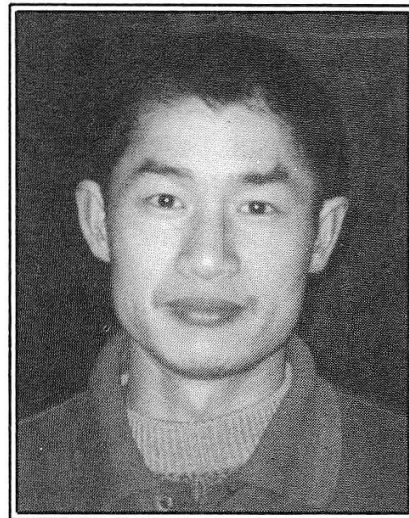


## *Inculturation and Its Constraints:*

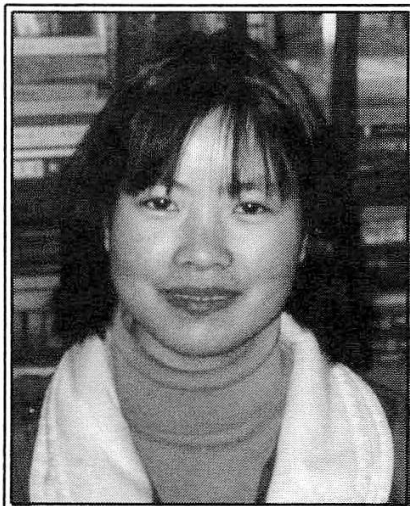
### *A Critique of Preaching Christ in Late Ming China: The Jesuits' Presentation of Christ from Matteo Ricci to Giulio Aleni by Gianni Criveller*

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**P***reaching Christ in Late Ming China* by Dr. Gianni Criveller looks at cultural exchange between East and West from the unprecedented Christological point of view. It unveils the 'inside story' of the arrival of Western missionaries in China during the Late Ming dynasty, and provides new information and perspective to an overall understanding of the Jesuits' activities.



The mission of the Jesuits in China is a popular topic today. Most scholars consider the Jesuits' activities, Vatican involvement, and the Chinese Rites Controversy from a cultural perspective. For example, Jacques Gernet (1921-) in his book *China and the Christian Impact* posited the incompatibility of the two cultures. He made



some unique observations which aroused criticisms from many scholars. Criveller's book is obviously a response to Gernet. In it, he examines the deeper relationship between the two cultures. From a Christological point of view, he examines the question of whether Christian thought can take root in China, which is a question of accommodation or inculturation. Criveller has systematically studied the Christological thought

of various Jesuits, from Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) to Giulio Aleni (1582-1649), and he has found compatibility between Chinese culture and Christianity. Hence, the inculturation of Christianity in China was possible. Aleni's missionary work in Fujian is an example of some success in inculturation.

Criveller answers many misunderstandings and prejudices regarding the missionary work of the Jesuits in China. In his view, the Jesuits' purpose was obvious. It was that declared by P. Michel Ruggieri (1543-1607) who said that he had come to China to save souls. Criveller's response to Professor Chen Cunfu also clearly pointed out that the purpose of the Jesuits in coming to China was neither for political power nor for social status; it was to spread a spiritual Gospel. When the missionaries came to China they did not want to have too many connections with the foreign religious protectorate because this might blur their motives. On the contrary, they did their utmost to distance themselves from the missionary protectorate of the political powers. Criveller noted that the different theological positions of the missionaries among themselves affected their methods of evangelization. This was especially the case with the probabilism of the Mendicants and the probabilism of the Jesuits. He thinks that the Jesuits' probabilism position followed the path of inculturation more closely, because it recognized that other cultures, including the Chinese culture, acknowledged the natural law. Therefore, there was common ground between them and Christian thought. The Jesuits also acknowledged a hope for the redemption of non-Christians. Hence they did not depend on weapons to enter China, but came peacefully. In fact, Ricci's first Chinese work was *On Friendship*, while Martino Martini's (1614-1661) first Chinese writing was *Seeking Friends*. As Criveller said, it was through friendship that the Jesuits began their dialogue with Chinese culture.

Dr. Criveller centers his research on Aleni's Christological thought. He realizes that Aleni was man schooled in culture, religion and dialogue. Aleni followed Ricci's dialogical method, as can be seen in his book *Sanshan lunxueji*, (*The Learned Conversation of the Three Mountains*), which was not his own work, but a record of his dialogue with others. In it, we can see an example of an open, friendly dialogue between the Christian and the Chinese cultures. Criveller also notes that there was dialogue between Christianity and Buddhism, but Aleni was not so successful at this. Nevertheless, Aleni was moving in the direction of further and richer dialogue.

Criveller does not blindly rationalize the works of the Jesuits; he points out the discord among them. For instance, Ruggieri's methods of evangelization were different from those of Ricci. Hence Criveller gives us a true picture of the Society of Jesus, analyzing both their good and bad points. Since Criveller upholds the spirit of Vatican II, he concentrates on certain deeper values in the Society of Jesus. He also notes that there could even have been cooperation between the Society of Jesus and other religious orders. What was lacking among them was dialogue. Had it taken place, it could have brought about a consensus beneficial to the spread of the gospel.

Furthermore, Criveller also analyzes both the life of Chinese Christians and the realities of the anti-Christian movements. Through the analysis of the life of the Chinese Christians, he sees hope for the spread of the gospel in China. By examining the people and the activities related to the anti-Christian movement, he realizes that the conflicts were not due to real, deep cultural differences, but to personal conflicts, material motives, and cultural conflicts of a superficial nature. However, he notices that the conflict between Buddhism and Christianity is both real and deep, and that in such circumstances good results were unlikely. This is because at that time both the Jesuits and the Buddhists (including Master Zhu Hong), from their own positions, either merely tolerated or belittled their opposite number. For instance, Aleni agreed with Ricci's explanation that the scriptures which the Chinese obtained from the western regions were only pseudo-scripture, and not the genuine one of Christianity. They also thought that the Buddhist belief in reincarnation was stolen from Pythagoras of ancient Greece. On the other hand, Buddhists, like Master Zhu Hong, considered that the heaven of Christianity was the Buddhists' realm of desire, and that God was merely a local deity in this realm of desire, and not the one and only most high God. In this way they belittled Christianity. Since in Buddhism there is no God who is ultimate creator of all things, further dialogue between Christianity and Buddhism is necessary in order to avoid mistakes and to improve mutual understanding. Criveller noted that the 'negative theology' of Christianity has points in common with the 'emptiness' and 'nothingness' found in the philosophy of Buddhism and Taoism. However, the Jesuits held a 'positive theology', and so dialogue with the Buddhists did not get very far.

Summarizing the above, Dr. Criveller treats all the activities of the Jesuits from a Christological point of view, including their

purpose for coming to China, motives, missionary activities, and theological debates. In a meaningful way he also deals with the roots of the Rites Controversy. He also analyses the life of Christians in China and all aspects of the anti-Christian movements. This book covers a wide field, but it centers on Christology, which is a fresh way of dealing with these issues. The purpose of our critique from here on is not to contradict Dr. Criveller's new explanations, but to analyze the 'inside story' of the Jesuits' missionary work in China from another point of view.

In our view, the encounter of Chinese culture (Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism) with Christian culture, including clashes, conflicts, opposition and learnings from one another, is a historical issue and cannot be solved overnight. Criveller only explores the issue from the angle of Christian evangelization. However, if we change to another perspective, we discover that whenever two cultures or two different types of people meet, their response is directly affected by their perception of the situation, as well as by the philosophy and theology they hold, and their personal self-interest.

The coming of Jesuit missionaries to China, bringing with them Christian culture, was bound to affect the personal interest of some people. Others harbored personal grudges. An example of this is Shen Que and Yang Tingyun, who were originally classmates and good friends. But later, due to a personal conflict between them, Shen Que initiated a persecution of Catholics. Of course, the criticism and attack of Christians in the anti-Christian movements involved personal self-interest. No matter how much they understood about the Catholic religion, on the whole some people felt that the activities of the missionaries violated China's interests. They considered the preaching and works of the missionaries to be a threat to the Ming empire, just as the Manchu forces were in the north and the Japanese pirates were in the east. Indeed cultural exchange would require new adjustments in personal interests. When a person became a Christian, there would surely be adjustments in family relationships. The daily life of the general public would also be affected on the national level.

During religious persecution, some people supported Christianity, while others strongly opposed it. People had different interpretations of the world around them, which, in turn, were reflected in different perceptions. Christian believers responded to anti-Christian criticisms by defending their religion. Some Confucian scholars had

a positive view of Christianity, though they were not converted. Ye Xiangao had always been on friendly terms with the missionaries, but when this posed a threat to his life, he distanced himself from Aleni and other missionaries. Hence peoples' relationship with the Christian Church could only be explained by their own self-interest, and not the world view which they held. Furthermore, our thinking cannot remain only at this level. Some people, who had a good relationship with the missionaries, eventually became Christians. Generally these people can be divided into two categories: one was the less educated people, who lived in the poor remote countryside, far from the political center. Whether they were converted to Christianity or not had no effect on their personal self-interest, especially political interests. Therefore, the faith of these people was firm and deeply spiritual. The other category was that of the well-educated intellectuals. Contrary to Gernet, Nicolas Standaert and others have pointed out that high ranking government officials, who were also intellectuals, became Christians. These people thought deeply, made comparisons, and struggled with all their might over the matter of conversion. Thus they were well prepared before they entered the church, and their faith was very firm.

Furthermore, from the perspective of philosophical theory, there really is a great difference between the Chinese and Christian cultures. The language barrier also had to be overcome before the gospel could be preached in China. In China, no one could really understand the notion of God becoming man and consider this to be glorious. Most people found this concept difficult to accept. Therefore many Catholic catechisms included special questions for the Chinese people as: 'Why didn't the incarnation of Christ take place in China?' 'Why did Christianity come to China so late?' etc. The reason the Jesuits were very concerned about these questions was because they were convinced that the way they used helped the Chinese comprehend the theological principles which they preached. The Jesuits would preach with stories and parables, which might be from the daily life, history and culture of the Chinese. For instance, Aleni cited as an example the story of Emperor Cheng Tang to show that suffering need not be a humiliation, but could be a virtue. Hence the concept that suffering could be an honor became acceptable. The Jesuits used all possible means to explain their theories to the Chinese. Ruggieri believed that with greater efforts, the Chinese could understand even the profoundest mysteries of Christianity. However,

the Jesuits were aware that the two cultures were different. Because of this, the deepest mysteries of Christianity and the four precepts of the Church were withheld from their preaching for a long time. They were aware that Christianity had been in China for only a short time, and that the Chinese still experienced some difficulty in understanding the core elements of Christianity. The Jesuits also understood and respected the feelings of the Chinese, so they would take their time and allow the Chinese to understand Christian thought step by step.

Even so difficulties still arose when these two cultures interacted. This was because Chinese culture, unlike Christian culture, possesses no theological element. Intellectuals, monks, or Chinese scholars who tried to understand the Christian worldview from their own philosophical outlook were not helped by general theoretical explanations. This was really a case of two worldviews or philosophical outlooks following different paths to understanding. Misunderstandings were bound to arise. Even with today's principles of interpretation, mutual understanding is hard to come by. Therefore, even after they accepted each other, the following problem was still present: when the missionaries thought that they possessed absolute truth and sought to instill this into the Chinese people, the Chinese would object. For instance, the Chinese would say that Buddha, Confucius and Emperor Wen of the Zhou Dynasty were saints like Jesus. Then why was Jesus God, and not the others? If they were saints, then they should receive equal treatment. Why arrive at the conclusion that Confucius and Emperor Wen were in hell? If the point of view of Christian theology was accepted, then the question of the fate of other holy persons, apart from those who were redeemed by Christ, must necessarily be faced. The missionaries tried hard to provide an explanation for this. In *Tianzhu Shiyi (True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven)*, Ricci suggested that there were four sectors in hell, and that one of these was the sanctuary for ancient sages. Actually this point is not explicitly stated in the Bible; it was only a theological development. This theology of hell was different from the oriental one (especially that of Buddhism). In Buddhism, people who had done evil would, according to the degree of gravity of their deeds, end up in one of the eighteen levels of hell. The saints would not wind up in hell; they had striven to help people to cast off a hellish life. Placing Emperor Wen, Confucius and other sages in hell would definitely hurt the feelings of the Chinese people. No basis can be found for this theory; it is only an 'explanation' deduced

from the theory of hell in Christianity. If one does not agree with an interpretation of reality, then one must reflect on the theory itself, which gives rise to the interpretation of reality. In our view, theory is a kind of tool to explain the world, but it is not necessarily objective, true or directly apparent to the opposite party.

On the theoretical level, whether people agree with a theory's explanation of reality or not depends, in turn, on whether or not they accept the theory itself. Christian theology offers one method of interpreting and explaining the world. Chinese culture also has its own method of interpreting and explaining the world. There is a great difference between the two methods of interpretation. It is difficult for us to arrive at a consensus on the theoretical level only. For one to accept the conditions of the other, then one must deny himself, either because he has not mastered his own theory, or has lost faith in it and has started to doubt it. Only then can he accept a new theory. When a person firmly holds on to his own theory, it is impossible for him to accept a theory that is so completely different from his own. He would either deny the opposite party or tolerate the opposite party. If he feels that the other theory is too strong, he will either run away from it or reject it outright.

The ordinary believers in China, like ordinary believers anywhere, did not grasp the profound theory of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. Their conversion to Christianity was due to the hardships they faced in life, and their hope in the gospel. What won these converts to Christianity was not necessarily the mysterious theories of Christianity, nor was it even the theory of love, but love in action. As for the literati, some of them explicitly denied and criticized Christian theory. They were firm in their Confucian position. It was impossible that they would agree with, or be converted to, Christianity; the most they would do was to tolerate its existence. Ruggieri wrote poems and wanted to join the poets' club. Dr. Criveller noted that Ruggieri was confident of the truthfulness of his theory, and he would express it in his poems, regardless how others looked at him. He was not afraid of being teased. From this we can see that the Chinese literati were similarly confident of their position, and they ignored the theories put forward by Ruggieri. In one of Ricci's manuscripts he wrote that he had much admiration and respect for the Chinese literati, but if they wanted to be saved, they still had to be converted to Christianity. From this we can see the literati in ancient China were both 'honorable' and 'noble'.

On the other hand, the missionaries also firmly believed their own theological theories. Even among different religious orders, each one maintained its own theological outlook, and they could not cooperate with one another. The Mendicants and the Jesuits each maintained their own theological principles. The Chinese Rites Controversy was a direct result of their being unable to arrive at a consensus. It is natural for people from different cultures to have their own ideological theories. Different theories lead to different interpretations of reality. It is also natural for non-agreement to lead to a denial of the theory. However, putting theory aside, human beings live in this flesh and blood real world. So cultural exchange frequently does not take place on the level of theory, but more often than not through acts of love.

In our view, the most important reason for the Jesuit breakthrough in China was not dependence on their theories, but because they brought with them the good news of Christ's love, and everything they did in China was imbued with this love. The offering of their lives for Jesus in China and their loving actions influenced thousands upon thousands of Chinese people. In the process of preaching the good news of Christ's love and in order to accomplish the purpose of evangelization, they adopted the method of accommodation. This was a matter of means only. Coming to China to preach the Gospel, the Jesuits encountered numerous problems: language, a different way of thinking, livelihood problems, but most importantly, the religions of the Chinese people, especially the ever-popular Buddhism. Under these circumstances, if they wanted to spread the message of love, they could do so only by accommodation. When Matteo Ricci came to China, he knew very little about the country. So he followed the advice of the 'apostle of the orient', Alessandro Valignano (1538-1606). He donned a monk's robe, and the Chinese people considered his religion to be a branch of Buddhism. However, as Criveller pointed out, Ricci was a Christian humanist. He possessed a special sensitivity for Chinese culture, and he quickly realized that the status of Buddhism was not very high in Chinese culture. Using Buddhism to spread Christianity would not be very helpful. Hence he did not blindly follow the original plan of entering through the Buddhist gate, but exchanged his monk's robe for that of the Confucian scholars. He strove to build friendly relations with the Chinese literati, in order to have a better chance of spreading the gospel of Christ. Matteo Ricci had traveled long distances, and endured many



hardships, before he finally arrived at the capital. There he built up a relationship with the emperor in order to obtain a status for Christianity and permission to spread it throughout China. In fact missionaries from other religious orders who did not agree with Ricci's missionary methods were also delighted with this turn of events. Ricci's policy of accommodation included the translation and study of the Chinese classics; in fact, many Jesuits including Alfonso Vagnone and Martino Martini, were good sinologists, and they had deep affection for Chinese culture. By comparing aspects of ethics and philosophy, Ricci tried to recover early Confucianism from its contemporary version. In early Confucianism Ricci had found a concerned, personal 'god', who was very similar to the God ('deus') of Catholic belief. Chinese ethics were also very close to Christian ethics, but regrettably later developments in Confucianism had caused it to deviate from the original orthodox path. The result was that Ricci attempted to use Christianity to supplement the insufficiency of Confucianism in making human beings good. In theory, this was an efficient means of accommodating to Chinese culture, but in the process, Ricci also misinterpreted certain aspects of Chinese culture. These misinterpretations only concerned the theological theories which Ricci held; they had nothing to do with his affection for things Chinese.

The Jesuits accommodated to Chinese culture in various ways. One of these was the creation of a Chinese style Christian art. João Da Rocha, who was a follower of Ricci's method, made a great contribution to the creation of Chinese Christian art. He tried to influence the Chinese people through a Christian art rich in Chinese characteristics. For example, in his 'The Method of the Rosary', there is a picture of Christ suffering on the cross with Chinese people painted into the scene. This concept, which went beyond time and place, was a means of accommodation. Da Rocha wanted to suggest that the suffering of Christ was not for Westerners only, but for all the world's people, including the Chinese; hence there should not be a feeling of alienation between the Chinese and Jesus Christ.

Giulio Aleni is the focus of Criveller's study on accommodation. The greatest difference between Aleni and the other Jesuits regarding accommodation was that he went to the grassroots. He conscientiously built up the church and attended to pastoral work. At the same time, he also had continuous dialogues, both open and private, with the literati. These dialogues demonstrated both the differ-

ences between the two cultures and the thinking of the people at that time. They also demonstrated the great effort Aleni put into spreading the gospel of Christ. In his book *Tianzhu Jiangsheng Yanxing Jilue (The Life of Our Lord Jesus Christ)*, Aleni was the first one to introduce the life of Christ in a comprehensive and systematic way. This book enabled the Chinese people to understand the gospel of Christ in a systematic way, and it holds a prominent place in the history of Christianity in China.

Aleni's motive for coming to China was obvious—he wanted to introduce a complete picture of Jesus to the Chinese people. He did not take part in the politics of China, nor did he interfere in the livelihood of the Chinese people. He only influenced the people around him through acts of love. Because his love was from Christ, many people from the lower social classes were impressed by his love and converted to Christianity. Out of love, he also held friendly, open and sincere conversations with the literati. This established a new model of accommodation for Christianity-dialogue. He was very careful when dealing with the complicated questions raised by the Chinese. He always bore in mind the goal of evangelization and his own requirements of love. Dr. Criveller's book reveals the deeds of Aleni in a systematic way. Although not everything that Aleni did was perfect, yet what he achieved in those historical circumstances was remarkable. The path of accommodation taken by the Jesuits was, in fact, in harmony with the spirit of Vatican Council II. This further confirms that that path was a prophetic preparation for the globalization of Christianity. Undoubtedly it was in the spirit of Vatican II's opening to the outside world that Criveller treated the topic of Christology in late Ming China, and presented the contributions of the Jesuits to the spreading of the gospel through the method of accommodation. Therefore, *Preaching Christ in Late Ming China* by Dr. Criveller is a very timely publication.