

## *Dialogues on Jesus in China (3): Why Was Jesus Not Born in China?*

*By Gianni Criveller*

**F**ormer Great Secretary Ye Xianggao, in the Learned Conversations in Fuzhou (June 1627), asked the Jesuit Giulio Aleni the following question: “If the benevolence and pity (of the Lord of Heaven) covers all, if His heart of love for humankind is so selfless, and is so to such an extent, why then did He not become incarnate within the boundaries of our Chinese civilization? It would have been easier to spread the message afar.” Ye Xianggao most probably considers China as the country most qualified for Jesus to be born in, since China (Zhong Guo) is exactly the Middle Kingdom. Matteo Ricci acknowledged that by placing China at the center of the earth in his famous map. Aleni does not yet dispute that China is at the center, but he questions whether geographical centrality should be a reasonable criterion. Confucius himself, notes Aleni, was not born



“Illustration of Christmas” from the Archives of the Franciscan Fathers, Madrid, Spain. The drawing was found in Giulio Aleni’s book, *Explanations of the Scripture with Images of the Lord of Heaven Incarnate*, published in Fuzhou in 1637.

in the central province of China, but was born in the kingdom of Lu, in what is now the eastern province of Shangdong. If geographical centrality were a decisive criterion, then the people of Chu would ask, "Why was he not born in our kingdom, Chu?"

The people of Yue would ask, "*Why was he not born in our kingdom, Yue?*"

To complete his argument, Aleni mentions also the case of Shun and King Wen, two famous Chinese noble historical figures, who are respected by the Chinese although they were born "outside the center." Aleni then invites his interlocutor to look at things from a non-Chinese perspective:

The vision of people is both confined and narrow. All judge distance as far or near by measuring from where they are. Were we taking a perspective from outside the boundaries of China, there then would be no question of Chinese and foreign, local or barbarian. If the Lord of Heaven had become incarnate in China, in this civilized great kingdom, those looking on from other places would inevitably experience similar doubts and questions, the same dissatisfactions.

Aleni also indicates that China should not be considered outside or too far away from the center of salvation. In fact, Aleni points out that Jesus was not born in Europe but in Asia, the continent to which China belongs.

Ye Xianggao asks a question shared by other learned persons. Aleni later includes it in his *Introduction to the Incarnation* (1635). The late 1620s and 1630s were the last years of the long-lasting Ming dynasty that held the spirit of "Chineseness" in high regard. The late Ming period was a complex society in ferment, where forces from inside and outside China were pushing for radical change. It should not come as a surprise that certain members of society, animated by patriotic sentiments, such as the former high official Ye Xianggao, were particularly suspicious of foreign elements. Their aim was to preserve the country from disintegration.

The preaching of a few Jesuit missionaries played, of course, only a marginal role in the dramatic unfolding that would lead to dynastic change in the following decade. However, those people who came into direct contact with the missionaries from the West had to take a position on a religion born outside China.

Some reformists, sympathizers of the patriotic Dong Lin Party, saw in the Christian message an opportunity for a renewal that would be compatible with the original teaching of Confucius. The three pillars of the Chinese Catholic Church, Xu Guangqi, Li Zizhao, and Yang Tingyun were the prominent figures of this group.

Others, like Ye Xianggao, were both attracted to and puzzled by the new teaching that was not from China, and could not make up their minds. They were attracted to the new teaching but had great fear of the unknown. Ye himself, although close to Aleni and other Jesuits, stopped short of embracing Christianity.

There was also a large group who definitely opposed the Christian faith on the basis that it was not of Chinese origin. During the Nanjing persecution (1616-1617), the director of the Ministry of Rites wrote: "They (the missionaries) take our incomparable China and compare it to their Great Western Land, as if there were two countries in the world."

Shen Que, vice-president of the Nanjing Board of Rites, who launched the attack, later made the same remark, "Jesus," he wrote on the arrest warrant, "is just a barbarian of the Western seas." Similar remarks are reported in about one hundred anti-Christian writings that were published in the late Ming period.

The fact that Jesus was not born in China lies at the core of the theological debate on the historical character of Christian Revelation. Ye Xianggao, together with other sympathizers and opponents, expresses a universal puzzlement at the claim of the historical singularity of the Incarnation of God, that challenges the minds of intellectuals of all times and in all places. Here lies the great merit and dignity of the questions of the Chinese interlocutors and the answers of Aleni.

The difficulty in accepting Christ, His Incarnation in history and His geographical and cultural particularity, is not problematic for the Chinese only, but is a universal challenge. It is the challenge of contemporary mission activity and theology too. When national, ethnic, and cultural belongings are unduly overemphasized, manipulated by those in power and turned into an ideology and exclusiveness, then the "otherness" and "singularity" of Jesus becomes a scandal.

But the mystery of the Incarnation has a historical character that cannot be overlooked without emptying the essential nature of Christian revelation: God really entered our world and history, sharing our life. Without this material event, Jesus would be reduced to a

myth, a theory, or an ideal. Paradoxically, it is exactly his singularity that makes Jesus universal. Christian mission is an invitation to people of every cultural tradition not to give up their inheritance but rather to go beyond it. Only in this way will humanity find unity. Aleni invites his interlocutors to assume a perspective from outside their own center so as to appreciate that there is no difference between local or foreign. Within a Chinese context, Aleni has marvelously paraphrased the famous Pauline vision of a reconciled humanity: “There is no longer any difference between Jew or Greek, or between slave and freedman, or between man and woman: but all of you are one in Christ Jesus”(Gal. 3, 28).

