

## *Dialogues on Jesus in China (8)*

### *Our Great Father-Mother*

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In his debates with Chinese intellectuals Father Giulio Aleni often referred to God as the Great Father-Mother. That expression was common among the first missionaries to China and their Chinese converts.

An example of this is found in Aleni's *The Learned Conversations in Fuzhou*:

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.

The origin of the expression is connected with Chinese cosmogony, based on the concept of *yang* (male element) and *yin* (female element). The

term designates both the emperor and the local authorities. Yang Tingyun, one of the three pillars of the early Chinese Catholic Church, developed the Christian interpretation of this typical Chinese expression. Yang was able to explain the meaning of the expression in terms of the relationship between Confucianism and Christianity:



*Yang Tingyun, first Chinese theologian*

Isn't His grace immense? Therefore, Confucianism considers Him Great Father-Mother and the Western countries consider Him the One True Master [Lord] (*yi zhen zhu*).

To regard the universe as one's own Father and Mother implies that all human beings should be regarded as one's own brothers and sisters. The term also refers to the relationship between a parent and a child, which reflects the relationship between God and humankind.

Yang again:

The Lord of Heaven rears men as fathers and mothers rear their children.

The same relationship expresses the important notion of the closeness of God:

Now, men regard the Lord of Heaven as the most venerated and the highest [and therefore] far from them instead of as close as a parent. They do not know He is among men... Therefore, one can say that He is the Great Father-Mother, who is venerated but also close and nobody is far from him.

By developing this idea, Yang Tingyun was able to overcome his own personal difficulties in accepting the closeness of God to humanity, which was achieved through the mystery of the Incarnation. It also helped overcome the difficulty many Chinese had accepting the notion of God as a person.

In addition this term has valid Christological implications: Jesus is the supreme expression of the Great Father-Mother's closeness to humankind. Jesus himself can be considered, in such a context, as the first of many brothers. The concept and the role of the first or oldest brother is very important in Chinese culture and mentality, and has been used to help make Jesus more understandable to the Chinese, more personal. There are several biblical references to Jesus as the first-born, especially in Paul's interpretation of Christ as the first-born of all creation and as the eldest of many brothers (Col.1:15; Rom.8:29).

### **Yang Tingyun: the first Chinese theologian**

Thanks to Yang Tingyun's valuable contribution to Chinese Christianity, he can be considered as the first Chinese theologian.

Yang was a scholar-official. He studied the Confucian classics for many years, but was also interested in neo-Confucianism and especially Buddhism. Laureate in 1592, he held several very important posts, including that of vice-governor of Beijing. He met Matteo Ricci during the years 1602-1608, but entered the Catholic Church only in 1613, in Hangzhou, after much discussion (nine days) with the Jesuits Lazzaro Cattaneo and Nicolas Trigault.

For the rest of his life, until 1627, Yang was mostly engaged in activities related to Christianity, revealing a deeply devout life. He housed and protected several missionaries in his home during the persecution of Nanjing (1616-1617), wrote eight books on religious matters, collaborated on many Jesuit publications (nine forewords and epilogues). He was Aleni's friend and important collaborator. A result of their special relationship is Aleni's biography of Yang Tingyun: *The Outstanding Achievements of Yang Qiyuan*.

Yang showed a clear grasp of complex doctrinal concepts, such as the three different natures of Revelation: "natural teaching (*xingjiao*)," revealed to everyone; "written teaching (*shujiao*)," revealed through Moses; and "teaching by grace (*enjiao*)" revealed through Jesus Christ. This scheme was certainly important for a correct formulation of the problem of evangelization in China.

Yang also faced the question of the central role of Christ, who was from a foreign country and unknown to the ancient Chinese sages. Yang had a clear theological understanding of the singularity of Christ, accepting "teaching by grace." Moreover, since there is a continuity between "natural teaching" and "teaching by grace," Christ's Incarnation was related to God's revelation in history, which had started with Yao, Shun, the Duke of Zhou and Confucius. Yang did consider the ancient Chinese sages as part of the "natural teaching."

The concept of God as Great Father and Mother could have had an important role in the inculturation process of Christianity in China. The inculturation process would require much more than this, but still converts and missionaries were on the right track. They

were aware of the problems of the necessity of creating a Chinese Christianity, but had few theological instruments to give them a satisfactory response. Yet, what they started was a process which, thanks to the original contribution of the converts, could have led to a Chinese Christianity.

Yang Tingyun and other converts had the intellectual moral ability to do that. The use of the term *Dafumu*, Great Father-Mother, is only an example that the converts had started something close to the inculturation process. The main authors of such a process can only be local Christians. Only they can unite in harmonious synthesis the "genius" of their people with the Good News of the Gospel.

Another advantage of this expression is its gender-free outlook. It is well known that one of the thorniest challenges of contemporary theology is the problem of inclusive language and the identification of God with the masculine-authoritarian figure of the father. In the Bible we have several passages that portray God as mother.

Jesus called God "father" using the expression *abba*, which has intimate and tender connotations and is not authoritarian at all. From time to time throughout the history of Christian spirituality, God has been presented as mother, although the image has never become mainstream.

In contemporary theology the feminist agenda is important and sensitive. A generalized use of this term would certainly help to build a more genderless and less patriarchal image of God. Unfortunately, the subsequent forsaking of the term "Great Father-Mother," probably a victim of the Chinese Rites Controversy, was one of the factors that prevented Chinese Christians from developing an original and inculturated interpretation of God and Christ.