

The Shining Embassy of Alopen

by
James R Warren

Alopen stood upon the bluff above the river as the screaming dust^a immersed the looming city in a lake of limonitic yellow beneath a cobalt sky. The setting sun behind him cast an etiolated light upon the gilded towers and temples whose mundic^b gleam relieved the shaly blackness of the darkling town ahead.

Beside the watercourses the dusty swords of phragmitic grasses seemed to flail in frantic opposition to the glaucous spears of willows as silent files of peasants picked their way along the dykes. Dogs barked against the wind whilst shy children hid behind the doors of hovels as the asses and the camel tossed their heads in tinkling harness and snorted hair-fringed muffles against the choking air-borne silt. Before him the urban scumble stretched beyond the mighty ship-strewn confluence as far as eye could see. As Alopen watched and waited baleful lamps began to puncture the vast diorama as if to foil with flecks of gold the silver stars above.

Ahead in Xanadu^c, the greatest city on Earth, chaos enveloped the Court. Who was the babbling stranger whose sudden outlandish appearance perturbed the new-found serenity of the Middle Kingdom? Clearly he was not a person on business from Porlock^d. His fair skin and frankish features could mean only one thing, too incredible to contemplate.

For centuries, the learned and the surd all regaled their children with fantastic tales of the Empire of Ta-ch'in, which was likely to exist only as The Antipodes, an allegorical counterpoise to the weight of the world. For the truly schooled knew that The Occident was a world of spirits in which sages may explore for spiritual things. Nevertheless, old reports alleged that the purple-gowned emperor of the Tachinese hated Persia and if the enigma in the paddies was his far-travelled legate then he may bring good news for The T'ang. So courtiers sacred and profane concurred with The Accomplished One that the stranger must be afforded every civility. Meanwhile, a monk versed in the lore and language of The Occident must hurriedly be procured whilst a lord is caparisoned for treaty. The Court is galvanised. Little do they know that the question is not *whether* Ta-ch'in

exists: For it *had* existed, but does not exist, yet is mightier still, and shall conquer in The Sign of Ten^e.

Let Ching-Ching take up the story:-

"When T'ai Tsung, the accomplished Emperor, was beginning his prosperous reign in glory and splendor, with intelligence and wisdom ruling the people, there was in the Kingdom of Ta-ch'in a highly virtuous man called Alopen. He augured from the blue sky and decided to carry the true Sutras with him, and watching the harmony of the winds, he hastened through difficulties and dangers. In the ninth year of Cheng-Kuan he came to Ch'ang-an. The Emperor dispatched Duke Fang Hsuan-ling, his Minister of State, to take an escort to the western suburb to meet the guest and to bring him to the palace".^f

So with Confucian diffidence and the tender physiocracy of the Oriental heart the good monk relates the fraught but serene reception.

The barbarian was ushered into The Imperial Presence and thirty damp and dusty codices were discovered in his baggage. Scholars had immense trouble with this intelligence since it was in Syriac, an obscure and uncouth script, and the concepts expounded were neither strategic nor commercial, but very, very strange.

Let "The Book of Praise" explain:-

"Hereby, with great respect, we declare that we examined the list of all the sutras and have found that there are in all 530 sutras belonging to the Religion of Ta-Ch'in. They are, however, all on leave sheets in the Brahmin language. In the ninth year of the Chen-Kuan period in the reign of the Emperor T'ai-tsung of the T'ang, Priest Alopen, Bishop of The Western Lands, arrived in the Middle Kingdom and humbly presented a petition to the Throne in his native tongue.

Fang Hsuan-ling and Wei Ching reverentially submitted the matter to the Imperial Information, when the petition was translated.

Afterwards, by Imperial Orders, the priest Ching-Ching, Bishop of this Religion was summoned and the above thirty mentioned books were translated".

Here is some of what Ching-Ching thought he read:-

"...the brilliant and revered Mi-shih-he, veiling his true majesty, came to earth as a man. An angel proclaimed the good news. A virgin gave birth to the sage in Ta-ch'in. A bright star announced the good news. Persians saw its glory and came to offer gifts. He fulfilled the ancient law of the twenty-four sages, governing the State on the great principle. He founded the new teaching of non-assertion which operates silently through the Holy Spirit of the Three in One and made humanity capable of good works by following the truth. Establishing the standard of the Eight conditions, he purified human nature and perfected truth. He opened wide the Three constant gates, celebrating life and destroying death. He hung up a brilliant sun to take by storm the halls of darkness. The forces of evil were all defeated. He rowed the boat of mercy and traveled to the palaces of light. In this way were all sentient beings saved. His mighty work completed, he ascended at midday to his original place...

...The true and eternal way is wonderful and yet hard to name. Its benefits and purpose are clearly known and splendid, therefore we name it and call it the Brilliant Teaching."^f

The last two sentences are abundantly right in any tongue and reflect the tenets of Chapter One of the Tao Te Ching.

The Imperial Countenance darkened. The audience fell silent. Duke Fang bowed and with tremulous voice asked what he must do with the disheveled foreigner. The Court prostrated as the Emperor rose. Then the wise T'ai Tsung declaimed "Take him to the ambassadorial quarters and afford him every service, holy man or not, as he awaits The Imperial Will". The ladies tittered and hid behind their paper fans as the turning occidental caught their gaze.

T'ai Tsung stalked with sorry steps to the innermost bower of the harem and ordered The Grand Eunuch to remove all from The Presence. Then T'ai Tsung wept, for now he knew, that surrounded by three thousand concubines in the midst of a city of three million souls, he was Alone as no Prince ever had been forlorn; unless it was that weird Tachinese sage who had "hung to take by storm the halls of darkness".

We Europeans have no record of Alopen. We do not even know his Greco-Roman name, if indeed he had such, and not a Semitic one. He must have been one of thousands who vanished into the desert never to be heard of again, like so many of the convicts of Georgian Australia, whose memory survives, if at all, in the lore of aboriginal peoples.

Ching-Ching resumed his work with those difficult texts:-

"The first thing is to obey the Lord of Heaven. The second vow is to act in filial piety and to care for parental needs with true sincerity. All the people who follow the Heaven-Way will make their home there when they die, if they are filial to their father and mother and do not fail to obey what they are told. So we should serve our father and mother for no living thing exists without a mother and father. [lost text]. The fourth vow is that anyone who professes faith in the precepts should thus be kind and good to all living beings and should neither hate anyone, nor harbor evil thoughts about them. The fifth vow is that all people should not only not take life, but should persuade others to do likewise, for the life of all living beings is of equal value to the lives of humans. The sixth vow is that none should commit adultery with another's wife, nor use any persuasion to try to make her commit adultery. The seventh vow is that no one should steal. The eighth vow is that no one should covet another's riches or rank when they see them, nor should they covet his field, house or servants. The ninth vow is that none should plot to bear false witness against another who is happier than he. The tenth vow is that no one should serve the Lord of Heaven with anything that does not belong to that person or at another person's expense.

Beside these there are many other things which you should consider. You should not deceive another person by taking advantage of his defenselessness; if you happen to see a poor child, you should not turn away from him; if your enemy is hungry, you should feed him and give him drink in plenty as well as forgive him and then forget what it was that caused you to make him your enemy. If you happen to see someone having to work very hard, you should assist him and use your own power for his good, as well as give him a drink of milk; if you happen to see another person without clothing, you should give him clothes..."^g

In 638, T'ai Tsung issued an Imperial Edict of Recognition of the votaries of the Shining Teaching, and his successor Kao Tsung favored the Christians and built Nestorian monasteries in every province whilst the faith spread to every city. Later Hsuan Tsung honored the church, endowing many abbeys, and even inviting priests to hold communion in The Imperial

Presence. His successor Su Tsung built four new monasteries and re-established others.

Soon Nestorian Christianity was holding its own beside the other foreign faiths of Buddha and Mohammed.

Nestorius had become a controversial Bishop of Constantinople in the time of Augustine and challenged Orthodoxy with some radical precepts which may commend themselves to the more "rational" theologies of our time:-

1 The Adoptive Character of Christ^h

"...Jesus was a human being who was 'taken up' by the Spirit of God. This Spirit, known as the Word, bestowed a form of divinity upon Jesus, but that divinity did not affect the fact that he was in essence an ordinary human being like you or me."¹

2 Mary Christotokos

Mary was not "Mother of God": For God by definition has no primogenitrix. Mary was the bearer of Christ:- "Christotokos".

3 Pelagianismⁱ

A very dangerous, but not summarily dismissible, doctrine: In short, the human spirit is intrinsically good, not essentially evil. Hence Original Sin has no theological meaning.

To these Occidental precepts of Nestorian Christianity, the Chinese added extrapolations based upon their own ethico-religious traditions, especially those of Buddhism and the Tao, though strictly-speaking the former is a prior import:-

4 General Deliverance

The Mercy of Christ extends to all "sentient beings" not just humans, much less Believers only. Accordingly the lives of all animals must be respected and preserved.

5 Syncretism

Syncretism allowed Chinese Christianity freely to adopt godly teaching from the other faiths with which it came into contact.

When aliens meet the tacitudes are exposed and made explicit as mere conventions, and understanding must be built afresh from its sensual foundations. The result is often an incondite synthesis of sublime and surreal beauty, serenely affective and memorable as no formulaic platitude shared by compatriots could be.

Let The Word tell you of His new-found Chinese Eden, the Mysterious Rest and Joy:-

"It might be compared to a lonely uninhabited mountain, full of all sorts of woods and trees, which have numerous leaves and branches spreading in all directions, giving shade and shelter. Although this mountain and its forests do not invite birds and beasts to come, yet all kinds of birds and beasts will seek this mountain and the forests and will come and settle there, of their own accord."^j

The Sign of Ten is a cross. The Atonement of The Cross meant little to the Chinese, but the Shining Path of Christ's Brilliant Teaching meant very much to them. Today Christianity has reached the crossroads: The branch it takes shall be its Final Path.

Of our free volition we may reject the wisdom and the faith of foreigners, whether or not they are holding British passports, but only God can decide who or what it is that is thus Consigned to Outer Darkness. Of our free volition we may deny life to those foreigners or other of God's Children, but who or what thereby wins Death Eternal is the Judgment of Another. The Cross has Three Arms but the forest many branches. We may denounce the heathen and the heretic, but only Christ knows all the paths of the forest, for they all lead to His Father. Like latter-day Nehemiahs we can rebuild our walls and exclude the Horonite and the Ammonite but all walls tumble in time for walls like laws are there to be broken.

Martin Palmer is an ecumenical Anglican and environmentalist. I am indebted to him for my knowledge of Alopen and his Chinese Nestorians, and to him for the passages of The Holy Sutras I have quoted. It is therefore fitting that Palmer has the last word:-

"I believe that the Nestorian church in China made a most significant and interesting attempt to translate the gospel, not just into another language, but into another culture and belief system. They were often despised by the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Protestant missionaries to China. I believe the missionaries were wrong to do so, and that the rejection of the Nestorian's attempts at acculturation perhaps accounts for the fact that despite their efforts - the greatest missionary venture in history - China by 1949 was still less than one per cent Christian.

I believe that the Nestorians can jolt us into seeing how culture-bound our version of the truth of God incarnate in humanity is. They can also challenge us to try and express the gospel in terms of the

cultures and beliefs which surround us today, and to do so with integrity but not with dogmatism".¹

References

- 1 "Living Christianity"
Martin Palmer
1993
Element Books of Shaftesbury
ISBN 1-85230-327-1
- 2 "The Nestorian Monument in China"
PY Saeki
1916
The Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge
(SPCK)
- 3 "Nestorian Documents and Relics in China"
PY Saeki
1937
The Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge
(SPCK)

Notes

- a The great loess plain of the Wei Valley comprises a fertile aeolian silt up to a hundred meters thick. This yellow dust is tinted by the hydrous iron oxide limonite, the pigment of yellow sand. The Wei drains to the Hwang Ho ("Yellow River").
- b An old Cornish word for the brassy crystalline mineral iron sulfide or pyrite. Pyrite or "fool's gold" often crystallises from black shales with which it contrasts both in color and form.
- c The Rome of the East. It is probably the case that the identification of modern Xian and the fabled Xanadu is defensible only upon philological and other circumstantial grounds. At any rate, the Chinese of The Tang Dynasty called their city Ch'ang-an-ch'eng (Walled City of Ch'ang-an).

Ch'ang-an (meaning "heavenly peace") was founded in 202BC near the confluence of the Wei and Ba Rivers and revived later by the Sui Emperors. In the sixth to seventh centuries it was expanded upon a hippodamian plan into a central Palace City surrounded by an Imperial City for officials and an Outer City suburb of artisanal and mercantile premises. Shortly after at the start of The Tang Dynasty (618-907AD) Xian reached its zenith and the population topped 3 million (c.f. Antonine Rome about 1.5 million). It declined, however, but though Marco Polo reported a thriving trade center, in about 1260AD the Mongol emperor Kublai Khan moved the capital to Peking. He continued to use the Wei Valley as an administrative and supply base.

Modern Xian remains a major spiritual, cultural and industrial center, with temples of many faiths, several general and technical universities, and aircraft, electrical, chemical and food processing industries. It is also a major archeological and tourist hub: Besides its "forest" of religious inscribed stones it has, about twenty miles East, the old Imperial Harem hot springs and the world-famous "terracotta army" burial, together with numerous other world-class monuments. The 1983 population was 2,180,000.

Scholars identify the Xanadu of Coleridge with Shang-to or Dolon Nor, both in Inner Mongolia.

d In 1797 the English poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834) retired sick to stay with friends at Culbone near the Exmoor coast between Lynton and Porlock. After reading "Purchas's Pilgrimage" and taking an opiate he dozed and on waking hurriedly began to scribble the several hundred lines of verse he had composed about Xanadu. Unfortunately, he was interrupted by "a person on business from Porlock" after jotting a mere fifty-four lines and upon returning indoors realised he had forgotten the rest! The remnant is the world-famous poem "Kubla Khan".

e The Chinese numeral for ten is a cross.

f From the Nestorian Stone at Xian.

g From the Hsu'ting Mi-shih-he Sutra of 635AD (205 verses).
(The Gospel of Peace of Jesus Christ).

- h I apologise for representing Nestorian doctrine with a simplistic word. This tenet should not be confused with the Adoptionist heresies of eighth-century Iberia. Palmer is nearer the mark with his summary.
- i Publicised by the British monk Pelagius (fourth century).
- j From the Chih-hsuan-an-lo Sutra.
(The Gospel which attempts Mysterious Rest and Joy).