

# Dialogues on Jesus in China (11)

## Jesus, Buddha and Religious Pluralism

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Zhou Xiaolian, in the discussion reported in the *Diary of Oral Exhortation*, reformulated the question about Jesus' relation to Chinese sages such as Laozi and Sakyamuni:

People may think that Jesus was only a great saint born of the world, the same as Kong of Confucianism, Lao of the Mysterious (School) xuan (Taoism), Shi (Sakyamuni) of the Chan (Meditation), etc., and He might not be the true Lord of Heaven.

Aleni answered:

We should not pass over this kind of talk too lightly. These people are not in the same category and cannot be mentioned together. One must be careful even to distinguish between



Kong, Lao and Shi. This is even more necessary in the case of Our Lord Jesus since He is respected as the Lord of Heaven, and is entirely different from human beings.

Long before Jesus' birth, prophets had already recorded all the signs. Everything had been mention in detail. The scriptures also recorded that a great saint, named John, would be born in the same year as the Lord of Heaven. His words and deeds would also be tremendously outstanding. People knowledgeable of the ancient scriptures estimated that the Lord of Heaven would become incarnate at that given time. Therefore, many thought that John was the Savior of the world. John enlightened the people and said, "I am but the forerunner of the true Lord. The true Lord is Jesus. I have witnessed the Holy Spirit descending on His head, and heard the words of the Lord in Heaven who said from above, 'This is My beloved Son.' Thus, I knew that He was the true Son of the Lord of Heaven."

When Jesus met people, He proved to be the true Lord. Therefore, the ancient saints of the West who attempted to explain that He was the true Lord, said: "If Jesus was not really the Lord of Heaven and yet called Himself Lord of Heaven, He would not have been a saint but rather the greatest sinner of all. How could He then be called a great saint?"

An ancient saint even maintained that, "If Jesus were really not the true Lord of Heaven, yet called the beloved Son by the Lord in Heaven making all people recognize Him as the Lord of Heaven, this would be the greatest of sins.

If on Judgment Day, I were accused of wrongly respecting Jesus, I could return the accusation to the Lord in Heaven, and ask why I have sinned. The ancient saint's extreme ideas could explain this all just like this. Then Jesus is truly Lord of Heaven, why would it be something to question?

Aleni first points out that Confucius, Laozi and Buddha cannot be put in the same category as Jesus. According to the Confucian literati, Confucius, Laozi and Buddha were not considered sages on the same level and of the same dignity. For Aleni the three sages, whatever their contributions, are simply human beings. To make evident the divinity of Jesus, Aleni restates that prophets has foretold Jesus' arrival, and these prophecies were recorded in Western scriptures long before they hap-

pened. According to Aleni, nothing like that can be attributed to the Chinese sages.

The passage concludes with the quotation of a Christian writer, possibly Richard of Saint Victor, which says that the evidence of the divinity of Jesus is so obvious that if the Christians are mistaken, they are deceived by God Himself.

Once again Aleni anticipates a discussion, which is very topical in contemporary debate on religious pluralism and interreligious dialogue. Zhou Xiaolian, like many contemporary persons involved in the *New Age* and new religions movement, are of the opinion that Jesus is just "one of the prophets."

Many Christian theologians advocate that interreligious dialogue requires all religions to give up the claim of being the only true religion. In particular Christianity should give up the presumption that Jesus is the only incarnation of God. These theologians seem ready to integrate *New Age* principles in their reasoning, which seem to me to depart radically from the Biblical contents. These authors affirm the urgency of replacing traditional Christ-centered theology with God-centered or Salvation-centered theology. They propose a clear-cut distinction between the Jesus of History and the Cosmic Christ. The first is the founder of Christianity and, insofar as he was a historic personage, just one of the many religious prophets, while the second is the ultimate fulfillment of religions, of humanity and of the cosmos. According to the *New Age*, Jesus was a man who became the means through which Christ, a powerful spiritual being, manifested himself. After the crucifixion, Christ abandoned the body of Jesus forever.

The Christ becomes the perfect "god idea," the awareness of the divinity within. Jesus had Christ-consciousness, or the Christ Spirit. But Christ is not Jesus only. Anyone can possess the "Christ Spirit", or the "Cosmic Christ Spirit." The unique reality of the Incarnation has been emptied out in favor of the Hindu doctrine of the series of possible infinite avatars. Jesus is not God incarnated for us and our salvation, the only name given to us through whom we can be saved. He is rather a manifestation of an abstract Christ Principle. There is one Jesus among many Christs.

Salvation is not a work of Jesus Christ crucified and resurrected, but rather "your own Christ Self is your savior." Human suffering is just a result of ignorance or of the law of the Karma. Hu-

mankind can free itself through proper knowledge, overcome the negativity of the material world and enter into the spiritual realm.

In the perspective illustrated above, Jesus is no longer the one redeemer of humankind proclaimed in the New Testament. Inner enlightenment replaces faith as obedience to God, the liberation of one's own creative potential replaces salvation, and prayer is transformed into a journey deep into oneself. Jesus, however, did not offer any spiritual technique. He offered his own life, claiming to be the one who came to atone for all the sins of the world. Once again the *drama* of the Passion of Christ is cast aside; the kerygmatic proclamation of the uniqueness of the Incarnation and of the Cross is still a scandal and foolishness.

It is evident that the Christological question is the central and determining feature in this debate. Here it follows the two apparently opposite aspects of the Christological dilemma. On one hand we have the absolute value of the Paschal kerigma, the impossibility of evincing the mystery of Christ from the collective hopes of humankind and the unique salvific mediation of Christ. On the other hand we have the great esteem and trust in human religious experience that reveals and mediates the Absolute to humans. We will return to these crucial questions in a later article.

