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Contextualization of Christianity in China

An Evaluation
in Modern Perspective

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COLLECTANEA SERICA

Institut Monumenta Serica • Sankt Augustin

Sumptibus Societatis Verbi Divini (S.V.D.)

Die Deutsche Bibliothek – CIP Cataloguing-in-Publication-Data

A catalogue record for this publication is available from Die Deutsche Bibliothek.
For further information, see: <http://dnb.ddb.de>

Sankt Augustin – Nettetal 2007

Redactors: BARBARA HOSTER, DIRK KUHLMANN, and ROMAN MALEK

Cover and layout: ROMAN MALEK

Technical assistance: JOSEF BIŠTUŤ

Printed by Druckerei FRANZ SCHMITT, Siegburg

Copyright: INSTITUT MONUMENTA SERICA
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53757 Sankt Augustin, Germany
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<http://www.monumenta-serica.de>

Distribution: STEYLER VERLAG
Postfach 2460, 41311 Nettetal, Germany
Fax: (02157) 12 02 22
E-mail: verlag@steyler.de
www.monumenta-serica.de

ISBN 978-3-8050-0547-0

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INTRODUCTION

Contextualization in the study of the history of Christianity in China has become increasingly popular in recent years. It has become a key research criterion in evaluating the strategies of Christian missions, of missionary behavior, of conflicts between Christian and local cultures, and of the success or failure of a given Church mission in China. In fact, there has been a tendency in both academic and mission fields to conclude that the more contextualized a given Church mission has been during its residence in China, the more successful has been the evangelical process. Some recent studies have even concluded that the slow growth of Christianity in China can be attributed mostly to a failure by some churches to contextualize their approach to the missionary process. While the contextualization strategy remains to be tested and adjusted in the missionary or Church setting, the rich sources of Christianity in China represent a gold mine for scholars to explore in this respect.

A useful dictionary definition of contextualization is that of "a dynamic process of the Church's reflection, in obedience to Christ and his mission in the world, on the interaction of the text as the word of God and the context as a specific human situation."¹ From the academic point of view, scholars can re-examine the Chinese Church or mission history through the prism of contextualization. For instance, we may ask if any useful purpose is served in adopting contextualization as a scholarly approach. If the answer is yes, there is then a need to seek to illuminate its major strengths and weaknesses as a research methodology. Once a sense of both, its strengths and weaknesses in this respect have been determined, we must then ask what role contextualization may be said to have played in the evangelical process. And how successful or unsuccessful it may have been in spreading the Gospel among the Chinese at a given time or place. Also, how did mission boards and individual missionaries respond to the ideas and requirements of contextualization? And to what extent did Chinese converts appreciate various considerations implicit in such a process? These and other related questions may well arise in a serious discussion of the issues involved in such an analysis.

Contextualization is also a better tool to evaluate Christian missions and local Churches, as well as Chinese Christians. This approach will help us have a better understanding of how a foreign religion was introduced to a Chinese

¹ Sinclair B. Ferguson, David F. Wright and J.I. Packer, *New Dictionary of Theology* (Downers Grove, IL 1988), p. 164.