

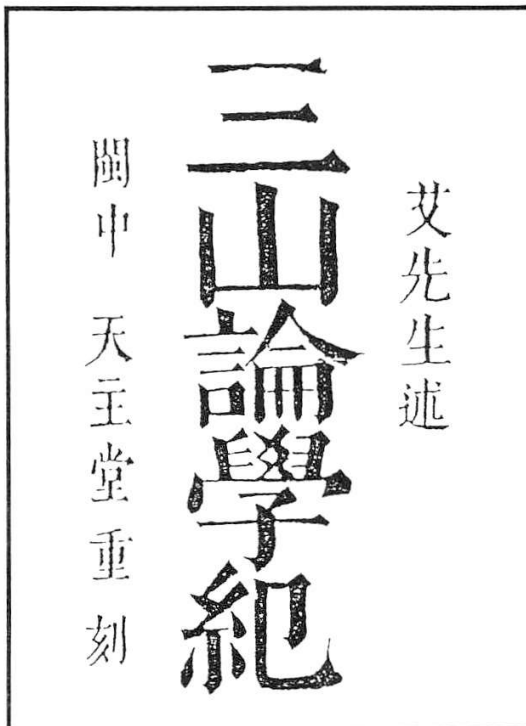
Dialogues on Jesus in China (2): Why did the Gospel arrive so late in China?

By Gianni Criveller

In *The Introduction to the Incarnation*, Giulio Aleni is asked: "Why is it that the truth was not preached [in China] in the past but arrived only in these days?"

Aleni was not the first missionary to be asked why Christianity had arrived so late in China. Matteo Ricci in *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven* had to employ the story of the ambassadors of Emperor Ming of the Han dynasty (209 BC - 220 AD) who returned from the West mistakenly with Buddhist instead of Christian scriptures to justify Christianity's late arrival in China.

In *The Learned Conversations of Fuzhou*, Aleni repeats Ricci's theory but also notes that there are, in fact, Chinese documents that record an early Christian presence in China. He refers to the Xi'an stele, discovered in 1623, as proof of the ancient presence of Christianity in China, dating back to 635 and the Tang dynasty.



A decade later, in a conversation with Zhou Xiaolian, reported in the *Diary of Oral Exhortations*, Aleni notably refrains from mentioning the old story of the arrival of Buddhist scriptures instead of Christian ones. Aleni, it appears, came to realize that the scriptures mix-up theory was a manipulation of the truth and that it would be better to emphasize the concrete evidence provided by the Xi'an stele: "The memorial stele had been buried for quite a number of years. It was only recently, in the third year of Tian Qi, that the people within the area unearthed it."

*The first page of Giulio Aleni's
"Learned Conversations of Fuzhou."*

Therefore [the news of the stele] spread widely in the area, and curious and studious scholars all came to look at it. This was something that happened in recent years in China, and yet you said you could not fully believe it.”

In late Ming China, antiquity was synonymous with truth, while novelty was equated with heterodoxy. Given the Chinese people’s deep respect for their own culture, the people of the Ming dynasty were little inclined to attribute much importance to anything that did not have roots in their past. This mentality was not confined to China. Other pre-modern societies and cultures consider antiquity a guarantee of truth. Jesus himself affirms the rightness of what was “from the beginning.” (Mt. 19:8)

Aleni mentions the preaching of the Apostle Thomas in India to further support the fact that the Gospel spread eastward soon after the time of Christ. India, Aleni points out, is located in Asia, next to China. However, Aleni’s definitive argument, as reported in *The Learned Conversations of Fuzhou* and *The Introduction to the Incarnation*, is both moral and spiritual: the truth cannot be judged according to the speed of its propagation.

“One should know that the operation of the virtuous religion should not be discussed in terms of speed, slow or fast, and distance, near or far. In sum, whether knowing by seeing, or knowing by hearing, the truth is the truth after discernment. The true religion would be responsible for its own operation... The Creator’s shaping and molding of Heaven and Earth, His creating of all creations, the births and transformation, which had no beginning or end, the mystical doctrines are boundless—are like the vastness of the immense ocean. How can we measure it by each drop of water?”

Aleni offered a moving invitation to his listeners to give up their set ideas and prejudices and focus instead on the search for the truth, wherever it might lie. From the majestic point of view of the Creator, distance, place and time might not be as significant as they appear to mortals.

In any case, the fact remains that the late arrival of Christianity suggests to the Chinese that they had been overlooked in the divine plan of salvation. The question is inextricably linked to the on-going debate on the theology of history.

The theology of history emerges from the Christian notion of the “history of salvation.” Irenaeus introduced the distinction between secular history and “salvation” history that Augustine

expanded in his *The City of God*. By the Middle Ages, however, the Christian faith became so deeply interwoven into European secular life that, despite the Muslim and Jewish rejection of the faith, Christians believed that the missionary mandate of Jesus to preach the Gospel to the whole world had been fulfilled. This notion had to be re-evaluated, however, when the explorers of the XVI century began to make contact with other “worlds,” peoples, and religions. A new theology of history had to be developed.

Early in the Qing dynasty, some of the most learned Jesuits in China proposed that Chinese classic civilization could be looked upon as the “Old Testament” of the Chinese people. Those theologians-historians-sinologists were called ‘Figurists,’ since they considered the Chinese sages and events of classical Chinese history as ‘figures’ of the biblical history of Salvation. While the Figurists might have gone too far in artificially combining biblical data with Chinese history, their questions were legitimate. Did God open a line of communication with the Chinese people through the words and works of Confucius, Mencius, Laozi, and other sages?

The present post-modern age is characterized by incredulity towards “meta-narratives,” the great stories of the progress of humankind. The previous modern age was characterized by the concept that history is moving towards a positive end, be it the promise of salvation or the emancipation of various political movements. This concept, and the realization that historical progress is not always positive, has been questioned by theologians since Auschwitz. Moreover, the history of salvation is being re-evaluated in light of the fact that some of the ancient Churches of the New Testament have been reduced to little flocks.

A theology of history that has the Cross as its focal point refuses any facile optimism about the progress of humanity. Yet, there is a unity to be found in the progress of humanity that is not the result of the success of Christianity but rather generated by a dialogue between God, as Trinity, and humanity. The dialogue between the Trinity and the world does not produce uniformity. It goes beyond arbitrary and artificial divisions that scar human history.

The timeless presence of the universal Church alongside the women and men of time and space is a sign of the Trinitarian origin and destination of human history. The universal mission of the Church, throughout history and the globe, is symbolic of deep unity and reconciliation.