

Should Faith Adapt to Culture, or Submit to Power?

—Reflecting on the True Boundaries of “Indigenization” through the Cases of Matteo Ricci, the Yongzheng Emperor’s Ban on Christianity, and German Church History

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I. A Seemingly Reasonable Logical Trap

In discussions about the “indigenization” of Christianity, the most common defense is: Christianity has always adapted to the cultures of various countries throughout history, so today’s demands are nothing special.

At first glance, this argument sounds mild and rational, yet it conceals a fatal confusion: Can the “cultural expression” of faith be indefinitely equated with obedience to “real-world power”?

Historical experience teaches us: Christianity has never been a faith that rejects culture, but it has also never conceded that any secular power has the authority to define the core of the faith. Unless we clearly distinguish these two boundaries, so-called “historical experience” will cease to be a tool for reflection and instead become rhetoric that rationalizes the current co-optation of the faith.

II. Lessons from Chinese History: High Adaptation Does Not Guarantee Safety

1. The Sinicization of Buddhism: Even Cultural Concessions Could Not Secure Independence

After Buddhism entered China, it underwent profound adaptation in philosophy, ethics, and even institutional forms. Yet the repeated persecutions of Buddhism under the Northern Wei, Northern Zhou, and Tang dynasties clearly reveal a harsh truth: the suppression of religion was usually not because it was “not Chinese enough,” but because its influence was “out of control.”

Key logic: Whether a religion is tolerated depends on whether it still retains spiritual authority independent of political power. Power demands not only uniformity in “appearance,” but also monopoly over the right of interpretation.

2. The Cost of Confucian Orthodoxy: Loss of Transcendence

Confucianism ultimately became the state ideology, but the price was the severe atrophy of its religious and transcendent dimensions: the Mandate of Heaven was interpreted by imperial authority, and ritual became a tool of governance. When a system of thought is completely absorbed by power, it loses the tension to question or challenge that power. To demand that religion follow the “success” of Confucianism is essentially to demand that religion castrate itself and abandon its essential role as a witness to truth.

III. Matteo Ricci’s Experiment: The Extreme of Cultural Adaptation and the Cold Logic of Power

Matteo Ricci’s practice represents the most theologically self-conscious and sincere attempt at indigenization in the history of Christianity in China.

Deep dialogue rather than superficial packaging: He was not merely “beautifying forms,” but attempting to enter the very core of Chinese thought. From wearing Confucian robes to engaging in dialogue about “Heaven (Tian), Principle (Li), and Nature (Xing)” in *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven*, this was a genuine effort to root the faith deeply in a foreign culture.

The essence of the Rites Controversy: On the surface it was a cultural misunderstanding about ancestor veneration and sacrifices to Confucius; in reality, it was a contest over “who holds the final right of definition.” When faith encounters

an absolute imperial power that fuses politics and religion, any ultimate loyalty not subordinated to the emperor will be seen as a threat.

The Yongzheng Emperor's ban on Christianity: Yongzheng's reasoning was brutally straightforward—not that the missionaries failed to understand Chinese culture, but that believers “know only their religious master and not their ruler and father.”

Ricci's failure proves: Even when cultural adaptation reaches its extreme, faith cannot secure long-term safety by being “more obedient.” Because the essence of power is exclusive—it will not tolerate the existence of an independent spiritual domain.

IV. A Modern Warning from Germany: When the Church Actively Courted the State

The “German Christians” movement in 20th-century Germany provides a painful modern example. They advocated reinterpreting the Bible according to national needs and making faith serve the rise of the state.

Result: The cross was replaced by the swastika; the church degenerated into a propaganda arm of the regime, completely losing its ability to speak for the victims or stand for justice.

Bottom line: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Confessing Church, through the Barmen Declaration, clearly proclaimed: “Jesus Christ is the one Word of God.” This was not a political statement, but a defense of the very DNA of the faith. They recognized that if the state could decide what the church believes, the church had already ceased to exist in any meaningful sense.

V. Conclusion: The Real Issue Has Never Been “Whether to Indigenize”

History repeatedly warns us to be wary of narratives that use “indigenization” as a means of co-optation:

- Culture can renew the expression of faith, but power must not take over the judgment of faith.
- Faith can have a “Chinese flavor,” but it must not have the “flavor of the yamen (government office).”
- Rooting in culture is for the sake of spreading truth; submission to power is betrayal of truth.

If faith can only adjust its doctrine and stance according to the ruler's mood in order to survive, it may gain temporary space to exist—but it will have already lost the most precious thing: the freedom to be accountable to the ultimate truth beyond power.