepts of cleansing from sin and vegetarianism with non-violence (*ahimsa*). The text concludes abruptly shortly after this.

Conclusions

These documents reflect an age of pluralism in China where the Christian faith sought to make a place for itself in an environment of Taoism and Buddhism. The Church of the East had already dealt extensively with Buddhist thought, and this is pervasive in the texts. One may say that these texts seek to contextualize the gospel through Buddhist concepts while at the same time correcting the non-ontological viewpoint of Buddhism. These texts take a very conciliatory attitude towards Taoism, using its terminology in a way that illustrates Christian concepts and denies Buddhist concepts. That orientation, coupled with the centering of Christianity’s most important monastery in the very heart of the resurgent Taoism of the time, would seem to indicate a deliberate strategy. Later sutras, in the form of Christian liturgy from the 8th century, would continue these adaptations, moving away from concepts of original sin and adopting a more thoroughgoing trinitarianism.⁶⁷ The later texts reinterpret the salvation of Christ as the product of the karma of previous lives, Jesus as the Tao, and similar conceptions.

These contextualizing efforts would seem to me to represent a particular kind of insider movement. This is a Christianity which adopted the garb, language, and philosophical terminology of both Taoism and Buddhism but in a way that put Christianity in the

These texts take a conciliatory attitude towards Taoism, using its terminology to illustrate Christian concepts and deny Buddhist concepts.

Taoist framework. Lost in that framework was a clear biblical conception of what salvation is and how one receives it. Why does Messiah die? Is salvation merely deliverance from ghosthood? What does it mean that he dies for “all creatures”? If humankind is essentially good and salvation is a product of good karma, how is this message any different than the Buddhist eight-fold path of ethical behavior or the Taoist quietist lifestyle? What is the relationship of Messiah and the Buddha? Is the great cloud of witnesses a group of *Arahats* (enlightened beings) in the heavenlies? Why would anyone cling to this ethical message of living a good life in the face of persecution? This Christianity seems to be preaching religious perspectives that already existed in China with slight modifications. Is there a distinctive Christian identity in these documents? The impression these documents give is of a Christianity with a very weak sense of separate identity, more comfortable in the context of Taoism than with the distinctives of the Christian faith. **IJFM**

Endnotes

¹ Dr. Don McCurry defines IM within the Muslim context as “you can still call yourself a Muslim . . . even though you believe in Jesus as Lord and Savior.” The phenomenon, however, is broader than just Muslims believing in Jesus; it is consistently understood as an issue of religious identity.

² I note seven different types of Insider Movements in Christian History (I focus entirely on the first type in this article).

1. The missional adaptation of the Church of the East in China to the Taoist school where they built their central monastery at Da Qin within the central monastery of the Taoist faith. One might call this Christianity seeking to make itself one of the schools/sects of the local religion.
2. Christian movements subsumed under dominating religions due to

religious persecution. An example of this would be the survival of the Catholic Church as secret believers under Shinto domination in Japan during the 17th–19th centuries to escape annihilation. This movement did re-emerge to a modified identity when persecution came to an end.

3. Developing secret believers in contexts where immediate persecution/execution is assumed. An example would be F. A.’s approach to reaching Saudis in Saudi Arabia in the 1970s and 80s, sometimes referred to as C6 evangelism.
4. Christianity adapting sociologically to become an accepted social subgroup in the culture. The Mar Thoma Church in India became in essence a new caste within the overall Hindu structure. This seems to be a pragmatic reaction to Christian “caste identity.”
5. Churchless Christianity, a term coined by Herbert Hofer, describing Hindus who follow an individualized or very small group adherence to Christ while remaining culturally Hindus in a pragmatic reaction to Christian “caste identity.”
6. C5 Muslim evangelism which is the archetypical “IM” where missionaries call themselves Muslims or Isa Muslims and encourage Muslims to stay within the Muslim religious structure. In contrast C4 Muslim evangelism seeks to stay within the confines of Muslim cultural structures but maintains a more overt Christian identity.
7. Conversion movements into a religion that seek to introduce elements of the Christian faith into the religion, very similar to point 1 and 2 but with the difference that these movements sought to both mollify the dominant religion and also purchase a greater measure of tolerance towards an on-going existing Christian movement. I find this primarily in the world of Islam.

Movements 2, 4, 5, and 7 are not the result of a direct missionary strategy but are based on pragmatics; the experience of persecution and adaptation or rejection of a sociological identity. Movements 1, 3, and 6 are specific strategic attempts to plant the gospel in new contexts.

³ “Nestorian” according to Palmer is a pejorative term and throughout this document we will use the term “Church of the East.” Based on an online lecture of Palmer on the Church of the East, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tifK5SUdSq0>, accessed July 21, 2014.

⁴ Latourette, Kenneth Scott, *A History of Christianity*, New York: Harpers, 1953, pp. 324–5.

⁵ Palmer, Martin, *The Jesus Sutras: Rediscovering the Lost Scrolls of Taoist Christianity*, New York: Ballentine, 2001, pp. 234–6.

⁶ Palmer, p. 49.

⁷ Palmer, p. 241.

⁸ Palmer, p. 215.

⁹ The documents come from a cave in Dunhuang, China, sealed around 1005 AD, Palmer, p. 1.

¹⁰ Palmer, p. 2.

¹¹ Palmer, p. 5.

¹² Palmer, pp. 51–2. Palmer notes that this document, written by Tatian in the second century, was very popular in the eastern churches. It is generally referred to in the West as the Diatessaron, a work that harmonized the four Gospels into a single narrative text. Only fragments of it remain in its original Syriac version.

¹³ Palmer, p. 55.

¹⁴ Palmer, p. 56.

¹⁵ Palmer, pp. 61–2.

¹⁶ Montalvo, David, “The Buddhist Empiricism Thesis: An Extensive Critique,” *Asian Philosophy*, Vol. 9, No. 1, 1999, p. 61.

¹⁷ There are those who argue that Buddhism’s concept of “no-self” is “more of a practical strategy than a metaphysical doctrine.” Cf. Albahari, Miri, “Against No-Atman Theories of Anatta,” *Asian Philosophy*, Vol. 12, No. 1, 2002, p. 5.

¹⁸ Palmer, p. 60.

¹⁹ Palmer, p. 62.

²⁰ Nyrose, Eric, “Pursuing Wisdom: An Investigation of the Relationship Between Some Ancient Religious Concepts of Wisdom and Current Notions of Critical Thinking Within Information Literacy,” *Journal of Religious & Theological Information*, 2009, Vol. 8, Issue 3/4, p. 132.

²¹ An example would be a recent doctoral dissertation approved at Columbia International University by Dr. Bonnie Aebi entitled “A Comparison of Biblical and Tamajaq Wisdom Traditions: Insights for Christian Communications.”

²² Palmer, p. 63.

²³ Palmer, p. 68.

²⁴ <http://www.chinabuddhismencyclopedia.com/en/index.php?title=Nirma%E1%B9%87ak%C4%81ya>. Accessed July 23, 2014.

²⁵ Palmer, p. 63.

²⁶ Chestnut, Roberta C., *Three Monophysite Christologies: Severus of Antioch, Philoxenus of Mabbug, and Jacob of Sarug*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1976, cited by R. A. Norris, Jr., in *American Historical Review*, Vol. 83, Issue 2, 1978, p. 411.

²⁷ Van Enkevort, Paul. “The Three Treasure: An Enquiry into the Writings of Wu Shouyang,” *Journal of Daoist Studies*. 2014, Vol. 7, pp. 117–145.

²⁸ Goldin, Paul R. “The Cultural and Religious Background of Sexual Vampirism in Ancient China.” *Theology & Sexuality: The Journal of the Institute for the Study of Christianity & Sexuality*. May 2006, Vol. 12 Issue 3, pp. 285–307.

²⁹ Palmer, p. 63.

³⁰ Epstein, M. *Thoughts without a thinker: Psychotherapy from a Buddhist Perspective*. New York: Basic Books, 1995, p. 28.

³¹ Palmer, p. 65.

³² Palmer, p. 67.

³³ Palmer, p. 68.

³⁴ Palmer, p. 66.

³⁵ Thirumalai, Madasamy, *Sharing Your Faith with a Buddhist*, Bethany House Publishers, 2003, p. 30.

³⁶ Palmer, pp. 137–8.

³⁷ Palmer, p. 138.

³⁸ Palmer, p. 140.

³⁹ Thirumalai, p. 145.

⁴⁰ Palmer, pp. 92–3.

⁴¹ Palmer, p. 141.

⁴² Thirumalai, p. 145.

⁴³ Palmer, p. 141.

⁴⁴ Salguero, C. Pierce, “Fields of Merit, Harvests of Health: Some Notes on the Role of Medical Karma in the Popularization of Buddhism in Early Medieval China,” *Asian Philosophy*. Nov 2013, Vol. 23 Issue 4, pp. 341–349.

⁴⁵ Palmer, p. 142.

⁴⁶ Palmer, p. 143.

⁴⁷ Palmer, p. 143.

⁴⁸ Thirumalai, p. 28.

⁴⁹ Palmer, p. 143.

⁵⁰ Palmer, p. 144.

⁵¹ Palmer, p. 146.

⁵² Palmer, p. 148.

⁵³ Priest, Graham, “The Structure of Emptiness,” *Philosophy East & West*. Oct 2009, Vol. 59 Issue 4, p. 467.

⁵⁴ Priest, p. 477.

⁵⁵ Palmer, p. 148.

⁵⁶ Palmer, p. 149.

⁵⁷ Moon, Seungho. “Wuwei (non-action) Philosophy and Actions: Rethinking Actions in School Reform,” *Educational Philosophy & Theory*, May 2015, Vol. 47 Issue 5, p. 456.

⁵⁸ Palmer, p. 159.

⁵⁹ Palmer, p. 160.

⁶⁰ Buddhist Liturgy, “The Great Compassion Repentance,” *Religion East & West*. Jan 2014, Issue 12, pp. 33–34.

⁶¹ Palmer, p. 161.

⁶² Palmer, p. 161.

⁶³ Palmer, pp. 161–2.

⁶⁴ Palmer, p. 163.

⁶⁵ Palmer, p. 167.

⁶⁶ Palmer, p. 168.

⁶⁷ Palmer, pp. 175–180.