

Marco Polo, History of Primitive Orthodox Christianity in China



Drawing: Marco Polo (c. 1254-1324)
Source: Hutton Archive Getty Images

<http://history.howstuffworks.com/european-history/who-was-marco-polo.htm>

EARLY ORTHODOX CHRISTIANS IN CHINA

Source: The Travels by Marco Polo, Penguin Books, London, England, 1958, pp. 235-7.

[Note: An Orthodox Christian reading the Travels by Marco Polo would be awestruck by a passage that is a very clear description of primitive Christianity having reached China in the 1st century A.D. During his travels across Asia, Messer Marco describes many Nestorian churches throughout Asia. However, the particular group he describes in the following passage was markedly different from his descriptions of the Nestorians. Their worship was structured around the *Psalter** and they claimed that three of the lesser apostles had brought the faith to China.

They even produced pictures (icons) of those three apostles. The timing of the encounter was between A.D. 1275 (when Marco Polo reached China after a 4 year trip, and 1292 when Marco finished his 17 years in China under the administration and patronage of the Emperor Kublai Kahn (1215-1294).]

“In illustration of this we shall tell you something about it which is reported by Messer Marco and is well worthy of narration. When Messer Maffeo, Marco’s uncle, and Messer Marco himself were in this city of Fuchau, there was in their company a certain learned Saracen, who spoke to them as follows: ‘In such-and-such a place there is a community whose religion nobody knows. It is evidently not idolatrous, since they keep no idols. They do not worship fire. They do not profess Mahomet. And they do not appear to observe the Christian order. I suggest that we should go

and have a talk with them. Perhaps you will recognize something of their usages.’ So they went to the place and began to talk to the people and interrogate them, and ask about their usage and their creed. They seemed to be afraid that they were being interrogated with the object of depriving them of their religion. Realizing this, Messer Maffeo and Messer Marco sought to allay their fears with words of encouragement: ‘Do not be alarmed. We have not come here to do you any harm, but only for your good and the improvement of your condition.’ For they were afraid that their visitors had been sent by the Great Khan to make this investigation in order to get them into trouble. But Maffeo and Marco attended the place so regularly day after day, familiarizing themselves with these people and inquiring about their affairs, that they discovered that they did indeed hold the Christian faith. For they possessed books. And Maffeo and Marco, poring over them, began to interpret the writing and translate it word by word from one language to another, till they found that they were the words of the psalter. Then they inquired from what source they had received their faith and their rule; and their informants replied: ‘From our forefathers.’ It came out that they had in a certain temple of theirs three pictures representing three apostles of the seventy who went through the world preaching. And they declared that it was these three who had instructed their ancestors in this faith long ago, and that it had been preserved among them for 700 years; for a long time they had been without teaching, so that they were ignorant of the cardinal doctrines. ‘But to this we hold fast, which we have received from our forefathers; we worship in accordance with our books and do reverence to these three apostles!’ To this Maffeo and Marco replied: ‘You are Christians, and we also are Christians. We advise you to send to the Great Khan and explain to him how you stand, so that he may grant you recognition and you may be able to keep your faith and your rule freely.’ But because of the idolaters they did not altogether dare to proclaim or practice their religion openly. So they sent two of their number to the Great Khan. Acting on the instructions of Messer Maffeo and Messer Marco, these emissaries first presented themselves to a certain person who was head of the Christians at the Great Khan’s court, so that he might broach their business in his

master's presence. What more shall I say? There in the Khan's presence was this man who was head of the Christians, asserting that they were Christians and ought to be approved as such in his empire. And he who was head of the idol-worshippers, being apprised of the matter, put in a counter-plea, claiming that this out not to be, because the aforesaid persons were and always had been idolaters and as such they were accounted. So there was great disputation about the matter in the Khan's presence. At last he grew angry and dismissing everyone summoned the two emissaries before him and asked them whether they wished to be Christians or idolaters. They answered that, if it pleased him and was not inimical to his sovereignty, they wished to be Christians as their forebears had been. Then the Great Khan ordered that they should be granted privileges whereby they should be acknowledged as Christians, and the status accorded to Christians should be applicable to all who professed their rule. And it was found that throughout the province of Manzi,** here and there, there were more than 700,000 households who adhered to this rule."

[Notes:

* *"And from olden times Israel has declared the praises of our true God with psalms and hymns found in that book of the Old Testament called the 'Psalter.' Our Saviour Himself and the Holy Apostles used them and chanted them (cf. Mark 14:28). Therefore, it was only natural that the first Christians from the nations who were grafted onto the stock of Israel should have prayed with the same voice as the fathers of old. Actually, the first services of the Church in New Testament times were composed almost exclusively from the psalms, which were chanted in the Hebraic manner in the translation used for generations by the Hebrews in the diaspora, the Septuagint. Till this day, there is no service of the Church which is not replete with psalms: the Hours, Vespers, Compline, Matins, even the Divine Liturgy itself; all begin and end with the psalms."* From "Forward", **The Psalter According to the Seventy of St. David, the Prophet and King, Together with the Nine Odes and An Interpretation of How the Psalter Should be Recited Throughout the Whole Year**, Holy Transfiguration Monastery, Boston, MA 1987, pp. 9-10

** “While Northern China was called [Cathay](#), Southern China was referred to as Manzi. Manzi often appears in documents of the Mongol [Yuan Dynasty](#)”--Citation from Wikipedia.]