

# Christian-Muslim Relations A Bibliographical History

Volume 11. South and East Asia, Africa and  
the Americas (1600-1700)

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## CONTENTS

Foreword .....	vii
List of Illustrations .....	xi
List of Maps .....	xiii
Abbreviations .....	xiv
Peter Riddell, <i>Introduction: Christian-Muslim Relations in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century (Asia, Africa and the Americas)</i> .....	1
Barbara Watson Andaya, <i>Islam and Christianity in South-East Asia 1600-1700</i> .....	15
Martha Frederiks, <i>Enforced migration: an Indian Ocean Africa narrative</i> .....	29
David D. Grafton, <i>Enforced migration: an Atlantic narrative in Christian-Muslim relations</i> .....	49
Works on Christian-Muslim relations 1600-1700 .....	69
South Asia .....	71
South-East Asia, China and Japan .....	269
Africa and the Americas .....	467
Index of Names .....	623
Index of Titles .....	632

# Álvaro de Semedo

Alvarez Semedo, Alvarus de Semedo, Zeng Dezhao,  
Xie Wulu, Sai Moduo

DATE OF BIRTH 1585 or 1586  
PLACE OF BIRTH Nisa, Portugal  
DATE OF DEATH 1658 or 1659  
PLACE OF DEATH Beijing

## BIOGRAPHY

Álvaro Semedo was born in 1585 or 1586 in Nisa, Portugal. He joined the Society of Jesus in 1602 and departed for East Asia in 1608, completing his studies in Goa. He arrived in Nanking in 1613 and spent the majority of his career in southern China. He was imprisoned in 1616 during a period of anti-Christian persecution and following that was exiled to Macau until 1621. In 1625, he travelled to Xian and studied the newly uncovered Nestorian Stele (Chinese: *Da qin jing jiao liu xing zhong guo bei*). Promoted to the position of procurator in 1636, he departed for Europe in order to assist with gaining church support and new recruits. He returned as vice-provincial of the China mission, and was based in Canton from 1649 until his death in 1658 or 1659.

## MAIN SOURCES OF INFORMATION

### *Primary*

Álvaro de Semedo, *Imperio de la China, i cultura evangelica en èl, por los reli-  
gios de la Compañia de Iesus: Compuesto por el padre Alvaro Semmedo de  
la propria Compañia, natural de la villa de Nisa en Portugal, procurador  
general de la prouincia de la China, de donde fue embiado a Roma al año  
de 1640. Publicado por Manuel de Faria i Sousa Cavallero de la orden de  
Christo, i de la casa real. Dedicado al glorioso padre S. Francisco Xavier,  
religioso de la Compañia de Iesus, i segundo apostel de la Assia*, Madrid:  
Impresso por Iuan Sanchez, 1642

### *Secondary*

D.E. Mungello, *Curious land. Jesuit accommodation and the origins of Sinology*,  
Honolulu HI, 1989

## WORKS ON CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS

*Relação da propagação da fé no reyno da China e outros adjacentes*, 'Account of the propagation of the faith of the Kingdom of China, and neighbouring places'

DATE 1641

ORIGINAL LANGUAGE Portuguese

## DESCRIPTION

*Relação da propagação da fé no reyno da China e outros adjacentes* was completed in Goa in 1638 as Semedo made his way back to Europe. It was published in various languages in the early 1640s during his visits to Lisbon, Madrid and Portugal. The original Portuguese version of 1641 is less known than the Spanish translation prepared by Manuel de Faria y Souza (1590-1649) and published the following year, so most sources give the Spanish title *Imperio de la China*. This translation is 384 pages long (making it the longest version).

The English version was originally published in 1655. In Chapter 30 of this version, the penultimate chapter of the first part of the book, Semedo refers to Muslims, Jews and other nations present in China (pp. 152-4). His treatment of them is quite distinct from his treatment of Chinese religions in Chapter 18. The central theme of the passage is the separateness of Muslims from the Chinese. He notes that Muslims are widespread throughout the country, speak Chinese, and are knowledgeable of their scripture (although not always religiously orthodox), but know little of their own (Arabic) language. On the one hand, he observes that they are indistinguishable from Chinese in terms of appearance but, on the other, he argues that they strive to preserve their national identity by marrying from within their community or by marrying Chinese women who, by entering a Muslim family, have become 'Moors'.

In line with his theme of separateness, Semedo asserts that the Muslims are despised by the Chinese, and that the Chinese are despised by the Muslims to such an extent that Muslims offer assistance from their centres only to fellow Muslims. Nevertheless, he notes that, historically, Moorish military assistance led successive governments to grant Muslims the same privileges as native Chinese, allowing them to maintain mosques, multiply, and eventually take governmental roles (although he argues that they generally do not advance to higher ranks). He also

notes the existence of regular embassies from various Moorish kingdoms and the conversion to Islam of Jews living in China. Elsewhere, Semedo makes fleeting references to Islam and Muslim nations, termed variously Saracens, Arabs, Moors, Mohammedans etc., mostly within the context of trade and diplomacy.

Semedo's treatment of Islam is far from polemical, but it contains a certain degree of negativity and anti-Islamism. Such negativity is captured within his central thesis that Muslims are foreign to China, which perhaps, when linked to passages exploring historic Christian communities in China, seeks to place Christians in a position where they have greater claims to indigenous identity (having also been present in China's past) than their Muslim counterparts. He does praise the Muslims in one respect, however, in that their abstinence from pork has led to the introduction of the consumption of beef in areas with Muslim populations.

#### SIGNIFICANCE

Some of Semedo's claims match those of Matteo Ricci, Nicolas Trigault and others, though the text became highly important in its own right for bringing the European population descriptive information on China. Its ongoing relevance is illustrated by the large number of translations made. Whilst references to Muslims and Islam are extensive in comparison with other texts on China written in the period, it cannot be claimed that they occupy a significant position in the text and it is unlikely that they greatly affected conceptions of the religion; the text's popularity was based on other factors. Nevertheless, as with the work of Ricci and Trigault, Semedo's claims vis-à-vis Islam and Muslims are repeated by contemporaneous and later scholars.

Like the majority of early 17<sup>th</sup>-century works, Semedo primarily refers to Muslims and Islam through the use of ethnic categories. Although, as noted, the text takes a somewhat anti-Islamic approach, it is primarily descriptive and historical in genre. In comparison with other texts of the period, the work provides much greater insights into Islam in China, some of which appear to be new concepts, such as changing national identities. It is also noteworthy that, in spite of the general anti-Islamic approach, Muslims are praised for being more in line with European conceptions of civilisation, demonstrated by their introducing the consumption of beef.

#### PUBLICATIONS

Álvaro de Semedo, *Relação da propagação da fé no reyno da China e outros adjacentes*, Madrid, 1641

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- G.B. Giattini (trans.), *Relatione della grande monarchia della Cina: Del P. Alvaro Semedo portughese della Compagnia di Gesu*, Rome: Sumptibus Hermann Scheus, 1643 (Italian trans.; repr. 1653, 1678); 4 H.as. 816, 1643; H.as. 4580 d-1/2, 1678 (digitalised versions available from *Münchener DigitalisierungsZentrum*)
- L. Coulon (trans.), *Histoire universelle du grand royaume de la Chine, composée en Italien par le P. Alvarez Semedo Portugais, de la Compagnie de Jésus, et traduite en notre langue par Louis Coulon P., divisée en deux parties*, Paris: Sebastien Cramoisy, 1645 (French trans.; repr. in two forms in 1667); BNF31350224 (digitalised version available through BNF)
- Álvaro de Semedo, *The history of that great and renowned monarchy of China. Wherein all the particular provinces are accurately described: as also the dispositions, manners, learning, lawes, militia, government, and religion of the people. Together with the traffick and commodities of that countrey: Lately written in Italian by F. Alvarez Semedo, a Portuguese, after he had resided twenty two years at the court, and other famous cities of that kingdom. Now put in to English by a person of quality and illustrated with several mapps and figures, to satisfie the curious, and advance the trade of Great Brittain. To which is added the History of the late invasion and conquest of that flourishing kingdom by the Tartars. With an exact account of the affairs of China till these present times*, London: E. Tyler for Iohn Cook, 1655 (English trans.); Wing S2490 (digitalised version available through EEBO)

## STUDIES

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- Chen Mingsheng, ‘China in the early seventeenth-century. Alvarez Semedo’s “History of the great and renowned monarchy of China”’, *Annals of Philippine Chinese Historical Association* 8 (1978) 20-79
- R. Löwenthal, ‘The early Jews in China. A supplementary bibliography’, *Folklore Studies* 5 (1946) 353-98

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