

# Christian-Muslim Relations A Bibliographical History

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# Ferdinand Verbiest

Nan Huairen, Ferdinando Verbiest, Ferdinandus Verbiest

DATE OF BIRTH 1623  
PLACE OF BIRTH Pitthem, Belgium  
DATE OF DEATH 1688  
PLACE OF DEATH Beijing

## BIOGRAPHY

Ferdinand Verbiest was a Belgian Jesuit. He twice attempted to embark on missions to South America, but on both occasions was refused permission by the Spanish. Deciding to travel to China instead, he arrived in Macau in 1658. He then worked in Xian, before moving to Beijing in order to work alongside Johann Adam Schall in the Imperial Observatory. During the trial of Schall and the other Christian members of the Imperial Observatory, he was placed under house arrest and, because of Schall's ailing health, he represented his superior at court. He was released from house arrest in 1669, when the tide had turned on the Jesuits' opponents. Thereafter, he successfully sought to restore Schall's reputation, and was himself appointed to a position in the Imperial Observatory (1670) to amend the calendar, becoming in the process a close advisor to the imperial family. Having first been a missionary who had assisted Schall, he later became the head Jesuit astronomer in China. In 1677, he was appointed to the position of vice-provincial.

A number of texts deserve mention for their relevance to the astronomical controversy and, therefore, to their indirect bearing on Christian-Muslim relations but, being scientific works, these are not given extensive treatment here. In 1668, or shortly afterwards, Verbiest published *Qin ding xin li ce yan ji lue* (or simply *Ce yan ji lue*), which records the investigation by the emperor into the Yang-Wu calendrical calculations. The majority of the text explores Wu's calendrical errors, but it also records conversations between Verbiest and the emperor, as well as edicts promulgated by the emperor punishing Wu for his errors. Attacks on the Muslim calendar, and on Wu and Yang directly, appear to be divorced from concerns of religious identities, and are instead grounded in contemporaneous science, the personalities of the Jesuits' opponents (real or imagined), and the state of opposition itself.

Verbiest's 1669 *Bu de yi bian* (not to be confused with Lodovico Buglio's work of the same title) sought to refute Yang's calendrical errors rather than his anti-Christian treatises. Like Verbiest's *Qin ding xin li ce yan ji lue*, the text therefore lacks direct references to Islam and Muslims, although Christian-Muslim conflict is at its heart. Verbiest regards Yang's veneration of old calendrical methods as resulting directly in the execution of the five Chinese Christian members of the Imperial Observatory.

Similarly, others of Verbiest's texts – especially *Wang zhan bian* (1669), *Wang ze bian* (1669), *Wang tui ji xiong bian* (1669) and *Xi chao ding an* (early 1670s) – that sought to address Yang and his followers' arguments, do not address Islam directly. This may indicate either an assumption that the religious identity of Jesuit opponents is common knowledge, or that the defining of these people as opponents was of greater importance than defining them in terms of their religious identity. Like *Qin ding xin li ce yan ji lue*, these texts are descriptive, apologetic and propagandistic in nature. They deal with scientific concerns and criticism in the areas of divination, geomancy and the calendar, whilst *Xi chao ding an* provides a description of the rebuilding of European astronomy in China after the controversy. These texts are polemical in their opposition to the Jesuits' opponents, but not with regard to a particular religion.

The rare, and technically anonymous – although probably written by Verbiest – *Ci xian wen da* (1678) focuses on a conversation between Verbiest and two of his students about whether or not he should accept promotion in the Imperial Observatory. Verbiest argued that an official position would reduce the time he could spend on spiritual matters, a concern which perhaps has its origins in Jesuit, Chinese and Muslim criticisms of Schall's acceptance of an official position. The students, on the other hand, argued that involvement in material affairs did not compromise involvement in the spiritual and moreover that, because the fallout of the astronomical controversy spearheaded by Yang had not yet fully abated, promotion was a means to further defend and restore the position of Christianity and Western astronomy. Yang is described in negative terms as an enemy of Western sciences. Given Verbiest's style in his other compositions, it is unlikely that Muslims are explicitly referred to as such; rather, as in his other work, it is Muslim officials (in this case Yang) who are attacked. From available commentaries, it appears that the text is apologetic and descriptive in nature.

Together with Lodovico Buglio (Li Leisi) and Gabriel de Magalhães (An Wensi), Verbiest produced *Yu lan xi fang yao ji* (or *Xi fang yao ji*) in

1669. The first pages give a geographical description of Asia, noting the existence of Hui hui (Muslim or Uyghur) lands. The authors also note various Muslim lands further afield, which are described as consisting largely of wilderness. The text is descriptive and lacks overt value judgement.

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#### WORKS ON CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS

*Astronomia Europaea sub Imperatore Tartaro Sinico  
Cam Hy ex umbra appellato in lucem revocata,*  
'European astronomy under the rule of the  
Tartar-Chinese Kangxi emperor. From darkness  
into light, an appeal revoked'  
'The *Astronomia Europaea* of Ferdinand Verbiest'

DATE 1687

ORIGINAL LANGUAGE Latin

#### DESCRIPTION

In *Astronomia Europaea*, Verbiest gives an account of Yang and Wu's trial and persecution, and the restoration of the Western calendar and astronomy. The text was edited by Philippe Couplet (Chinese: Bo Yingli, 1623-93), and is 136 pages in length. Written and compiled between 1679 and 1680, the work was transported by Couplet to Europe between 1681 and 1683, but was not published until 1687. Some of its sections were reworked from Verbiest's 1674 *Xin zhi yi xiang tu*. Yang's (here rendered Yangquangsenius) religion is not mentioned, but he is described as the most wicked adversary of the Jesuits and, elsewhere, as an imposter (ed. and trans. Golvers, p. 18). Wu (rendered Uming-huén) is positively described as a bold man, and a member of the *Mahumetana secta*. Here it is noted that Wu had previously falsely accused Schall (p. 3). In his account of the gnomon shadow test, used by the Kangxi emperor to determine the accuracy of European and Muslim astronomy, Verbiest refers to his opponents and their (Muslim) methods, and specifically to Wu's (referred to here only by the term *Mahumetanus*) methodology (pp. 5-6). Verbiest writes that Wu was rash in speech, ignorant and inexperienced in astronomy,

and the creator of an inconsistent and contrary Sino-Arabic calendar (p. 12). Later he makes a fleeting reference to Muslim impositions on the emperor (p. 15). The majority of direct references are descriptive, noting, for instance, that a Muslim mathematical 'social' class existed (p. 22) or that the Sino-Arabic calendar was erroneous (p. 15). The majority of the text is scientific, providing records of observations and explanations of tools; in this sense, it is primarily a scientific work. Nevertheless, the sections that deal with Muslims and the astronomical controversy are historical, apologetic and propagandistic in genre, descriptions of a Jesuit victory for a European audience.

#### SIGNIFICANCE

Whilst anti-Muslim in judgement, the text is not a polemic against Islam. It is only polemical in so far as it attacks the Jesuits' opponents, but for the most part the religious identity of these adversaries is either assumed or not mentioned. As noted, terminologically *Mahumetanus* and its derivatives are used. Here a change in spelling is registered, with earlier texts using *Mahometanus*. Another set of key terms generally used in reference to the calendar is derived from the word *Arabicus*. It is therefore interesting to note the use here of both ethnic and religious terminological categories to refer to things Islamic or Muslim in origin or nature. This is also a feature of other texts from the period.

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