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The Soul and Buddha-Nature in Jesuit–Buddhist Debates in the Late Ming Fujian–Zhejiang Regions

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Abstract: The Jesuit missionary in Fujian, Giulio Aleni, ingeniously integrated Christian teaching concerning the soul into the traditional Chinese understanding of human nature. He adeptly reconciled the Christian notion of the soul, created by God, with the neo-Confucian belief in human nature bestowed by heaven. However, during the late Ming period, Chinese Buddhist thinkers held a contrasting perspective rooted in the Buddha-nature theory. According to this theory, Buddha-nature is intrinsic to every sentient being, devoid of a Creator. This fundamental discord in the understanding of human nature sparked intense debates between Jesuit missionaries and Buddhists in the Fujian–Zhejiang regions. These debates probed intricate themes, ranging from the ontological origin of nature to the associated soteriology surrounding human nature, as well as the hierarchical relationships between humans and other sentient beings.

Keywords: human nature; soul; Buddha-nature; nature bestowed by heaven

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1. The Philosophical Background: Giulio Aleni's Doctrine of the Soul in Contrast to the Chinese Buddhist Theory of Buddha-Nature

Beginning with the arrival of Jesuit missionaries in China during the late Ming dynasty to spread Christianity, figures such as Michele Ruggieri 羅明堅 (1543–1607) and Matteo Ricci 利馬竇 (1552–1610) launched attacks on Chinese Buddhism (Cf. Meynard et al. 2018, pp. 12–16). Under the guidance of missionaries, local Chinese Catholics such as Xu Guangqi 徐光啟 also vigorously attacked Buddhism. Initially, the Buddhist community in late Ming China only offered sporadic rebuttals against attacks from Catholicism. Examples include the debate between Xuelang Hongen 雪浪洪恩 (1545–1608) and Matteo Ricci in 1599 in Nanjing and the exchange of letters between Yu Chunxi 虞淳熙 (1553–1621) and Matteo Ricci. Yunqi Zhuhong 雲棲株宏 (1535–1615) was the first prominent monk to openly criticize Christianity and defend Buddhist doctrines. In the year following his death (1616), Shen Que 沈潅, the Nanjing Ministry of Rites, initiated the "Nanjing case against the Christians" 南京教案. Subsequently, the center of Catholic missionary activities shifted from Nanjing to Hangzhou. Around the same time, the Jesuit missionary Giulio Aleni 艾儒略 (1582–1649) achieved success in Fujian until the outbreak of the "Fujian case against the Christians" 福建教案 in 1637 (Cf. Kern 1992; Wu 2019).

In the Ming dynasty, Fujian and Zhejiang, regions where Buddhism had already flourished, experienced an intense phase of debate between Catholicism and Buddhism. Monks and lay Buddhists from Fujian and Zhejiang actively countered the attacks by Jesuit missionaries. In 1639/1640, their responses were compiled into the *Sheng chao po xie ji* 聖朝破邪集 (*Collection Against Heresy in Current Imperial Dynasty*). The treatises in this collection primarily originated from two Buddhist lineages: the Pure Land school represented by Yunqi Zhuhong and his disciples Yu Chunxi and Xu Dashou 許大受; and the Linji 臨濟 Chan school, represented by Miyun Yuanwu 密雲圓悟 (1566–1642), Feiyin Tongrong 費隱通容 (1593–1661), and others. Among them, *Sheng chao zuo pi* 聖朝佐闢 by Xu Dashou is the longest apologetic thesis in this collection.[1] Later, Ouyi Zhixu 藕益智旭 (1599–1655), active in Zhejiang and Fujian, also joined the debate, and his work, *Pi xie ji* 闢邪集 (Collection Against Evil), was published in 1643.

In the Catholic camp during this period, the prominent figure Giulio Aleni 艾儒略 received support from Donglin Faction東林黨 member Ye Xianggao 葉向高, who facilitated his missionary activities in Fujian. Giulio Aleni adopted Matteo Ricci's strategy of engaging with Confucianism while criticizing Buddhism and Daoism. Prior to the "Fujian case against the Christians", he published fifteen books in Fuzhou 福州, including *San shan lun xue ji* 三山論學記 (*Records on the Discussion of Knowledge in Three Mountains*), *Wan wu zhen yuan* 萬物真原 (*True Origin of All Things*), and *Ji he yao fa* 幾何要法 (*Essentials of Geometry*), etc. Additionally, the words and deeds of Jesuit missionaries Giulio Aleni, Andrius Rudamina 盧安德, Bento de Matos 林本篤, and Simão da Cunha 瞿西滿 during their mission in Fujian from 1630 to 1640 were recorded and published by Li Jiubiao 李九標 (?—1646?) as *Kou duo ri chao* 口鐸日抄 (the first four volumes were published in 1633 followed by the complete eight volumes in 1640). This publication roughly coincides with the era of the creation of the aforementioned *Sheng chao po xie ji*, and there is also geographical overlap.[2]

In the following parts of this article, an in-depth exploration is undertaken to dissect the multifaceted debates that transpired between the Jesuit missionaries and the Chinese Buddhists during this period, centering around the themes of the soul[3] and Buddha-nature (Skt. *buddha-dhātu*, Ch. *fo xing* 佛性). These themes unfold within the same discourse pertaining to human nature, wherein we scrutinize not only the salient focal points of contention but also delve into the intricate intellectual backgrounds of both sides.

Previous studies have revealed that Giulio Aleni creatively used "nature" (*xing* 性) integrating Catholic theology and philosophy into neo-Confucian thought. For instance, Lin Yuehui's article highlights Giulio Aleni's work, *Xing xue cu shu* 性學觕述 (*A Brief Introduction to the Study of Human Nature*), which uses the neo-Confucian concept of "nature" to explain the Catholic notion of "soul" (*anima*) (Lin 2020, pp. 57–74). Here, this study would like to emphasize that one of the purposes of equating the concept of *xing* to the Catholic idea of the "soul" is to differentiate the soul from the conventional understanding of spirit (*hun* 魂) in China. In the *San shan lun xue ji*, Ye Xianggao posed the following questions to Giulio Aleni:

> The goodness and evil in people are not equal, and rewards and punishments in this life may not be completed; it is necessary to establish them after death. However, some argue that the human spirit is nothing more than refined vital energy. When the vital energy gathers, there is life; when it disperses, life ceases. How can there be rewards and punishments after death? Even if the vital energy of a person remains undispersed, with no physical form, where would the experiences of joy or suffering occur? And where would rewards and punishments be applied?[4]

Ye assumes that the existence of the spirit is a necessary condition for the retribution of good and evil, but Confucianism generally does not concern the question of what happens after death, and it typically does not separate the spirit and matter. According to the mainstream perspective from thinkers such as Zhang Zai 張載 to Zhu Xi 朱熹, all things are seen as variations of the gathering and dispersing of *qi* 氣, the vital energy.[5] In the context of Song-Ming neo-Confucianism, the spirit is also understood as being composed of fine vital energy (*jing qi* 精氣). Life is believed to arise when energy converges and ceases when energy disperses, with no consideration for rewards or punishments *post-mortem*.

In response, Aleni regarded the vital energy, *qi*, as the air in four elements (including earth, water, fire, and air), and he specifically emphasized that the soul is not the air involved in respiration.[6] However, this explanation did not satisfy Ye, and he further proposed, "The human soul is indeed not the air of respiration but may be identical with the fine vital energy of a person." (人魂非呼吸之氣固矣，然或與人精氣為一) which is according to the traditional understanding of the spirit within the context of Song-Ming neo-Confucianism. In reply to this, Aleni explained as follows: if we understand the soul as vital energy, a form of life-sustaining force, then, according to this perspective, one should possess greater talent and intelligence when young, as vitality is stronger during youth.

As a person ages, however, their insights are expected to weaken along with the decline of vital energy. Nevertheless, we observe that individuals often gain enhanced insights as they age. Therefore, the soul cannot be equated with vital energy.[7] In fact, Aleni's argument carries a presumption that cognitive activities are led by the soul, as in the Western tradition where the mind and soul are unified. However, this assumption is absent in the Chinese intellectual tradition, where cognitive activities are attributed to the mind (*xin* 心), and the role of the spirit is merely to sustain life processes.

To bridge the gaps in understanding the concept of the soul between Western and Eastern perspectives, Giulio Aleni endeavored to connect the soul, received from God, with the Confucian theory of human nature. As Song Gang points out, Zhu Xi equates *xing* 性 (nature) with *li* 理 (principle), an absolutely good entity in contrast to the impure, unstable *qi* 氣 (vital energy). Through his discussions with Yang Tingyun 楊廷筠 in Hangzhou, Ye Xianggao in Fuzhou, Aleni realized that the term *xing* 性 (nature) has profound connotations in Confucianism, and continually promoted the correspondence between Christianity and Confucianism on the subject of human nature. Aleni directly equated the Western notion of the "soul" with the Confucian concept of "nature commanded by heaven" (*tian ming zhi xing* 天命之性), and he says that the Lord with His highest good endows man with a good nature at birth. However, three factors cause the emergence of evil: the original sin that taints man's good nature, the inherited vital energy (*bingqi* 禀氣) from parents, and social customs in different places (cf. Song 2018, pp. 217–19).

Aleni intentionally avoids the discrepancies between the soul and *xing*. Ames pinpoints that the relationship between *renxing* 人性, *tian*天, and "command" (*ming* 命) must not be construed in an altogether deterministic manner. *Tian*, as the source of *xing*, does not diminish human self-determination. Human beings do not come from *tian* as finished products but rather learn from tradition to shape themselves and contribute to *tian*. Human beings both receive from and contribute to *tian*. Unlike in Western thought, where the concept of God and external originative principles shape human existence, Confucianism highlights the co-creative role of individuals in defining what it means to be human. This nuanced understanding empowers individuals to shape their own destinies and contribute to the ongoing development of *tian* (Ames 2021, pp. 400–1).

However, the Jesuit missionaries in Fujian adopted Aleni's approach, integrating Confucianism's human nature theory to elucidate the concept of the soul. They asserted that the souls created by God are initially equal in acuity, and any disparities that arise do so from variations in the clarity and turbidity of the received vital energy. For instance, in a sermon, Bento de Matos remarked, "Hence, concerning the essence of the soul, originally, each possesses the faculties of memory and understanding. However, those endowed with turbid vital energy will inevitably have dull faculties of memory and understanding" (*Kou duo ri chao* 4:87). The Jesuit missionaries also attributed the individual differences in gender, abilities, and destiny to the "nature made of vital energy" (*qi zhi zhi xing* 氣質之性).

In stark contrast to his favorable disposition toward the Confucian interpretation of nature, Giulio Aleni strongly disapproved and was critical of the Buddhist understanding:

> The human mind, nature, and life are inherently bestowed by God. While Buddhism places emphasis on the enlightenment of the mind and the realization of nature, one should initially delve into understanding how God, the Supreme Lord, has graciously endowed humanity. How can one justify being human without acknowledging the Creator's benevolence? In this context, the knowledge of mind-nature finds its fundamental origin and ultimate purpose. However, when Buddhism exclusively advocates the vastness and limitlessness of Buddha-nature, it effectively erases the profound fundament and the great origin, thus falling short in guiding people. In such a case, how can the mind be enlightened, and the nature truly realized?[8]

The idea that God creates the soul was strongly opposed in late Ming Buddhism, and this contention can be testified in many places in the debates between Matteo Ricci and prominent Buddhist thinkers. For example, Matteo Ricci elucidated on the intangi-

ble nature of the soul in his work *Tian zhu shi yi* 天主實義 (*The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven*) when he was questioned about how the universe could truly accommodate so many souls.[9] Ouyi Zhixu, in his treatise "Tian xue zai zheng" 天學再徵 ("Further Inquiries into the Catholic Doctrines"), agreed with the intangible feature of the soul/spirit, using the term *shen* 神 from Chinese Buddhist texts to refer to the spirit. However, he challenged the Catholic notion of the soul created by God by arguing that, since the soul is intangible, it should not undergo creation and destruction, nor should it have a quantifiable number. Therefore, the idea of God creating the individual soul is unfounded.[10]

The Linji Chan master Miyun Yuanwu also criticized the idea that the soul is created by God, and he identifies the soul with the traditional Chinese Buddhist concept of *shi shen* 識神 (consciousness-spirit):

> Moreover, to assert that, "One finds tranquility in the knowledge that their soul originates from God; this constitutes a complete and true teaching." We need not assert whether such a claim is foolish or cleverly calculated. Even if presented convincingly as the foundation of a doctrine, it cannot function as a guide, let alone bring about the world's rescue and people's transformation. Why? Since the "soul" serves as a significant indicator of life and death, our revered sages aptly designate it as "consciousness-spirit", while the common people, often lacking clarity, mistakenly perceive it as "soul". With this foundation, from this perspective, the teachings (of Jesuits) should be comprehended … The nature remains immutable from the outset, whereas the soul is susceptible to fluctuations.[11]

The background of this critique is also very complex. Indeed, Yuanwu would not readily embrace the correlation posited between the Christian conceptualization of the "soul" and the unchangeable nature. Like Ouyi Zhixu, he draws a parallel between the notion of the soul and the Chinese Buddhist concept of *shi shen* (consciousness-spirit), specifically alluding to Ālayavijñāna. The Ālayavijñāna literally means "storehouse consciousness", where the seeds (*bīja*) of all the *dharma* and *karma* are preserved. Based on those *dharma*s, the phenomenal world, both inner and outer, is composed; and driven by karmic force, the process of transmigration continues. The Ālayavijñāna, serving as a good substitute for "self" (*ātman*) or soul, pervades the entire body during life, withdraws from the body at the time of death, and carries the complete karmic records to the next rebirth. From the view of Yuanwu, the Ālayavijñāna, residing within the domain of mutable phenomena or function, stands in contrast to the "nature", which epitomizes the unalterable essence, the Buddha-nature inherent in all sentient beings. This leads to the question of how, from the perspective of Chinese Buddhist doctrine, one should understand the relationship between the Buddha-nature and the Ālayavijñāna.

In early Indian Buddhism, the doctrine of "no-self" (*anātman*) inherently opposed the notion of a soul, which functions as the agent of transmigration (*saṃsāra*) in the Brahman tradition. Buddhists contend that cognitive and emotional activities are carried out by the mind/consciousness (*citta/vijñāna*) and mental factors (*caitasika*), without the function of the soul. However, determining the entity serving as the subject bearing karmic consequences and undergoing transmigration has become a challenging issue. Most Abhidharmic schools adhered to the belief in the transmission of karmic forces between this life and the next life without positing a continuous subject. Nevertheless, such concepts did not find unanimous acceptance in the early propagation of Buddhism in China.

In pre-Qin periods, the term *shen* refers specifically to human ancestors on the bronze inscriptions and also comes to mean "life" and "spirit" in the pre-Qin classics. When *qi* takes form, *shen*, the spirit, is born (Ames 2021, p. 195). Furthermore, under the influence of the concept of transmigration from Indian Buddhism, from the second to the sixth centuries CE in China, the concept of *shen* (the spirit) consistently held the position as the subject of transmigration in Chinese Buddhist texts. In certain Buddhist apologetic literature, one can discern intense debates between pro-Buddhist thinkers (such as Huiyuan 慧遠, Zongbing 宗炳, Xiao Ziliang 蕭子良, Emperor Wu of Liang 梁武帝, etc.) advocating the perspective that "the *shen* is immortal" (*shen bu mie lun* 神不滅論) and anti-Buddhist

thinkers (including Fan Zhen 范縝, He Chengtian 何承天, etc.) asserting that "the *shen* is mortal" (*shen mie lun* 神滅論). Parallel to the challenges encountered by Jesuit missionaries, early Chinese Buddhists also confronted the absence of an absolute dichotomy between the spirit and the body in traditional Chinese thought, such as Confucianism and Daoism. Both were perceived as composed of the same vital energy, *qi*, with the only distinction being that the spirit consisted of clear *qi* while the body was constituted by turbid *qi*. However, in explaining the concept of transmigration and the introduction of *karma* (action) from India, early Chinese Buddhists posited that the *shen* is immortal, not composed of *qi*, and entirely distinct from the body. At the termination of a life, the body's *qi* disperses, but the *shen*, the immortal spirit, persists and moves on to the next life. However, this notion of *shen* contradicted the 'no-self' doctrine inherent in early Indian Buddhism. As the Chinese Buddhist community gained increased familiarity with Indian Buddhist doctrine, the role of *shen* became subject to skepticism. Simultaneously, during this period, the translation of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra* 大般涅槃經was underway. The Buddha-nature/Tathāgatagarbha theory from India resonated with Chinese Buddhists.[12] Tathāgatagarbha (embryo of the tathāgatas) or Buddha-nature thought seeks to answer the question of why ignorant beings are able to become enlightened by suggesting that this capacity is something innate in the minds of all sentient beings, which has become concealed by adventitious afflictions that are extrinsic to the mind.[13] Subsequently translated texts related to Tathāgatagarbha, such as the *Laṅkāvatāra-sūtra* (*lengjia jing* 楞伽經), *Ratnagotravibhaga* (*baoxing lun*寶性論), show the combination of Tathāgatagarbha with Yogācāra theory. In *Laṅkāvatāra-sūtra*, the Tathāgatagarbha is clearly identified with Ālayavijñāna (storehouse consciousness), the central concept in the Yogācāra theory. Additionally, the *Ratnagotravibhaga* uses traditional Yogācāra categories for analysis, although Ālayavijñāna does not occur in this treatise. These texts further influenced the composition of *Dasheng qixin lun* (大乘起信論, Treatise on the Awakening of Faith According to the Mahāyāna). In *Dasheng qixin lun*, the mind is, on the one hand, subject to production and cessation (which the treatise identifies with Ālayavijñāna), on the other hand, it remains always grounded on the mind of true thusness (*zhenru* 真如) (which the treatise identifies with Tathāgatagarbha). Therefore, the mind is simultaneously deluded and enlightened. This distinction between this enlightened essence of the mind as "true thusness" and its various temporal manifestations as "production and cessation" is also described in terms of "essence" (*ti* 體) and "function" (*yong* 用).[14]

The amalgamation between Tathāgatagarbha/Buddha-nature and Ālayavijñāna significantly shaped the development of the theory of mind-nature in Chinese Buddhism, asserting that the external Ālayavijñāna serves as the fundament of the entire world, fraught with suffering and illusion, while its internal essence embodies the pure Tathāgatagarbha/Buddha-nature. This idea generally replaced the role of *shen* in Chinese Buddhist literature; thus, late Ming Buddhist thinkers such as Miyun Yuanwu also name it *shi shen* (consciousness-spirit).

Therefore, according to the viewpoint of Yuanwu, the Catholic conception of the soul, endowed with cognitive capacities and playing a pivotal role in matters of life and death, is considered solely as the Ālayavijñāna, not the immutable essence of the mind—the Buddha-nature. Noteworthy is the rejection by the late Ming Buddhist thinkers of the concept of an external, eternal God; they maintain that only the inner essence remains pure and eternally unchanging.

Within this intellectual milieu, the debates between Jesuit missionaries and Chinese Buddhist thinkers on matters concerning the soul/nature are centered on the following divergent perspectives: (1) nature bestowed by heaven as opposed to the inherent spiritual nature; (2) the love of God versus the awakening of inherent nature; and (3) the three kinds of souls in contrast to the unity of the inherent nature. Subsequently, we delve into each of these topics individually in the following sections.

2. Nature bestowed by Heaven in Contrast to Inherent Spiritual Nature

In discussing the characteristics of God and His role in the creation of the soul, Giulio Aleni, in *Xing xue cu shu*, underscores the notion that material beings can be shaped based on raw materials, but the soul of an individual can only be a creation exclusive to the all-powerful Creator, characterized by boundlessness and omnipotence. As he states, "The spiritual essence of humans belongs to the formless divine body; how could it be brought forth by anything else? Only the Almighty Creator has the power to shape and bestow it upon humanity."[15] However, the Buddhist layman Xu Dashou criticized the Jesuits' claim that the soul is created by God. His critique starts with the following text, unfolding in the form of a dialogue with Giulio Aleni:

> I once queried the foreigner Aleni, stating, "Your teachings posit that the human soul, whether virtuous and ascending to heaven, or sinful and descending to hell, does not return. However, the sensitive souls of birds and beasts are said to be extinguished without transmigration. In that case, the intermediate realm (between heaven and hell) for human beings will be vacant. Then, how do you account for our existence?" To this, Aleni responded, "Do you consider the human soul to be ancient? They are all newly created by God. The Creator continuously begets life, so even without a cycle of transmigration, it does not impede the multitude of beings. In reality, there is no concept akin to the Buddhist notion of past lives."[16]

In this passage, Xu Dashou and Giulio Aleni compare the Buddhist concept of transmigration with the Catholic belief in God creating the soul. Xu's initial critique addresses the individual diversity in the process of creation of the soul: according to the doctrine of transmigration, individual differences are connected to the karmic forces from past lives. If individual souls are created ex nihilo by God, this cannot explain the vast diversity in human destiny, including factors such as poverty and wealth, nobility and humility, longevity, and premature death. In Buddhism, karmic forces from past lives influence one's destiny in this life. In response to this question, Giulio Aleni, drawing on the teachings of neo-Confucianism regarding human nature, associates the differences in human destiny with the qualities of vital energy bestowed upon everyone. This triggers Xu's second critique: he astutely emphasizes the proposition that integrating Confucianism's conception of human nature will diminish the omnipresence of the Creator. Within the Confucian framework, it is suggested that the sage is subject to limitations, and even heaven and earth (paralleling the Creator in the Chinese tradition) are considered deficient. Thus, the process of creation is associated with the influence of vital energy. In stark contrast, Christian doctrine vehemently posits that God, in His essence, is devoid of limitations, and the entirety of existence in heaven and earth emanates from His creative prowess. Nonetheless, Xu argues that the role of vital energy as an intermediary in the creative process implies a nuanced limitation to God's omnipotence.[17] In this debate, Xu acutely revealed the inherent contradiction within the combination of the neo-Confucian concept of *xing* and the Catholic concept of soul.

Furthermore, the Chan master Miyun Yuanwu presents yet another representative perspective that challenges the assertion of God creating the soul and God's omnipotence. Initially, he introduces a probing inquiry, questioning whether God possesses a soul. The logical corollaries of this query unfold with intriguing implications: if God is devoid of a soul, then His existence is nullified; conversely, if God is endowed with a soul, the souls emanating from Him, particularly human souls, should inherently mirror the perfection of God's own soul. However, a perplexing paradox emerges. If God, in addition to being omnipotent, embodies perfect goodness, the persistence of such distinctions raises a compelling quandary. Miyun Yuanwu queries why, in a realm governed by an ostensibly all-powerful and all-good deity, inequalities among individuals are not only permitted but seemingly fostered, leading to conflicts and competition. In essence, the enigma that surfaces is why, if God possesses unparalleled power and goodness, He tolerates and even contributes to the manifestation of human inequality.[18] Interestingly, Yuanwu, likely

without foreknowledge, utilized the Omnipotence Paradox to deconstruct the theological assertion positing the divine creation of the soul, and he asserted that the teachings of Buddha, elucidating that all sentient beings inherently possess the Buddha-nature, reflects a religion characterized by universal compassion and authentic justice.[19]

Considering the contrasting perspectives held by Buddhist monks and Jesuit missionaries during the late Ming period in the Fujian–Zhejiang regions, it becomes apparent that they delved into the debates between the two philosophical considerations of human essence, the Buddha-nature and the soul. Jesuit missionary Giulio Aleni employed the Confucian concept of "the nature bestowed/commanded by God" as a foundation for elucidating the creation of souls by God. In contrast, Xu Dashou and Miyun Yuanwu vehemently contested the discourse on the Creator's omnipotence and ultimate goodness. They posited that human nature is not a creation of the Creator, but rather an intrinsic spiritual essence inherent in all sentient beings.

3. The Love of God in Contrast to the Awakening to Inherent Nature

Due to divergent interpretations concerning the genesis of human nature, regarding the religious praxis and soteriological theory, Catholicism accentuates salvation wrought through the benevolence of God, whereas Chinese Buddhism assigns particular significance to the awakening of one's intrinsic nature.

Catholicism underscores the nurturing of humanity through the love of God, with the most representative ritual being the reception of the Holy Eucharist. In this context, the term "Love of God" pertains to the benevolence of God (Grk. *theophilos*). In the *Kou duo ri chao*, while engaged in missionary work in Fujian, Bento de Matos elucidated the significance of receiving the Holy Eucharist to the Chinese congregation, underscoring the connection between believers and God forged through this sacrament. Central to Catholicism, this ritual symbolizes the profound act of partaking in the body and blood of Christ, embodying the love and sustenance generously bestowed by God upon humanity. As the Jesuit Bento de Matos preached before the Holy Eucharist, "Love is what God bestows upon us. When people love each other, they exchange gifts to signify their love. Now, God's love for us not only preserves and nurtures us daily but also grants us His most sacred and precious body. How great is this love?"[20]

However, in *Sheng chao po xie ji*, Xu Dashou sharply presents the following critique: "Today they seek God for sustenance, and tomorrow they ask God to forgive debts. Throughout day and night, they offer prayers and praises, exhausting the deity with bizarre rituals. Yet, regardless of our souls/spirits being cast between seeking sacrament and avoiding calamities, we remain unable to organize ourselves."[21] Xu Dashou argued that seeking sustenance and avoiding calamities in Catholicism will render us "unable to organize ourselves", which aligns with Lu Jiuyuan's 陸九淵 idea of "putting in order the spirit and taking charge of ourselves" 收拾精神，自作主宰, opposing the Catholic emphasis on human powerlessness in self-salvation and the need for external intervention, such as receiving the Eucharist and seeking absolution.

Similarly, Chan master Feiyin Tongrong criticizes Matteo Ricci for not recognizing the innate nature and pursuing external goals. He argues that Ricci recklessly assumes the existence of a God outside the human mind to admire and suggests practicing devotion to this external God, deviating from one's essential nature and seeking outwardly.[22] Thus, from the perspective of Chinese Buddhists, Jesuit missionaries and Buddhism harbored disparate perspectives regarding human nature, resulting in discernible divergences in their religious practice and redemption doctrines. The Jesuit missionaries underscored the conviction that, given the creation of the soul by God, human practice invariably entails the pursuit of salvation from God, wherein the key to redemption lies in God's benevolent love. In contrast, Buddhism accentuates the notion that all sentient beings inherently possess a Buddha-nature. Consequently, in practical terms, the emphasis lies on awakening to this innate nature rather than seeking external sources for spiritual fulfillment.

The Jesuit missionaries also underscore the Love for God (Grk. *philotheos*) as the central theme of their religious praxis when elucidating the faculties of the individual soul. During missionary work in Fujian, Giulio Aleni engaged in discussions with a Chinese believer regarding the three faculties of the soul (3:69):

> … He (the Chinese believer) asked again, saying, "The soul has three functions: memory, understanding, and love/desire. I dare to ask which one can achieve merit?" The priest (Giulio Aleni) replied, "It is indeed love." He asked, "Why is that?" The priest replied, "Can a person have knowledge of God and yet not be moved by love and admiration? In that case, memory and understanding are not sufficient for merit. However, someone may be deficient in memory and understanding, yet be fervent in their love and admiration for God. In this case, the emotion of love surpasses the capacities of memory and understanding and becomes the treasury of merit."[23]

It is known that in 1624, the Jesuit missionary Francesco Sambiasi 畢方濟 and Xu Guangqi 徐光啟 published a book named *Ling yan li shao* 靈言蠡勺, which is the first systematic introduction of Aristotle's theory of the soul into China. As Tian Shufeng (Tian 2016) cites, this book also includes the three faculties of the soul: memory (*jihan* 記含), understanding (*mingwu* 明悟), and love (*aimu* 愛慕), which should be attributed to Augustine rather than Aristotle. According to the Augustinian tradition, the three internal faculties of reason, memory (*memoria*), understanding (*intellectus*), and will (*voluntas*) represent the trinity of God within human beings, or we can say God imitates himself to create the rational soul (Tian 2016, pp. 142–46). However, Augustine believes that the three faculties of the soul have equal status since they belong to the same substance (the soul), while *Ling yan li shao*, ascribes greater significance to the will compared to the other faculties. Meynard has identified that *Ling yan li shao* was deeply influenced by the contents in the *Conimbricenses*, and the text also skillfully borrows two Confucian concepts, benevolence (*ren* 仁) and wisdom (*zhi* 智), to explain that the will (paralleling benevolence) is superior to understanding (akin to wisdom). Furthermore, *Ling yan li shao* posits a hierarchical structure within the will, the natural will, the emotional will, and the rational will. The latter contains the love for supreme good, namely God (Meynard 2019, pp. 130–31). Apparently, Giulio Aleni explains the faculties of the soul based on *Ling yan li shao* and, following Francesco Sambiasi, he emphasizes the importance of love for God in the religious praxis for achieving merit, considering it to be superior to memory and understanding.

In contrast, Chinese Buddhists emphasize that awakening or comprehending one's original nature (悟本性) represents the religious praxis leading to achievement. Let us now return to Feiyin Tongrong's critique of Matteo Ricci:

> (Ricci) initially does not know what is inherently possessed by everyone, referred to as root (*ben* 本), original nature (*ben xing* 本性), the grand path, as well as from which the form originates, both ancient and contemporary sages have devoted themselves to understanding this. Therefore, by following this path, the people can be enlightened, and when the commoners are at peace, the ruler's governance is effective.[24]

Feiyin Tongrong emphasizes the role of comprehending one's inherent nature for achievement. Here he uses Chinese words such as *ben* or *ben xing*, which are also utilized by Confucians as concepts for human nature (Ames 2021, p. 4), and illustrates the awakening of inherent nature by referencing the words of the Confucian sage Mengzi 孟子, "Form and appearance are given by heaven. But only the sage can truly embody his inherent qualities." (形色天性也，惟聖人然後可以踐形) He asserts that embodying one's inherent qualities involves adhering to the inherent principle of one's true nature, engaging in thorough, direct, and silent practice in alignment with this inherent nature (就其本體當然之理，全直默踐). This signifies the unity of mind and body in the moral practice. The sage thus transcends life and death, connects with the deity, and endures through the ages without erosion.[25] Paralleling the Confucian doctrine from this perspective, the Chan Buddhist discourse, cen-

tered on the eradication of the division between body and mind, transcends mere philosophical comprehension of non-duality; rather, it intricately intertwines with a method of religious practice that leverages the synergistic engagement of both body and mind to actualize the innate essence within.

4. The Three Types of Soul and the Unity of the Inherent Nature

Aristotle distinguishes in the *De anima* three main types of souls: the nutritive soul, the sensitive soul, and the rational soul, corresponding to plants, animals, and human beings, respectively. He categorizes the three types of souls into three levels, from lowest to highest. The lowest is the "nutritive soul" intrinsic to all plants, with functions such as nutrition, growth, and reproduction. The middle level is the "sensitive soul" intrinsic to all animals; beyond the nutritive soul, it possesses the functions of nutrition, growth, and reproduction, but its primary functions include sensation, desire, and movement. The highest level is the "rational soul", unique to human beings; in addition to the functions of the nutritive and sensitive souls, the human soul's distinctive primary function is reasoning. This aligns with the accounts in the book *Ling yan li shao* (published in 1624),[26] as discussed previously, marking the first systematic introduction of Aristotle's understanding of the soul. However, as early as 1603, in the *Tian zhu shi yi*, specifically in its third section titled "On the Immortality of the Human Soul and the Great Differences between Humans and Beasts" 論人魂不滅大異禽獸, Matteo Ricci articulates the three types of souls: the nutritive soul (*sheng hun* 生魂), the sensitive soul (*jue hun* 覺魂), and the spiritual soul (*ling hun* 靈魂). Ricci further notes that the spiritual soul combines (the faculties of) the nutritive soul and sensitive soul. It nurtures human growth, enables perception of the world, and endows humans with deduction, reasoning, and understanding. Even though the human body may die, the soul does not perish, as it endures eternally.[27]

Moreover, Giulio Aleni also follows Aristotle's categorization of souls, and he postulates that the nutritive soul within plants and the sensitive soul within animals are inherently enrooted in substance, while the human soul transcends such confinement. In contrast, the human soul assumes the status of a mysterious entity (*shen miao zhi ti* 神妙之體), unrestricted by form or substance, experiencing no alteration in its aggregation or dispersion. Despite its initial association with the human body, the human soul does not necessarily succumb to it, encapsulating the notion of having a beginning but no end.[28] Here, the idea of being created by God signifies the "beginning". Following physical demise, the soul does not undergo annihilation but rather awaits a final judgment, thereby embodying the concept of "having no end".

As discussed earlier, Giulio Aleni draws a distinction between the human soul and vital energy. He interprets the Catholic human soul, created by God, as aligning with the Confucian concept of "nature bestowed by heaven." In contrast, Ricci does not directly equate nature and the soul; instead, he views the soul as more fundamental than nature. According to Ricci, "There is initially a fundamental soul, and then there is a fundamental nature. With the fundamental nature, one is determined within a species. Once determined within the species, then one takes on a particular form."[29] Giulio Aleni intricately amalgamates the neo-Confucian tenet of "nature bestowed by Heaven" with the Christian concept of the human soul, endeavoring to assimilate metaphysical implications from this autochthonous Chinese notion. His objective is to articulate that the soul transcends a mere corporeal composition of *qi*. In this nuanced perspective, both the nutritive soul and the conscious soul, entwined with the material substrate, are posited to be intricately constituted by *qi*.

In contrast to Jesuits, within the Chinese Buddhist paradigm, anchored in the premise of "all things possessing Buddha-nature", a doctrinal egalitarianism prevails, positing the fundamental equality of all sentient beings in their inherent nature. In *Sheng chao po xie ji*, Xu Dashou summarizes the Jesuits' theory of the three kinds of souls as follows:

> Matteo Ricci and other foreigners such as Giulio Aleni and Nicholas Longobardi discuss the nature (*xing*) in a different way. They assert that the natures are not

> the same; the natures of birds and beasts have no previous life, and there will be no future life … Our human nature also has no previous life but an eternal future life. Why? Because the human soul is created by God, and after creation, the retribution of joy and suffering is endless. Only the nature of God is born in the extreme past, pervades the extreme future, and has no beginning or end. Why? God can create everything, and there is nothing that can create God. It is also stated that what is above can encompass what is below, so birds and beasts have mixed souls of plants and trees, human souls have mixed souls of birds and beasts, and God's soul has mixed souls of humans, birds, trees, and stones, and so on.[30]

Xu Dashou comments on Matteo Ricci, Giulio Aleni, and Nicholas Longobardi's concept of nature. In reality, Ricci and Longobardi did not strongly connect the theory of the soul with the theory of *xing*. Thus, Xu Dashou's critique should be directed primarily towards Giulio Aleni. After Xu summarizes the Jesuits' perspective that the higher-level soul contains the lower-level souls, he puts forth the argument that, according to the Jesuits, the souls of different species (beasts and birds) will vanish after this life, but only the human soul experiences suffering. In this case, as Xu argues, before the Jesuits arrived in China, no one would have had the opportunity to embrace Catholicism and ascend to heaven. Instead, everyone would enter hell, contrasting unfavorably with animals that do not face punishment since they have no afterlife. This would suggest an absurd conclusion that God's love for animals surpasses His love for humans.[31] Furthermore, the Chan master Feiyin Tongrong noted that the differentiated understanding of humans and animals would lead to a moral crisis of the indiscriminate killing of animals:

> Dividing animals and humans, emphasizing that animals lack a human soul and, thus, are meant only for consumption, leads to unbridled slaughter and a complete lack of compassion. This contradicts the teaching of our sage that "if one can understand human nature, one can understand the nature of all things". Moreover, when people already fall into delusion by dividing the human self into three souls, how much more misguided is it to claim that animals lack a soul (like a human), and allow unrestrained killing? Could this not be seen as a deepening of delusion within an already confused state?[32]

From this vantage point, Buddhism's critique of the proposition in Christian doctrine that "the soul has three kinds" (魂有三種) is fundamentally rooted in Buddhist egalitarianism. Buddhist thinkers assert that the souls of plants, trees, and animals should not be differentiated from the human soul. Although traditional Buddhist theory typically excludes plants, trees, and the natural environment from the category of sentient beings, the Tiantai school of Buddhism introduced the notion that "even plants also have Buddha-nature" (草木亦有佛性). Considering this perspective, the emphasis on the equality of the inherent nature of all beings in Buddhism stands in stark contrast to the concept of "the three types of souls" in Christianity.

5. Conclusions

The issue of human nature is a crucial theme in Chinese intellectual history. Giulio Aleni, a missionary in Fujian, incorporated the Christian doctrine of the soul into this framework, primarily in response to the traditional Chinese elites' understanding of the spirit as being made of fine vital energy. By reinterpreting the Christian concept of the human soul created by God as the "nature commanded by heaven" and attributing variations in individuality to the "nature made of vital energy", Giulio Aleni cleverly combined the doctrine of the soul with neo-Confucian views on human nature prevalent in the Song and Ming dynasties. However, within this realm, Chinese Buddhism had already undertaken extensive exploration, gradually forming a sophisticated metaphysical and soteriological system centered on the theory of Buddha-nature. Consequently, Jesuit missionaries and Buddhists in the Fujian–Zhejiang regions engaged in intense debates on the issue of human nature.

The debates at hand not only illuminate the nuanced comparisons of doctrinal tenets but also furnish an abundance of philosophical reservoirs conducive to fostering contemporary religious dialogue. In the quest for a greater comprehension of diverse religions, one must discern discrepancies within seeming similarities amidst their doctrines. Through analyzing the philosophical background of the debates, the discrepancies within the seeming parallels can be meticulously unveiled. In our case, both Western Christianity and Chinese Buddhism delve into the complex terrain of human nature, positing its inherent goodness. However, the divergence lies in the origin of this human nature: Chinese Buddhists assert that every sentient being holds a Buddha-nature, intrinsically pure and good, whereas Christianity maintains that human nature, crafted in the likeness of God, inherently possesses goodness. Additionally, divergent views on soteriology emerge due to discrepancies in the source of human nature, and thus, discussions revolve around the soteriology associated with such a nature—whether salvation is through the love of God or via the awakening to an inherent Buddha nature. Finally, although both traditions uphold the principle of equality in discussions of human nature, the views still differ: Christianity underscores the equality of individuals possessing rational souls, namely human beings, while Buddhism emphasizes the equality of all sentient beings.

Indeed, these historical debates should be identified as apologetic discourses, rather than religious dialogue. Each side in the discourse on human nature employs distinct terminologies, often rooted in disparate metaphysical traditions, rendering their reconciliation challenging. However, in religious dialogues, we sometimes superficially compare similar concepts, thereby disregarding the discrepancies in their theoretical frameworks. Nevertheless, a careful examination of the doctrinal background of religious debates can help us to juxtapose terms with vastly divergent connotations within a unified framework. This endeavor, in turn, enriches cross-cultural religious dialogue by fostering a mutual understanding of divergent theoretical presuppositions. Consequently, rather than seeking religious amalgamation, the primary aim of religious dialogue should lie in cultivating mutual understanding and embracing the distinctive theoretical postulates of each tradition. In fact, differentiation, rather than the opposite, can reduce the competitiveness among different religions, thereby facilitating their harmonious coexistence.

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Notes

1 Research on *Sheng chao zuo pi* by Xu Dashou is covered by Dudink (1993) and Meynard et al. (2018).

2 The studies related to *Kou duo ri chao* include works by Zürcher (2007) and Song (2018). The biography of Giulio Aleni is explored in works by Zürcher (1997a, 1997b) and Menegon (1993), while for a concise overview of Christian missionaries in Fujian, refer to Zürcher (1990) and Menegon (1997). One collection of theses (Lippiello and Malek 1997) is dedicated to the studies concerning Giulio Aleni.

3 In the realm of introducing the theory of the soul to the Chinese by Jesuits, Giulio Aleni's works garnered notable attention (Dong 2015; Lin 2020). Furthermore, *Xing xue cu shu* was translated into English by Meynard and Pan (2020). For an exploration of the earliest introduction of Aristotle's soul theory by Jesuit missionaries, see Tian (2016) and Meynard (2019, pp. 106–43).

4 *San shan lun xue ji*, p. 625: 人之善惡不齊，生前賞罰未盡，必在身後固宜。然或謂人之靈魂，乃精氣耳。氣聚則生，氣散則死，安見身後複有賞罰耶？縱人之靈氣，或有精爽不散者，形軀既無，苦樂何所受？賞罰何所施耶？

5 Ames (2021, p. 144) points out that, in thinking through *qi*, we must begin from the wholeness and transitory nature of experience. As is described by Tang Junyi, "in the minds of Chinese people, the cosmos has always been nothing more than a continuous stream, a kind of flow; all of the things and events of the cosmos are just a continuing process. And beyond this process there is not some other fixed substratum that supports it." (Tang 1991, vol. 11, p. 9).

6 Ibid., p. 625.

7 *San shan lun xue ji*, p. 626.

8 *San shan lun xue ji*, p. 612: 人心性命，原天主所賦也。佛以明心見性為宗，則當先發明天主所以為主，其賦於人者若何？吾之所以為人，不負造萬主者若何？心性之學，始有本原，始有歸著。今釋教獨揭佛心，廣大無際，抹煞大本大源，絕不導人歸向，則心於何明？性於何見？

9 *Tian zhu shi yi*, p. 282.

10 *Pi xie ji*, p. 50b.

11 *Sheng chao po xie ji*, p. 333a: 況謂"人之靈魂出自天主則有著落，方是大全真實之教。"無論其愚迷橫計，即一出言之表，立教之端，且不可為訓，而況其拯世而化人耶？何也？靈魂者蓋生死之大兆也，即我先聖呵為識神者，是亦即世間俗人罪夫，見事不清，詆為魂靈者是也。以此為端，以此為表，教可知矣……夫唯性始無變易，魂則有動搖。

12 Cf. Zhao (2023, pp. 130–36). The terms of Buddha-nature and Tathāgatagarbha (*rulai zang* 如來藏) are used as synonyms in the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra*.

13 Cf. the entry of Tathāgatagarbha in Buswell and Lopez (2014).

14 Cf. the entries of Ālayavijñāna, Tathāgatagarbha and *Dasheng qixin lun* of Buswell and Lopez (2014).

15 *Xing xue cu shu*, p. 256: 是以人之靈性既屬無形神體，豈他物之所能生哉？惟夫全能造物之主，乃能化成賦予人也。

16 *Sheng chao po xie ji*, p. 278b: 余嘗問艾夷曰："爾教謂人之靈魂，善升天堂，惡墮地獄，二俱不返，而禽獸之覺魂，又斷滅不輪，則中界人類應空，我爾複自何出？"艾曰："子以人魂為舊有乎？皆天主新造耳。造者生生不已，所以雖不輪轉，不礙多人，實無佛家前世之說"。

17 *Sheng chao po xie ji*, p. 278b.

18 *Sheng chao po xie ji*, p. 333b.

19 *Sheng chao po xie ji*, p. 333b,c.

20 *Kou duo ri chao*, pp. 458–89.

21 *Sheng chao po xie ji*, p. 284b: 今日也求天主賜糧，明日也求天主免債，昏夜祝頌，捏怪疲神，則無論我之魂神，日放于索糧、免厄之間，而不能收拾。

22 *Sheng chao po xie ji*, p. 349a.

23 *Kou duo ri chao*, pp. 439–40: ……複問曰："靈魂有三司：曰記含、曰明悟、曰愛欲，敢問何者可以為功？"司鐸曰："其惟愛欲乎。"曰："云何？"司鐸曰："人豈無明知天主，而竟不發愛慕者，是記含、明悟尚未足為功也。乃有拙於記含、明悟而獨篤於愛慕天主者，是愛欲之情超出記含、明悟之上，而為功之府者也"。

24 *Sheng chao po xie ji*, p. 349a: 悟本性大道則不外求：始不知人人所固有者曰本、曰本性、曰大道，並形所由來者，今古聖賢莫不于此盡心性焉。故以斯道以覺斯民，百姓安而君王治。

25 *Sheng chao po xie ji*, p. 349b.

26 *Ling yan li shao*, pp. 324–25.

27 *Tian zhu shi yi*, p. 250.

28 See note 7 above.

29 *Tian zhu shi yi*, p. 280: 始有本魂，然後為本性；有此本性，然後定於此類；既定此類，然後生此貌。

30 *Sheng chao po xie ji*, p. 277b: 乃利瑪竇及艾、龍諸夷之稱性獨不然，言諸性不同，禽獸之性，無前世，亦無後世。何也？天主朔生，殺則頓滅也。吾人之性亦無前世，永有後世。何也？人魂亦系天主創造，一造以後，苦樂之報皆無盡也。惟天主之性，生於極前，貫於極後，而無始無終。何也？能造一切，更無一物能造彼也。又言上能包下，所以禽獸混有草木魂，人魂混有禽獸魂，天主魂又混有人禽木石諸魂等。

31 *Sheng chao po xie ji*, p. 278a.

32 *Sheng chao po xie ji*, p. 350a: 又裂禽獸不具靈魂，應供口腹，致人恣殺，全無不忍之德，將吾聖賢盡人盡物之性，一時迷沒。且人分上計有三魂已是迷妄，何況更裂禽獸不具靈魂，致人恣殺，寧非迷中又生迷，妄中複增妄乎？

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