

Dialogues on Jesus in China (12)

Jesus and Buddha

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In the following question Jesus is directly compared to Sakyamuni. Both having a terrestrial mother, Jesus can be just a man like Sakyamuni:

Shizhang asked Master Aleni:

Shijia (Sakyamuni) was the King of Kolas, [*Kolas* (the Chinese transliteration is *Jing fan*), is the name of a region in India, ruled by the Sakya family, n.d.a.] and Māya's offspring.

He is but a human being created by the Lord of Heaven. That is definite. May I ask since Jesus was also given birth by the Holy Mother, was he not then a human person?

The answer of Master Aleni reiterates that Jesus is definitely a human being, but he is also the Lord of Heaven.



His human nature
could establish an example for all humankind,
as He suffered for us.
His divine nature
on the other hand, is omnipotent.
If we talk about humankind,

then there is no need to talk about *Shijia*,
 all the great saints and sages from the past,
 all of them were simply humans.
 They cannot be compared to even one ten-thousandth
 of Jesus, the Lord of Heaven.

The comparison between Jesus and Sakyamuni proposed by Shizhang continues. Sakyamuni himself could be an incarnation that came for the salvation of the world. Aleni's answer is not, at least in the first part, very original. He reiterates the apologetic arguments mentioned in other dialogues: Jesus fulfilled the prophecies about Him recorded in the Old Testament. Moreover, His works and miracles testify to His divine origin. Sages and saints of the past, no matter how intelligent and wise, could never perform such great prodigies. Then, about the specific person of Sakyamuni, Aleni concluded by saying:

Shijia, although he acted far beyond the norm,
 only called himself teacher.
 Did he dare to reign over the most supreme
 and allege to be the Lord of Heaven and Earth?
 In our country, we are very serious about names and titles,
 to be called "saints"
 is already something very rare,
 Not to mention being called the True Lord of Heaven and Earth.
 Such a matter would not be taken lightly and thoughtlessly.

Aleni points out that, like the ancient Chinese sages, Sakyamuni did claim being of divine origin. It is worthwhile noting that Aleni does not condemn the historical person of Sakyamuni. He acted, says Aleni, far beyond human average, and simply called himself a teacher. Although Aleni, closely following the policy inaugurated by Ricci, harshly condemns Buddhism as a religion, he nevertheless shows respect for its founder, acknowledging that he did not advocate divine power or divinity for himself. Aleni showed no intolerance in his defense of Christianity.

The question about the possibility that Sakyamuni was himself a divine incarnation was particularly difficult and delicate. The Buddhist idea of *hua sheng* (reincarnation, transmigration or transformation) can, somehow, be confused with the Christian concept of Incarnation. To a Chinese audience with a Buddhist back-

ground, it would not be too difficult to accept that both Sakyamuni and Jesus are two different forms of incarnation. In the pamphlets against Aleni that appeared in the 1630s, Buddhist authors contended that the Christian heaven was none other than the Tushita heaven of Buddhism, and that the Christian God was in the same category as the Tushita god. The Incarnation of Christ was interpreted as one of the many manifestations of Buddha. Jesus might well have been one of the many manifestations of the Buddha, an *avatar*, and it would thus be absurd to call him the Lord of Heaven. Also the Buddha resided in the Tushita Heaven before rebirth on earth. Therefore the Christian God was far below the gods of the Brahma Heaven. To Buddhist apologists, Christianity is an absurd religion that stole some doctrines such as Trinity, Incarnation, Heaven and Hell from Buddhism, and radically perverted their significance.

The Buddhist and Hindu tradition of considering Jesus as one of the many possible *avatars* continued throughout the centuries and has gained new supporters today who often quote a Bhagavad-Gita passage:

For the protection of the good,
For the destruction of the wicked,
And for the establishment of dharma,
I assume a body in every age.

The “contemporary successors” of Aleni’s interlocutors claim that there is no “only begotten” Son of God. There is rather a plurality of avatars, there are many “sons of God” since God has incarnated himself several times.

The relationship between Christianity and Buddhism in China has always been fascinating and complex. It is well known that the Jesuits Michele Ruggieri and Matteo Ricci first entered China under the likeness of Buddhist monks, and for nine years wore those robes, carrying out the directive of the Visitor Alessandro Valignano. Ricci and Ruggieri considered Buddhist vestments as an external sign of their internal desire to conform to the Chinese world. However, the understanding of the Zhaoqing Prefect who first accepted them into the Chinese territory, and the understanding of the population might have been very different. For the population they appeared just as another Buddhist sect, and in fact, the Jesuits

introduced themselves as bonzes from the West (*xi he shang*). They called the chapel by the Buddhist term of *miao*. Because of his humanistic upbringing, Ricci felt less comfortable in a Buddhist dress. He also realized that, although some Chinese respected the bonzes, others, particularly the better educated, held them in contempt. He also perceived Buddhism as a dangerous rival that could mislead and confuse people about the radical differences, and the basic incompatibility of the two religions. Like Christianity, Buddhism was a foreign religion coming from the West with monastic life, celibacy, fasting, Holy Scriptures, meditation, temples, devotions and an organization somewhat similar to the Christian one. The missionaries needed to distance themselves from the Buddhists, especially since the population often mistook Christianity for one of the many Buddhist sects. Buddhism was then perceived by the missionaries as a direct adversary, able to occupy the religious space that the moralistic, but non-religious Confucianism had left free. Ricci's strategy was to bring Confucianism to fulfillment by giving it a religious soul, and he could not afford to let the Buddhists do it first. Ricci had several opportunities to hold discussions with educated bonzes and Buddhists, especially Zhu Hong (1535-1615), the most important leader of lay Buddhism.

From these discussions Ricci understood how Buddhist argumentation was not constructed in absolute definitions, but rather on an evolving description of reality. In his famous *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven*, Ricci refuted Buddhist doctrine, especially the reincarnation, but he did not dismiss as demonic the historical figure of Sakyamuni. According to Ricci, Sakyamuni was a person with a mission from the Lord of Heaven. It was the personal sin of Sakyamuni that ruined everything, according to Ricci. It would be interesting to know from Ricci what enlightenment Sakyamuni received and which task he was to perform.

Today the dialogue between Buddhists and Christians is quite developed. The meeting "Buddhism and Christianity: Points of agreement and disagreement" held in Kaohsiung, Taiwan, in the summer of 1995, at the Monastery of Fo Kuang Shan was an important moment for this dialogue. The initiatives of Chiara Lubich and other personalities and institutions are held in high esteem. There are, however, still polemics and differences. But there is no point in pursuing an impossible doctrinal agreement. The differences on the

concept of the person, the origin and destiny of human life, the idea of salvation and of God are too radically different. At the same time one cannot help noticing that Christ and Buddha are possibly the most respected and popular men in the history of humanity. Many persons, both members and non-members of the two religions, appreciate their teaching and examples as complementary, worthy and inspiring.



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