

Dialogues on Jesus in China (4)

Why Was the Incarnation Not Mentioned in the Chinese Classics?

By Gianni Criveller

Since the beginning of Heaven and Earth, we, in China, have never heard of such a thing (as the Incarnation of the Lord of Heaven). From the beginning, in the ancient books that have been passed down throughout the ages, nothing like this has ever been mentioned. How can anyone be sure that the Incarnation really happened?

Giulio Aleni answered Ye Xiang-gao's question with a long and detailed explanation of how the life of Jesus matched precisely with the prophecies found in the scriptures. The Incarnation was awaited for a long time, and Jesus fully realized the expectations.

According to Aleni, this should be a definitive proof of the truth of the Incarnation.

Aleni argued that books about Jesus are so numerous that they can fill rooms. It was only that they had

口鐸日抄小引
泰西諸先生之航海而東也。涉程九萬里。
歲三秋。比入東土。而尺絲半粟。毫無所求。
于人。獨鐸音遠播。其所醒覺而提命之者。
不一而足。嗟夫。是豈炫學問而博聲稱者。
哉。蓋亦以造物主之真傳。晦蝕已久。而
二氏之曲說。浸淫方深。馮生總總。都在洪
波浩淼之中。覓一片板隻筏。而不可得。故

The Diary of Oral Exhortations (1640 A.D.)

not been translated and passed on to the land of China. For Aleni, such records are evidence enough. This argument, however, did not convince Zhou Xiaolian, whose objections are recorded in the con-

versations in *The Diary of Oral Exhortations*. Zhou's objections are logical. The prophecies and records that concern Jesus are to be found only in the Western scriptures. There was no trace of them in Chinese scriptures. "Why should a Chinese believe in the Western scriptures rather than in those of his own country?" he asked.

Moreover, Zhou argues that what is recorded in Western scriptures, and the classics originates with the people from the West, therefore Eastern people may not be inclined to believe in them.

According to Aleni, the fact that the Chinese had no prior knowledge of Western books did not mean that such books were untrustworthy. "Before coming to China, Western missionaries had never heard of China's history or its ancient Chinese sages," he said, nevertheless the missionaries were ready to believe the truthfulness of China's historical records."

If the scriptures of the West could not be fully trusted, Aleni noted neither could the historical records of the Chinese Emperors, nor other works such as the *Five Classics* and *Four Books*.

In another dialogue between Aleni and the same Zhou Xiaolian, Aleni asks whether it is impossible to believe that something exists simply because someone has not seen or heard of it.

If this is true, then my country has never heard about those who are called ancient saints and sages in China and the events about them. I would never say that just because I have not seen nor heard about such things [before coming to China] that I think that they never happened. If one doubts the important event of the Incarnation, then I invite that one to look for proof from those who have seen and heard about it.

Aleni must be credited for not engaging in the exaltation of Christian scriptures at the expense of the Chinese ones. In fact, on several occasions he showed interest in and respect for the Chinese classics. His argument was that the fact that the two scriptures were unknown to each other did not mean that either one was untrustworthy. Nobody today can expect Aleni to have deepened these issues through the use of modern theological interpretation. Neither does Aleni develop the ideas that he briefly suggests in other dialogues: that the decisive difference between the Chinese and Western scriptures, both trustworthy, is that the Chinese classics do not talk about religion in any definitive manner, as the Western scriptures do.

The Chinese classics have never claimed to express a definitive religious truth. Confucius' humanism implied reluctance to speak of or show interest in questions concerning spiritual beings and death. The strategy inaugurated by Matteo Ricci, and followed by Aleni, was that Confucianism and Christianity are complementary precisely because Confucianism is a philosophical teaching that is compatible with the religious doctrine of Christianity.

A contemporary missiologist appreciates Aleni's dialogical and free style that would have made him intellectually and morally in tune with the missionary attitude promoted by the Second Vatican Council.

Contemporary missiology perceives the universality of Revelation within a salvation-history perspective. The doctrine of creation, as it is understood today, implies that the creative act is in itself revelation—the self-communication of God who is at the origin of every nation. Since the creative act constitutes history, the events of human history reflect revelation. All nations, therefore, somehow, have received a revelation from God. Moreover through the Incarnation, Jesus Christ has united himself to every person in the world (John Paul II, *Redemptoris Hominis*, no. 37), therefore personal history, somehow, also reflects a revelation from God. The meaning of the Incarnation is universal; it transcends cultures and nations in order to embrace them all. At the same time, since our experience of God is always mediated, the Incarnation expresses the irreducible historical and specific character of Christianity. As a result the universal revelation is mediated in specific and singular historical, and events that can never be overlooked or nullified. God, the invisible One, is known only through what is visible, historical, concrete. The fact that Jesus was born in Judea, from a Jewish family, is part of God's mysterious saving plan for humanity.

Accepting Jesus' specific historical particularity is a problem that many people of different nations have had to struggle with throughout centuries of evangelization, as evidenced from the Jewish and Greek-Roman reactions to the Christian faith. The people of China are no exception. Some of them were bewildered by the fact that Jesus was not born in China, by the late arrival of Christianity and the silence of the Chinese classics on the Incarnation.

The relationship between God and humanity is not easy to accept because it does not necessarily match human expectations. Jesus himself did not meet the messianic expectations of most of his

contemporaries and fellow-countrymen. His message was dismissed since he was from Nazareth, a town from which “nothing good could come.” Those who accept Christianity are called to accept as savior a Jesus who belongs to a specific time, place and culture. It may be particularly difficult for civilizations that are conscious of their ancient and rich cultural, and religious inheritance—and the Late Ming civilization is certainly one of those—to accept this specific and irreducible character of Christian revelation. On the other hand, the specific-historical revelation of God in Christ does not exclude the significance of transcendental revelation—they are complementary, and they relate to each other.