

## *Dialogues on Jesus in China (13)*

### *Dialogue versus Syncretism*

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**I**n the following passage Zhou Xiaolian makes an interesting proposal: to unite the religion of the Lord of Heaven with the teaching of Buddha and Laozi. Most probably the proposal takes the same direction as the *Sanjiao* (Three Teachings), the syncretic movement that advocated unity among the three Chinese teachings, Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism.

The teaching of Buddha and Laozi  
should co-exist with the Lord of Heaven.

Just compare the Lord of Heaven to an emperor.

Then the ministers, civil servants and officials, all  
could join together like various streams flowing into one single  
great river...

Now all (three) are running and pushing against the other, why?"

The Master said:

If Buddhism and Taoism's relationship with the Lord of Heaven  
is said to be like the ministers' and subordinates' relationship with  
the emperor,

then it is only suitable to obey the commands of one emperor,  
and not to secretly set up hidden commands,  
and not to have thoughtless plans of rebelling against and super-  
seding the emperor's own commands....

Now Buddhism and Taoism are, however, not doing that.

They, being ministers and subordinates, dare to go against (the  
emperor's) commands and be contemptuous of the laws,  
ordering people to follow them and not the emperor.

They are rebels and usurpers to the extreme.

If we people join them and attach ourselves to them,

We are doing evil.

Aleni did not accept Zhou Xiaolian's proposal. The Jesuits' strategy was quite different: ally with Confucianism against the other two religions. It was exactly the religious character of Bud-

dhism and Taoism that made the alliance of the three religions impossible.

Using a political image, Aleni said that Buddhism and Taoism are like ministers who rebel against the emperor. To those who sought to reduce Christ to figures such as Laozi or Sakyamuni, Aleni answered that the essential difference is that Christ is God, the others are not. Aleni, as one would expect, did not undermine the role of Christ, who is unquestionably regarded as the only Savior of the world. However, the Chinese sages and saints (including the Buddha) are not dismissed as negative or demonic figures. Aleni did not say that they were in hell, or that what they taught was all false, as the Mendicants would have said.



Aleni could have distinguished the original teaching of Buddha and especially that of Laozi from the contemporary features of popular Buddhism and Taoism. He could have done that following the same distinction the Jesuits applied between original Confucianism and the contemporary Neo-Confucianism.

Zhou Xiaolian insists that there is convergence between Christianity and Buddhism, at least on the moral precepts. Again Aleni refused to ally his teaching with Buddhism.

Regarding the similarities between Christianity and Buddhism, regarding the Commandments and the doctrine of Heaven and Hell, Aleni reiterates the old theory of the Buddhists' stealing some Christian concepts, as Ricci had already done in his *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven*.

Zhou Xiaolian can be considered an anticipant of the religious spirit of our time. The project of unifying religions is very popular in our postmodern-New Age. There is a popular tendency, that we might call "Christ syncretism" to use Jesus as a means for

the unification of world religions. It should also be noticed that this plan is not new. Gnostics and Manicheans also proposed it. In the New-Age religious climate, syncretism takes the form of "holism," or "wholism." Religious "holism" professes that *All is One*. There is no distinction between creation and created reality, between humans and nature, between humans and God: such distinctions are illusions. The Ultimate Principle may assume several material and concrete appearances in history. These manifestations are not the *real*, rather they are just an illusory phenomenon, having a mere symbolic value. True revelation cannot be expressed in history, therefore all historical religious expressions have the same limited value. These manifestations go by many names. No one can claim to represent the truth in an exclusive way.

Some critics of inter-religious dialogue see it as a road to relativism, with the risk of undermining not only the absolute value of Christianity but also the need for missionary work and conversion to Christ. In the worst of the scenarios described by critics, inter-religious dialogue is depicted as a constituent element of religious pluralism and modern syncretic tendencies, a form of modern relativism and the product of the failure of ideological certainties.

Objectively speaking, the dilemmas between dialogue and mission seem to have no solution. I am of the belief that in a very important sense there is an irreconcilable divergence between dialogue and proclamation. Inter-religious dialogue cannot shrink from the judgments put forward by the cross of Christ nor from the judgment, which the cross of Christ lays down. There is a deadline after which the Crucified Christ can no longer be engaged in dialogue. The scandal and the foolishness of the Cross take precedence over the claims of dialogue. But this does not denote that this is the end of dialogue, or that it is an impossible and useless undertaking. It has merely shown its limits, just as all religious activities and theological discussions have their limits. Dialogue is both possible and necessary, because it is not held between abstract systems and religious theories but among flesh and blood believers.

True dialogue rejected the temptation of syncretism, relativism, and religious pluralism. In the postmodern era Christianity cannot be accredited as the true religion in the public forum. To consider Christianity as true or false is an equally indifferent option, which enjoys the same irrelevant plausibility. The postmodernists have given up the search for universal and objective truth. They are convinced that there is nothing more to find than a host of conflict-

ing interpretations or an infinity of linguistically created worlds. As Lyotard has expressed it: "We deliver no message, we bear no truth, bring no revelation, and we do not speak for those who remain silent." The decline of truth is best described in the successful "post-modern" novel of Umberto Eco *The Name of the Rose*, "The mission of those who love mankind is to make people laugh at the truth, to make the truth laugh, because the only truth lies in learning to free ourselves from the insane passion for the truth."

Inter-religious dialogue cannot fall into the postmodern trap. Those participating in inter-religious dialogue must neither relinquish nor deflate their personal identity. Such behavior could give rise to a sense of personal insecurity and even of insecurity regarding what one has to offer. It could even be an obstacle to receiving fully what others have to offer. Dialogue presupposes humility and a deep awareness of one's own faith.

The Catholic Church has issued several strong pronouncements in favor of dialogue. These documents affirm that the Church's mission of evangelization comprises various activities, including dialogue and proclamation. These two activities are distinct, each possessing its own statute and enjoying its own value. Proclamation naturally constitutes the foundation, the center and summit of evangelization, since the knowledge of Jesus Christ is the aim at which the entire evangelizing mission of the Church is directed. Other religions are viewed with great open-mindedness: their adherents are saved by Christ not in spite of their religion, but through the faithful practice of that religion, and, in some wondrous manner, precisely by virtue of that religion.