

**Polemical treatise on *The Resemblance of Chinese Rites to Graeco-Roman Idolatry*: the last major salvo on the Paris front between the Jesuits and the Dominicans over the domination of the evangelization of China.**

Alexandre, Noël. *Conformité des ceremonies chinoises avec l'idolatrie grecque et romaine: pour servir de confirmation à l'apologie des dominicains missionnaires de la Chine*. Cologne: Chez les heritiers de Corneille d'Egmond, 1700. 6 1/4 inches (160 mm), [xii], 202, [2] pp.

This polemical treatise on *The Resemblance of Chinese Rites to Graeco-Roman Idolatry* was the last major salvo on the Paris front in the turf-wars between the Jesuits and the Dominicans over the evangelization of China, where both were lobbying for the Christian God. When a religion spreads by force of arms, or is a branch of the government, it acquires an uncontested official authority that can generally afford to make some accommodation for vanquished, but not entirely superseded, beliefs. In the nominally Roman Catholic South American continent, for instance, certain indigenous religious practices endured, just as in Russia, the Orthodox church had no more success in eradicating magic and superstition than the Soviet government later had in eliminating Orthodoxy.

The evangelization of China by Christians, however, was quite another matter, for there was no question of conquest, and any accommodations made would be subjected to close scrutiny, both by the Chinese and the missionaries' fellow-Christians. But Jesuits, both in Europe and in China, had always sought proximity to the throne, giving them a quasi-official standing. The Emperor Kangxi did in fact issue an edict in favor of the toleration of Christianity in 1692, in appreciation of Jesuit contributions to warfare and astronomy (which allowed him to predict eclipses, one of the imperial functions), as also in acknowledgement of the accommodating Jesuit position in what came to be known as the Chinese Rites Controversy. At issue was the precise nature and theological dimension (if any) of Chinese folk religion, ancestor worship, tributes to the Emperor and reverence for Confucius.

The Jesuits claimed that these relatively innocuous practices were mere social

customs, and should be tolerated in light of the greater good. The Jesuits' great enemies, the Dominicans, insisted that ancestor worship was idolatry, that rites were religious and that Confucianism was more than just a "philosophy." **Spread 219** shows several Chinese worshippers bowing down before their heathen idols, with a statue of Confucius in the center, an image borrowed from the Jesuit Athanasius Kircher's *China Illustrata*.

Rome had at first allowed a certain liberty to Chinese Christians. The liturgical use of Chinese instead of Latin was approved in 1615, and in 1656 Pope Alexander VII endorsed accommodation to Chinese "customs." The Jesuits "went native," even dressing in Chinese robes, to an extent that shocked the Dominican and Franciscan missionaries on their subsequent arrival. A pamphlet war ensued in Europe, chiefly in Paris. One of the great guns was the eminent Dominican theologian of the Sorbonne, Noël Alexandre (1639–1724). The veteran controversialist's initial *Apologie* for the Dominican missionaries appeared in Cologne in 1699, followed in the next year by this attempt to show that there was little to choose from between Chinese rites and the pagan ceremonies of classical antiquity, already admitted to being a Bad Thing. Alexandre drew on Dominican reports in Latin, Portuguese, and Italian. (There is a reduced edition of a mere 119 pages, which prints only a French text). In addition to the full 212-page text reproduced here, the volume contains, bound in at the end, seven smaller tracts on the same subject, including two (of the seven) letters addressed by Alexandre to Louis Le Comte (**Spreads 113–58 and 181–96**), two addressed to Jean Dez (**Spreads 161–79 and 197–206**), letters by Louis Champion de Cicé (**Spreads 209–245**) and Artus de Lionne (**Spreads 258–343**) and finally, an undated digest of Jesuit sources ironically entitled *La Bonne Foy des Anciens Jésuites ... sur l'Idolatrie des Chinois* (**Spreads 246–57**). After Alexandre's intervention, and a flurry of pamphleteering, Pope Clement XI ruled against the Society of Jesus. The Chinese Emperor responded to the Papal Bull of 1715 by banning Christian missionaries in 1721.

The title page of this copy bears a contemporary inscription *Ex Libris Stephani Derey Sacerdotis*, presumably in the hand of Etienne de Rey, Canon of the cathedral of Rodez, who died in 1763.