Article

Critical Research on Religion

Not about religion: A reinterpretation of the Chinese rites controversy

Critical Research on Religion
2023, Vol. 11(3) 332–348

DOI: 10.1177/20503032231199492
journals.sagepub.com/home/crr
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Abstract

As one of the most significant events in the history of Sino-Western interaction and that of Chinese Christianity, the "Chinese Rites Controversy" has been the subject of numerous studies from both Western and Chinese scholars since the 1980s. When interpreting the rites issue of the Controversy, most studies see the crux of it as the "religious" nature of the Confucian rites. In contrast to this dominant understanding, this article argues that both the uncritical repetition of "religious" in the modern interpretations of the Controversy and its tacitly approved validity presuppose a universal and timeless conception of "religion." Through a method of historicisation, i.e., examining carefully in what sense "religious" and related terms such as "civil," "political," "superstitious," and "yinsi," etc. were used in the original texts of the Controversy, this article intends to show that the use of "religious" by modern authors constitutes, though to a great extent unconsciously, a hermeneutical anachronism. The root of this anachronism lies in that the use "religious" as a generic adjective defining a distinct sphere of human enterprise that can be differentiated from those "non-religious" ones is a modern invention, and could find its place in neither encompassing Christian truth nor the *tianxia* order, nor even the fusion of these two horizons manifested in the awareness of literati Catholics, all of which defined the context in which the rites issue was debated during the Controversy.

Keywords

The Chinese rites controversy, confucianism, tianxia, religion, superstition

Introduction

As one of the most significant events in the history of Sino-western interaction and that of Chinese Christianity, the Chinese Rites Controversy (hereafter as "the Controversy") has been the subject of numerous studies from both western and Chinese scholars since 1980s. When approaching the

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Controversy and the two major issues involved—the adequacy of using certain Chinese terms (for example, 天*tian* and 上帝*shangdi*) to translate the name of God and whether Chinese converts should be allowed to attend the rites in honor of Confucius and the ancestors—these studies seem to have a variety of focuses. However, there is one question regarding the debate over rites that connects most of the studies and that has often been used to define the crux of the matter, namely the question of whether the Confucian rites were essentially *religious* or *civil/political* in nature.

Since most scholars find interpreting the rites issue through the question of "religion" unproblematic, if not self-evident, reluctance to embrace this view may cause some confusion. Furthermore, the textual evidence seems to support this approach: the term "religious" in its various Latin forms indeed appears, sometimes in parallel with those of "civil" or "political" (or both), in various original texts addressing the Controversy. Despite these considerations, this article argues that the uncritical repetition of "religious" in the modern interpretations of the Controversy presupposes a universal and timeless conception of "religion." What is assumed by the modern authors when repeating the aforementioned question is that they are using the terms in the same sense as their seventeenth century Catholic predecessors did and that there is no need to investigate the historical development of the terminology. Through a method of historicization, the discussion below intends to show that the use of "religious" and its inclusion as part of a dichotomy with "civil" or "political" by modern authors constitutes, though to a great extent unconsciously, a hermeneutical anachronism. The root of this anachronism lies in the fact that within the seventeenth century Catholic worldview, the "religious-civil/political" dichotomy referred to something significantly different from what it means for a modern reader.

To be more specific, in the modern worldview that acts as an a priori framework through which modern readers interpret the world, the "religious-civil/political" dichotomy automatically refers to the modern binary distinction between "religion" and the "secular," with the former being a distinct sphere of human enterprise that can be differentiated from the latter "non-religious" ones. It is difficult to find any sign that the modern authors on the Controversy intend to convey anything different with that dichotomy. While it is true that not all of them explicitly substitute "civil/political" with "secular," as does the Chinese scholar of religion Tiangang Li (1998), most use "civil/political" and "non-religious" interchangeably. In a modern context, the latter essentially means the "secular." This usage tacitly assumes that since Catholicism is a religion, belonging to a distinct religious realm, if the Confucian rites involved in the Controversy were merely civil and political in nature, they should be acceptable to the Catholic Church as essentially belonging to a different realm of human enterprise and therefore being *religiously irrelevant*.

In stark contrast to this understanding, as will be elaborated below, wherever "religious" appears in Church documents regarding the Controversy throughout the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, it never referred to a genus containing a variety of species of individual traditions as different expressions of distinct "religiosity." Accordingly, "civil/political" in that context had nothing to do with "non-religious" in the modern sense of the term, as a "non-religious" or "secular" domain had not yet existed, or more precisely, been created beforehand, whether in Catholic Europe or imperial China. In fact, instead of "religion," the dominant conceptual framework adopted by the seventeenth to early eighteenth-century Europeans and a small number of Chinese Catholics when debating the Confucian rites was that of "superstition," which, like "religion," has also been inherited by the modern interpreters of the Rites Controversy. When talking about the Confucian rites, "superstitious" and "religious" are more than often used by the modern authors in an interchangeable way. To some extent this is understandable, as the interchangeability of the two terms can indeed be deduced from their usage in the original documents. However, in a modern context in which "religious" has acquired a very different meaning from that in the seventeenth century, this

interchangeability between "religious" and "superstitious" becomes seriously problematic. Meanwhile, the connotations of "superstitious" have also undergone some great changes since the eighteenth century, essentially as an integral part of the modern project of demarcating "religion" from the "secular."

To a great extent, this article can be seen as a response to the call Nicholas Standaert (2001) makes in his chapter on the Rites Controversy included in *Handbook of Christianity in China (vol. 1)*, where he considers the obsession with "the question of whether the rites to ancestors and to Confucius were 'religious' in nature" a major problem of modern scholarship on the Controversy (684), and maintains that "the history of words like 'religion,' 'superstition,' 'civil,' 'political' should be taken into account to investigate this matter" (685). Since then, both Standaert himself (2017) and scholars such as Gianamar Giovannetti-Singh (2020) have made worthy attempts at dealing with the "religious" problem in modern studies of the Controversy. Nevertheless, for understandable reasons, neither of these authors was able to build their argument upon solid examination of the original texts and their usage of the terminology, a procedure which is nevertheless indispensable and infrastructural for disenchanting "religion" in modern scholarship on the Controversy. The analysis below, therefore, adds to the aforementioned pioneering efforts in historicizing the categories used in not only historiography but other disciplinary and interdisciplinary studies of the Controversy. Effectively, it can be viewed as a more "preliminary" investigation in that direction, in the sense that it builds an argument against the "religious" interpretation upon a careful examination of the original texts produced for, or closely related to, the Controversy, and lays down an "exegetical" foundation for renewed interpretations of the event. At the same time, this article intends to focus on a previously less emphasized aspect, that is, the inadequacy of the "religious-secular" framework in understanding the Chinese empire's all-encompassing *tianxia* (all under Heaven) order in its relation to the Confucian rites.

The following discussion includes two main sections. A theoretical framework firstly explains in what sense the modern binary distinction between "religious" and the "secular" existed neither in the minds of the Chinese nor those of European Catholics in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. This is built upon an understanding that neither Catholicism as an "encompassing religion" (borrowing from Timothy Fitzgerald) nor *tianxia* as a cosmological totality allowed for such differentiation, whether in intellectual constructs or institutional reality. On that basis, three groups of texts, consisting of those authored by Matteo Ricci (1552-1610), those written by the missionaries or promulgated by the Roman Catholic authority during the Controversy, and those written by the Chinese Catholics, including the Kangxi emperor's declaration on the rites, will be examined to further build the argument that the "religious-secular" dichotomy had never been adopted by the actors of the Controversy as a categorial framework to understand and explain the rites issue.

Two Premises

As eloquently argued by Critical Religion scholars including Timothy Fitzgerald (1997, 2000, 2007a, 2007b), Russell T. McCutcheon (1997), Talal Asad (2003), and Brent Nongbri (2013) etc., "religion" as both a concept and an institution in its binary distinction with the "secular" is both a modern invention and a rhetoric construct. The term "religion" in its modern sense, that is, an internalized private sphere of experience, manifesting itself in different institutions or practices with the same "religious" essence, had not fully emerged until the eighteenth century.

Generally speaking, during the long Middle Ages, there had been no differentiation between a distinct "religious" domain of human enterprise and the "secular" as a "non-religious" one in Catholic Europe. What people have termed "temporal" had not been outside of what Otto

Gierke (1913, 8) called "a divinely instituted Harmony which pervades the Universal Whole." It could not be more wrong to assume, as modern people would usually do, that "spiritual" and "religious," or "temporal" and "secular" are interchangeable terms. While "religious" and the "secular" constitute two realms each defined as the anti-thesis of the other, "spiritual" and "temporal," embodied in the Church and the state as two institutions, had been seen as two co-ordinate powers or two swords instituted by God (16), and thus both were not outside the encompassing Christian Truth (Fitzgerald 2007b, 219).

The term "civil," which was sometimes used as a synonym for "temporal" in medieval times, certainly did not refer to a domain outside the Christian Commonwealth. Although Standaert (2017, 17) traces its medieval use back to Augustine's criticism in *The City of God* of Marcus Varo's division of divinity (three theologies), a more important clue actually lies in Augustine's understanding of *civitas* (city) in its relation to *cives* (citizens) and *civilis* (civil). While his use of the term *civitas* is apparently influenced by the classical communal form of the city-state, *civitas* in *The City of God* refers to a group of people or community ordered by a single body of laws and norms (Griffiths 2012, 38-39). Citizens in this context are those members of the city, and the affairs related to their citizenship are civil (*civ. Dei* 19.16). For Augustine, not only is the civil not a secular domain in the modern sense, but also one which stands at the center of the arena between God and Satan and already displays in this age (*hoc saeculum*, as in contrast to the future age, *saeculum futurum*) fundamental and constitutive practices either belonging to the city of God or the earthly city (Griffiths 2012, 44).

One can certainly say that the Reformation, while making it possible for temporal rulers to decide which church they would like to recognize, also made it possible for the first time to imagine a realm separate from the Christian church. However, it would be too hasty to say that any clear notion of "non-religious" had appeared in Catholic Europe in the seventeenth century. In fact, the reification of the Tridentine legacy and the accompanying confessionalization created in the century following the Council of Trent (1545-1563), if anything, an even closer tie between the Church and the state, and thus between the spiritual order and the temporal order in the Catholic world (Hannracháin 2015).

If the binary distinction between "religion" and the "secular" had not emerged in the seventeenth century, then what does the term "religious" mean in the original documents of the Controversy? Throughout medieval history, *religio* had been used in various senses, and none of them referred to a realm distinct from the "secular." Among these usages, the most ancient one, which can be dated back to the late antiquity, concerned ritual practices. In this context, *religio* simply meant "worship practice" or "rite," whether its object was the Christian God or pagan gods, although in terms of this difference, worship was either viewed as *vera religio* (genuine worship) or *falsa religio* (false worship), the latter of which was also sometimes referred to as *superstitio* (Smith 1991, 26-32; Nongbri 2013, 26-31). Different from our modern understanding, however, this worship or rite did not constitute a distinct sphere of human existence that could be differentiated from the others; on the contrary, it underlay the encompassing Christian Truth, and the latter pervaded both the church and the state, as well as the "society," as we may call it today, as a whole (Fitzgerald 2007a, 17).

After the rise of monastic life, *religio* acquired a new meaning, being used to designate this special state of life which could be differentiated from that of other Christians. On that basis, it could be used in a plural form to refer to different monastic orders (Smith 1991, 32-33; Nongbri 2013, 31-32; Fitzgerald 2007b, 220-221). Later on, the division of the Christendom as a result of the Reformation stimulated a new use of *religio* in the sense of a class with different members, as can be seen in the works of Edward Lord Herbert of Cherbury (Smith 1991, 40; Nongbri 2013, 93-96). Through works of Jean Bodin and John Locke "religion" started to acquire its modern meaning as a

private affair concerning the salvation of one's soul and which is essentially different from the state, politics, and the economy, that is, spheres which *should* operate on the basis of neutral, secular rationality (Nongbri 2013, 97-104). However, this latest change during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries mainly took place in the Protestant world, and, as the textual analysis will show below, "Catholics did not much share in the evolution." "The term has seldom meant for Catholics what it has meant for Protestants" (Smith 1991, 42). As a result, both of the pre-modern usages of *religio* were still dominant within the Catholic discourse well into the eighteenth century.

When the modern binary distinction between "religious" and the "secular" barely emerged in Protestant Europe and not at all in Catholic Europe during the time of the Rites Controversy, it was another dichotomy that actually occupied a much more important place in the Catholic discourse. This was the dichotomy between *vera religio* and *superstitio*, the latter being another term for *falsa religio*. There is no doubt that *superstitio* had been a notoriously elusive and slippery term throughout most of Christian history and that there had been various ways to set the boundary between it and *vera religio*. However, what had never changed until the Enlightenment and the Scientific Revolution is that *superstitio* was conceived in contrast to *vera religio* (Bailey 2007, 2013; Cameron 2010). While modern people see "science" as the natural antithesis of "superstition," this, as correctly indicated by Fitzgerald (2007a, 7, 23, 52, 87, 96, etc.), constitutes merely another parallel binary distinction to that of "religion" and the "secular," and thus has a relatively recent origin.

Therefore, when used by modern authors on the Controversy, especially in their treating it as interchangeable with "religious," "superstitious" is made to a great extent subject to the modern "religious-secular" framework, in which both "superstitious" and "religious" belong to a distinct sphere of human enterprise that can be differentiated from "non-religious." This use of "superstitious," while being an anachronism as such, only has the effect of confirming the existence of a "non-religious" domain in the era of the Controversy. This is in sharp contrast to the usage in the original texts of the Controversy, where *superstitio*/*superstitiosus* was seen as opposed to putatively *vera religio*, that is, orthodox Christian worship, rather than as another non-secular category being further differentiated from "religion." To be more specific, in these texts *superstitio*/*superstitiosus* is mostly used to refer to the idolatrous nature of the Confucian rites. In spite of the mercurial nature of "superstitious," idolatry has stably constituted one of the core connotations of the term within the Catholic tradition (*New Catholic Encyclopaedia* 2003, 13:623-624; Aquinas, *ST* II-II. Q92. A2; Bailey 2007, 90-118). Whenever debating the superstitious nature of the Confucian rites, therefore, the focus of the texts was on whether wrong objects were being worshiped or paid divine honor when the rites were being performed (*New Catholic Encyclopaedia* 2003, 7:305). At the same time, idolatry never merely meant "wrong religion" in the modern sense, but the crisis of existence as a whole.

Having examined the relevant categories through which the European participants of the Rites Controversy had grasped the world, we turn to the worldview of their Chinese counterparts. First of all, as in Catholic Europe, throughout the Middle Ages until the second half of the nineteenth century, there had been neither a (modern) notion of "religion" nor a differentiation between "religion" and the "secular" as two distinct domains in China. During imperial China (BC 221 to AD 1911), Confucianism had mostly been the dominant and imperially endorsed ideology, complemented by Daoism and Buddhism. The indigenous term that had been used by Chinese to refer to the three traditions was *jiao* (教), coincidentally the same as the suffix the Chinese attach to the terms for different religions today, such as in *Fo jiao (*佛教Buddhism) or *Yisilan jiao* (伊斯兰教 Islam). However, as pointed out by Yapei Kuo (2017, 157; see also Chen 1999, 21-27), *jiao* in pre-modern China had nothing to do with the modern category of "religion," mainly in the sense that *jiao* lacks "a strong 'contrastive' emphasis of being 'opposed to other, non-religious kinds of

things.'" In contrast to the modern Chinese term for "religion"—*zongjiao* (宗教), the connotations of *jiao* mainly include teaching, instruction, and education. Accordingly, Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism had been traditionally referred as *sanjiao* (三教three teachings). The sixteenth and seventeenth century Jesuit missionaries, including Matteo Ricci, were fully aware of these connotations of *jiao*. In fact, in order to highlight the congruity between Catholicism and Confucianism, they not only gave Christianity the appellation of *Tianzhu jiao* (天主教the teaching of the Lord of Heaven), but also gave the pope a new title—*jiaohua wang* (教化王the king of education) (Kuo 2013, 239-240).

Second, as no realm could exist outside the encompassing Christian order in medieval Europe, in an analogical manner, we could say the same about the Chinese *tianxia* (天下all under Heaven), a term which has usually been translated simply as "the world" since the twentieth century but meant something very different in imperial China. For Liang, Qichao (1936, 3:76-77), *tianxia* implied a certain conception of the world as a cosmological totality, which presupposes a certain relationship between earth and heaven. Mingming Wang (2012, 338) explains that *tianxia* was "a world-scape, built into the larger cosmology that covered earth, heaven, and everything in-between." In that sense, *tianxia* can be seen as the Chinese equivalent of Christendom, prescribing a comprehensive series of principles and values concerning all kinds of relations (338; see also Lewis and Hsieh 2017, 25-29). The temporal regime or the organization of the state, which has been first and foremost categorized into a "non-religious" domain and essentialized as "politics" by modern discourse, had been from the very beginning the focus of *tianxia*.

In this framework, whose formation can be dated back to Western Zhou (from the end of the eleventh century BCE to the year 771 BCE) (Lagerway 2010, 20-24; Wang 2012, 339-347; Wang 2019, ch.1; Eno 2009, 101), the imperial governance as a whole was embedded in a transcendental cosmology. While *tian* (Heaven) was the ultimate ontological and moral grounds, the emperor was seen as *tianzi* (天子Son of Heaven), who governed *tianxia* according to *tianming* (天命Mandate of Heaven). *Tianzi* was thus obliged to embody the laws and norms decreed by Heaven. What stood in parallel with the imperial hierarchy, which had the emperor at the top descending to different levels of officials, was a hierarchical structure of deities with a list of gods and goddesses under Heaven. What connected these two structures was a hierarchy of rituals performed by the emperor and temporal powers at different levels under him for Heaven and deities at corresponding celestial levels. This sophisticated cosmological apparatus, which is termed "ritual governmentality" by Mayfair Mei-hui Yang (2011, 29), not only provided legitimacy for imperial governance throughout the realm, but as "an encompassing power construct" allowed transcendental norms and values from Heaven to permeate *tianxia* (31). It was difficult, if not impossible, for one to differentiate "religion" from the "secular" within *tianxia*.

In parallel to the dichotomy between *vera religio* and *supersitio* in Catholic Europe, there existed in Chinese ritual governmentality a dichotomy which was equally, if not more, fundamental to the *tianxia* order, that is, one between *zhengsi* (正祀 orthodox rites) and *yinsi* (淫祀 improper rites). This parallelism was embodied in the following two aspects: (1) in Catholic Europe, until the invention of the modern "religious-secular" dichotomy, what was opposed to *superstitio* was *vera religio* instead of "science"; similarly, *yinsi* in imperial China was understood as deviation from *zhengsi* (Nedostup 2010, 9); (2) just as the significance of *superstitio* in Catholic Europe went far beyond the sphere of "religion," through the lens of ritual governmentality we can easily see the importance of differentiating *zhengsi* from *yinsi* for the *tianxia* order. It was this parallelism that made Chinese authors, including the Kangxi emperor, capable of grasping without much difficulty the *superstitio* framework utilized by the European Catholics when addressing the rites issue. Therefore, no less than the Jesuits denying the superstitious nature of the Confucian rites, the

Chinese Catholics highlighted their compatibility with Christian Truth (and the *tianxia* order), rather than their belonging to an irrelevant or even separated "non-religious" realm.

Third, the ancestors and the rites to them played a sacred (as opposed to "religious" in the modern sense) role in the *tianxia* cosmology, as the ancestors were seen as the first "settlers" on earth and thus embodied the will of Heaven. As early as in the Western Zhou, the ultimate ancestor, Houji, lord of grains, was already "sacrificed to secondarily, after the sacrifice to Heaven" (Lagerway 2010, 22). The connections of the ancestors to earth, conquest, and ultimately to Heaven, had been repeatedly manifested and consolidated by sacrifices to the ancestors as an integral part of the imperial ritual system. Although their importance declined at the imperial level after the early Tang dynasty (618 to 907 AD), the prominence of the rites for the *tianxia* order did not by any means decrease in late imperial China. This was shown through the confirmations of the paramount importance of filial piety among *wulun* (五伦the five-basic relationship). Ceremonies performed in honor of the ancestors had been taken in late imperial China as one of the most important means to practice and promote filial piety, and in this way constituted an integral part of the *tianxia* order. No matter how these ceremonies had been interpreted during the Controversy, they by no means belonged to a "non-religious" domain, or one that could be seen as outside the encompassing *tianxia* cosmology, as will be shown below.

Textual Analyses

Matteo Ricci on Confucianism and its rites

Matteo Ricci himself was never involved in the Rites Controversy proper. However, it would not be exaggerating to describe him as the "initiator of evil," as it was his theology of Confucianism and the policy of cultural accommodation based on it that generated dissident voices, firstly inside the Jesuit order (Liu 2011, 11-14) and then among missionaries from other religious orders, and eventually led to a controversy that involved the Curia.

For this reason, when exploring Ricci's views on the ritual dimension of Confucianism, it is quite natural for scholars to start with the Jesuit's more general ideas about Confucianism. However, when implementing this interpretative strategy that few would see as problematic in itself, most studies adopt without hesitation the modern "religious-secular" framework, focusing on whether Ricci saw Confucianism as a "religion" and inferring from, or comparing with it, his answer to his position on the rites. Based on their answers to the first question, these studies either claim that Ricci's view of there being no religious factors in the Confucian rites was in alignment with his understanding of Confucianism as not being a religion (Minamiki 1985, 20), or that as Ricci approved the religious status Confucianism, his negation of the religiosity of Confucian rites constitutes a discrepancy (Young [1994] 2018, 97). By bringing Ricci's interpretation of Confucianism into the "religious-secular" framework, what this kind of exploration attempts to answer is not only a question "China (was) never able to ask" (Smith 1991, 66), but one Ricci himself neither asked nor provided an answer to. For his missionary purpose, Ricci indeed needed to make a judgement on Confucianism and its rites. Instead of their (non-)religious nature, however, this was about whether and in what sense the tradition founded by Confucius was compatible with Christian Truth, and vice versa. As discussed above, the most prevalent dichotomy for Catholics at the time was *vera religio* vs. *falsa religio*/*superstitio*, rather than religious vs. secular/nonreligious. This apparently applied to Ricci's discussions about the *sette* (sects) or *leggi* (laws) in China, which, among others, can be perfectly exemplified by his chapter on the various forms of worship in China in his memoirs about the China mission.[1]

Keeping this in mind, let us now examine a few most frequently cited passages from Ricci on the Confucian rites. Both of the first two are again from his chapter on the Chinese worships in his memoirs, one concerning the Confucian rites to the dead and the other concerning the ceremonies in honour of Confucius. Lack of space forbids us to quote the entire sections, although those parts with categorial significance deserve to be highlighted. For example, when explaining the rite to the departed ancestors, Ricci claims that in this offering

> they (the Chinese) consider the ceremony as an honor bestowed upon their departed ancestors, just as they might honor them if they were living… This practice of placing food upon the graves of the dead seems to be beyond any charge of sacrilege and perhaps also free from any taint of superstition [*omni superstitionis labe purum*]. Because they do not in any respect consider their ancestors to be gods [*nullam numinis partem*], nor do they petition them for anything or hope for anything from them. (Ricci and Trigault 1953, 96; Ricci and Trigault 1615, 107-108)

When discussing the rites to Confucius, Ricci writes:

> With the coming of each new moon and also at the time of the full moon, the magistrates congregate in this temple (of Confucius), together with those of the baccalaureates order, to do honor to their great master… They do not recite prayers to Confucius [*nullas porro ei preces recitant*] nor do they ask favors of him or expect help from him [*ab eo quicquam petunt aut spirant*]. They honor him only in the manner mentioned of honoring their respected dead. (Ricci and Trigault 1953, 96-97; Ricci and Trigault 1615, 107-108)

In both of the passages, including the key expressions in Latin, Ricci's focus cannot be clearer. Not only does he not use the term "religious" in his formulation, but he never refers to the rites as "civil." What is at the center of his interpretation is whether these rites had any superstitious or idolatrous elements. This contrasts sharply with George Minamiki's (1985, 20, emphasis added) reading of the latter passage, in which he states that "to Ricci's way of thinking, the ordinary rites performed in honour of Confucius did not contain any strictly *religious* implication… they possessed a *civil and social* significance," even though he also acknowledges that Ricci himself never made the formal distinction between "religious" and "civil." The ground upon which Minamiki makes this judgement is that for Ricci, Confucianism "had a strictly 'this-worldly' outlook" (20). What could not have been plainer here is the tacit acceptance by Minamiki of the modern assumption about "religion" being an otherworldly affair and anything but "civil" and "social," that is, "non-religious." However, not only Minamiki but anyone who equates "civil" and "social" with "non-religious" here should find themselves caught in a predicament, if they treat seriously Ricci's ([1607] 1978, 1:441) claim in *Tianzhu Shiyi* that ancient Confucians believed in the immortality of human souls and their "presence" (in the sense that they can "hear the laments and see the *kowtow*") in the ancestral rites. How would Minamiki, it is wondered, understand the "non-religiosity" of this?

Another frequently cited passage of Ricci regarding Confucius can be found in the fifth chapter of his memoirs, with the title of "Liberal Arts and Sciences in China, and Degrees of the literati." When discussing in what way Confucius was venerated by the Chinese, Gallagher's modern English translation presents a key statement for understanding the question, which reads "He (Confucius) was never venerated with *religious* rites, however, as they venerate a god" (Ricci and Trigault 1953, 30, emphasis added). The same sentence is translated as "然而, 他从未**像神**那样**受**到**宗**教式的**崇拜**" (however, he was never worshipped as a god in a *religious* manner) in modern Chinese (Ricci and Trigault 1983, 32, emphasis added). However, Trigault's Latin translation, which is the

source text of Gallagher's English translation, of the sentence does not contain the term "religious" at all. It says instead that Confucius "was venerated still as a mortal, but not even with the rite for any deity" [*eum per tot retro secula, sed mortalium tamen, non etiam numinis alicuius ritu venerantur*] (Ricci and Trigault 1615, 29). Two points can be made about this discrepancy: (1) it confirms again that the focus of Ricci regarding the ceremonies for Confucius lies in whether any idolatrous elements were involved in them and this has nothing to do with their "religious" or "secular" nature; (2) as an example of "loss in translation," it shows how the common practice of imposing the modern notion of "religion" on premodern texts through translation has contributed to the misinterpretations of the Controversy, as most modern studies on this topic to various extents rely on translated texts.

In accordance with Ricci's understanding, early Jesuit missionaries in China largely endorsed the aforementioned Confucian rites, perhaps with the exception of the solemn ceremony in honor of Confucius which included sacrificing dead animals, given that the rites were purged of any erroneous practices that gradually developed in the history of Confucianism. Taking Francisco Furtado (1587-1653), the vice provincial of the Chinese mission at the time, as an example, in his 1636 letter to Mutio Vitelleschi (1563-1645), the General of the Society of Jesus, Furtado (1700, 12, emphasis added) made it clear that the reason for Chinese Christians being allowed to be present in the ancestral and Confucian rites was that "there was no *superstition* in these ceremonies." While he did use the term "*Christianam Religionem*" (13), this was used in the dominant sense of the phrase throughout most of Christian history, that is, Christian worship, as explained above. In the same letter, Furtado also makes an interesting analogy that can help shed light on our discussion below. When explaining why it is reasonable to allow Confucian Christians to pay reverence to the deceased, Furtado indicates that this practice is analogous to that of Catholic subjects presenting *political* honor [*honoris politici*] to the body of their deceased heretic king (13, emphasis added). "Political" in Furtado's letter means something different from its modern usage. When giving a narrative of Matteo Ricci's death and funeral in *De christiana expeditione apud Sinas*, Nicholas Trigault describes the rites performed by the Chinese neophytes, after the completion of the ones of the church, as *politicos* (Ricci and Trigault 1615, 644). Here, instead of "religious," what stands in contrast to *politicos* is *ecclesiasticis ritibus* (ecclesiastical rites). The difference between the two was essentially in parallel with the aforementioned one between spiritual and temporal, or between the church and the state, the latter of which, as emphasized above, did not belong to a "non-religious" realm. Therefore, it is safe to deduce that by *politici* what Furtado intended to emphasize with this analogy was still the non-idolatrous nature of the Confucian rites.

Voices of the Church during the Controversy

The second group of texts under examination includes a series of official texts submitted to or promulgated by the Roman Catholic Church addressing the Chinese Rites Controversy. These started with Innocent X's Decree of 1645 and concluded with *Ex Quo Singulari*, Benedict XIV's bull of 1742.

Entitled *Quaesita Missionariorum Chinae, Seu Sinarum* (*Bullarium* 1839, 1:123-131), issued by the Propaganda Fide, and sanctioned by Pope Innocent X, this 1645 decree was the first one among a series of documents promulgated by the Magisterium dealing with the Controversy. This decree was to respond to the propositions submitted by Juan Bautista Morales (1597-1664), a Dominican missionary in China, denouncing a series of missionary practices followed by the Jesuits, including the toleration of Chinese Catholics' participation in certain Confucian rites. While the decree includes both Morales's propositions and the judgments made by the Holy Office, throughout the

document it does not use "religious" to describe any of the rites involved.[2] When discussing the Chinese rituals and sacrifices, including the ones in honor of Confucius and the deceased, the determining standard was whether they included idolatry or superstition (127-129).

This focus on the (non-)superstitious nature of the Confucian rites was reaffirmed by a letter written by Furtado (1700) to Morales in 1640, which includes responses to the questions raised by the latter. Again, this letter used the term "*religio*" to contrast "*vera Religio inter Christianos*" (true worship among Christians) with "*falsa Religio inter Gentiles*" (false worship among Gentiles) (15). When explaining why the Jesuit missionaries in China permitted no converts to attend the solemn ceremony in honor of Confucius, Furtado (17, emphasis added) makes it very clear that "*quia tamen* ***superstitionem*** *redolet*" (because it still smacks of superstition).

The next important church document was issued in 1656 as a response to the Jesuit reaction to the decree of 1645 (*Bullarium* 1839, 1:131-137). Based on the appeal made by the Jesuit Martino Martini (1614-1661) against Morales's "misrepresentation" of the Chinese rites, this decree to some extent "subverted" some of the judgments made in the 1645 decree by adopting Martini's interpretation of the rites. This rescript particularly dealt with four questions from the thirteen presented by Morales, and in the whole process the focus was always on whether there were any superstitious/idolatrous factors in the ceremonies. While certain ceremonies in honor of Confucius were permitted to Christians for their "civil" and "political" nature, both of which, as explained above, do not refer to "non-religious," what defined the civil and political was that there were no idolatrous factors involved in the ceremonies (135).

After a third decision of the Holy Office reaffirmed both the 1645 and 1656 decrees and virtually left everything regarding the rites issue to the discretion of the missionaries in China, it was the 1693 mandate of Charles Maigrot, the vicar apostolic of Fujian, that broke the deadlock in China and prompted the Holy See to reconsider the issue. After spending some time studying Confucianism and other Chinese teachings, Maigrot came to the conclusion that Christians should be prohibited from being part of the Chinese rites. With the hope of bringing order and harmony to his vicariate, he issued a mandate on March 26, 1693 (*Acta* 1709, 2-7). Among the seven articles included in the mandate, four (3-6) more or less address the rites issue. In addition to accusing Martino Martini of not making accurate descriptions of the Chinese rites, Maigrot in the mandate prohibits Chinese Christians from being present at the solemn rites in honor of Confucius and the dead held twice a year and refrains them from the practice of putting the spirit tablets at home and of using certain Chinese phrases on the tablets such as *jingzhu* (敬主honor the master), *jinggui* (敬鬼 honor the spirits), and *lingwei* (灵位seat of the spirit). The reason for all of this for Maigrot was clear: these ritual practices were in his eyes superstitious (articles 4 and 5, 5-6). Although his understandings as such added nothing new to the ongoing controversy, the importance of the mandate lies in the fact that it was the first document that adopts the categorial pair of "religious-civil" which has become a standard narrative in modern scholarship on the Controversy. This appears in one among a series of propositions (article 6) that Maigrot considered erroneous, and it states that "*Cultum, quem Confucius Spiritibus adhibuit, Civilem potiùs, quàm Religiosum fuisse*" (the worship which Confucius rendered to the spirits was rather a civil one than a religious one) (6).

For modern readers and authors, this differentiation immediately points to the modern usages of the two terms, with *Religiosum* referring to a distinct, spiritual, and otherworldly sphere of human enterprise, and *Civilem* being one of the non-religious or secular domains. In fact, in the Chinese translation of *100 Roman Documents Relating to the Chinese Rites Controversy (1645-1941)* (see footnote 2), *Civilem* is even translated directly as "世俗" (secular) (Noll and St Sure, 2001, 18). However, as long as we examine the mandate, or even its sixth article, as a whole, we can easily identify the senses in which Maigrot uses these two terms. Before listing these "false" propositions,

Maigrot already makes it clear that they are erroneous because they "*viam ad superstitionem patefaciunt*" (pave the way to superstition) (*Acta* 1709, 6). This makes clear that by "*Religiosum*" Maigrot actually means "worshiping," or more precisely, in this specific context it means "falsely worshiping" or simply "idolatrous." Accordingly, "civil" here should be properly understood as the quality of lacking superstitious or idolatrous elements, and in neither Christendom or *tianxia*, nor even Confucian natural theology "invented" by the Jesuits, does it refer to a "non-religious" realm.

Contrary to Maigrot's wish, his mandate created more chaos than order. Not only did the Jesuits in China question its validity due to the current uncertainty of Maigrot's vicariate, but Chinese Christians also refused to obey it. In such a situation, Maigrot resorted to Rome for a definite judgment. On November 20, 1704, Clement XI (8-52) eventually approved a new decree. As this decree was made to a great extent as a response to Maigrot's mandate, it firstly lists in "*Quaesita*" the seven articles and the respective objections in accordance with their order of appearance in Maigrot's mandate, before making responses to them one by one. Throughout the whole "*Responsa*," the dominant framework adopted is that of the superstitious, and it does not juxtapose even once the "religious" with the "civil" or "political." On the other hand, the "religious-civil" dichotomy only appears in question 5 of the fourth article. As the whole "*Quaesita*" part can be seen as a more detailed elaboration of Maigrot's seven articles and their objections, it is safe to say that the Holy Office did not intend to add any new connotations to this usage, which was until now still a conceptual tool to differentiate "idolatry" from "only worshipping the true God."

In hindsight, this 1704 decree was decisive to the pre-modern stage of the Chinese Rites Controversy, not only because it was its promulgation in China in 1707 that led to the indignation of the Kangxi emperor and thus the turning point for the Catholic mission in China, but also because the documents issued in the following decades by Rome regarding the Controversy can to a great extent be seen as confirmations of the 1704 decree, including its theological framework. In fact, both Clement XI's 1715 apostolic constitution, *Ex illa die* (*Bullarium* 1839, 1:305-313), and Benedict XIV's "conclusive" decree of 1742 (*Magnum Bullarium* 1752, 16:105-114) merely juxtapose once "religious" and "civil," both as a quotation of the expression used in the 1704 decree. For most of the time, "superstitious" was the most frequently used term for discussing the nature of the rites.

Chinese Confucians on the Rites

The last group of texts under examination were all authored, or at least approved, by Chinese Confucians. These included both Confucian Christians and the Kangxi emperor who, though not converted to Christianity, was undoubtedly a Confucian, and virtually the "pope" of all Confucians. Considering this, it would be not too unreasonable to start with him.

In addition to his very unhappy interview with Maigrot and his subsequent furious reaction to Rome's decision on the Controversy and their consequences, the Kangxi emperor has frequently been linked to an imperial declaration interpreting the Chinese rites. This declaration was drafted in the form of a petition by four of the Jesuits, including Claudio Filippo Grimaldi (1638-1712), Antonie Thomas (1644-1709), Thomas Pereira (1645-1708), and Jean-François Gerbillon (1654-1707), and submitted to the emperor for approval in 1700. When interpreting the rites, the focus of the petition was whether Confucius or the ancestors were worshiped for seeking blessing (Huang [1894] 2003, 555-556). Regarding the rites to the former, it states that "the reverence paid to Confucius is for his model as a master, rather than seeking blessing or praying for intelligence and official rank" (555). As for the sacrifices to the latter, the petition claims that they stem from "the righteousness of loving one's family members, and according to the Confucian principles there is no asking for blessing but only filial

piety," and that "while the tablets of the ancestors were set up, this does not mean that their spirits are considered as residing in the wood"(555).

Not surprisingly, the "religious-secular" framework is again employed by modern authors, in an anachronical way, to interpret Kangxi's declaration. This can be seen, for example, in Minamiki's (1985, 42, emphasis added) discussion about the declaration, where he claims that "if the rites were to be considered civil and political ceremonies of the state and *separated from religious belief*, then the emperor as the supreme representative of the state would have the final authoritative say in the matter." Anna Sun (2013, 35, emphasis added) even makes this point more unequivocally by maintaining that "Kangxi explicitly supported the view that Confucian practices such as the veneration of ancestral spirits and Confucius's spirit are *not religious*." In a similar fashion, Tiangang Li (1998, 51, emphasis added) maintains that "Kangxi at the time indeed agreed with the Jesuits that the sacrifices to Confucius were *not religious activities*."

All of the texts examined so far were drafted by Westerners, even though some of them could be called "Confucian Catholics" and thus brought in their works a certain form of fusion of horizons. Compared to these texts, those written by Chinese literati converts regarding the Confucian rites, with their deeper roots in Confucianism, constitute excellent examples of how a different form of fusion of horizons had contributed to the debate, and thus how the rites involved were understood. Their writing took place during the course of the Rites Controversy as the result of Jesuits seeking native interpretations of the meaning of Confucian rites. Many of these texts are preserved in *Archivum Romanum Societatis Iesu*, *Japonica Sinica*, and have been published in a facsimile edition by Nicolas Standaert (鐘鳴旦) and Ad Dudink (杜鼎克). What is important for our discussion is whether and to what extent their understandings of the rites still accord with the critical assumption of this article, that is, they had nothing to do with the modern binary distinction between "religion" and the "secular."

Some of the Chinese converts' essays included in the above collection were made as responses, or, more precisely, rebuttals, to the Dominican Francisco Varo's denunciation of the Chinese rites in his *Bianji (1)* (辩祭*A Debate on the Rites*). In the same manner as the Church documents examined above, Varo's focus in this essay lies in (confirming) the superstitious and idolatrous nature of the rites (*Archivum* 2002, 10:369). Accordingly, when making their responses, the native Confucian Christians put the emphases on denying superstitiousness of the rites, rather than their "religiousness."

For example, in *Bianji* (2) (《辨祭》*Distinguishing Memorial Rites*), Yan Mo (严谟) distinguishes unequivocally the sacrifice for *Shangdi* from other Confucian rites, such as that to the ancestors which, Yan insists, involved "no iota of praying for blessing" (11:39); he adds that "we have never seen any newly created rites that view the ancestors as deities and grant them excessive reverence" (40). In another essay written by Yan, *Jizu Kao* (《祭祖考》*On the Rite for the Ancestors*), he emphasizes again the non-superstitious nature of the sacrifice: "since the Tang till today, from the emperor to scholars and ordinary people, there has been no praying for blessing in their sacrificial orations" (22). In *Bianji (1) Canping* (《辩祭参评》*Comments on "A Debate on the Rites"*), Li Liangjue (李良爵) makes a similar point by stating that "the ceremonies for the Sage [Confucius] are for his teachings, and those for the ancestors are for their giving life. From ancient times till now, these rites have been only expressions of respect and had nothing to do with praying for blessing" (10:381).

In addition to these statements, the fact that the Chinese converts did not deal with the issue using a "religious-secular" dichotomy can be seen in an intriguing point made by Zhang Xingyao (张星曜) in his *Sidian Shuo* (《祀典说》*A Discussion on the Rites*). When explaining why the practice of putting the inscribed wooden tablets in one's home was not superstitious, Zhang claims that for the

Chinese it does not matter whether the souls of the ancestors are in the tablets or not "because if the souls are good, they would go to heaven; if the souls are evil, they would be prisoned in hell. Does their being here matter?" (454-455). A Christian cosmology can be clearly seen here, making the practice of retaining the wooden tablet even analogous to erecting tombstones by medieval Catholics. But, we should ask, in what sense could the latter practice be seen as secular?

Another focus among these essays is the status of Confucius, or more specifically, his sanctity or sacredness. This was partly because of one of the appellations Chinese gave to Confucius, "*sheng ren*" (圣人sage), in which the Chinese character "圣" could be translated as "holy," "sacred," "saint," "sanctified" or even "divine" in different contexts. In order to prove the non-superstitious nature of the rites to Confucius, therefore, it was necessary for the Chinese converts to explain the status of Confucius and in what sense he was reverenced.

In an essay titled as *Lishi Tiaowen* (《李师条问》*Answers to Simao Rodrigues*), Yan answers a series of questions intentionally designed by Rodrigues for clarifying the meanings of the Chinese rites. When explaining the meaning of the rites to Confucius, Yan insists that they "have been merely for reverence and involved no iota of asking for blessing" (11:156). Xia Xianggong's (夏向功) *Liyi Wenda* (《礼仪问答》*Questions and Answers on Rites*) is another essay written in a question-and-answer style. When dealing with the rites for Confucius, in addition to those propositions frequently made by other Chinese converts such as the non-idolatrous nature of the rites and literati praying for no blessing in the temple, Xia particularly emphasizes that the reason for reverencing Confucius with rites is because "Confucius' *dao* [truth, path, means] is essentially the *dao* of *tian*, and that is why his *dao* is supreme and he achieved what others cannot" (10:138). What Xia refers to as *tian* here is certainly the Christian God, and in that sense, Confucius was respected for his understanding of the truth of God, or his "natural theology." Thus, by no means was the non-idolatrous reverence to him understood by Xia as "non-religious." Even when bringing this understanding into the *tianxia* framework, the respect paid to Confucius due to the great contribution he made to revealing *tiandao* (the truth from Heaven) to the world did not belong to a separated, "non-religious" realm.

Some of the Chinese authors tend to make a more careful differentiation between Confucius and the Catholic saints, since in Chinese both were called *shengren* (圣人). For example, in *Caogao Chaopai* (《草稿抄白》*A Draft*), Yan explains the meanings of *sheng* in the Chinese context and differentiates it from the western term "saint" (11:100-105). Based on this, Jinshui Lin ([1994] 2018, 76, emphasis added) alleges that "Yan believed that the rites to Confucius… were very different from the *religious* worship of saints." However, what Yan emphasizes here is only a problem of translation in order to refute the accusation that Confucius was illegitimately canonized as a saint in China, as he says: "one may say that Confucius is not canonised in the western sense and thus cannot be called *sheng*, [but they] may not understand that in our country *sheng* is simply an appellation for supreme things… Thus, it is the Westerners who borrowed our character" (*Archivum* 2002, 11: 102). This has little to do with the "non-religious" nature of the rites to Confucius.

At the same time, the Chinese dichotomy between *zhengsi* and *yinsi* was employed by some of the authors as a conceptual framework to differentiate *vera religio* from *superstitio*. The nineteenth question of *Lishi Tiaowen* asks: "What is the meaning of the rites to Lord Guan?" When answering this question, Yan indicates that the rites esteeming Guan as a great emperor in heaven should be considered *yinsi* as these give a title exclusive to God to a subject of a previous dynasty (11:208). In *Caogao Chaopai*, Yan uses *yinsi* to refer to the rites asking for blessing from the deceased and to those worshipping mortals as deities (11:104). Another author who infused *yinsi* with Christian connotations was Li Jiugong (李九功). In *Lisu Mingbian* (《礼俗明辨》*Distinguishing Rites and Customs*), Li, when refuting the allegation that the rites to Confucius are for blessing, differentiates

literati who pay respect to the sage from those who practice *yinsi* (9:36). While the fusion of horizons in these discussions is apparent, their use of *yinsi* is in alignment with the way in which *superstitio* is used in the western texts examined above. The focus here is always whether the Chinese rites under examination is in accordance with Christian Truth, instead of their "religiosity" or "secularity."

Conclusion

While what has been examined by this article constitutes merely a small selection from the voluminous texts produced during and for the Chinese Rites Controversy, they to a great extent are also those that have been most frequently discussed by modern scholars regarding the Controversy. However, as the current study tries to show, what has been collectively and unconsciously applied by them when interpreting these texts is a categorial framework that had not existed in the minds of the contemporaries of the dispute. In that sense, all of such interpretations can be considered anachronistic.

According to Fitzgerald (2007b, 212), dealing with the Controversy, especially its rites issue in terms of the modern binary distinction between "religion" and the "secular," should be seen as "methodologically inconsistent." It leads to an inadequate grasp of not only how the participants of the Controversy understood the Confucian rites but of the implications of this far-reaching event. Apart from making visible this inadequacy, what is of even more value in the historicizing efforts made by Standaert (2017), Giovannetti-Singh (2020), and me in this article, is to urge historians (of China) to rethink altogether their use of "religion" as an analytical category. This task is more urgent than ever due to its nature as a power category (Fitzgerald 2015, 305). The issue is less with the modern invention of "religion" as such than with its constructing effects, in its interplay with other power categories such as "secular" or "politics," on the contemporary world. Historical studies uncritically using these categories undoubtedly play their part by presenting "religion" as something simultaneously universal and distinct both in time and place, and in this way, both reflect and help shape contemporary history. For that reason, I would join Kathryn Lofton (2020, 72) in her advocacy of "hermeneutic acuity" in history, which entails the realization that "religion" is a power-laden process in the hands of historians who name distinctions, explains sociality, and manage relationships to power (84). When accessing to the Controversy through a "religious" lens, therefore, a certain form of power relationship is unavoidably assumed, defined, and promoted. The discussion above, with all its historicizing efforts, strives to provide a preliminary investigation upon which renewed historical explorations of the Chinese Rites Controversy can be made without being caught into the complicity of making "religion."

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Notes

1. The original Italian title of the tenth chapter of book one is "*Di varie sette che nella Cina sono intorno alla religione*" (Ricci 1942, vol.1, 108). Here I am not going to repeat the argument made by Standaert (2017, 19), where he proves convincingly that both the Italian *religione* used by Ricci in his manuscript and Nicolas Trigault's Latin translation *religionis* for the title of the chapter, referred to "ritual practice" or simply "worship," as discussed above. In contrast, the modern English and Chinese titles, which read "Religious Sects among the Chinese" (Ricci and Trigault 1953, 93) and "中国人的各种宗教派别" (Various Religious

Sects among the Chinese) (Ricci and Trigault 1983, 99) respectively, use "religious" or 宗教的 as a generic adjective defining a distinct realm for the "sects," and thus constitute two typical examples of anachronism.

2. Ironically but not surprisingly, in *100 Roman Documents Relating to the Chinese Rites Controversy (1645 -1941)*, which includes the English translations of the "documents issued by various Popes, their legates, and the Roman commissions which acted with papal approval" (Noll 1992, v) during 1645-1941, the first sentence of the ninth question is translated as "The Chinese have a religiously observed custom, a teaching handed down by Confucius" (2). After comparing this translation with the Latin original, it is not difficult to detect that the "religiously observed custom" is the translation of "*Inviolabilis observantiae*." My theory of the translator's choice here is that they use "religious" to refer to "sacrosanct" which is how "*inviolabilis*" is usually translated. While this is certainly an understandable choice, it indeed misleads the modern readers of the document, and the notoriously slippery definition of "religion" as a modern concept apparently contributes to this. When translating the same sentence, the Chinese translators of the book followed the English translation and translated the Latin word as "宗教式的" (literally as "in a religious manner"). Both "representations" constitute another example of the role played by (mis-)translation in constructing the modern narrative about the Rites Controversy.

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