

Linguistic and Conceptual Problems in the Encounter of Western Christianity and Chinese Thought

(A summary)

International and intercultural encounter is based upon mutual understanding and realized in a process of translation and transmission of thought and patterns of action. In his attempts of finding ways of understanding in China, the Italian Jesuit Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) changed from a Buddhist-Daoist (monastic) to a Confucian (intellectual) approach. His search for appropriate concepts in speaking about God and other Christian doctrines demonstrates how necessary and difficult it is to discover the suitable starting-points in a foreign language belonging to a different cultural world.

Language is the fundamental bridge of communication in human society, it is true, but the concrete language can be a barrier as well. It can be a barrier from the side of the speakers, but also from the side of the language itself. People, who do not know the foreign language, do not understand. But the language itself can be an obstacle due to different structures, a lack of appropriate expressions and concepts and other features missing in a certain language, in other words, due to the limitations which are inherent in every language. Wherever the capabilities of a language and its connection to philosophical and ideological implications are overlooked, the way of true mutual understanding is blocked.

In modern times anthropology seems to be a better approach to illustrate the problem than theology. Western politicians travelling to China often are being asked to demand more respect for the human rights from the Chinese government. Mostly it ends up in angry replies. The main reason for such a result is definitely to be seen in differences between Western and Chinese anthropologies. This can be illustrated by explaining the different ways of understanding a human being and the concept of person. A person is, in Western everyday's life, the individual human being. In view of the Trinitarian concept of God, Christian theology, however, insists in the concept of person on individuality and relationships. A person is an individual, singular being, and at the same time, a being which is in many ways related a) to other humans, b) to many other worldly beings, c) finally to God. Often enough these relations are neglected by Westerners. Consequently, the concept of person stands for the ego alone and implies at the end a radical egotism resp. egocentrism. The term "egocentrism", however, can be applied to an individual person, but culturally speaking, also to nations, continents etc. (cf. the term "Eurocentrism"). In view of this, the Chinese emphasize the manifold relations which constitute human life. This can be demonstrated by dealing with the Chinese language and thought. However, it hardly can be denied that the emphasis on the multiplicity of relations can become so strong that the esteem of the human individuality disappears. Anyway, the different emphasis of the two pillars "individuality" and "relationships" seems to be one of the basic roots of misunderstanding between Western and Eastern cultures.

The case study of the concept of "person" shows that regarding the intercultural dialogue, the various different backgrounds in language and thought of the partners of dialogue need to be elaborated and considered more thoroughly. It cannot be allowed that the cultural background of one side becomes normative for all others. At the same time, it is dangerous if one language is taken as the unique basis for common understanding. What counts in intercultural encounters, is applicable to the encounter between philosophy and religions, too.