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# BERNARDINO DE SAHAGÚN AND MATTEO RICCI

## CATHOLIC MISSIONARIES AS FORERUNNERS OF A CULTURE SENSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY\*

*Pradeep Chakkarath*

### 1. Introduction

Though historians of science frequently portrait the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries' Age of Enlightenment as the intellectual and socio-cultural movement that sparked modern Western science, it is worth noticing that some of the most frequently discussed and in some cases even idealized thinkers of that era were ancient, especially Greek thinkers and scientists: Eminent scholars like Herodotus, Thucydides, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Hippocrates, Galen, Euclid, Archimedes, Ptolemy and many others' did not only survive the centuries and millennia until the Western world declared the "modern era", but were even canonized within the archives of modern science. The same cannot be said for Europe's medieval thinkers and researchers. Ever since Francesco Petrarca (for his very own specific reasons) called the centuries reaching from the collapse of the Roman Empire to his own times the "Dark Age", for the most time Western historiography fostered the idea that the millennium between Rome's decline and the Renaissance constituted nothing but the so-called "Middle Ages", i.e., a long but merely transitory and dark period that fell like a shadow on the light once spread by antiquity and that needed to be overcome in order to make way for the new Age of Enlightenment and modernity. Although the various protagonists of the Age of Enlightenment were quite diverse with regard to their

\* Some of the considerations in this chapter draw upon thoughts put forward in P. CHAKKARATH, *Kultur und Psychologie: Zur wissenschaftlichen Entstehung und zur Ortsbestimmung der Kulturpsychologie*, Kovac, Hamburg 2003; Id., *The Role of Indigenous Psychologies in the Building of Basic Cultural Psychology*, in J. Valsiner (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Culture and Psychology*, Oxford University Press, New York 2012, pp. 71-95; J. STRAUB-P. CHAKKARATH, *Kulturpsychologie*, in G. Mey-K. Mruck (eds.), *Handbuch Qualitative Forschung in der Psychologie*, VS Verlag, Wiesbaden 2010, pp. 195-209

intellectual positions and goals and though some of them were still trying to reconcile new and conservative modes of thought, most of them were quite united in identifying the main source of the darkness they wanted to overcome: it was the role of the catholic church and its influence on nearly all domains of political, economic, intellectual, and social life. This becomes clear in their demand for a process of secularization which they considered a *conditio sine qua non* for the essential process of rationalization and modernization.

In some regards, the historiography of the modern sciences until recently has been repeating many aspects of this general portrayal of medieval times. Within the general perception it is mainly the scientific and institutional developments in the 18<sup>th</sup> and especially the 19<sup>th</sup> century that are seen as decisive for what is known as the “scientific revolution”<sup>1</sup>. Of course, it is hard to deny that the diminishing power of clerical and dogmatic thinking was closely related to the scientific progress in Europe and that the thinking of scholars like Galilei, Kepler, Newton, Kant, and Darwin was more influential on modernity than the volumes written by Augustine, Albertus, Aquinas, and Bonaventura. It is also true that the gradual replacement of church run schools by state run universities, laboratories and similar academic institutions was a necessary step to provide the institutional change that accelerated the accumulation of scientific knowledge. However, the general notion that representatives of the church in general were mainly obstacles to scientific development is wrong and needs some correction.

In this chapter I will use the examples of two quite different scholars to illustrate this point. Both lived in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, both were catholic friars, and both served as missionaries of their church far away from Europe. Nonetheless, both contributed largely to the progress of the social sciences, though – due to the reasons mentioned above – their substantial methodological and methodical contributions to empirical field work are rarely adequately recognized in the historiography of the social sciences. Since the portrayal of these two scholars’ work stems from a cultural psychologist’s point of view, I will focus the following sketch on showing to what extent both, Bernardino de Sahagún and Matteo Ricci, took up questions and perspectives that are still of key interest for any researcher who is interested in the relationship between culture, individual, and the human psyche. Therefore, I will first give a

<sup>1</sup> P. CHAKKARATH, *Kultur und Psychologie*, cit.

sketch of the field of cultural psychology – a discipline which usually is seen as a critical offspring of 19th century’s laboratory based psychology – and then present some key features of Bernardino’s and Matteo’s scientific approaches. Thus, I hope to show how close many of their considerations were to our so-called “modern” thinking and how valuable their work is until today.

## 2. Cultural Psychology

“Cultural psychology” is a comparatively new, but internationally well-established term used to refer to a diverse array of theoretical, empirical, and methodological approaches within the field of psychological research. In order to understand the specific scientific aims and interests of cultural psychology, it is useful to consider it in the context of other approaches to the investigation of the psychological role of culture. A few of the most influential are outlined in the following<sup>2</sup>.

The German *Völkerpsychologie*, founded by Moritz Lazarus and Heymann Steinthal in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> and redefined by Wilhelm Wundt in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, was the first modern attempt to integrate culture-related topics into the newly emerging field of psychology. Due to its interdisciplinary character, conceptual ambiguities, and methodological openness in times when most social scientists favored the more precise, rigorous research methods adopted by natural scientists, *Völkerpsychologie* was soon considered a somewhat exotic discipline. Nonetheless, most culture-sensitive psychological approaches, including cultural psychology, maintain that their perspectives are rooted in the ideas put forth by *Völkerpsychologie*. This is also true for *psychological anthropology*, which borrowed from psychological and psychoanalytical theories and methods for cross-cultural field work, for example, within the “culture and personality” school, and had a considerable influence on psychology’s cultural turn in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Currently, the most influential culture-inclusive psychological approach is that of *cross-cultural psychology*, which emerged from psychological anthropology but has generally favored mainstream psychology’s nomothetic/quantitative approach and

<sup>2</sup> P. CHAKKARATH, *Kulturpsychologie und indigene Psychologie*, in J. Straub-A. Weidemann-D. Weidemann (eds.), *Handbuch Interkulturelle Kommunikation und Kompetenz*, Metzler, Stuttgart 2007, pp. 237-249; J. STRAUB-P. CHAKKARATH, *Kulturpsychologie*, cit.

an experimental paradigm in which culture is treated like just another quasi-independent variable. In contrast, the Russian *cultural-historical psychology*, founded by Lev Vygotsky in the 1920s, emphasized the role of the contextual dependence of human psychological functioning and the complex process of the cultural mediation of meaning through social interaction.

Thus, *cultural psychology* owes much of its interdisciplinary character to the ideas of German *Völkerpsychologie*, while its focus on the “meaning-making process” in human action and experience stems from the Soviet school. Moreover, although cultural psychologists do not refrain entirely from including experiments and quantitative methods in their chiefly multi-method research designs, they do share a preference for qualitative and interpretative methods with representatives of these earlier two approaches. In addition, since cultural psychology from its beginning has critically assessed how “Western” (i.e., ethnocentric) psychological assumptions and methods are applied to non-Western societies and individuals, many cultural psychologists sympathize with ideas brought forward by *indigenous psychology*, the latest of the culture-sensitive psychological approaches.

Since the roots of qualitative and interpretative scientific research are much older than the quantitative procedures that lay the foundation for 20<sup>th</sup> century mainstream psychology, some researchers trace cultural psychology’s earliest beginnings back to ancient ethnographers’ studies of cross-cultural differences (e.g., Herodotus) and Greek philosophers’ thoughts about the psychological role of culture and society (e.g., Plato and Aristotle). With a few exceptions that we are going to deal with in the following part of this chapter, medieval scholars are rarely mentioned, probably in part because their Christian version of scientific universalism and their neglect of empirical social research did not prove useful for a culture sensitive approach to understanding and analyzing different cultures, ethnicities, and belief systems. So it was up to Giambattista Vico’s work in the 18<sup>th</sup> century to gain much more recognition. Vico questioned the adequacy of Newtonian methodology for the study of human nature and drew attention to the relevance of history, linguistics, hermeneutics, and semiotics for a comprehensive investigation of human affairs that included the psychological functioning of individuals and societies.

Traces of these forerunners within the development of cultural psychology can be seen in the work of Jerome Bruner, one of the founders and most prominent representatives of contemporary cultural

psychology. His scientific journey from the “New Look” in the psychology of perception and the cognitive revolution of the 1950s and early 1960s led him to the following conception of cultural psychology, which is endorsed by cultural psychologists all over the world:

A cultural psychology is an interpretive psychology, in much the same sense that history and anthropology and linguistics are interpretive disciplines. But that does not mean that it need be unprincipled or without methods, even hard-nosed ones. It seeks out the rules that human beings bring to bear in creating meanings in cultural contexts. These contexts are always contexts of practice. It is always necessary to ask what people are doing or trying to do in that context<sup>3</sup>.

He concluded that cultural psychology needs to be based on action theory and employ the manifold methods of interpretation that have always served the social and cultural sciences in general:

There is no one “explanation” of man, biological or otherwise. In the end, even the strongest causal explanations of the human condition cannot make plausible sense without being interpreted in the light of the symbolic world that constitutes human culture<sup>4</sup>.

The necessity of employing diverse social scientific methods, including those usually neglected by mainstream psychological – including cross-cultural psychological – approaches, also became clear in the work of Ernst E. Boesch, another pioneer of modern cultural psychology. He suggested that we construe culture as a field of action that «not only induces and controls action, but is also continuously transformed by it» and is thus «as much a process as a structure»<sup>5</sup>. This understanding of culture forbids us to reduce humans and the complexity of their life worlds to mere elements of nature and to ignore the role of culture, in other words, to ignore the question about how the human mind and human agency shape culture while being shaped by culture themselves.

Against the background of the historical sketch and key theoretical positions given above – and although there are certainly fine, even intercultural, differences between different cultural psychologists’

<sup>3</sup> J.S. BRUNER, *Acts of Meaning*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Mass.) 1990, p. 118.

<sup>4</sup> *Ivi*, p. 138.

<sup>5</sup> E.E. BOESCH, *Symbolic Action Theory and Cultural Psychology*, Springer, New York 1991, p. 29.

theories – three closely connected assumptions can be identified that serve as a fundamental theoretical and methodological framework and common ground for cultural psychologists:

- Cultural psychology is a discipline that focuses on the inherent dependence of all psychological phenomena (structures, processes, functions) on cultural ways of life, language games, practices, and discourses, and vice versa, and thus on the presumed mutual relationship between culture and psyche.
- Cultural psychology conceives of cultures as practical knowledge, symbols, and orientation systems that are inherent to human action and enable us to give meaning and sense to our lives and worlds.
- Under the assumption that the first two premises are true, cultural psychology holds that psychology is necessarily an interpretive science. As such, cultural psychologists focus their methodological approaches on the hermeneutic problem of understanding the phenomenon of meaning. This includes a thorough reflection of the cultural conditions and aspects of science, its concepts, and its endeavors.

Let us now see how many of these essential characteristics of nowadays cultural psychology can be found in the contributions of Bernardino de Sahagún and Matteo Ricci, two figures who lived and worked in the shady time period between the so-called “Dark Age” and the “Age of Enlightenment”.

### 3. *Missionaries as Culture-Sensitive Scientists*

#### 3.1. Bernardino de Sahagún: Interviews, questionnaires and problems of translation

It is often said that the interest in the topic of “culture” increased considerably with the Age of Discovery that began in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century and the accumulation of knowledge about non-European cultures expedited by the introduction of Gutenberg’s printing press. Interestingly enough, in those times when European expansion and imperialism were closely linked to Christian mission, important contributions to the advanced investigation of foreign people and their cultures was achieved by 16<sup>th</sup>-century missionaries. Looking back from our presentist perspective

to these achievements, we can assess Bernardino de Sahagún's field work in Mexiko one of the most impressive contributions in this regard<sup>6</sup>.

Sahagún (1499-1590), a Franciscan friar, arrived in Mexiko ("New Spain") in 1529, just eight years after Cortés had achieved the downfall of Tenochtitlan and the Aztec civilization. He had studied at the University of Salamanca, a center of Renaissance humanist ideas and a birthplace of modern Western linguistics and philology. Soon upon his arrival, Sahagún recognized that old traditions, convictions and respective behaviors were still alive among the indigenous people of New Spain and had not been erased with the destruction of their former societal frameworks. He was therefore very recipient for the complex problems involved in spreading the undistorted word of the Gospel among the natives who only spoke Nahuatl and were unable to understand Spanish, Latin, or any other European language so far. Being an alumnus of Salamanca he perfectly understood that the meaning of words and other symbols depends on (interculturally varying) fields of actions with their very specific language games, practices, and discourses. With other words, solving the problem of translating the word of the gospel into the language of the Mexican natives, demanded cautious ethno-linguistic and methodological reflections. Based on year-long observations and communication, Sahagún had no doubt that the cognitive skills, emotions, and motivations of the natives were not decisively different from those of Europeans – an insight that was not shared by all members of his church. The problems and questions that Sahagún had to deal with were many, like for example: Since Europeans often use their intellectual skills in order to cheat, how can one be sure that the Nahua people not also merely *pretend* to believe in the gospel. Even if they do not merely pretend to believe, how can one be sure that the word of the gospel was translated in a way that ensures that they believe in the same things true Christians were believing in? How can we achieve at gaining *their perspectives* (*emic* approach) in order to answer these questions adequately?

So Sahagún, who was to stay the last 61 years of his long life in Mexico, trained some of the younger natives in Spanish and field observation, before he had them interview selected elders who were considered indigenous experts by members of their communities. He then took the data collected as well as data from his own observations as a starting

<sup>6</sup> For details on Sahagún's life and works see M. LEON-PORTILLA, *Bernardino de Sahagún: First anthropologist*, transl. by M.J. Mixco, University of Oklahoma Press, Norman (OK) 2002.



point for the construction of semi-structured questionnaires written in Nahuatl. He selected three groups of Nahua experts from three different regions, who studied the data collected, and confirmed that the testimonies Sahagún and his co-workers had gathered were authentic and not biased by ethnocentric assessments stemming from Christian or Spanish points of view. While interpreting the data, he sorted the information into three categories:

- information related to supra-natural powers, religious beliefs, and religious practice;
- information related to the “human sphere”;
- information related to “facts of nature”.

It took Sahagún decades to complete his project of documenting the indigenous perspectives on religion, history, aspects of social life, and information about the geophysical environment, including flora and fauna. The product was his *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España*, in the latest version known as *Florentine Codex*<sup>7</sup>, a bilingual opus written in Nahuatl and Spanish, supplemented by hundreds of ethnographic illustrations and various comments by Sahagún himself. Although it might be true that Sahagún manipulated some of the original information given by his native informants, e.g., in order to give a more favorable image of the *conquista* and to justify measures taken by the church, we should acknowledge that his systematic field-work approach was astonishingly modern and foreshadowed qualitative and interpretative research in the current social sciences<sup>8</sup>. For a fair assessment of Sahagún’s efforts, we should also keep in mind that his Church was dismissive of many aspects of his work. He was heavily criticized for his attempt to reconcile Christian tenets with elements of the indigenous belief systems. Moreover, the Spanish inquisition disliked the fact that the descriptions provided by Sahagún attested to a remarkably high level of civilization of the Nahua culture, even before the natives’ conversion to Christianity. This added to depictions and perceptions of the Europeans that were not altogether favorable. As a result of the interventions by the Spanish inquisition, Sahagún’s volumes were not published until the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. After

<sup>7</sup> B. DE SAHAGÚN, *Florentine Codex: General History of the Things of New Spain*, from the Sequera manuscript of 1578-1579, rev. ed., Vols. 1-13, School of American Research and The University of Utah, Santa Fé (NM) 1970-1982.

<sup>8</sup> M. LEON-PORTILLA, *Bernardino de Sahagún*, cit.

publication, they could have contributed to that century's culturalist perspectives in the social sciences, but it was mainly ignored by the historiographers of the social sciences – including the historiography of psychology and cultural psychology – and by social scientists as well.

### 3.2. Matteo Ricci: The Method of Accommodation

In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Alessandro Valignano, the powerful “Visitor of Missions” of the Jesuit Order in China, Japan, and India, had stated that the cunning character of Indians and their confused attitudes towards the human soul and human responsibility hinders successful Christian missionary work in India. According to Valignano, the Chinese and the Japanese personality on the other hand, was much more similar to “Western” personality and therefore missionary work in China and Japan promised much more success. As a footnote it may be added that Valignano’s assessment of the Indian and the Chinese personality was echoed in European analyses of the Asians even later on, for example in the comparisons of Indian and Chinese society in Hegel’s works<sup>9</sup>.

Although, from today’s point of view, Valignano’s statement about the Indians seems to be insensitive and politically incorrect, it is important to note that he was a humanist mind and had great influence on the change of perspectives taken by the Jesuits within their missionary work. Criticizing some leading Jesuit missionaries for their disrespectful treatment of Asian converts and their conviction that the Easterners had to adapt to Western ideas and conduct, Valignano insisted that it is the Europeans who must first learn the Asian languages, adapt to Asian customs and treat any new convert as equal if they want to overcome the difficulties in proselytizing members of non-Western societies with lasting success<sup>10</sup>. Of course, mastering these tasks was much easier in societies that were in many regards similar to European societies. Since Valignano saw much more resemblances between Confucian and Christian humanist modes of thinking while at the same time seeing less similarities between the Hindu and Christian thought systems, it was clear to him that the Jesuit mission had to strengthen its efforts mainly in China and Japan. Valignano was also closely involved in sending Matteo Ricci

<sup>9</sup> Cf. P. CHAKKARATH, *Stereotypes in Social Psychology: The “West-East” Differentiation as a Reflection of Western Traditions of Thought*, in «Psychological Studies», 55 (2010), pp. 18-25.

<sup>10</sup> J.F. SCHUTTE, *Valignano’s Mission Principles for Japan*, Institute of Jesuit Sources, St. Louis 1980.

from Goa to Macau in 1582. Ricci was to become the central figure and role model in putting Valignano's idea of accommodation into practice.

Before Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) was dispatched to China he had spent about four years in Goa, the Portuguese colony in India. While during his years in India he did not put much effort in learning an Indian language or adopting Hindu customs (which was quite difficult to do for a Christian believer), soon after his arrival in Macau and following the directions given by Valignano, Ricci began learning the Chinese language (including Classical Chinese) and script. He also studied the canonical books of Confucianism and became the first European scholar to translate the Confucian classics into a Western language, i.e., Latin. In the process of these endeavors, he realized the strong influence that Confucian thinking had on the Chinese state and mind and that the scholarly terminology used in Confucian texts opened the possibility to translate key concepts of the Christian belief system into Chinese. A telling document of this philological accommodation strategy is «The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven»<sup>11</sup>, a treatise in which Ricci argues that the Chinese concept "Lord of Heaven" can be considered a synonym for the Christian concept of "God" and that in general Confucianism and Christianity do not oppose each other but are strikingly similar in many regards. Therefore, it did not seem necessary to him to eradicate the natives' understandings of the world and to impose foreign concepts on the Chinese. Rather, he wanted to shed light on the deeper meaning of key concepts by analyzing them against the background of Chinese *and* Christian intellectuality.

What can be seen here is the attention that Ricci gave to the concept of *similarity*. For him, overcoming differences and finding similarities was the starting point for the Jesuits' approach to intercultural perspective taking which provided the grounds for intercultural understanding. Ricci and other Jesuits who also took up Valignano's ideas, acquired profound general and academic knowledge of their host society, dressed, behaved, and talked like the members of various Chinese societal groups. Ricci was especially interested in making friendships with the literate elite because they were the ones most interested in the kinds of Western scientific knowledge that he and other Jesuits were able to offer and that served as a common ground of understanding on which their missionary work could be built. This shows that their approach

<sup>11</sup> M. RICCI, *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven = T'ien-chu shih-I*, ed. by D. Lancashire, Institute of Jesuit Sources, St. Louis 1985.

was more refined than it seems at first sight: They did not simply try to convey Christian concepts and beliefs to the Chinese; rather they tried to identify what field of knowledge their Chinese partners were interested in, what they had already contributed to that field themselves, and to what extent Western knowledge could contribute to the already existing Chinese body of knowledge. With other words, they first tried to discover culture-specific intellectual interests that promised a successful intercultural exchange and then took that exchange as a starting point for further exchange on further topics, including religion, philosophy, politics, and technology. It does not surprise that with this goal in mind Ricci soon excelled many of his contemporaries with regard to his knowledge and skills. As a true renaissance man he was a cartographer who drew maps of China and the world, he construed sundials, modified technical and musical instruments, translated many works from Latin into Chinese and vice versa and at the same time worked as a missionary. Ricci's *Treatise on Mnemonic Arts*, which he wrote in order to teach Western memorization techniques to the Chinese, shows him as a mathematician and psychologist and is perhaps the most famous example of his accommodation method<sup>12</sup>. Ricci chose this topic being aware of the importance of memorizing vast amounts of text from the Confucian classics when preparing to apply for a position in Chinese civil service administration. As he had expected, the Chinese nobility and literati welcomed his efforts as well as his skills and became interested in learning more about additional domains of knowledge and Western and Christian thinking in general. Another example of Ricci's method can be seen in his endeavor to blend two complete different systems of music: the western system based on harmony and the Chinese system, based on melody. Again, this was an effort to demonstrate that something new and positive can arise from intercultural encounters and interactions. When Ricci conceived of the Chinese language as of music to which the foreign singer must adapt, he metaphorically characterized the Jesuits' understanding of accommodation as a process of gradual and reciprocal acculturation – an understanding that was met with skepticism by other figures of the church. At the instigation of some Dominican and Franciscan missionaries who complained that Ricci had taken the accommodation method too far, the Vatican finally outlawed his approach<sup>13</sup>.

<sup>12</sup> J.D. SPENCE, *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci*, Viking, New York 1985.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. A.C. ROSS, *A Vision Betrayed: The Jesuits in Japan and China, 1542-1742*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 1994.

#### 4. *Conclusions*

Without any doubt, Bernardino de Sahagún and Matteo Ricci developed far-reaching approaches to the empirical investigation of foreign cultures. Although one should not forget that their main goal was always to promote their faith and to persuade the natives to convert to Christianity, the methods they used to achieve this goal were culture-informed, culture-sensitive, and proof of their intercultural competencies. Their approaches were quite different but complementary. Both approaches rooted in the methodological and cultural psychological question about how beliefs, world views, and concepts can be translated into the meaning systems of foreign cultures without any loss and without naively tapping into the pitfalls of ethnocentrically biased assessments. They asked themselves what is necessary to understand how people from a foreign culture view and understand the world and both understood that it is not possible to understand others without taking their perspective. Therefore they learned the languages of the cultures they were staying in fluently, became familiar with the natives' oral and written traditions, studied their history and customs, and employed the method of long-term interactive and non-interactive observation in manifold ways that foreshadow modern mixed method research strategies. Bernardino de Sahagún and Matteo Ricci became forerunners of cultural and social anthropology, ethno linguistics, and cultural psychology. In so far as they were interested in the mindsets and thinking styles of indigenous cultures and of their members, they were also applying a perspective which is central to indigenous psychology: Against the background of modern philosophy of science as put forward by eminent thinkers like Karl Popper, Ludwig Fleck, Thomas Kuhn, and Paul Feyerabend we should come to acknowledge that scientific theories have a certain cultural and historical range. Therefore, they may frequently not provide the concepts, the methodological equipment, or the intercultural competence to adequately deal with the foreign and the others. Then we have no other choice but to refrain from imposing our point of view on the other and to start with understanding how he or she understands the world. Then and only then should we start discussing scientific hypotheses – not just among ourselves but with the rest of the world. To this end we need to take off our thinking caps, i.e., try to refine our mindset – a mindset that might prevents us, for example, from expecting contributions to culture-sensitive science from missionaries and within the early times of Western

colonialism. In a modern scientific culture, where spending years of one's life in foreign cultures before reaching at scientific conclusions, the examples of Bernardino de Sahagún and Matteo Ricci also remind us that this effort can be (and probably must be) a life-long endeavor.