

Dialogues on Jesus in China (6)

Where are we from? Where are we going?

By Gianni Criveller

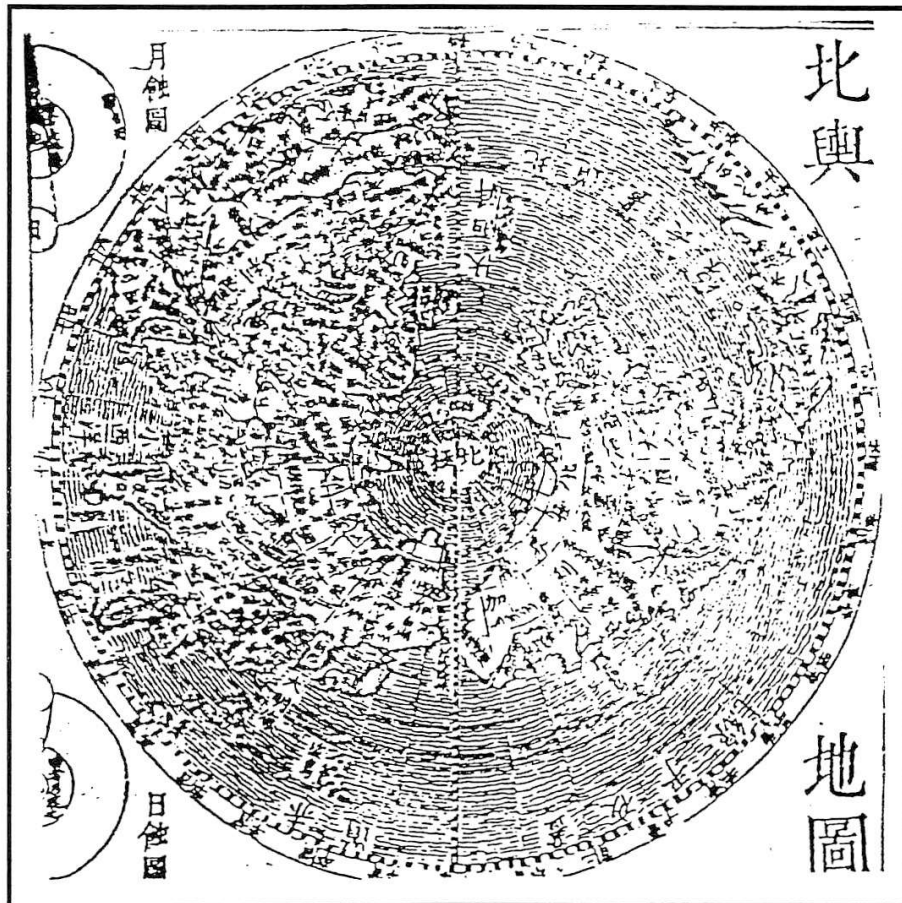
In the dialogue with his interlocutors Father Giulio Aleni not only answers the questions he is asked, but he also proposes a series of basic questions about the origin, the meaning and the destiny of life. These are, after all, the questions that pertain to our human condition:

Where do we come from?

Where did we get our nature?

What bright and noble things should we do today?

What should we do in the future?



Northern hemisphere from Aleni's Zhifang waiji (1623)

These questions are formulated on the occasion of the debate on the 'foreign' origin of Jesus and the late arrival of Christianity in China. Aleni invites his interlocutors to change their standpoint and ask new questions, the question about the ultimate origin and meaning of each one of us. In this way Aleni tries to existentialize the questions of his listeners.

The Christian message is essentially about the mystery of our life; a mystery calls for something more than debates about time or place. Aleni proposes that Christianity is a mystery that cannot be thoroughly fathomed by the human mind, but it calls for the virtue of faith. Finally, the Confucian virtue of filial piety is the natural virtue that corresponds to the supernatural virtue of faith.

In the Christological section of *The Learned Conversations in Fuzhou* answering the question of Ye Zianggao concerning the logic behind the Incarnation, Aleni recalls the theme of the mystery of God which cannot be thoroughly fathomed by the human mind: "If one delves into the mystery of the Great Lord without a respectful and fearful heart, he can be considered as being under the light of the sun but instead of being content with the blessing of its shining presence, he wants to stare right into it, forcibly trying to look at the origin of its dazzling light:

"As a result his eyes will become dizzy and dazzles and he will not be able to enjoy the light. How can one talk about fathoming the creation of Heaven and Earth by the Lord of Heaven?"

To penetrate a mystery that cannot be fathomed by the human mind, faith (*xin*) is necessary. Faith "...is the origin of the Way, the first of the merits, the root of the ten thousand virtues. Believing in the true faith, one would then recognize him to be the Great Lord of Heaven and Earth, the great Father-mother of all humankind."

Aleni interprets the Chinese virtue of filial piety in a Christian way. Filial piety is certainly dear to the Confucian Ye Xianggang, who has questioned why the Lord of Heaven has not become man in China. The right attitude for a child practicing filial piety is not to question but rather to obey the will of his parents.

"A human son serving his parents, morning and evening in heat and in cold, would always show respect and filial piety. Although his parents are always disciplining him and giving him hard work, he should still follow and obey their every order and dare

to doubt or question a thing, and this is how he might be called a good son.”

In previous articles we pointed out that Aleni invites his friends to accept the truth for itself, no matter its origin. Mystery is the crucial concept adopted by Aleni to provide the most radical answers to the objections of his interlocutors. The term adopted by Aleni, *aoyi* is rare but not a neologism. I believe Aleni has several reasons for seeing *aoyi* as signifying the mystery of God (*dazhu aoyi*): *ao* basically implies the common idea of something mysterious. *Aoyi* is a very rare combination and as such countenances the new meaning that the author wants to convey; *aoyi* comes right after *dazhu* (Great Lord), implying a religious, spiritual and theological meaning.

Aleni’s presentation of Christian revelation as a mystery in the sixteenth century is quite remarkable. While Christian tradition has always attested to the doctrine of the incomprehensible God who comes to us as mystery, it must be said that revelation is not always sufficiently emphasized as a mystery.

In the post-Tridentine doctrinal framework, there was the danger of regarding God’s mystery as something that could be understood through the objective doctrine taught by the Church, the tendency to subject God to systematization. In modern times theologians spend much energy defending and demonstrating the credibility of the Christian faith to a culture that glorified reason and science.

The post-rationalist, post-modern dimension in which we are now immersed calls for the presentation of Christian doctrine beyond the rationalist mode. Post-modernism acknowledges that reason does not have all the answers. Reason, if it wants to remain reasonable, must acknowledge its limits and open itself to the transcendent dimension.

Mystery indicates not simply something profound and difficult, but also a fascinating religious experience that leads to a new dimension of living a life of faith.