

# An Ancient Message for a Post-modernist Future

Martin Palmer

T  
H  
E

J  
E  
S

S  
U  
S

S  
U  
T  
R  
A  
S

For over thirty years I have had a deep fascination not just with the faiths, cultures, history and philosophies of ancient China, but most especially with that strangest of phenomena, ancient Christianity in China. When I mention this to most people, they say “What ancient Christianity?” for the story of the coming of Christianity to China in the early 7th century is one of the best kept secrets of both China and Christianity. As the faith developed, it drew upon Daoist, Buddhist, Confucian and Christian imagery. In recent years, a team of colleagues and I, through the few but fascinating texts that have survived, entered into the conceptual world of these early Christians and then deep in the heart of China made the somewhat astonishing discovery of the earliest surviving Christian monastery and artwork.

As a religions specialist and translator of ancient Chinese texts, over the years I have worked closely with Daoism and Buddhism in China. I have had the joy of translating some of the great classical texts, such as the *Dao De Jing*, *I Ching*, the myths and legends of Guan Yin, the Eight Immortals, and perhaps the greatest delight of all, Chuang Tzu. I have also been very fortunate to have worked professionally with Daoists on the Sacred Mountains and with Chinese Buddhists on various ecological projects. It thus was that on many occasions, I was able to visit the so-called ‘Nestorian Stone’ held in the Forest of Stele Museum at Xian in Shaanxi Province. This stone, carved in 781 AD, graphically recounts the story of the coming of Christianity to China in 635 AD and of the teachings of the Church.

Let me pause here a moment to comment on some terms. The Early Church in China is usually described as being part of the “Nestorian Church,” thereby linking this ancient Church to Nestorius, a Greek bishop of the Western Church who was declared a heretic in 431. This association is a slur. It was a term used by Nestorius’s Christian opponents to describe what was in fact the “Church of the East” — a Church that stretched from Babylon to China and from Southern India to the Central Steppes. The Church never called itself “Nestorian”; and as virtually no one today has a clue as to what the term means, that label has become a stumbling block. It has, in fact, been used by those who have written about the Early Church in China to indicate that this was not a ‘proper’ Church, but a flawed heresy. I, however, have always felt that the actual story was much more interesting.

