

Prudentes sicut serpentes: Dissimulation and Concealment in Japanese and Chinese Missions in the Seventeenth Century

Iveta Nakládálová* 

Palacký University Olomouc, Czech Republic

This volume aims to explore the concepts of hypocrisy and dissimulation, conceived in the framework of the 'tensions at the heart of Christian teaching and experience'. This tension primarily points towards a conflict between ideal and lived practice; however, in certain circumstances, dissimulation and deceit might be understood as legitimate responses to a given situation. This article examines significant aspects of dissimulation in the specific case of early modern missions in China and Japan at the end of the sixteenth and throughout the seventeenth century, where missionaries often had to resort to disguise and concealment. Many of them had to overcome immense difficulties just to enter the country; some had to evangelize in secret, living in constant fear and facing ongoing persecution. In these territories, the 'policy of deceit' therefore became a relevant part of the proselytizing enterprise. I examine these practices of dissimulation with regard to evangelization strategies, and relate them to the sincerity and the confession of the faith, two of the central problems of the Christian credo. I argue that dissimulation was perceived, by the missionaries, as a legitimate and tactical response to the challenging and complex circumstances of the Japanese and Chinese missions in this period.

* The present article is part of the project 'Early Modern Evangelization of China: The Franciscan Mission and its Theory', which received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No. 892795, and which was carried out at Palacký University Olomouc. Křížkovského 511/8, 779 00 Olomouc, Czech Republic. E-mail: iveta.nakladalova@upol.cz.

Studies in Church History 60 (2024), 197–215 © The Author(s), 2024. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of the Ecclesiastical History Society. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives licence (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided that no alterations are made and the original article is properly cited. The written permission of Cambridge University Press must be obtained prior to any commercial use and/or adaptation of the article.

doi: 10.1017/stc.2024.10

INTRODUCTION

'Dissimulation' is an extremely rich and multifaceted notion, one which has played a vital role in Western philosophical, political and theological thought. Its conceptual genealogy is very complex, and its polysemous nature is overwhelming, since it associates a range of meanings which are related, but at the same time quite different. In one sense, dissimulation refers to disguise, camouflage or concealment; in another, it points towards falsehood, imposition or lying. I would like to emphasize the ambivalence between secrecy or hiding (in itself morally neutral) and, in contrast, the ethically questionable acts of fraud, hypocrisy and lying. This dichotomy embodies essential concerns about human conscience and conduct,¹ and fundamental dilemmas of truth, authenticity and fallacy. This is a particular issue in religious settings and in matters of faith and the Apostolate, where this antagonism has been described in terms of tension and conflict between, on the one side, sincerity of faith and ideal practice and, on the other, lived experience and the practical demands of society and evangelization.

In this article, I explore this topic in the context of early modern evangelization, because the missionary experience seems to exemplify, with particular clarity, multiple facets of dissimulation and hypocrisy in religious practice. Early modern missionaries were often working in environments hostile to the Christian faith, facing persecution and danger. Dissimulation, therefore, became a vital part of their experience, especially in those territories where evangelization was not part of an imperial or colonial enterprise. That is the case with both the Chinese and Japanese empires, which deliberately practised a policy of seclusion and suspicion towards foreigners that did not allow for any direct military or political support for the Apostolate on behalf of European rulers. From this point of view, the framework of early modern missions in Asia provides a useful insight into the complexity and richness of dissimulation, deceit and hypocrisy in religious and evangelization practice.

This volume of Studies in Church History is focused on hypocrisy and, particularly, on the moral implication of two-facedness. In my article, I will show how, in the context of evangelization, the terms

¹ For the genealogy of dissimulation and lying in European thought, see Perez Zagorin, *Ways of Lying: Dissimulation, Persecution and Conformity in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, MA, 1990), 5.

'hypocrisy' and 'dissimulation' themselves become problematic, because they often refer to disguise and concealment which are, in the given situation, inevitable. My first aim, therefore, is to provide a glimpse into the casuistry of duplicity and deceit in the mission field, which shows that early modern missionaries did not understand them as ethically questionable. I do so by presenting several contexts in which missionaries came to consider dissimulation as unavoidable. I also link some of these cases to the theological problem of the confession of faith, that is, the public statement or acknowledgment of Christian belief. Secondly, I demonstrate that this pragmatic understanding of dissimulation – particularly the aspect which I call 'smuggling the faith' – has profound implications, not only for evangelization strategies, but also for the early modern notion of conversion and the very idea of the truthfulness of the faith. My aim is not to offer a systematic treatment of dissimulation in the wider context of premodern evangelization, but to provide a case study analyzing a collection of significant testimonies which show that dissimulation was perceived by missionaries as a legitimate and pragmatical response to the complex circumstances of the early modern Japanese and Chinese mission. This approach represents only one facet of dissimulation in the context of the early modern Apostolate, not a universal missiological principle, but it sheds light on the relevant challenges and dilemmas of the evangelization enterprise.

DISSIMULATION IN RECENT SCHOLARSHIP

In order to provide appropriate contextualization, I begin by offering a brief review of the relevant academic literature on the topic of dissimulation, which recent scholarship views as 'historically and ... hermeneutically central to the political, religious, and literary culture of Early Modern Europe'.² It is even described as the 'central axis of the discussion on the religious freedom, the law, intimacy and the delicate relationship between the morals and the politics' in Europe after 1500.³

² Stefania Tutino, 'Jesuit Accommodation, Dissimulation, Mental Reservation', in Ines G. Županov, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of the Jesuits* (Oxford, 2019), 216–40, at 216.

³ Diego Rubio, 'Di/simulación y fronteras religiosas en la temprana modernidad', in José Luis Betrán, Bernat Hernández and Doris Moreno, eds, *Identidades culturales en el mundo ibérico de la Edad Moderna* (Bellaterra, 2016), 39–50, at 39.

This religiously motivated dissimulation has been explored particularly in the context of doctrinal dissent, and specifically in relation to Nicodemism. However, Nicodemism applies mainly to European Protestant environments and, therefore, cannot be extrapolated without concessions to the overseas evangelization enterprise.⁴ Several recent studies focus on specific practices of dissimulation, such as mental reservation and equivocation,⁵ developed especially in the framework of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation in reaction to religious persecution, intolerance and increasing doctrinal imposition.⁶ This was a period when ‘the phenomenon of dissimulation became a focus of increased attention of dispute’⁷ and it was widely discussed among Protestants.⁸ Most significantly for this study, dissimulation has also been explored in relation to the tension between the ‘inner space of conscience’ or inner experience, on the one hand, and outward appearance and action, and the obligation to conform to political, social and religious standards, on the other.⁹ All this scholarship is relevant for this study, although it is important to bear in mind that it explores dissimulation strategies in relation to religious dissent within Christianity. This differs significantly from the context of the overseas Apostolate, where similar strategies are applied in confrontation with peoples who were completely unfamiliar with the Christian faith. Dissimulation in the missionary context is still relatively

⁴ See, for instance, Delio Cantimori, *Eretici italiani del Cinquecento e altri scritti*, ed. Adriano Prosperi (Turin, 1992; first publ. 1939); Carlo Ginzburg, *Il Nicodemismo. Simulazione e dissimulazione nell'Europa del '500* (Turin, 1970).

⁵ See, for example, Perez Zagorin, ‘The Historical Significance of Lying and Dissimulation’, *Social Research* 63 (1996), 863–912; Zagorin, *Ways of Lying*, esp. 153–85.

⁶ See, for instance, Albano Biondi, ‘La giustificazione della simulazione del Cinquecento’, in idem et al., eds, *Eresia e Riforma nell'Italia del Cinquecento. Miscellanea I* (Florence, 1974), 7–68.

⁷ Zagorin, ‘The Historical Significance of Lying and Dissimulation’, 885.

⁸ *Ibid.* 894.

⁹ See, for example, Jean-Pierre Cavaillé, *Dis/simulations. Jules-César Vanini, François La Mothe Le Vayer, Gabriel Naudé, Louis Machon et Torquato Accetto. Religion, morale et politique au XVIIe siècle* (Paris, 2002). A further important strand of recent scholarship on dissimulation focuses on *ars dissimulandi*, that is, on the dissimulation related specifically to early modern courtly culture and political life, on the hiding of true thoughts and feelings, on the displays of etiquette and conversational skills. See Jon R. Snyder, *Dissimulation and the Culture of Secrecy in Early Modern Europe* (Berkeley, CA, 2009). Compare also Rosario Villari, *L'elogio della dissimulazione. La lotta politica nel Seicento* (Bari, 1987). For case studies of early modern dissimulation, lying and deceit, see Miriam Eliav-Feldon and Tamar Herzig, eds, *Dissimulation and Deceit in Early Modern Europe* (London, 2015).

unexplored territory, with only a few studies devoted specifically to missionary documents and experience.¹⁰

However, some scholars, such as Stefania Tutino, study the well-known strategy of missionary *accommodatio* in terms of dissimulation.¹¹ Accommodation is inherent to the approach taken by the Society of Jesus in its Apostolate in Japan and China, and the scholarship on this topic is extensive.¹² I would argue, however, that even though *accommodatio* did imply an adaptation to local societal and political norms, it lacked the element of secrecy and disguise which is an essential aspect of dissimulation. Furthermore, contemporary Jesuit perceptions of accommodation saw it, not in terms of

¹⁰ See Tutino, 'Jesuit Accommodation, Dissimulation, Mental Reservation'. There is also a growing number of studies on missionary habit and clothing customs, especially in relation to missionary social identity, the strategy of accommodation and the discrepant attitudes of different orders towards evangelization. See Eugenio Menegon, "The habit that hides the monk": Missionary Fashion Strategies in Late Imperial Chinese Society and Court Culture', in Nadine Amsler et al., eds, *Catholic Missionaries in Early Modern Asia: Patterns of Localization* (London, 2020), 30–49; Nadine Amsler, *Jesuits and Matriarchs: Domestic Worship in Early Modern China* (Seattle, WA, 2018), esp. 13–31 (ch. 1, "Clothes make the man": The Jesuits' Adoption of Literati Masculinity); Marina Torres Trimállez, 'Finding Norms for the Chinese Mission: The Hat Controversy in the Canton Conference of 1667/1668', in Manuel Bastias Saavedra, ed., *Norms beyond Empire: Law-Making and Local Normativities in Iberian Asia, 1500–1800* (Leiden, 2022), 285–328; and Rómulo da Silva Ehalt, 'Theology in the Dark: The Missionary Casuistry of Japan Jesuits and Dominicans during the Tokugawa Persecution (1616–1622)', in Bastias Saavedra, ed., *Norms beyond Empire*, 249–84. Ehalt quotes the letter of the Dominican Angel Ferrer Orsucci to his brother, in which he states that the priests in Japan 'used to dress like Spaniards', with a sword tied to the waist, long beards but no tonsure—a style that would later earn them the moniker 'barbones' or 'big beards' (ibid. 250). He adds, however, that in 'Japan Jesuits met severe criticism, both internal and external, when they decided to imitate Buddhist monks and wear their robes' (ibid. 251 n. 10).

¹¹ See, for example, Tutino, 'Jesuit Accommodation, Dissimulation, Mental Reservation'.

¹² For a general introduction to the topic of missionary accommodation and religious syncretism, see James S. Cummins, *Christianity and Missions, 1450–1800* (London, 1997); David E. Mungello, *Curious Land: Jesuit Accommodation and the Origins of Sinology* (Stuttgart, 1985); Anthony C. Clarke, *A Voluntary Exile: Chinese Christianity and Cultural Confluence since 1552* (Bethlehem, 2013); Joan-Pau Rubiés, 'The Concept of Cultural Dialogue and the Jesuit Method of Accommodation: Between Idolatry and Civilization', *Archivium Historicum Societatis Iesu* 74 (2005), 237–80; Andrés I. Prieto, 'The Perils of Accommodation: Jesuit Missionary Strategies in the Early Modern World', *Journal of Jesuit Studies* 4 (2017), 395–414; Ana Carolina Hosne, 'The Tricky Concepts of "Hispanicization" in Peru and "Accommodation" in China', in eadem, *The Jesuit Missions to China and Peru, 1570–1610: Expectations and Appraisals of Expansionism* (New York, 2013), 71–96.

deceit,¹³ but rather in terms of extremely pragmatic adaptation to circumstances. In its utilitarianism, *accommodatio* is undoubtedly related to dissimulation; however, the dissimulation I want to explore here does not imply turning a blind eye to controversial dilemmas and to the lack of doctrinal purity in favour of a syncretical blending of the Christian faith with local customs, which is the central focus in the study of Jesuit *accommodatio* in their overseas missions.¹⁴

HISTORICAL CONTEXT: EARLY MODERN MISSIONS IN CHINA AND JAPAN, AND THEIR SOURCES

In the early modern period, the Society of Jesus was the first order to arrive in the East Indies. Although the founder of the mission, Francis Xavier, never actually reached mainland China, he nonetheless laid the foundation of the Jesuit Japanese mission after his arrival in Japan in 1549. The Franciscans started their evangelization activities in Japan after 1587. As far as the Middle Kingdom is concerned, the Jesuits arrived in China in the 1580s, gaining access to the imperial court in 1601. The mendicant orders, including the Franciscans, entered the empire slightly later, in the first half of the seventeenth century. Both the Jesuit and the Franciscan orders produced an extensive body of missionary documents, which comprise vast collections of letters, *relationes* (reports on the state of the mission), chronicles,

¹³ The Jesuit methodology of accommodation does seem to have a hint of secrecy in the case of missions in Protestant countries. According to the instructions of the Jesuit Robert Persons, it was necessary to conceal the true identities and change the names of the missionaries, in order to avoid suspicion: Tutino, 'Jesuit Accommodation, Dissimulation, Mental Reservation', 220. As Tutino puts it (ibid. 225): 'Where is the boundary that separates blending in from faking it?' But this concealment of one's true identity (and faking something which is not) would be, naturally, impossible in the overseas missions, where the outer appearance of European servants of God immediately gave away their radical alterity.

¹⁴ It is a matter of constant scholarly discussion whether the *accommodatio* (especially in China) implied a doctrinal shift, an adaptation of the Christian credo to the spiritual and religious sensibilities of the local population, and whether it brought about the perils of 'unlawful' syncretism and doctrinal contamination, a sort of 'syncretic hybrid'. 'It was a complex and multilayered entity in which the global was in constant tension with the local and the everlasting and atemporal truth of Catholic theology was both opposed to and in conversation with the "tropical" religious, devotional, and cultural contexts in a continuously dialectic process that rendered the global Catholic identity diverse, textured, porous, precarious, and discontinuous.' Tutino, 'Jesuit Accommodation, Dissimulation, Mental Reservation', 219.

and a complementary body of treatises on problems of moral theology, and confessional and pastoral practice. These exist, together with the reworkings of these original accounts, in contemporary European anthologies and *historiae* on the progression of the mission. All these documents must be read and contextualized with the utmost caution, since they often became vehicles of doctrinal edification and religious propaganda. Nevertheless, I would argue that, despite their ideological bias and chronological spread across the whole seventeenth century, a ‘transversal reading’ in search of dissimulation and hypocrisy is legitimate, because all these sources share the common experience of evangelization carried out in perilous, often hostile, and always challenging circumstances. Moreover, despite this very extensive *corpus*, testimonies of dissimulation are surprisingly few, and they can be classified into three different groups, all of which are related to missionary practice: first, the physical concealment of the missionary in hiding (*missionarius oclusus*); second, the dissimulation of faith; and third, the smuggling of faith. There is one fundamental difference between these thematic strands: while the *missionarius oclusus* deals with simple physical concealment, the dissimulation and smuggling of faith exemplify key theological questions relating to the enactment of the Christian credo in the challenging circumstances of the mission.

Let us return initially to the conceptual breadth of dissimulation. Some scholars have suggested that the polysemy of this term can be dichotomized into covering up the truth (*suppressio veri*) or, alternatively, stating or insinuating untruth (*suggestio falsi*). This dichotomy corresponds to the early modern distinction between dissimulation and simulation,¹⁵ as set forth by the Italian writer Torquato Accetto, author of one of the most influential early modern treatises on dissimulation:¹⁶ ‘Si simula quello che non è, si dissimula quello ch’è’ (‘we simulate that which is not, we dissimulate that which is’).¹⁷ The analysis in this article will focus on the *suppressio veri* (the suppression or concealment of truth) which, in the framework of missionary activity, is epitomized in the biblical verse which forms the title of this paper, *prudentes sicut serpentes* (‘wise as

¹⁵ See Rubio, ‘Di/simulación y fronteras religiosas en la temprana modernidad’, 42.

¹⁶ On Accetto, see Snyder, *Dissimulation and the Culture of Secrecy in Early Modern Europe*, 59–67.

¹⁷ Torquato Accetto, *Della dissimulazione onesta*, ed. Salvatore Silvano Nigro (Turin, 1997), 78. My translation.

serpents'), as cited in 1679 by the Franciscan Francisco Péris (1635–1701), one of the most active missionaries in China, especially in the Canton province in the 1670s. In a letter to his Father provincial, Fernando de la Concepción, Péris informed his superior about the advancement of the Franciscan mission in his province (Canton) and commented on the request of his brethren in Fokien (now the province of Fujian) for more missionaries. Warning against this, Péris explained that 'this is no time for simplicity and fervour; on the contrary, we have to proceed with utmost tact and prudence: *be ye therefore wise as serpents, quia omnia tempus habent*'.¹⁸ Later in his letter, Péris exhorted that the arrival of new missionaries in China should be 'without noise, without any annoyance [*sin ruido, sin disgusto, y sin mucha nota*], and without attracting excessive notice, because in these times, much prudence and wisdom is needed.'¹⁹

This approach, related to the *suppresio veri* in that it implies 'not stating the whole truth', is also at work in the case of Ferdinand Verbiest (1623–88), one of the key figures of the Jesuit Apostolate in China during the seventeenth century. In one of his letters to Europe and to his fellow missionaries in China, Verbiest warns against the oath of obedience towards the Vicars Apostolic of the *Congregatio de Propaganda Fide* (Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, CPF), which had been ordered by the decree of 29 January 1680, especially if the oath was to be delivered in written form by the missionaries. Even if done in secret, Verbiest cautions, the Chinese emperor would surely learn about it: firstly, because native clergy and catechists would have to swear it in Chinese; secondly, because servants and others in the missionaries' households would learn about it; and thirdly, because of potential Chinese apostatizing priests.²⁰ That would undoubtedly lead to the destruction of the mission and to widespread persecution, because the emperor

¹⁸ Lorenzo Pérez, OFM, 'Cartas y relaciones de las misiones de China', *Archivo Iberoamericano* 8 (1917), 390–486, at 444. The first reference is to Matt. 10: 16: 'I am sending you out like sheep surrounded by wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves'. The second is to Eccles. 3: 1: 'For everything there is an appointed time, and an appropriate time for every activity on earth' [NET]. Emphasis in Péris's original.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 446.

²⁰ Verbiest to Gregorio López (in Canton), 15 January 1683, in Noël Golvers, ed., *Letters of a Peking Jesuit: The Correspondence of Ferdinand Verbiest, SJ (1623–1688)* (Leuven, 2017), 464 (no. 54). The same argument is subsequently developed in a letter from Verbiest to the cardinals of the CPF, 25 January 1684, in *ibid.* 545.

would learn that the pope does not require the Chinese emperor's licence in promulgating and practising the Christian religion.²¹

It is therefore absolutely necessary, insists Verbiest, to dissimulate the spiritual and legal authority of the pope and the fact that he does not respect the Chinese emperor's power over spiritual matters within the Chinese empire.²² The Jesuits, Verbiest asserts, proceed always with the utmost care and caution, and 'we do not reveal to the Chinese (to the Mandarins and much less to the Emperor) even the fact that we have a father provincial.'²³ In sum, in relation to the power structures of the order and of the whole church, Verbiest recommends absolute dissimulation in the form of *suppressio veri*: to avoid disclosing the true state of affairs as much as possible. While writing this epistle, he asserts, the Vice Provincial Fr Dominicus Gabiani 'remains hidden in his cell ... so that the members of the imperial family and the servants, who often visit us, know nothing about him; and in this way we avoid any inquiries.'²⁴

CASUISTRY OF DISSIMULATION AND DECEIT

Missionarius oclusus

This strategy of absolute secretiveness is the most discernible facet of dissimulation at work in the body of early modern Jesuit missionary documents from China and Japan, but it is by no means exclusive to the Society of Jesus. All the orders had to deal with the imperative of *missionarius oclusus*, the missionary who, for safety reasons, was obliged to remain hidden,²⁵ often physically 'hidden in his cell', as

²¹ Verbiest to the cardinals of the CPF, 25 January 1684, in Golvers, ed., *Letters of a Peking Jesuit*, 545.

²² Golvers, ed., *Letters of a Peking*, 447.

²³ Ibid. 469. All translations of Latin primary sources are mine.

²⁴ 'Manet ita oclusus in cubiculo ... ut familiares et domestici Regis, qui omni momento solent nos adire, nil sciunt de illo: et hoc facimus ad evitandas multas interrogaciones': ibid. 469.

²⁵ In the context of Japanese mission, the condition of the *missionarius oclusus* even received a Japanese term. Ehalt, 'Theology in the Dark', 255, comments: 'numerous Christians helped hide missionaries during the persecution, a condition which European and Japanese alike referred to as *hissoku* (*hisoku* in Jesuit documents), i.e., "to be hiding, or enclosed, secluded, not going public"'. Ehalt further describes the fascinating phenomenon of a Japanese 'underground church' established after the persecutions at the end of the sixteenth and beginning of the seventeenth centuries, and the role of Christian brotherhoods (charitable confraternities following the model of the Portuguese

seen in Verbiest's letter.²⁶ This approach is further exemplified in the decision to dress so as to disguise the religious habit,²⁷ a common strategy mentioned in many accounts from Japan after the harsh persecution of Christians at the end of the sixteenth century and in the first decades of the seventeenth. One of the reports on the persecution of Christians in Japan during the 1630s recounts that the Franciscans Francisco de Santa María and Bartholomé Lauret, together with some of their servants, were unable to hide from their pursuers even at night (which is the 'disguise of the sinners'), so in the end had to 'withdraw to the mountains, under the cover of the forests and scrubland.'²⁸ We learn also that 'the fathers are never free from danger in Japan', and that the local Christian church is 'in grief and despair', since its ministers 'have no home, no place to stay; they are obliged to wander from house to house under the cover of the night, crossing deserts without ever feeling safe ... almost never can they celebrate the Mass in peace'.²⁹

In this and similar cases of *missionarius occultus*, the prudent *suppressio veri* entails the concealment of the missionary's true identity, habit and appearance, or the act of physical hiding. Jerónimo de Jesus was appointed the superior of the convent in Osaka in 1596, but his arrival was delayed and he was thus saved from being imprisoned with the other Franciscans, Jesuits and Japanese neophytes who were to be martyred as the 'Twenty-Six Martyrs of Japan' in 1597.

Misericórdias and native Buddhist lay organizations) that provided shelters for the hidden missionaries: *ibid.* 255.

²⁶ Another example from Verbiest's letters: Father Manuel Laurifice remained hidden in his cubicle for more than one month, 'and the emperor learns nothing about him. We have to hide our own brethren with so much caution ...': Golvers, ed., *Letters of a Peking Jesuit*, 633.

²⁷ For more information on missionary habit and dressing customs, also in relation to the accommodation practices, see above n. 10. For the study of this topic in the context of missions in Muslim territories, see Hugues Didier, 'Entre el disfraz y el martirio. Los viajeros jesuitas en el Asia musulmana (siglos XVI y XVII)', *ISIMU. Revista sobre Oriente Próximo y Egipto en la antigüedad* 6 (2006), 77–87. Didier points out that many Jesuits travelling in Muslim countries in Asia in the early modern period would of necessity wear Muslim clothes. He explores, with more detail, the case of Francisco de Georgis (1595), whose martyrdom was related to his confession of faith and also to his dress.

²⁸ Diego Aduarte, *Relacion de la persecucion que tubo la iglesia en el Japon en dos años, es a saber, desde el 1626 hasta el 1628. Singularmente à cerca de seys religiosos de la orden predicadores, es à saber, dos sacerdotes españoles y quatro legos Japones* (Barcelona, 1669), fol. 14^v.

²⁹ Aduarte, *Relacion de la persecucion*, fol. 23^r.

Jerónimo de Jesus camouflaged his habit ‘under Japanese dress’ and remained hidden in the house of a native Christian. He narrates the misery and torments of such an existence in his letters. ‘I could not possibly describe’, he writes to his ‘dearest brother’, Juan de Garrovillas, on 20 December 1598,

my going underground in caverns and finally in a sugar cane plantation, whose chill penetrated me in such a manner that I was close to death for a month and a half. I cannot possibly describe how I listened to the public announcement that whoever gave me food [*limosna*] or whoever attended mass was to be proscribed.³⁰

There is great anxiety and tension in this testimony, but there is no conflict implied in the dissimulation and hiding, born, as they were, out of necessity.

Dissimulation of Faith

In certain contexts, however, the *suppressio veri* did entail a deeper confrontation between inner convictions and their outer manifestation, for example, when neophytes were forced to dissimulate their newly acquired faith. The European chronicle of the Jesuit mission in South Asia, based on the missionaries’ regular reports and annual letters, the *Historia y anal relacion de las cosas que hizieron los padres de la Compañía de Iesus por las partes de Oriente y otras en la propagacion del Santo Euangelio los años passados de 607 y 608* (*History and Annual Relation of Things Accomplished by the Fathers of the Society of Jesus in the Orient . . . in the Years 1607 and 1608*) quotes a letter, presumably written by a Japanese woman, in which she laments being forced to conceal her ‘newly acquired piety from the people of my household’, since she cannot ‘embrace *the things of salvation* with complete freedom of the heart’. Consequently, she prays at midnight and very early in the morning: ‘I make the sign of the Cross and I pray before the others can see me’.³¹

³⁰ Lorenzo Pérez, OFM, ‘Fr. Jerónimo de Jesus. Restaurador de las misiones del Japón. Sus cartas y relaciones’, *Archivum Franciscanum Historicum* 16 (1923), 507–44, at 517.

³¹ Christóbal Suárez de Figueroa, *Historia y anal relacion de las cosas que hizieron los padres de la Compañía de Iesus por las partes de Oriente y otras en la propagacion del Santo Euangelio los años passados de 607 y 608* (Madrid, 1614), 308. Emphasis added.

The concealment or dissimulation of one's faith, as it appears here, is a complex theological problem related to the *confessio fidei*, the act of (public) declaration of faith. The intricate casuistry of the *confessio fidei* was developed in the body of European moral theology in the framework of expositions on the first precept of the Decalogue ('You shall have no other gods before me'; NET).³² It is not possible to explore this topic in detail in this article, but it is apparent that in the South Asian missions, the act of *confessio fidei* very often took on features that clearly show the profound implications of dissimulation in the particular context of the missions.

The list of sixty-one *quaesita* (controversial issues, from the point of view of pastoral or confessional practice, whose resolution was to be made by church authorities) collected from the missionaries in Japan and analyzed by a group of Jesuit elders of the province of Japan gathered at the *Colégio da Madre de Deus* in Macau on 8 July 1620, includes several queries concerning the legitimacy of the efforts of Japanese neophytes to hide their faith by simulating being non-Christians. One of the doubts refers to the 'custom of hanging an *ofuda*, a slip of paper or a tablet placed at the entrance of a house that could indicate, among other things, that its residents were affiliated to a Buddhist temple or a Shintō shrine'.³³ The Japanese missionaries were doubtful about the legitimacy of this practice: were the Christians actually allowed to hang *ofuda* in their houses? In their resolution, the Jesuits judged the use of the *ofuda* to be a public denial of faith, and therefore illicit, but it might also have been perceived otherwise, in accordance with the casuistry of the *simulatio* of alien faith (*simulare alienam fidem*) which, according to some church authorities, could be tolerated in certain circumstances because it did not mean denying the faith of Christ internally (*interna voluntate*) but only externally (*externis signis*).³⁴

³² The theological authority is Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II. q. 147, 'De simulatione et hypocrisis'. For the casuistry of the *confessio fidei* in the particular context of the overseas missions, see Ehalt, 'Theology in the Dark', 251 n. 10, where he lists scholastic summas and treatises on moral doctrine that were most relevant for the missionary work.

³³ Ehalt, 'Theology in the Dark', 264.

³⁴ See, for instance, Martinus Becanus, *R. P. Martini Becani Societatis Iesu Theologi Manuale Controversiarum Huius Temporis* (Monasterii Westphaliae, 1624), 677. The discussion is included in ch. 2, 'An liceat negare fidem Christi, ad vitandam mortem' ['Whether it is allowed to deny faith in Christ in order to avoid death'], and ch. 3, 'An

This precept is related to the doctrine of *humanae aures* ('human ears') which allows for external dissimulation if the heart remains true. This principle was famously formulated by Pope Gregory the Great (d. 604) who, in his commentary on Job 35: 2, asserts:

The ears of men judge our words as they sound outwardly, but the divine judgment hears them as they are uttered from within. Among men the heart is judged by the words; with God the works are judged by the heart.³⁵

In sum, the confession of the faith was a highly controversial issue in contemporary theological debate, and its casuistry became even more complex in the challenging circumstances of overseas missions.

The Strategy of Smuggling the Faith

There is yet another relevant and specific aspect of dissimulation in early modern missionary documents from China and Japan, one which is not acknowledged in the body of moral theology and which does not appear, as far as I am aware, in any early modern guidelines on evangelization.

The chronicle on the Jesuit mission in South Asia quoted above, *Historia y anal relacion de las cosas*, describes an exorcism performed on a pagan Japanese woman in Meaco (present-day Kyoto), to whom a Christian physician was called. When the doctor arrived, he grew suspicious and he 'acknowledged the illness through its effects', meaning that he interpreted the illness as an action of the devil; consequently, he placed, secretly (*dissimuladamente*), an *agnus* (a pendant or medallion, showing the Agnus Dei) under the head of the bed. The possessed (or the devil inside her) 'acknowledged the virtue of the *agnus*, and she became very agitated, making loud noises'. The people around the bed realized what was happening and placed the *agnus* directly on the woman's body; the devil departed, leaving her quiet and in peace.³⁶

aliquando liceat tacere aut dissimulare fidem Christi' ['Is it ever allowed to silence or conceal faith in Christ?'], 673–7.

³⁵ Gregory the Great, *Moralia* 26.10, online at: <http://monumenta.ch/latein/text.php?table=Gregorius_Magnus&rumpfid=Gregorius%20Magnus,%20Moralia%20in%20Iob,%2026,%20%20%2010&level=4&domain=&lang=0&links=&inframe=1&hide_apparatus=1>, accessed 10 June 2022.

³⁶ Suárez de Figueroa, *Historia y anal relacion de las cosas*, 307.

A similar testimony, which concerns the imperative of secrecy in the missionary practice and – importantly – depicts the transition from an initial disguise towards subsequent disclosure, can be found in one of the reports from the province of Canton, written in 1695 by the Franciscan and Provincial Commissary Jaime Tarín. In it, Tarín mentions the practice of ‘disguising/concealing the [religious] habit of the missionaries when proclaiming the Gospel’. He explains that this practice was initially introduced by the Jesuits, but that the Franciscans had deliberately chosen to maintain it and therefore wear Chinese dress until ‘the time has come to lift the veil’ (*hasta que sea tiempo oportuno para correr el velo*).³⁷

The report does not elaborate further on this act of disclosure, but analogous testimonies provide indications of what it might have meant. In a letter written in Spanish and Latin in Beijing in 1684 (some ten years before the Franciscan report) and addressed to the Dominican José Duque in Manila, the Jesuit Ferdinand Verbiest provides recommendations to a group of Dominican missionaries who are to be sent to China. He asserts that they should be very careful when relating to the Chinese authorities. Drawing on his favourite metaphor which depicted mission as a perilous journey through rough seas, he here employs the image of a sea journey to emphasize the need to ‘steer according to the directions of experienced pilots’, that is, to adhere to the Jesuit approach. Claiming that ‘the extraordinary and indiscreet fervour is of no use here in China’, he recommends that missionaries must manage their missions (‘governar la cristiandad’; literally ‘govern their Christendoms’) ‘peacefully, in secret, and without making much noise’.³⁸ In this way, he claims, mission will gradually take hold, until such time as China discovers, ‘to its own surprise, that it has become completely Christian’ (*mira-bitur se totam Christianam esse*).³⁹

This must have been a vital strategy for Verbiest, since he repeated the same argument, almost verbatim, in another letter written the same year to the cardinals of the Congregation of the Propaganda Fide. In this second letter, he describes the ‘silent and secret Christianization’ that the Jesuits have been carrying out with the

³⁷ Lorenzo Pérez, OFM, ‘Origen de las misiones franciscanas en la provincial de Kwang-tung (China). Conclusión’, *Archivo Ibero-americano* 8 (1917), 237–96, at 276.

³⁸ Golvers, ed., *Letters of a Peking Jesuit*, 559.

³⁹ *Ibid.* 559.

utmost caution for over a century. In his opinion, this strategy of initial concealment, eventually followed by an unexpected disclosure, was the only possible policy in the Middle Kingdom. Verbiest compares it to the approach of the Muslims, whose numbers, he says, 'have been progressively growing in the Chinese empire, so that now the authorities could not expel them without causing huge tumults and revolts'. In the same way, he writes, '*ipsa Sina tandem mirabitur se totam Christianam esse*' ('China itself, to its own surprise, will discover that it has become completely Christian').⁴⁰ The same idea of China discovering, with surprise, that it has become Christian was used by Verbiest in a third letter, addressed to Louis de Cicé, Missionary Apostolic: *miretur se totum paene insensibiliter esse Christianum* ('[China] would find itself, with surprise, Christian'). Here, Verbiest describes the process as *paene insensibiliter*, that is, 'almost imperceptible'.⁴¹

This is arguably the most remarkable aspect of dissimulation in early modern missionary documents. The clandestine approach perceives evangelization as a sort of 'smuggling the faith': introducing it in a furtive and covert way and behind the backs of the Chinese. Some scholars might associate this attitude with the accommodation method frequently associated with the Jesuits, and described as 'Jesuit willingness to accommodate themselves and their message to different audiences'.⁴² However, it is also related to those strategies which have been described by modern historians as the 'apostolate through books',⁴³ or the 'apostolate through sciences and arts', or also the

⁴⁰ 'Atque eiusmodi cautela missionarii nostri Sinenses semper usi, Religionem Christianam iam per centum et amplius annos in vasto hoc gentis tam politicae imperio sustentarunt, cum interim a multis aliis Orientis regnis saepius fuerit in exilium expulsa, et a multis adhuc exulet. Et siquidem Emin(entiis) V(est)ris visum fuerit ut eadem cautela pergamus, tunc sacra Religio alterius et alterius saeculi iubilaeum intro hoc imperium celebrare poterit, *et ipsa Sina tandem mirabitur se totam Christianam esse*, vel certe Christianorum in illa numerus paulatim adeo excrescet, ut ipsa etiam invidia externarum armorum vim contra illas adhibere vereatur; sicut nimirum cum Mahometanis modo contingit, qui iam a pluribus saeculis ita paulatim intra hoc Regnum invaluerunt, ut ipsiusmet Regni potentia de illis expellendis sine sui perturbatione et tumultus periculo consilium inire non possit': Golvers, ed., *Letters of a Peking Jesuit*, 547. Italics added.

⁴¹ Ibid. 778.

⁴² Andrés I. Prieto, 'The Perils of Accommodation: Jesuit Missionary Strategies in the Early Modern World', *Journal of Jesuit Studies* 4 (2017), 395–414, at 395.

⁴³ See Ad Dudink and Nicolas Standaert, 'Apostolate through Books', in Nicolas Standaert, ed., *Handbook of Christianity in China, 1: 635–1800* (Leiden, 2001), 600–31.

‘apostolate through gifts’,⁴⁴ also typical of the Jesuits, which exploited the interest of the mandarins, and sometimes even of the emperor, in music, European mechanical tools such as clocks, or in astronomy, and in the European sciences more generally,⁴⁵ in order to promote evangelization. The assumption was that their knowledge of these disciplines would grant missionaries access to these highly-ranked officers and scholars, and indeed to the imperial court in general.⁴⁶ However, the strategy of the ‘apostolate through earthly interests’ was not conceived in the same, quasi-secretive ways as the approaches described by Verbiest. Rather, it was perceived as a necessary concession to Chinese tastes, and was often experienced as a heavy burden by the missionaries, who found that these earthly matters occupied too much time and did not allow enough space for spiritual matters. ‘Smuggling the faith’, in contrast, should be understood as a completely undisclosed, secret programme of mission, which seems to have been conceived specifically for China, precisely due to the empire’s traditional secrecy and hermetic attitude.

Here we return to the phrase *prudentes sicut serpentes*,⁴⁷ as used by the Franciscan Pêris in 1679. According to the Gospel of Matthew, Christ’s words, ‘Be ye therefore wise as serpents’, addressed to the apostles charged with spreading the faith, were followed by a further simile, ‘and harmless as doves’ (Matthew 10: 16): ‘Behold, I am

⁴⁴ See, for instance, Qinghe Xiao [肖清和]: ‘Apostolate through Gifts: Social-net and Accommodation of Catholicism in China during Late Ming and Early Qing Dynasties’ [‘礼物与明末清初天主教的适应策略’], *Dongyue Tribune* [东岳论丛] 3 (2013), 81–94.

⁴⁵ Ferdinand Verbiest was himself a skillful astronomer.

⁴⁶ The Jesuits were by no means the only order that would recommend the strategy of ‘apostolate-through-earthly-matters’. The Franciscan Blas García writes in his autobiography about his relations with the local governor or king, and his attempts to introduce the Christian faith to him. Importantly, Blas García and his companions were granted access to the king because they were able to repair his European watches: ‘I strived for *fitting in him* the knowledge of true God and of his holy law [*Yo procuraya encaxarle el conocimiento del verdadero Dios y su santa ley*], and on various occasions, I exposed it completely to him. However, even though the prince “would assert that he believed in what I was saying”, he did not try to become Christian, because he knew he would have to abandon his concubines and the unjust interest he was obtaining from his vassals.’ Lorenzo Pérez, OFM, ‘Origen de las misiones franciscanas en la provincial de Kwang-Tung (China)’, *Archivo Ibero-americano* 7 (1917), 203–354, at 230.

⁴⁷ It is worth noting that this text was refuted by Calvin as a justification for dissimulation and the duplicity of heart and language of the spiritualists, libertines and the Nicodemites. See Zagorin, ‘The Historical Significance of Lying and Dissimulation’, 894.

sending you out like sheep surrounded by wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves' [NET].

It should be noted that Thomas Aquinas refers to this instruction in his *Commentary on Saint Matthew's Gospel*,⁴⁸ when elaborating on the polarity between serpentine wisdom and dove-like *simplicitas* (simplicity, frankness, openness), which he associates with sincerity, both in the heart and in the mouth. P  ris, on the other hand, did not contrast the prudent serpent with the dove, but characterized the need to be 'as serpents' with a reference to Ecclesiastes 3:1: *quia omnia tempus habent* ('because everything has its time').⁴⁹ In replacing the reference to the dove with this temporal qualifier, P  ris therefore avoids the tension inherent in the Gospel of Matthew, namely the problem of deceit and the duplicity of the heart and of the mouth, which was the focus of Aquinas's exegesis.

By arguing that no more missionaries should be sent to China at the moment, because 'this is no time for simplicity [*simplicidad*] and fervour; on the contrary, we have to proceed with the utmost tact and prudence',⁵⁰ P  ris called into question the *simplicitas* required by Christ in spreading the faith.⁵¹ He rejects the idea that missionaries in China can take a frank and undisguised approach, instead giving priority to the highly pragmatic notion of the 'proper time which is yet to come', because there is 'time for every purpose under heaven'.⁵²

For P  ris, it seems that the pace of evangelization, at least in the challenging environments of the Japanese and Chinese missions, was a question of God's appropriate time and God's favourable moments and, more importantly, of the due measure that achieves the aim. In his argument, the concurrence of prudence and simplicity, inherent in Jesus's parable and in Aquinas's commentary,

⁴⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *Corpus Thomisticum. Sancti Thomae de Aquino Super Evangelium S. Matthaei lectura*, ed. Roberto Busa (Turin, 1951), caput 10, lectio 2, online at: <<https://www.corpusthomicum.org/cml0619.html#87357>>, accessed 12 June 2022.

⁴⁹ Eccles. 3: 1: 'Omnia tempus habent, et suis spatiis transeunt universa sub caelo' ('For everything there is an appointed time, and an appropriate time for every activity on earth' [NET]. P  rez, 'Cartas y relaciones de las misiones de China', 444.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ I cannot delve here into the intriguing relationships between deceit, duplicity of heart and language, and the shadowy side of dissimulation, which are implicit in this seemingly straightforward reference to serpents and doves. In a future article, I intend to explore this particular exegesis of the parable, along with the slippery space of two-facedness, and hypocrisy and trickery in missionary practice.

⁵² P  rez, 'Cartas y relaciones de las misiones de China', 444.

disappears, because the arduous circumstances of the mission required the simplicity of the doves to be left behind in order to adopt the prudence of the serpents. In missionary contexts, in sum, distinctive forms of concealment and smuggling of the faith exemplify the nature of dissimulation in religious practice, and particularly the tension between, on the one hand, the expectation that inner faith should manifest itself outwardly, and, on the other, the necessary concessions of outward faith in complex circumstances.

CONCLUSION

Various forms of dissimulation can be found in the context of Christian evangelization in late sixteenth- and seventeenth-century China and Japan. These reflect the specific circumstances of the local culture, which demanded secrecy and hiding. In this sense, the strategy of concealment seems to respond to the pragmatic requirements of the mission. However, this article has shown that ‘smuggling the faith’ might also be related to the slippery notion of two-facedness, and to the duplicity of heart and language, condemned by Thomas Aquinas. There is here a blurring of the distinction between *suppressio veri* and *suggestio falsi*, which undoubtedly deserves to be explored further, especially in relation to early modern strategies of evangelization. It has profound implications for the very idea of conversion and the profession of faith in the context of the Apostolate.

Unlike theological doctrine, which builds upon a complex casuistry regarding dissimulation in the *confessio fidei*, missionaries in their daily practice do not seem to have emphasized conversion as an act of individual consciousness, but rather to have seen it as a state of grace which should be achieved by any means. In other words, while official theological discourse might perceive dissimulation as a potential threat to the inner experience of faith, missionary practice, at least in the contexts described in this article, seems to have acknowledged deceit as an inevitable reaction to demanding circumstances. From this point of view, to see ‘smuggling the faith’ as morally questionable would seem to entail an anachronistic projection of our own spiritual and moral dilemmas onto these missionary documents. Modern scholarship on the history of Christianity in Asia, and particularly the early modern missions in China and Japan,

needs to bear in mind the disparity between doctrinal discourse and missionary practice.

Early modern missionaries in China and Japan did not experience ‘managing their mission in secret’ (‘que los missionaries gobiernen su Christianidad ... como a las escondidas’, according to Verbiest)⁵³ as ethically ambivalent. Their attitude was pragmatic, not in the sense of ‘the end justifies the means’, but rather because of their deep belief that they were bringing the grace of faith to the gentiles. For these missionaries, ‘smuggling the faith’ did not represent a moral conflict, or a confrontation between authenticity and dishonesty, because it was done for the sake and salvation of the souls of the infidels. The early modern missions in China and Japan reveal not only the ambiguous and intricate nature of dissimulation, but also the dilemmas associated with it, especially in religious settings and in matters of faith.

⁵³ Golvers, ed., *Letters of a Peking Jesuit*, 559.