

Christ in Late Ming China (2)

Giulio Aleni (1582-1649)

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I believe that Giulio Aleni is one of the most distinguished foreign missionary of his time. He belonged to the second generation of Jesuit missionaries to China, a period that followed Matteo Ricci, (1582-1610) the pioneer, and preceded the celebrated epoch of Adam Schall (1591-1666) and Ferdinand Verbiest (1623-1688). Aleni succeeded in entering China in the year 1613, after an attempt two years earlier had failed. In a short time he became most fluent in both spoken and written Chinese. He worked in several places: Shaanxi, Shanxi, Jiangsu, Henan and especially in Hangzhou (Zhejiang). During the years he spent in Hangzhou (1621-1624), he published four scientific books on geography and philosophy. Later, in the 1630s he published two more scientific books on geometry and Western culture.



1. Aleni makes a pastoral choice

In 1625 Aleni made what I would call a *pastoral choice*. After writing the scientific treatises and traveling from one province to another, Aleni moved to Fujian and worked there for 25 years, until his death in 1649. He rarely wrote about science again, but published about fifteen books or booklets of a catechetical, doctrinal and pastoral nature. It appears that he felt that the mission's basis was solid enough to allow him to dedicate his energies outward, to the task of direct evangelization. This decision brought him into close personal contact with the common folk who were less educated in Neo-Confucianism and more inclined towards popular religiosity than the literati among whom his fellow Jesuits worked. Facing this new environment and having at his disposal

the successful advances and accumulated experience of his fellow missionaries, Aleni decided to make the mystery of Christ the focus of his teaching. This choice reflected Aleni's personal inclination towards a Christocentric spirituality, which he had acquired during the years of his formation in the seminary. Veneration of the cross and adoration before the Blessed Sacrament were a central part of Jesuit spirituality and it was not by chance that the young Giulio, imbued with this kind of spirituality during his formative years, felt the first stirring of a missionary vocation while meditating on the Passion of Jesus.

In his discussion with the Chinese literati, Aleni adhered to Ricci's apologetic method, using natural revelation as a starting point. In this way Aleni continued Ricci's strategy. Aleni's *The True Origin of All Things* (*Wanwu Zhenyuan* 萬物真原)¹ was published in 1628, and received widest acceptance. In it he carefully avoids the pitfall of reducing the Christian God to the philosophical concept of the Supreme Being, identifiable with the simple human search of the Origin of all things. In fact, in chapter 9, entitled "It is not possible to have a complete idea about the Lord of Heaven," Aleni states that, "the Lord of Heaven is in no way merely a tentative explanation of human research."² Along with Von Collani³ I think that we are in the presence of interesting elements of *negative theology*.

If Aleni had desired to extend the *negative theology* approach to an investigation of the problem of God, he would certainly have found much inspiration in Taoist philosophy. But the *negative theology* was not a part of the theological mainstream of Counter-Reformation Catholicism, nor was it familiar to Aleni, trained in Neo-Scholasticism.

¹ *Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana* (from now on BAV), *Borgia Cinese*, 349 (4), of which I have a microfilm; published and translated by H. OTTO, *Premier Traité du 'Tao Yuan Tsing Ts'oei': Wan Ou Tchenn Yuan: Véritable Origine des Créatures*, in: *Dossier de la Commission Synodale*, 6/7, 1933, pp. 813-817, 953-961, 1031-1048.

² *Wanwu Zhenyuan*, p. 18.

³ C. VON COLLANI, *Fr. Francisco Luján O.P.'s Annotationes to Giulio Aleni's Wanwu Zhenyuan*, in (edited by LAPIELLO, T., and MALEK, R.) "Scholar from the West" *Giulio Aleni S.J. (1582-1649) and the Dialogue between Christianity and China*, Brescia-Sankt Augustin, 1997, pp. 291-322.

Besides, the Jesuits did not yet appreciate philosophical Taoism, perhaps because they could not distinguish it from the Taoist religion. As a consequence Christian *negative theology* and the original Taoism of Laozi and Chuangzi never met until much later.⁴

2. On the Confucian and Christian morality

There was little in the Christian morality proposed by Aleni to his communities that could be said to be based on Confucian ethics. It had much more of a biblical orientation. One of the most striking examples of this is his explanation of the meaning of life found in *Fifty Additional Sentences* (*Wushi Yanyu* 五十言餘), 1645, Aleni's final work.⁵ While Confucianism in general represents a very positive approach to this life, it expresses little interest in what happens after death. Aleni, however, in accord with Counter-Reformation preaching, gives strong emphasis to the temporality of this life and eternity in the next.

At the end of his book, Aleni presents a story of the encounter of a scholar and a mendicant (*The Scholar and the Mendicant*) in which we find the description of a God who is gentle and kind, which is very much in accord with the sensibility of Renaissance Catholicism, and particularly with the style of the *devotio moderna*, that stresses the loving aspect of Christian life and the personal experience of Jesus Christ. The story, that has also a pronounced Buddhist and Taoist flavor, can well be associated, both in form and content, to the Chinese wisdom literature. It is also close to the philosophy of Wang Yang Ming. Since many Chinese would appreciate the idealistic climate of the tale, such a story serves as a good example of how these two worlds can be brought together in the sharing of their similar spiritual sensibility.

⁴ In the XX century, the Christian intellectual John Wu developed this aspect from a theological and mystical point of view, comparing the thought of St. Therese of Lisieux and Laozi: J. WU, *Chinese Humanism and Christian Spirituality*, New York, 1965, pp. 53-126.

⁵ WU XIANG XIANG, and FANG HAO, *Tianzhujiao Dongchuan Wenxian Sanpian*, 6 vols, Taipei, 1972, (from now on TZJDCWXSP), 1, pp. 363-409.

3. Aleni as a pastor: promoting an inculturated Christianity

Aleni wrote three highly laudatory biographies: *The Life of Michael Zhang* (Zhang Mige'er Yiji 張彌克兒遺蹟),⁶ on Michael Yang Tingyun: *The Achievements of the Surpassing Nature Yang Qiyuan* (Yang Qiyuan Xiansheng Chaoxing Shiji 楊淇園先生超性事蹟),⁷ and Matteo Ricci: *The Life of Dr. Ricci, from the Great West* (Daxi Li Xiansheng Xingji 大西利先生行蹟).⁸ The Chinese audience, familiar with moralistic tales (like the *Shanshu* 善書) and Buddhist literature (like the texts of monk Zhuhong 祿宏), was ready and eager to come into contact with the spiritual and moral exhortations of virtuous men. Aleni followed the pattern of presenting such models to encourage the spiritual growth of his Christians. In this, he is indebted to his Jesuit formation, where the lives of saints or of virtuous Christians played an important role. He is also indebted to the Chinese culture, which is centered on self-cultivation and the practice of virtue.

The novelty and originality of Aleni consisted in this: he was the first missionary to offer the biographies of Chinese Christians for emulation in place of the hagiographies of Western saints. This is certainly a step forward in making Christianity less foreign and in honouring and dignifying the achievements and the religious experiences of local Christians. In this way Chinese Christianity started its own 'history of the church', its own 'tradition'. Like the early Fathers of the Church Aleni wanted to write about people whose

⁶ Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, *Catalogue COURANAT Chinois* 1098, *Chinois* 7188. See also N. STANDAERT, *Chinese Christian Visits to the Underworld*, in (edited by) L. BLUSSE, H. T. ZURNDORFER *Conflict and Accommodation in Early Modern East Asia. Essays in Honour of Erik Zürcher*, Leiden, 1993, pp. 54-70.

⁷ N. STANDAERT, *Yang Tingyun, Confucian and Christian in Late Ming China. His Life and Thought*, Leiden, 1988, Chapter Three: *Chinese Religious Biography*, pp. 51-73;

⁸ BAV, *Borgia Cinese*, 350 (3), with two portraits of Ricci. On the three Biographies see also M. D. XU, *Aleni's Writings on Matteo Ricci and on the Chinese Converts Yang Tingyun and Michael Zhang*, in *Scholar from the West*, pp. 375-402.

examples his converts could really imitate.⁹ The memory of those who professed the faith and the narration of their experience in order to transmit the faith to future generations are important theological elements of an incultured Christianity.

The inculturation process would require much more than the accommodation that Aleni implemented, but still Aleni was on the right track. He was aware of the need and the problems to integrate Christianity with Chinese culture, but he had few theological tools with which to respond satisfactorily. In modern theological language we would call such a response *inculturation*.

Aleni and the other Jesuits could not start an inculturation process since they lacked the basic theological instruments. Yet, what they initiated was a process that, thanks to the original collaboration of the converts, could have led to a Chinese Christianity. Their converts had the intellectual and moral preparation to do that. The use of the term *Dafumu*, 'Great Father-Mother,' for God, is an example that the converts had started something close to the inculturation process. Inculturation was a goal that could only be reached generations after the arrival of the Gospel. The main authors of such a process could only be the local Christians. Only they could unite the 'genius' of their people, with the Good News of Salvation through Christ in harmonious synthesis.

4. Aleni as a pastor: preaching the *novissimi*

Reading his writings one notes that the Aleni of the *Catechisms* is very much the sophisticated and brilliant author who is able to move from science to philosophy, and from morality to religion. Following Ricci, he shows extensive knowledge of and admiration for Chinese culture; he also seems ready to accommodate the presentation of his message with sensibility and prudence.

On the other hand, the Aleni of the *doctrina Christiana* shows

⁹ Ricci's biography might also well belong to the same plan. Ricci, although foreign, was the father of the Chinese Church, he was the very beginning of the 'history of the Chinese Church.' Having lived in China for so many years and having adopted the Chinese way of life, he might well stand as an example for the converts.

quite a different image. He is the strict preacher who threatens eternal punishment. He is also the good shepherd of his Christian communities, always showing a fatherly concern for the material and spiritual well-being of his children.

A good example of Aleni's sterner side can be found in the *novissimi*, (books on the four last things: death, judgment, heaven, hell). His works are not only full of references and descriptions of the heavenly joys, but also, and especially, full of descriptions of the eternal and horrendous torments in hell. It is particularly interesting to observe this aspect in the *Song of a Holy Dream*, (*Shengmongge* 聖夢歌), published in 1637.¹⁰ While the Confucians would consider the description of the punishment of hell and the joys of paradise superstitious and fanciful, they would find an appreciative audience among adherents of Chinese folk religion and the more popular expressions of Taoism and Buddhism. There are striking similarities between Aleni's song and Buddhism. His portrayal of earthly reality as inconstant and ephemeral is certainly consistent with the Buddhist concept of the impermanence and vacuity of life. This could have served well as a constructive basis for a dialogue with Buddhists. However such similarities, instead of bringing the missionary into closer contact with these religions caused further separation. The missionaries preferred having nothing to do with Chinese religions in order to prevent people being confused about the radical difference between Christianity and other religions.

5. Aleni as a pastor: the sacrament of Penance and the examination of the conscience

Fearful tales play a large part in Aleni's *Sacrament of Penance* (*Dizui Zhengguilüe* 滌罪正規略, 1627,¹¹ the first book written for the Christian life of the converts. In the XIVth, XVth and XVIth century fear was widely used as motivating influence in pastoral work in Europe. The preachers often used the so-called *exempla*: these were

¹⁰ I worked on a microfilm reproduction of the copy in *BAV, Borgia Cinese*, 336/4, published in Zhoujing 州景 in 1639.

¹¹ I consulted the copy from *BAV, Borgia Cinese*, 381 (3), of which I have a microfilm. The text was also published in *TZJDCWXXB*, 3, pp. 1195-1272.

supposedly true tales that were more apt to increase the level of fear than the practice of virtue among the listeners. The people of Fujian reveled in similar strange stories in their popular religion. This and other similar books show that the missionaries did not shrink from presenting the more difficult and less appealing aspects of Christianity. In fact, the frightening reality of the *novissimi* constituted a large part of their preaching.

Penance was not an easy sacrament to introduce into China. Cultural resistance, such as the natural sense of shame in expressing one's own personal failures and emotions, also played an important role. In particular it was difficult to introduce a concept of sin, distinguishing it from the feeling of losing face, so deeply rooted in Chinese mentality. The acknowledgment of one's own situation of sin and of the need for the grace of the Lord was intended to be the first step on the journey of faith. Aleni offered doctrinal and practical elements to understand, appreciate and practice this sacrament. The material he provided was mostly traditional, with nearly all of it coming from the Jesuit's catechetical production in Europe.

A large space was devoted to the 'examination of conscience.' The Jesuits noted that the examination of conscience had similarities to certain Confucian practices, like the so called *self-examination*. This was a very fortuitous discovery for them since it was a practice particularly dear to the Jesuits' spirituality. The exaltation of the role of the conscience by the Jesuits is central in the European controversy on *probabilism* and *probabiliorism*. Its diffusion in the Christian communities could not but play an important role in developing a Christian life based upon strong personal convictions. It would also strengthen personal motivation for improving one's own moral life. The examination of conscience also emphasized the important role the conscience played in spiritual formation, thereby reducing the risk of creating a Christian community with a legalistic mentality. This would have been no small achievement.

In his writings, Aleni also suggested resorting to the priest when one is in need of counseling. This seems akin to the practice of 'spiritual direction.' The concept is the same: to help the Christians develop a responsible and committed Christian life. Aleni taught the Chinese not merely to adhere to their new religion, but also to seek solutions

themselves for the many problems arising from the impact of their new faith on the Chinese context. In fact the converts of Aleni's communities in Fujian were the most active in devising accommodations of Christian practices to the local customs.

10. Aleni as a pastor: a Eucharistic-centered spirituality

Shortly after publishing the booklet on Penance, Aleni wrote the *Litany of the Eucharist* (*Yesu Shenti Daowen* 耶穌聖體禱文) and the *Treatise on the Holy Mass* (*Misa Jiyilüe* 彌撒祭義略)¹² for his Christian communities. Years later, in 1641, Aleni published a *Treatise on the Doctrine of the Eucharist* (*Shengti Yaoli* 聖體要理).¹³ Among Aleni's instructions there is the suggestion of daily participation in Holy Mass.

The opportunity for daily Mass was certainly available only for a few Christians at the time. However, Aleni's invitation clearly shows his pastoral mindset. With daily participation in the Mass, the Christians could meet Jesus every day, see him present in the Eucharist, to receive him in their daily life. The practice of daily Mass and the exaltation of the sacrament of the Eucharist, including the practice of adoration, is certainly the fruit of the Catholic reform promoted by the Council of Trent in its polemics with the Protestants and their doctrine on the Eucharist. The Jesuits, who were the principal protagonists of the Counter-Reformation, had a Eucharistic spirituality as one of the central elements of their formation.

In his explanation of the doctrine of the Eucharist Aleni's focuses on the mystery of Redemption. He interprets the Eucharistic mystery Christologically. A Eucharistic spirituality as the actualization of the mystery of Christ's Redemption is the only form of spirituality ever developed by Aleni. He did not write about the Virgin Mary or on the lives of saints as other missionaries did. In other words, he did not develop a Marian spirituality, or a spirituality based on a particular saint's charisma. He was Christocentric: Aleni was diligent in founding

¹² The two texts were published together. I studied a microfilm of the copy from BAV, Barb. Or. 132 (2).

¹³ I consulted a microfilm of the copy in BAV, Borgia Cinese 345 (9). Also published in *TZJDCWXXB*, vol. 3, pp. 1181-1191.

the Christian community in no one but Jesus alone. He deserves special credit for that.

6. Aleni as a pastor: Meditation of the Life of Our Lord Jesus Christ:

Between 1635-1637 Aleni published what I consider his most important work: *The Life of Jesus in Words and Images*, (*Tianzhou Jiangsheng Chuxiang Jingjie*, 天主降生出像經解)¹⁴ The completion of this work represents the third stage in his itinerary toward the Christological formation and spiritual development of his community. As we have mentioned above, the purpose of the two books was to offer an instrument for reading about the wonderful works and words of Jesus, and with the help of images, to meditate on them. With such an instrument, the knowledge of Jesus would be comprehensive, deep and affective. The Christians would be moved by the poor and humble birth of Jesus, instructed by his teachings, surprised and amazed by his miracles, brought to tears by his bitter passion and terrible death, filled with joy by his resurrection, engaged in the work of evangelization after his Ascension into heaven and filled with apostolic courage after the descent of the Holy Spirit.

This advanced level of knowledge could not be reached except through the practice of personal meditation on the mystery of Christ. The practice of meditation already had a long tradition in China. It was practiced by Confucians (the quiet sitting meditation *jingzuo* 靜坐), by the Taoists and by the Buddhists (*Chan* 禪). Using the form proposed by Ignatius of Loyola, Aleni introduced Christian meditation into this

¹⁴ BAV possesses the most ancient editions of the book. The most ancient is in *Barb. Or.* III, 134 (1). It is a complete edition, with 55 images plus the images of Jesus the King and the plan of Jerusalem, without *Introduction*. From the same collection there are two other copies: *Barb. Or.* III, 134 (2 and 3), with the same images and the introduction. In *Borgia Cinse* we have two copies: 410 (with 51 images plus the two images of the plan of Jerusalem and Jesus the King) and 443 (1), both incomplete and not in order and without an introduction. In *R. G. Or.* III, 226 (3) we have the introduction and 50 images; in III 247 (6-7) we have an edition which is both incomplete and out of sequence.

long and noble tradition. With Aleni, the exchange between the West and China began on the level of spiritual experience.

The Life of Our Lord Jesus Christ, (*Tianzhu Jiangsheng Yanxing Jilue* 天主降生言行紀略), published in 1635¹⁵ is the first translation to be made in Chinese of most of the Gospels. Aleni does not follow any one evangelist; rather he combines several elements from the four Gospels into one coherent narrative. About fifty years after the arrival of the first Jesuit missionaries, the principal contents of the Gospels were finally available to the Chinese. The publication of this voluminous book may be considered a milestone in the history of Christianity in China. This is evidenced by the publication of several editions, some with and others without illustrations, up to the 1920s.

To make the Gospels more understandable for his readers Aleni, in *The Life of Our Lord Jesus Christ*, made many, although minor, adaptations to the Chinese culture. He told the story of Jesus in a painstakingly detailed personal style. The readers would have considered his language vivid, attractive and comprehensible. It was simple and full of realistic details. He also added a large number of interesting notes. These certainly helped the Chinese readers to better understand the Gospels. These materials, brought together expressions, examples, historical as well as events of everyday life with the Chinese language. Through his abundant commentary, Aleni introduced concepts, places, stories and people belonging to the biblical history of salvation. In this way, and within a strictly Christological interpretation, the Chinese came into close contact with many elements and figures of the Old Testament. The readers of *The Life of Our Lord* also had an opportunity to learn many details about the history of Christianity and to garner a large amount of information about the lifestyle of both Jewish and Western people. *The Life of Our Lord* became a great opportunity for cultural exchange between China and the West.

Most of all Aleni wanted to present the Gospel in its entirety. This principal preoccupation overrode the question of adaptation. Clearly, in this book, accommodation came after the faithful presentation of the

¹⁵ BAV, R. G. Or. III 219 (5), *juan* 1-4; BAV, R. G. Or. III 219 (6), *juan* 5-8; CUPF, D 4 M, in the collection *Daoyuan Jingcui* 道原精萃, 2.3.4. (with illustrations).

evangelical message. Aleni related the Gospel to the life of the Christians. He urged them to cultivate the moral virtues in imitation of Jesus. The comments and notes contain several invitations to consider the person of Jesus with devotion and love.

7. Aleni as a pastor: Jesus presented to the children.

In 1642 Aleni published one of his last books, *The Four Characters Classic of the Holy Catholic Religion* (*Tianzhu Shengjiao Sizi Jingwen* 天主聖教四字經文).¹⁶ It was an instrument for Christian children and new believers. It provided a basic, yet complete formation in the Christian religion. Aleni's model was a rather well-known Chinese schoolbook *Sanzijing* 三字經 (*The Classic of the Three Characters*), from the Song period: a text used by children to learn characters. To the Chinese readers, the form and style of this book would have been very familiar, attractive and easy to read. By using this device, the new contents and doctrine would have appeared a bit less foreign and easier to understand. It is worth noting that, while the natural topic of a work of this style would have been the common ground of Confucian and Christian morality, Aleni chose instead a mostly biblical and doctrinal content, making extensive use of edifying Christian stories about the disgrace of eternal damnation. Only the external form is Confucian. The content is completely alien to traditional Confucian education and belongs totally to the new religion of the Lord of Heaven. Aleni quietly continued his distancing from Confucianism to develop a distinctively Chinese Christianity.

While the stories of the Old Testaments are reduced to the Creation and to a few important figures, the major portion of the work is dedicated to the doctrine and life of Jesus. The Passion of Jesus is described in touching and graphic detail, something that would certainly have impressed the young reader. Aleni's purpose was to infuse the young Christians with love for such a lovable Savior and with terror for the consequences of refusing the grace of Redemption. It is once again clear that Aleni was doing his utmost to bring the converts to the heart of the Christian message: the person and works of the Savior of the

¹⁶ Information based on the copy from BAV, *Borgia Cinese*, 334 (26), of which I possess a microfilm.

world, Jesus Christ. The Christians were invited to form a personal relationship with Jesus through a life of love, virtue, prayer, practices of piety (such as the Via Crucis) and performance of good works in imitation of Jesus.

8 Aleni in dialogue: Learned Conversations in Fuzhou (*Sanshan Lunxueji* 三山論學紀).¹⁷

Recording and eventually publishing learned conversations was a common practice in China. In the *Learned Conversations of Fuzhou*, published in 1627, Aleni answers the objections made by the former great Secretary Ye Xianggao and the Censor Mr. Cao, a devout Buddhist, regarding the Incarnation. Cao is identified by scholars as Cao Xuequan 曹學佺 (1574-1648).

The dialogue can be divided in two parts. The first is a series of objections concerning the disparity between the omnipotence and awesomeness of God and the humiliation entailed in becoming man. This objection, which is universal, is not an insurmountable obstacle to embracing the faith. In fact, it already reveals a high regard for the dignity of God and an astute judgment on the weakness of the human being. This is already a good starting point for advancing toward the Christian faith.

Aleni's answers are both philosophical and practical. He first makes use of scholastic arguments like the infinite nature of God and convenience of the Incarnation for the redemption of humankind. Aleni does not introduce the mystery of the Trinity at this point. This would be asking the non-Christian Ye too much. Still, Aleni presents God as love. Love is the ultimate motivation for the Incarnation. The Lord of Heaven, the Great Father and Mother, could not leave humankind desolate and abandoned.

Aleni's examples develop the concept of God as love. One image, taken from nature, aims at showing how the union with humanity does not change the nature of God. Two other images, the mother who takes care of her child and the Emperor that saves his son's life, were calculated to touch the heart of the listeners and the readers. In this,

¹⁷ I studied the microfilm of a copy in *BAV, Borgia Cinese* 324 (20b); also published in *TZJDCWXXB*, 1, pp. 419-493.

Aleni proved to be an excellent announcer of the Gospel of love.

The second series of objections concerns the reasons for China's exclusion from the plan of salvation. These problems are important and valid and must be respected. The self-conscious Ye represents the dismay of all the Chinese who are legitimately proud of their civilization and who are also attracted to the truth of the Christian faith: did God merely cast China aside? This is not just a sinocentric obsession but a serious theological question. Today, we would call this the mystery of the universal plan of salvation.

In answering such difficult questions, Aleni first repeats Ricci's theory of the untimely arrival of Buddhism in China, long predating the arrival of Christianity. The other answers are more enlightened although still insufficient. The ancient presence of Christianity in China attested to by the recent discovery of the Xian stele (less than two years earlier) is used as proof probably for the first time of the antiquity of Christianity, which arrived in China one thousand years earlier. In China antiquity is synonymous with truth while novelty is equated with heterodoxy. Given their deep sense of history, the Chinese are not very inclined to attribute importance to anything which does not have roots in their past.

It is interesting to note how Aleni stresses the fact that Judea was not in Europe but in Asia, the same continent as China. Although Europe was not the homeland of Jesus, still it accepted the Christian faith. This sounds like a polite invitation to the Chinese to overcome a geographic sino-centrism. Aleni's best argument--one should accept the truth for itself, no matter where it comes from, since truth speaks for itself--is only mentioned in passing in these conversations. In future Aleni will develop this argument further. Christianity is a mystery that the human mind cannot grasp without the virtue of faith. It is interesting to note that the virtue of faith is immediately followed by a Christian interpretation of the virtue of filial piety. Good children follow and obey their parents, and dare not doubt or question them.

Aleni's two interlocutors, Ye in particular, because of the difficulty in accepting the Incarnation, did not convert. Ye, however, was always on friendly terms with Aleni and his protector. This shows once again the difficult cultural barrier confronting the missionaries and how difficult it was for even the closest collaborators and admirers to

accept the faith.

9. Aleni in Dialogue: *Introduction to the Incarnation of the Lord of Heaven* (Tianzhu Jiangsheng Yinyi 天主降生引義), 1635.¹⁸

This is the first Chinese book totally dedicated to Christology. It presents a important debate on Christology and Chinese culture using some typical objections found also in other texts. Several passages and chapters of this book can also be found in *The Learned Conversations* and the *Diary of Oral Exhortations* (Kouduo Richao 口鐸日抄). These help us understand how Aleni's books were compiled. *The Learned Conversations* was composed with the help of *literati* friends. The *Diary of Oral Exhortations* was edited by a large group of converts. The help of the Chinese converts in writing these books was both important and indispensable and all the more fascinating since these books contain long sections dedicated to Jesus Christ, the mysteries of his life and the problem of the relationship of Christ to China.

In *Introduction to the Incarnation* the mystery of Christ is presented both from a Trinitarian and biblical-historical perspective. The Old Testament was yet to be translated into Chinese, but thanks to Aleni's well organized treatise on salvation history, the biblical contents and protagonists, were not unknown to the Chinese Christian communities.

While some of the questions and answers are probably taken from commentaries the missionaries brought from Europe, other questions are typically Chinese. The general format for these books was to present the questions that emerged from conversations among missionaries, scholars and the people.

Aleni was already familiar with the objections to the doctrine of the Incarnation, but in this treatise Aleni deals for the first time, with one of the thorniest difficulties of early Christianity in China: why the

¹⁸ I studied a microfilm reproduction of the copy from BAV, *Borgia Ciniese* 324 (5) b, edition of the 1635. I also used the reprint and French translation in H. OTTO, *Second Traité du 'Tao Yuan Tsing Ts'oei': Questions sur l'Incarnation*, in *Dossier de la Commission Synodale*, 1, 1934, pp. 176-186, 230-239, 336-341, 489-497, 566-578.

Son of God had to suffer. Aleni's answer proves his missionary genius. He did not repeat theological explanations already available in other Christian booklets. Instead Aleni quoted a moving episode from the legendary period of Chinese history, attributed to Cheng Tang 成湯 (1766-1753 B. C.), the first Emperor of the Shang dynasty. Along with Chinese sages, Cheng Tang had gained a reputation for wisdom and virtue. During his reign, a severe drought resulted in a terrible famine causing much suffering among his people. The situation was so bad that people were convinced that only a human victim would appease Heaven. The Emperor said he was willing to give up his life in order to save the nation. He fasted, cut his hair and sat in a simple carriage. Near a mulberry grove he confessed his sins and offered himself as a victim to God. An abundant rainfall soon brought the drought to an end.

Praying, interceding and sacrificing oneself for the nation was part of the priestly function of the Emperor, the Son of Heaven. Emperor Cheng Tang appears, in Aleni's writing, as a pre-figure of Jesus, who offered his life to the Lord of Heaven for the sake of humankind. This example would certainly make the Passion of Jesus more comprehensible to the Chinese. Suffering is not necessarily a sign of shame; it can also be an expression of virtue and love.

The Incarnation is wholly linked to the mystery of the Redemption. Without any philosophical consideration Aleni presents the Incarnation as the long-awaited realization of God's salvific plan for humanity. The Incarnation is not simply a self-revelation of the Lord of Heaven, a communication to the world of God's almighty power (miracles) and law (morality), but it is the human being's redemption from sin, a redemption won by Jesus through his Passion, death and Resurrection. In this sense the book is more than a simple *Introduction to the Incarnation*; it is an *Introduction to the mystery of Christ*.

The way Jesus is compared to Confucius and Mencius is noteworthy. While their dignity as sages is reiterated and respected, it is also clear that their doctrine and work are entirely within the bounds of human experience. Jesus is the Son of God and cannot be put on par with them. We have here both respect and distance from the Chinese vision of life. Aleni accepted Ricci's position that Confucius as a philosopher knew the truth of the Lord of Heaven. Ricci carefully avoided any direct confrontation between Confucius and Jesus. Aleni,

shifting the core of his preaching from the Lord of Heaven to the mystery of the Incarnation and Redemption in Jesus, was engaged in comparing Jesus with the masters of Chinese culture, affirming the superiority of Jesus.

10. Aleni in Dialogue: *The Diary of Oral Exhortations* (Kouduo Richao 口鐸日抄).¹⁹

Professor E. Zürcher considers *The Diary of Oral Exhortations* to be the most fascinating book of late Ming Christianity.²⁰ In fact it contains a gold mine of information about the Jesuit's methodology and the reaction of the Chinese. We have here "accommodation in action."

As we saw above, in his numerous discourses, Aleni was confronted with several questions about Christ. Why was the Incarnation so late in history? In Chinese traditional mentality the truth must have its origin in antiquity-- the older the better. Why was Jesus not born in China? The Chinese civilization had been flourishing for a long time: it was certainly a very worthy place and prepared to receive God-incarnate. This problem is linked to the following one: why did the Christian doctrine arrive in China so late? Why did God leave China out of his salvific plan for so long? When God was incarnate, heaven must have been left empty, or are there two gods? If Christ is the Master of the Western countries, why should he also become the Master of China? China already has Confucius, Laozi and Sakyamuni. Why should they be considered inferior to Jesus? Are their teachings not so noble and valuable as those of Jesus Christ? None will fail to notice that similar questions are part of the modern debate on religious pluralism.

Aleni was the first missionary to answer these questions in a systematic way. His teaching about Christ appeared in the extensive production of catechetical books, and especially in the *Diary of the Oral Exhortations* that his disciples compiled by recording the

¹⁹ I studied a copy from: *Taipei Zhongyang Yanjiuyuan Fusinian Tushuguan Zangbajuanben* 台北 中央研究院傅斯年圖書館 藏 8 卷本, 1872 (the complete version, originally written in 1630-1640).

²⁰ E. ZÜRCHER, *Giulio Aleni et ses Relations avec le Milieu des Lettres Chinoises au XVII^e Siècle*, in (edited by) L. LANCIOTTI, *Venezia e L'Oriente*, Florence, 1987, pp. 107-135.

missionary's conversations, homilies and arguments. In a word, the *Diary* records a missionary in dialogue. This text, which has only recently come to be appreciated for its importance, gives Aleni a prominent role among the Jesuits of the late Ming.

I have numbered twenty-one Christological texts in the *Diary*, including some already found in the *Introduction to the Incarnation* and the *Learned Conversations of Fuzhou*. I provide their full translation elsewhere.²¹ The following are short comments on various topics.

a. The mystery of the Trinity

Aleni acknowledged that the mystery of the Trinity is difficult to understand. He proposed explanations based on scholastic metaphysics, such as the three faculties of the soul and the action of word and memory. In the four passages dedicated to the Trinity²² the questions raised do not deal with specific Chinese objections, nor do Aleni's answers suggest comparisons with Chinese concepts. Although Aleni used Chinese terminology, as *sheng* 生 and *fa* 發 (to describe the difference between creation and generation), it is most likely that the listeners and readers had a hard time comprehending the mystery of the Trinity explained in scholastic terms. It is amazing, however, that Aleni was ready to introduce the most difficult and sophisticated theological elaboration of Christian thought to his listeners.

b. The mystery of the Incarnation.

To explain to this listeners that after the Incarnation, there were not two Lords of Heaven, one in Heaven and one on earth, Aleni gives two examples. For his first example he uses the figure of the sun. Although the sun is high in the sky its light and warmth are at the same time reflected on the earth. The second example is taken from political life. He speaks of the king who, although he leaves the capital to subdue

²¹ G. CRIVELLER, *Preaching Christ in Late Ming China. The Jesuits' presentation of Christ from Matteo Ricci to Giulio Aleni (1582-1649)*, Taipei, 1997.

²² *Diary*, 3, 31-32; 4, 20-22; 4, 21; 4, 24.

a revolt, still remains in control of his country.²³

A thorny issue for the Chinese was that the Incarnation implied a denigration of the dignity of the Lord of Heaven. Aleni's interlocutor thought of the Lord of Heaven in the same terms as he thought of the supreme dignity of the Emperor, therefore it was impossible to accept the humiliation implied by descending to the human level. Again Aleni uses the image of the king who intervenes in a local dispute:²⁴

Even though he is most supreme,
yet due to the desire to save the world,
he solemnly and with dignity became incarnate.
He deserves even more respect,
and even more awe.
What is so blasphemous about this?
When there is great chaos throughout the country, and
the minister has no power to control the situation,
the supreme lord of the ninth sky (the most respected position of
kings) comes personally to allay the situation and create peace.
Not only would this not be considered blasphemous, but
the sense of gratitude (towards the king) would be increased again as
much.

The discussion on the Incarnation continues with the explanation of the prophecies on the Incarnation and a summary of the life of Jesus.²⁵ Aleni openly challenged the China-centrism of his interlocutors. The Incarnation was not foretold in Chinese Classics, but was well recorded in Western Classics. Furthermore, the actual events totally satisfied expectations. Jesus' fulfillment of the prophecies of the Old Testament was the principal argument proposed by Aleni to prove the truthfulness of the Incarnation, although this was not recorded in the Chinese Classics. While this argument was conclusive for Aleni, it is very unlikely that it had the same convincing power for the Chinese audience. In this case Aleni's reasoning was still within the European mindset. His theological preparation prevented him from engaging in an

²³ *Ibid.*, 2, 21-22.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 7, 14-15.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 7, 15-19.

in-depth comparison of the meaning, the value and the interpretation of Western and Chinese scriptures.

c. The Mystery of the person of Jesus

The unity of the person of Jesus is the subject of a dialogue with Lin Yongyu 林用猷.²⁶ Yongyu, Aleni's interlocutor, mistakenly confuses the body of Jesus for his human nature, and the soul of Jesus for his divine nature. Aleni's scholastic explanations were quite difficult for his listeners to grasp. The very concepts of nature, person, divinity, soul..., as interpreted by scholastic philosophy, were alien to Chinese metaphysics and anthropology.

d. The soteriological meaning of the Passion of Jesus

Aleni and his followers often dialogued about the Passion of Jesus.²⁷ His listeners were already familiar with the preaching on the suffering of Jesus. Aleni sought to explain the meaning of Jesus' suffering and death, and seems to have used two approaches to present such a sensitive and central topic. The first dealt with the soteriological meaning of the Passion of Christ; the second, with the devotional and moral attitude such suffering should arouse in the disciple.

Delivering a homily on the feast of the Exaltation of the Cross, Aleni illustrates the soteriological fruits of the Cross.²⁸ He presents the power of the Cross by recounting the story of Emperor Heraclius who won a war against the Persians, and from whom he recovered the relics of the Cross (629). After describing the dialogue between Heraclius, who was determined to carry the precious burden on his own shoulder, and the patriarch Zachary, who suggested that his imperial splendor was hardly in accordance with the humble appearance of Jesus, Aleni invited his interlocutors to humble themselves before the sufferings of Jesus.

e) Devotion toward the suffering Jesus

The suffering of Jesus, according to Aleni, should inspire deep

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 3, 25-26.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 6, 26-27; 8, 38.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 6, 25-26.

compassion and stimulate a zealous determination to imitate him.²⁹ In other passages, Aleni refers to the discovery of crosses in Fujian. This was certainly a great boost for the evangelization of the province. Aleni, however, does not rest upon the material aspect of this discovery. He quickly switched from visible crosses to invisible ones: the crosses that everyone must bear daily. To bear one's own cross is, according to Aleni, the first duty of a devout Christian.³⁰

Aleni was a great preacher. His homily on the Passion is a fine example of the devotion toward the person of Jesus the Jesuits tried to instill into their Christians. The Passion of Jesus, motivated by the love of Jesus for us, should animate the faithful with the same sentiment toward Jesus. The story of Job and his friends beautifully exemplified the relationship of the faithful with Jesus.³¹

In another soul stirring homily on the Passion, Aleni gives a lesson in the kind of morality that should govern the life of the faithful: those who crucify Jesus in fact are the "seven deadly sins".³²

f. Offering one's own life to Jesus

The following passage, taken from a homily given on the feast of the Ascension, again showed Aleni's ability to use fascinating parables and examples, of both Chinese and European origin, to instill into his listeners the desire to offer their lives generously to Jesus. The simplicity and clarity of Aleni's preaching were certainly one of the main reasons for his great success in evangelizing the Fujian province.³³

There was a king in my country
 who was going out of the capital city.
 All those who belonged to the city,
 offered very expensive and luxurious gifts.
 One poor man had nothing to offer.
 He was waiting, from afar, along the way.
 He saw a brook with water

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 1, 22.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 1, 11.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 6, 20.

³² *Ibid.*, 6, 21.

³³ *Ibid.*, 7, 9-10.

that was clear and lovely.
 He used his hands to hold some water,
 respectfully lifting it saying,
 'I am very poor,
 yet my king is going away,
 and I cannot extend my respect.
 I am really very ashamed.
 May I offer some clear water as a gift?'
 The king was pleased,
 'You suffer from poverty
 yet you have the courage not to come empty handed and without
 something to offer.
 Your sentiments are more important than any material gift.

g. Jesus Christ compared with Chinese sages and religions.

In an interesting and long conversation with Zhou Xiaolian 周孝廉 about Jesus and other religious figures, Aleni points out that Confucius, Laozi and Buddha cannot be considered in the same category as Jesus. In fact, in China, even the Confucian literati, did not consider Confucius, Laozi and Buddha as being on the same level or having equal dignity. In any case, for Aleni the three sages are simply human beings. To demonstrate the divinity of Jesus, Aleni again restates that Jesus' arrival was foretold by prophets and these prophecies were long before recorded in Western scriptures. According to Aleni, nothing of this kind can be attributed to the Chinese sages. The passage concludes with a quotation from a Christian writer, possibly Richard of St. Victor, who said that the evidence of the divinity of Jesus is so obvious that if the Christians are mistaken, then they are deceived by God Himself.³⁴

The difficult dialogue continues.³⁵ Xiaolian is not yet convinced by Aleni's answer. His objection is quite logical. The prophecies and records that concern Jesus are found only in the Western scriptures. There are no traces of them in Chinese scriptures. Why should a Chinese believe in the Western scriptures instead of those of his own

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 7, 17-18.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 7, 18-19.

country? A similar problem had already been raised when discussing the Incarnation which likewise was not recorded in Chinese Scriptures. Again Aleni reiterates the truthfulness of Christian scriptures. The recent discovery of the Xian stele gave Aleni a fortunate, new and eloquent argument: Christianity is not a novelty in China; it arrived in the Middle Kingdom one thousand years earlier!

According to Aleni, because the Chinese have no knowledge of Western books does not mean that these books are untrustworthy. Before coming to China the missionaries had never heard of the ancient Chinese sages and history. Nevertheless the missionaries are ready to believe them. According to Aleni, the decisive difference between the Chinese and Western scriptures, both trustworthy, is that, unlike the Western scriptures, the Chinese scriptures do not talk about religion in a definitive manner. The Chinese scriptures never claimed to express a definitive religious truth. The Western scriptures did and their claim is trustworthy because it is verified by concrete evidence.

Nobody could expect Aleni to explore these questions further through modern theological means. Modern theologians would eventually answer Xiaolian questions in a very complicated and intricate way. Today the problem would be raised under the theology of Revelation, and in particular in the relationship between universal and particular revelation. The theology of religions, together with the theology of interreligious dialogue, would also be involved in such questions.

Here, it is sufficient to note that Aleni always claimed the religious superiority of Christian revelation. Yet he maintained a dialogical attitude. He was ready to recognize the validity of those elements that he saw as compatible with the Christian faith.

Another interlocutor, Shizhang 士章, compared Jesus directly with Sakyamuni.³⁶ The comparison between Jesus and Sakyamuni proposed by Shizhang to Aleni has two aspects. Jesus, like Sakyamuni, could be nothing more than just a man, both of them having a terrestrial mother. On the other hand, it could be that Sakyamuni himself is an incarnation of God and came for the salvation of the world. One notes how both objections are extremely pertinent and justified.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 4, 2-4.

Aleni's answers to the questions are not always original. He reiterates the apologetic arguments. Again Aleni affirms that Jesus fulfilled the prophecies spoken about him. Moreover his works and miracles testify to his divine origin. Sages and saints of the past, no matter how intelligent and wise, could never perform such great prodigies. The ancient Chinese sages never claimed to be of divine origin. This is also true for Sakyamuni. It is worthwhile noting that Aleni does not condemn the historical person of Sakyamuni. He acted, says Aleni, far beyond the average human, and simply called himself a teacher. Aleni, closely following the policy inaugurated by Ricci, harshly condemns Buddhism as a religion, but he nevertheless shows respect for its founder. He acknowledges that Sakyamuni did not advocate divine power or identity for himself. Aleni showed no intolerance in his defense of Christianity.

The question about the possibility that Sakyamuni was himself a divine incarnation was particularly difficult and delicate. The Buddhist idea of *hua sheng* 化生 (reincarnation, transmigration, transformation) can, somehow, be confused with the Christian concept of Incarnation. To a Chinese audience with a Buddhist background, it would not be too difficult to accept that both Sakyamuni and Jesus are two different forms of incarnation. Again Buddhism appeared to the missionaries as a dangerous rival that could mislead and confuse people about the radical differences between and the basic incompatibility of the two religions.

In a different passage we have an interesting proposal by Xiaolian: to unite the religion of the Lord of Heaven with the teaching of Buddha and Laozi. Most probably the proposal goes along the lines of the *Sanjiao* 三教 (Three Teachings), the syncretist movement that advocated the unity among the three Chinese teachings, Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism. Aleni could not accept such a proposal. The Jesuits' strategy was quite different: join forces with Confucianism against the other two religions. According to Aleni, the ultimate irreconcilability of Christianity with Buddhism and Taoism is precisely the religious character of the two teachings. They are like ministers who dare to go against the emperor.³⁷

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 7, 19-20.

Aleni could have distinguished the original teaching of Buddha and especially Laozi from the contemporary features of Buddhism and Taoism. He could have done that by using the same differentiations the Jesuits applied to original Confucianism and the contemporary Neo-Confucianism. But the Jesuits' strategy was already well established and according to them, seemed to be very fruitful.

It is worthy to note that this was one of the first times that a discussion on the subject of the relationship between Christ and other religious or morally holy figures took place with a missionary. Aleni, as one would expect, did not undermine the role of Christ, who is unquestionably regarded as the only Savior of the world. On the other hand, the Chinese sages and saints (including the Buddha) are not dismissed as negative or demonic figures. Aleni did not say that they were in hell, or that all they taught was false. A dialogical attitude toward the other religions would require much more than this. However, Aleni, as is evidenced by his dialogical style, seems to be one person who would have been ready to move in that direction.

11. Conclusive comments on the *Diary*

Among the religious themes of the *Diary*, the figure of Jesus is clearly at the center of Christian faith and life. Also the qualitative difference between Jesus and the *Chinese saints* is continually and firmly stressed. In studying Aleni's religious text we have seen that his preaching was particularly centered on Jesus, and on his Passion. It is interesting to note that the Resurrection played a small, almost marginal, role in the presentation of the mystery of Redemption. Aleni and the Jesuits preferred to present their Christians with a Jesus suffering and dying on the Cross rather than a risen and glorious Jesus.

The theological and catechetical model of the XVIIth century, influenced by the spirit of the Counter-Reformation, was certainly very different from modern theological and catechetical sensibility. The preference in those days was for a devotional approach to the person of Jesus. The sufferings of Jesus were far more suitable to arouse the emotions and the piety of the faithful. Today, we prefer to emphasize the need to consider the Paschal Mystery in its entirety. The very meaning of the Passion and Crucifixion of Jesus is informed by the Resurrection of Jesus. Without the Resurrection, the death of Jesus

remains pointless.

During the XVIIth century, both in Europe and in China, the emphasis was on seeing the death of Jesus on the cross as the whole of the mystery of the Redemption. Jesus had paid the ransom for the remission of sins, and satisfied the offense against God. The Jesuit missionaries should not be faulted for this since they were children of their times.

After thoroughly studying the *Diary* and Aleni's writings in general, we can conclude, perhaps with some surprise, that Aleni and the Jesuits not only did not conceal the Crucifixion, on the contrary, they stressed this teaching in their preaching and in the formation of catechumens and Christians. The goal of the missionary was, I believe, to arouse a deep feeling of sympathy, admiration, respect, and finally to win the people to devotion to and adoration for the person of Jesus, who suffered grievously for humankind.

17. Conclusion: Aleni's proposal of a Christ-centered spirituality

Aleni responded to several objections that arose from a Chinese mentality and which were directed at the figure of Christ. These answers are of great interest for the history of Christian mission in China and for the history of the cultural relationship between China and the West.

Still, Aleni did not formulate a true Chinese Christology. Although he laboured almost 40 years in China, he could not produce a Christology with Chinese characteristics. He certainly did become Chinese with the Chinese, but Aleni was still European. It could not be different. A Chinese Christology must be developed by Chinese Christians.

However, Aleni did make a precious contribution. For the first time in an exhaustive way, he provided the tools that the Chinese Christians needed to develop a personal experience of Christ and a spiritual life centered on the person of Jesus. In fact, it is only from a truly personal immersion in the mystery of Christ that one can engage in theological reflections on the same Christ. A Christological reflection is much more than an intellectual experience; it is an experience of life in Christ. It is within this kind of existential experience that theologians

unite the Christian faith with the *genius* of their own people. In accepting Christ, local theologians can discover their own roots more deeply.

The tools that Aleni offered were, first of all, the example of his own personal life dedicated to Christ and his unfailing commitment to the propagation of the Gospel. Aleni also made a significant literary contribution. His books provide something of an itinerary toward a Christological spirituality.

One can object that Aleni offered a 'Jesuit' spirituality rather than a 'Christological,' one. He did, in fact, emphasized the elements typical of a Jesuit formation. He cannot be faulted for this since people give what they have and consider to be most precious and beautiful.

Facts about China

China's population has more than doubled in the past 44 years. It now stands at more than 1.2 billion people.

The Han Chinese make up at least 92% of China's population.

The official language in China is Mandarin but there are a number of other languages. The principal ones are Cantonese, Yue, Wu, Hakka, Xiang, Gan, Minbei, and Minnan.

The principal cities are Beijing, the capital; Shanghai, Tianjin, Shenyang and Guangzhou.

The life expectancy for males is 68 years and 71 for females.

China has a literacy rate of approximately 85%

In 1997:

2.56 million Mainland Chinese travelled abroad or to Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan for tourism, business, study, training and to visit relatives. Of these;

43,000 were given approval to go abroad for training or study.

122,000 were given permission to travel abroad for business or some form of negotiation.

50,000 were permitted to settle permanently in Hong Kong.

380,000 Mainlanders went to Hong Kong as tourists.

48,000 went to Taiwan for personal reasons.

(CD, 27 Jan. 1998)