

## Chinese Theological Review: Volume 11:2

### Table of Contents

From the Editor.....	2
1. Introduction – Chen Zemin, Erskine Clarke, Robert Evans, Guest Editors.	3
2. The Church and Changing Societies: A View from the United States – Justo L. Gonzalez .....	10
3. Churches in a Changing Society – Walter Bruggemann .....	22
4. Making Connections: Christianity and Culture in the Sino-American Dialogue – Philip L. Wickeri .....	32
5. Christianity and Chinese Intellectuals: History and the Present – K.H. Ting .....	41
6. Chinese Theology and Its Cultural Sources – Wang Weifan.....	44
7. Inculturation of the Gospel and Hymn Singing in China – Chen Zemin ....	49
8. Gospel and Culture: Interpretation and Reinterpretation – Ji Tai .....	58
9. Theology in the Contemporary Chinese Context – Kan Baoping .....	64
10. Doing Theology in Chinese – Richard X.Y. Zhang.....	71

## From the Editor

The Chinese Theological Review has had a long-standing policy of offering its readers articles reflecting efforts by Chinese Christian thinkers and others to plumb the relationship between Chinese culture and Christianity and to seek Chinese cultural sources for a Christian spirituality which would speak to the Chinese experience.

Therefore, in this second issue of volume 11 of the Review, we are delighted to provide the means by which the essays included here, by both Chinese and American scholars on the subject of religion and culture, can be shared with a wider audience.

As the guest editors note in their introduction, several of the essays in this volume were prepared for consultations held in Nanjing and Decatur, GA in 1992 and 1994. Similar discussions involving Chinese participants have been held in the U.K., in Germany, and elsewhere. We hope this issue of the Review can be part of the larger conversation on Christianity and cultures, broadening as it does the scope of concern beyond Western boundaries and contributing to a multicultural approach. Its appearance comes at a particularly appropriate time, following the recent mission conference of the World Council of Churches on the theme Gospel and Culture which held in Brazil in late 1996.

Contributions by some of those involved have been published in this Review or elsewhere in the intervening years. Happily, Reverends Ji Tai, Kan Baoping and Richard X.Y. Zhang were willing to contribute new essays for this publication. Professor Chen Zemin's article on hymn singing grew out of a presentation given at another gathering. That by Rev. Wang Weifan appeared in translation in the China News Update of September 1995. The version published here is a version of that translation by the editor.

The question of theology in Chinese, raised in his essay by Richard X.Y. Zhang, has a particular resonance even for an English-language volume such as this. Several of the Chinese authors have included Chinese characters in their essays which the editor feels it is important to retain. With this decision made, another choice looms: should the characters be printed in their simplified (in official use in mainland China) or traditional (habitually used in most other Chinese communities) form? Of course, many, if not most, educated people can read either one; still, a choice has to be made on some basis. Since this Review aims at a readership outside China proper, the English-speaking editor has chosen to print Chinese characters in the traditional form.

My thanks to the authors whose work is included in this volume 11:2; to Bob Evans for urging the project to completion; to Marvin Hoff and the Foundation for Theological Education in Southeast Asia for continued support; and to my colleague Cecilia Ip for her excellent production skills.

Janice Wickeri  
Hong Kong

## 1. Introduction – Chen Zemin, Erskine Clarke, Robert Evans, Guest Editors

The “Gospel and Culture” debate has raged from the time of the Council of Jerusalem conflict over the relationship between Christianity and its Jewish heritage to the controversy at the 1991 World Council of Churches Canberra Assembly. At this historic assembly in Australia, when China Christian Council was received into membership, an Asian woman theologian explored through music and dance the relationship of the Holy Spirit to her culture rooted in Buddhism and Shamanism. Several church bodies expressed strong disapproval of her message. Problems of Gospel and culture are posed by the obligations and rights of people in every part of the globe, from, China to the United States, to interpret the meaning and message of the Gospel in appropriate cultural terms. Throughout history the excitement over fresh ways of explicating the good news of God’s love and liberation has been accompanied by charges of distortion, compromise, and syncretism.

Conflicts over the understanding of Gospel and Culture – as well as their resolution – usually emerge from encounters and ensuing dialogue among Christians from different regions of God’s good creation. These encounters can raise disturbing questions about the relationship between one’s understanding of the gospel and those cultural forms which have shaped its proclamation and its reception. These encounters between Christians can also lead to new insights and mutually enriching dialogue. This volume encompasses such a positive encounter as it disseminates the fruits of a Sino-American dialogue pursued in the hope that it will enrich and stimulate continued dialogue on the critical issues of Gospel and Culture. The guest editors of this special edition of the *Chinese Theological Review* are honored to have the opportunity to share their reflections with you.

The editors participated in a series of encounters between American and Chinese Christians engaged in a partnership between Nanjing Union Theological Seminary and Columbia Theological Seminary. Numerous cross cultural encounters, including exchange visits between faculty, students, administrators and trustees, were made possible by grants from the Henry W. Luce Foundation. Mutually beneficial dialogue was pursued through two formal consultations in Decatur and Nanjing and dozens of informal conversations, worship services, and cultural presentations between pastors, teachers, students and lay leaders throughout China and America. Initial stages of this dialogue began in 1979 when two of the guest editors, Professors Chen Zemin, Vice-Principal of Nanjing Seminary, and Robert Evans, Director of Plowshares Institute and Consultant to the Luce China Project, were part of delegations visiting one another's churches and seminaries. Friendships were nurtured, and a distinctive partnership of trust and mutuality formed that included exchange visits between Bishop K.H. Ting, Principal of Nanjing Seminary; Douglas Oldenburg, President of Columbia Seminary; Glenn Bucher former Dean; Professor Erskine Clarke, chair of Columbia's International Committee; and colleagues and friends affiliated with each institution.

This special edition of the Review represents only one element of a holistic approach toward global theological education. As Professor Mortimer Arias, one of the prime movers in developing international theological partnerships, declares,

Any global perspective has to be mutual; otherwise it is not global. Theological education cannot be global unless mutuality is intertwined in the curriculum, at the heart of pedagogical praxis, part of the administration of resources, inherent in the faculty formation and plurality, effective in the seminary-community and seminary-church interactions, and workable in the international partnership and relationships of theological institutions.<sup>1</sup>

The Nanjing/Columbia partnership strives to embody a vision of global mutuality. At the heart of our dialogue is an evaluation by staff in both seminaries of the relationship between Christ and culture and the role of the Church in changing societies.

The current discussion of Gospel and Culture has been a concern of the Church worldwide, especially since the provocative presentation by Professor Chung Hyun-Kyung at the Canberra Assembly in 1991. To emphasize the importance of this dialogue, the World Council of Churches Central Committee at its January 1994 meeting in Johannesburg, S.A. initiated a new and long-term study of Gospel and Culture. "The ecumenical study process seeks to understand the implications of a gospel that both challenges and is challenged by the cultures in which it finds itself, in order that the churches and individual Christians may live and witness authentically." (Minutes of the Central Committee, January, 1994) The study included consultations throughout the world and culminated in a 1996 conference on world mission and evangelism in Brazil with the theme "Called to One Hope: The Gospel in Diverse Cultures."

As noted above, the comprehensive nature of the question of gospel and culture was dramatically posed in Canberra by the Asian professor exploring contextual theology through engagement with her Korean culture through dance. Professor Chung asked those in dialogue with her to prepare the way of the Holy Spirit by invoking "the spirit of Hagar, Egyptian Black slave woman exploited and abandoned by Abraham and Sarah, the ancestors of our faith ... the spirit of people killed at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, . . . the spirit of Mahatma Gandhi, Steve Biko, Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X... the spirit of the Amazon rain forest, . . . and of the earth, air, and water, raped, tortured and exploited by human greed for money. . . ." <sup>2</sup> Voices at the Assembly declared that acceptable limits of diversity had been breached.

Challenge of the encounter between gospel and culture was also presented at Canberra by a group of Aboriginal people who graphically reminded those present that their Aboriginal culture "had been on the receiving end of the negative aspects of the missionary movement."<sup>3</sup> Colonization and sometimes genocide are part of the history of the encounter between a

---

<sup>1</sup> M. Arias, "Mutuality in Global Education," A.F. Evans, R.A. Evans, D. A. Roozen, *The Globalization of Theological Education*, Maryknoll, N.Y., Orbis, 1993), p. 338.

<sup>2</sup> S.W. Ariarajah, *Gospel and Culture*, (Geneva, World Council of Churches Publications, 1994), P. 47.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.

culture and that which is declared as the gospel. The dialogue about gospel and culture is summarized in an excellent review of the ecumenical discussion in a work by S. Wesley Ariarajah. The author asserts that the issue at stake is not theological "correctness" but rather one of "continuity in content with the traditional way of presenting the Christian message."<sup>4</sup> The question is whether there should be "limits to diversity" or whether "the Christian faith . . . has only a center - Jesus Christ - but no boundaries."<sup>5</sup>

The articles in this special edition of the *Chinese Theological Review*, while not officially part of the WCC consultations are in the spirit of this international dialogue, and we believe they make an important contribution to theological reflection. The articles may be especially important because they emerge from a partnership between institutions of theological education which are growing in trust and mutual learning. The relevance of the articles is heightened because the two institutions are within nations which are international forces of great political and economic influence and where one nation experienced colonization and economic exploitation at the hands of the other. North American domination of China was closely associated with a Christian mission which frequently demeaned the values of Chinese culture and religions. Nineteenth and twentieth century Sino-American hostility culminated in the demonization of communism and capitalism by one another and resulted in a cold war and a hot war on the Korean peninsula that cost of thousands lives and innumerable relationships.

Significant tensions and problems of understanding continue. Strained relationships exist not only between the governments of China and the United States but also on occasion between Christians and churches in each country. This gives the partnership reflected by this volume even greater symbolic significance along with the study process being encouraged by Christian communities throughout the world, including the study of the WCC Program Unit on Churches in Mission.

The following paragraphs highlight the editors' principal concerns as we solicited reflections on "Churches in Changing Societies," the central theme of our dialogue on Christ and Culture. The volume begins with two essays from a biblical perspective. Both Professors Gonzales and Brueggemann were involved in intensive "immersion" experiences in China; they initially shared a form of these reflections during their second visit to China in a consultation in Nanjing. However, both authors are clear that as an Old Testament scholar and church historian their view of the problem is from the United States. Nevertheless, the Chinese colleagues indicated that the volume should begin with these two articles. Gonzales and Brueggemann are not only struggling with similar issues as their Chinese colleagues, but they base their views on a biblical foundation, consistent with Chinese commitments to the value of Scripture, and root their arguments in the prophets and revelation from a holistic perspective appropriate to this dialogue.

Dr. Gonzales provides an economic and cultural analysis of the Book of Revelation. The recurring themes of "every nation and tribe and language and people," leads up to the problem of "becoming a multicultural church in a multicultural world." Gonzales challenges

---

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 49.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. xi.

the churches both in the U.S. and in the rapidly changing society of China. Similarly, Professor Brueggemann as an Old Testament theologian brings his historical and literary analysis and expertise to the post-exile canonical prophets to show the role of the Holy Spirit in a church in a radically changing society. Brueggemann's final section, "A Church Invaded by the Spirit," is addressed not only to the church in America but also to the Chinese Church in her present bewilderment.

Rev. Dr. Phillip Wickeri is a North American who has spent most of his professional life in Hong Kong and the People's Republic of China. He is the first and only U.S. citizen since 1949 to be ordained by the China Christian Council. Dr. Wickeri's book *Seeking the Common Ground* elevated his respect in China where a distinguished Chinese church leader declared to an editor that Wickeri was "the American who had the best understanding of the church in China." As the title of his essay suggests, Dr. Wickeri serves as the bridge in this Sino-American dialogue on Christianity and culture.

Wickeri connects the first two articles to reflections by three senior Chinese church leaders and theologians: Bishop K.H. Ting, Principal of Nanjing Seminary and retired President of the China Christian Council; Rev. Wang Weifan, Professor of Biblical Studies; and Rev. Chen Zemin, Professor of Theology, Vice-Principal of the Seminary and former Vice-President of the China Christian Council. The essays by these leaders of the church in China illustrate contextualized reflections on gospel and culture as they take on the role of theological guides. Bishop Ting explores the controversial topic of communicating with Chinese intellectuals as "culture Christians." Wang Weifan, as a poet and biblical theologian, discloses the resources of traditional culture for a distinctive Chinese theology. And Chen Zemin, writing as a systematic theologian, offers his surprising revelation of the power to shape life and culture by hymn singing rather than by homiletics or hermeneutics. Professor Chen's discussion of hymns indicates how Westernized the church in China has become and how difficult it is to indigenize worship.

The final connection in the volume is to a very important group of younger scholars who are and will continue to provide leadership for the seminaries and churches of China. Because of the so-called Cultural Revolution, churches and seminaries were closed for over ten years, and the process of preparing leaders for the church was radically disrupted. These three scholar-pastors bring their experience in graduate theological education in North America and Europe, plus their immersion in issues of gospel and culture, to the service of the church in China. Reverends Ji Tai, Kan Baoping and Richard X.Y. Zhang are teachers at Nanjing Seminary with pastoral responsibilities in city churches like St. Paul's. All three make specific theological applications of cultural resources to gospel interpretation. Ji Tai does this by examining the hermeneutical route from the interpretation of the gospel by Western missionaries to a message of God's salvation that can be reinterpreted in a Chinese context. Kan Baoping concentrates on how T.C. Chao and Y.T. Wu, the two most important Chinese theologians in the first two-thirds of this century, constructed theology in the Chinese social and political context. Richard Zhang concludes this series of reflections on gospel and culture by emphasizing the need for "doing theology in the Chinese language."

The editors see two basic questions in the dialogue about gospel and culture that stand out in these essays. The first question has to do with the relationship between the life of a religious community - including its theology, ethic, ethos, and worldview - and its socio-historical context. More specifically, how is the life of the church in the United States or China, in all of its diversity, related to the particular social and cultural history of a nation in transition? What has been the role of immigration, for example, in the church in the United States'? Professor Gonzales makes much of this, and his essay points toward the larger question of historical context. What has been the role of geography in the religious life of the people? What has been the role of military and economic power in shaping religious life in either the United States or China? The impact of the "Vietnam War" or the "Cultural Revolution" are dramatic examples of recent political and military events with economic and societal implications for the practice of religion in the respective countries. Professors Gonzales and Brueggemann specifically address issues of the socio-historical context in which the Christian gospel was interpreted as do several of the Chinese essays, particularly Bishop Ting's and Rev. Kan's.

On the other side of the equation, the question can be asked, How has religion helped shape the culture of a nation'? In particular, in what ways does U.S. Culture reflect the influence of Puritanism or, more broadly, Calvinism'? What has been the role of biblical imagery in shaping U.S. foreign policy'? Numerous historians have written about sacred myths of the American people, myths rooted in the biblical story, such as the United States as the Promised Land, the American people as God's New Israel or God's Chosen People. Presidents Reagan, Bush, and Clinton have all referred in major public addresses to the United States as a "city on a hill." What has been the relationship between religion, or more narrowly the Christian Church, and U.S. society?

A similar set of questions can be asked about China: In what ways are the beliefs and practices of the Christian community in China - in all of its diversity - related to the history and culture(s) of the Chinese people'? Does the church in China have a style of life, a tone and character, a moral and aesthetic spirit, or an underlying attitude toward itself and the world that is distinctly Chinese? This is a major theme in many of the Chinese articles.

The basic assumption of all the articles appears to be that religion is not an autonomous cultural phenomenon; it is rooted in a particular social context. This is the legacy of Feuerbach - a people's understanding of God is a reflection of their social reality. Marx, however, extended Feuerbach's model by insisting that "man makes religion; religion does not make man." The *making* of religion means that religion is not simply a representation, as with Feuerbach, but a production, and that production serves the interests of those doing the making.

If, however, the life of the church in the United States and China is simply a reflection of two different social and historical realities, how is it that Christians can meet in Nanjing and Decatur and find deep levels of identity with one another? What is the character of this recognized identity that appears to reach across if not transcend the differences of history and culture?

Another way to look at this question is from the perspective of ideology and utopia. This is particularly clear in Gonzales' article, although he does not use these terms. The degree to which Christianity is rooted in particular social realities points to its ideological function. Christian ideology can distort and hide social realities, and legitimize present power arrangements. It can also act positively as a means of integration and social identity. Yet there is also a utopian function - the positing of a vision for the future, an imaginative exploration of alternative possibilities. Professor Gonzales' use of the Book of Revelation is most illuminating at this point. Yet even this Cuban-American professor reads Revelation out of a particular social/cultural context that shapes his imaginative exploration of alternative possibilities. How might a Chinese scholar read the same material? What would be different and why? Richard Zhang's reflection hints at this in his linguistic nuances. Dialogue on issues such as these illustrates the Nanjing/Columbia partnership and the debate on gospel and cultures in China and the United States as well as in Australia and Brazil. The relationship of utopian visions to ideological forces is always critical and difficult.

A second basic question that stands out in our minds is closely related to the first - what is the relationship between Christianity and modernity? To put it even more sharply, what is the relationship between Protestant Christianity, Westernization, and modernization? Does Protestant Christianity encourage an adoption of Western values, and are Western values fundamental for modernity? Modernization has emerged out of a culture marked by an ascetic rationalism, highly developed organizational skills, and an aggressive competitiveness curiously linked to a spontaneous civic cooperation. Protestantism has been closely associated with the rise of such a culture - even if one does not accept Max Weber's thesis in the Protestant Ethic. A Protestant ethic and a modern, market-oriented economy have at least been mutually supportive of each other.

This basic question raises additional concerns embedded in the articles. Does Christianity in China discredit and undercut traditional culture in China? Is there a relationship between the growth of a modern, market-oriented economy in China and the growth of the church in China? Is there a relationship between the democratic impulse seen in China in the last decade and the growth of the church there? The dangers of such relationships are hinted at strongly in the articles by Brueggemann and Gonzales. Likewise the Chinese articles address these questions from several angles. Kan Baoping responds perhaps most directly, especially in his discussion of modernity.<sup>6</sup> Issues of self-identity and theological education raised by some writers also are fundamentally related to this larger question of the relationship of modernity and Christianity. Indeed, the defense of traditional cultures under attack by the rush of modernity is evident in many of the Chinese articles, as they have been in Western articles when traditional Western cultures have been under siege by modernity. But what Westerners call Romanticism, which has been a major defense against modernity, has seldom been effective. Thus the defensive character of Kan Baoping's statement, "modernity does not necessarily lead to civilization," points toward the use of traditional categories to ward off the impact of modernity. To many Western ears such defenses sound parochial and Romantic, thus fundamentally helpless before the power of modernization.

---

<sup>6</sup> See especially Kan, p. 123.



A vigorous debate about the relationship between gospel and culture emerged in an international academic consultation on "Christianity and Modernization" in October of 1994 in Beijing. Four of the contributors and two of the editors of this special edition of the *Review* as well as Professor Will Coleman of Columbia Seminary made presentations at this event. What was surprising to many of twenty international scholars present from outside China was that the Consultation was under the sponsorship not only of the Amity Foundation, the overseas arm of the China Christian Council, but also The Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and its Institute of World Religions. It is clear that dialogue on gospel and culture reverberates in the halls of the academy, the church, and even public forums.

The editors offer special thanks to Janice Wickeri, the regular editor of the *Chinese Theological Review*, for her support, her editorial and translation skills, and for the opportunity to share these reflections as fruits of our Nanjing/Columbia partnership. We hope that our readers are already or will soon become engaged in lively discussion and lived responses which this dialogue mandates. Phillip Potter, a former General Secretary of the WCC from the Caribbean, urged "Churches everywhere to participate together in God's work in making the *oikumene* an *Oki's*, a home, a family of men and women . . . of varied gifts and cultures, possibilities, where openness, trust, love and justice reign."<sup>7</sup>

Chen Zemin is Vice-Principal of Nanjing Union Theological Seminary.

T. Erskine Clarke is Professor of American Religious History and Director of the International Program, Columbia Theological Seminary.

Robert A. Evans is Executive Director, Plowshares Institute and Professor, University of Cape Town, South Africa, and Director of the Globalization of Theological Education Project.

---

<sup>7</sup> Ariarajah, *Ibid.*, p. ix.

## 2. The Church and Changing Societies: A View from the United States – Justo L. Gonzalez

As I began reflecting on this subject, the first thought that occurred to me was that, as an historian, I learned to measure time in terms of centuries. Then I moved to the United States, where I was surprised to find that historians often measure time in terms of decades. Today, we are gathered in a country that has traditionally understood its history in terms of dynasties. I do not know exactly what that means; but I suspect that as we engage in a Sino-American dialogue it will be important for us to reflect on the dynamics of a dialogue in which one partner represents a civilization that is able to think in terms of dynasties, while the other thinks in terms of decades.

The second thought that occurred to me as I began reflecting on the subject, "The Church in Changing Societies," is that the church was born precisely in the midst of such a changing society. Luke tells us that Jesus was born in the time of Augustus Caesar. That means that he was born just at the time of the demise of the Roman Republic and the beginning of a new order. The ancient land of Egypt had been conquered by Rome just a few years earlier. And a few years before that, the Roman Senate had named Herod King of Judea, and forced his authority on the Jewish people. At the time when the Christian Church was born, Galilee itself was a hotbed of rebellion against Rome. And in the very years when the Christian Church was forming its identity and writing several of the books that would eventually become part of the New Testament, the Jews were revolting against Rome, and being cruelly suppressed.

Demographically, the policies of the Roman Empire were bringing about radical changes throughout the Mediterranean basin. The Romans "took from their Hellenistic predecessors the notion that human existence at its best is 'civilized' existence - that is, quite literally, 'citified' existence. The greatest invention of antiquity, from the point of view of both Greeks and Romans, was the city. When Aristotle described humans as 'political animals,' he did not mean merely, as we would today, that humans are by nature involved in politics; he also meant that the essence of the human is best seen in that highest of human creations, the polis."<sup>1</sup> What this meant was that Rome saw itself as the great city whose task it was to replicate itself in many other cities. Every imperialistic thrust needs an ideology with which to justify itself. The ideology of Roman imperialism, by which it justified itself, was the building of cities. Rome was the great civilizer, which means the great "cityfier." The very word "civilization," by which most modern Western languages express the highest achievements of a culture, actually means the building of cities.

And builders of cities the Romans were. Where ancient cities already existed, they were rebuilt, embellished, often granted especial privileges. Where there were no cities, the Romans built new ones. This was their great pride, so that when a famous orator from Smyrna visited Rome, and sought to praise her for her achievements, he said:

---

<sup>1</sup> J.L. Gonzalez, *Faith and Wealth* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1990), p. 28.

The coasts and interiors have been filled with cities, some newly founded, others increased under and by you. . . . All localities are full of gymnasia, fountains, monumental approaches, temples, workshops, schools, and one can say that the civilized world, which had been sick from the beginning, . . . has been brought . . . to a state of health.<sup>2</sup>

This supposed state of health which Aelius Aristides describes, however, was seen very differently from another perspective. In order to build cities, the countryside had to pay. While wages remained fairly constant, taxes and inflation took an increasing toll on the rural poor. In Egypt, for instance, where a peasant's lot had never been easy, things were made much worse under Roman rule. The time soon came where the normal wages for a rural worker, 2 oboli a day, could only buy seven-tenths of a liter of unhulled wheat - enough to make a small loaf of bread - and out of that amount, that rural worker had to pay taxes of at least 135 oboli a year - roughly the equivalent of 67 days of work. In other provinces the situation was no better.

In Asia Minor, the Book of Revelation records a protest against such conditions. In Rev. 6:5-6 we read:

When he opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature call out, "Come!" I looked, and there was a black horse! Its rider held a pair of scales in his hand, and I heard what seemed to be a voice in the midst of the living creatures saying, "A quart of wheat for a day's pay, and three quarts of barley for a day's pay, but do not damage the olive oil and the wine!"

When the King of Pergamum bequeathed most of Asia Minor to the Roman Republic, the region was rich and prosperous. Its main exports were wools and dyestuffs, and its fertile lands grew sufficient wheat for all its population. Yet, as the region became integrated with the rest of the Empire, rich landlords realized that acreage devoted to grapes and olives resulted in much greater income than the same acreage planted to grain. Slowly but inexorably, the land moved into the hands of a few rich owners, who devoted more and more of it to grapevines and olive trees. Grain became scarce and the province, though rich because of its exports of wine and olive oil, was poor in that there was not enough to eat. In the year 92 AD, Emperor Domitian issued a decree ordering that half the vineyards in the province be destroyed, precisely with the purpose of promoting grain production. But the landed aristocracy raised such an outcry that the emperor rescinded his decree. The result was even greater scarcity of grain, and greater misery for the poor. The normal price of wheat was twelve quarts for a denarius; and barley, which was used mostly for animal feed and for humans only in times of economic difficulty, was supposed to be 24 quarts for a denarius. Thus, what the "living creature" in Rev. 6:6 says is a strong protest against an inflationary process that has made the price of wheat rise by 1200 per cent, and the price of barley rise by 800 per cent: "A quart of wheat for a day's pay, and three quarts of barley for a

---

<sup>2</sup> Aelius Aristides, *Roman oration*, 94, 97. Translation by J.H. Oliver, *The Ruling Power: A Study of the Roman Empire in the Second Century after Christ through the Roman Oration of Aelius Aristides* (Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society. 1953).

day's pay, but do not damage the olive oil and the wine!" Furthermore, the rider against whom the living creature raises such a challenge carries in his hands, not a bow like the first rider nor a sword like the second, but a pair of scales, symbol of the trade that has made the landed aristocracy rich, and the poor classes even poorer, bringing a devastation comparable to war and to the warriors of the first two horses, who carry a bow and a sword.

Demographically, this resulted in great population shifts. There are records of villages where the population declined to such a point that the entire village disappeared, as peasants moved to the city, fled to the wilderness, or were forced to work for the great latifundia that were developing. There are also records of repeated decrees ordering those who had moved to the cities with no business there to return to the countryside. But such decrees were to no avail, and city governments increasingly found themselves forced to provide a dole to prevent riots among the growing and restless urban masses.

It was not only the lower classes that saw the changes that were taking place and decried them. The Roman aristocracy also understood that great changes were taking place in the very fibre of society, and bemoaned them. Pliny the Elder, for instance, a contemporary of the Apostle Paul and a friend and companion of Emperor Vespasian, decried the growth of latifundia where slave labor was on the rise, and looked back to former times when the land was divided into smaller holdings cultivated by free citizens who were proud to work the land.<sup>3</sup>

Culturally, the changes were no less dramatic. At the time of Alexander's conquests, much of the ancient civilization of the East (meaning Syria, Palestine, Egypt, Mesopotamia) had been submerged under the universalizing influence of Greek culture. But precisely at the beginning of the Christian era there is the emergence of several movements that have this in common: they are all new creations resulting from the filtering of the ancient, suppressed traditions of the East, through the overlay of Hellenistic culture. Hans Jonas has put it thus:

What we do witness at the period roughly coinciding with the beginnings of Christianity is an explosion of the East. Like long-pent-up waters its forces broke through the Hellenistic crust and flooded the ancient world, flowing into the established Greek forms and filling them with their content, besides creating their own new beds.<sup>4</sup>

Jonas goes on to argue that among the movements that resulted out of this re-emergence of the world of the Eastern Mediterranean were Hellenistic Judaism, especially in the form of Alexandrian Jewish philosophy, Babylonian astrology and magic, the various mystery cults, gnosticism, and Christianity.

In short, to speak of a changing society was nothing new in the world into which the Christian Church was born. And the early church did indeed have much to say about a changing society. But while Pliny and much of Roman aristocracy looked to the past as the

---

<sup>3</sup> *Nat. hist.*, 1.18.13,21.

<sup>4</sup> Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958), p. 23.

ideal model of society, the early church looked to the future, and spoke of an even more radical change - a change so radical that it was best described as the Kingdom of God, or as a new city coming down from heaven:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. (Rev. 21:1-2)

If the city of Rome claimed to be the great civilizer, the great cityfier, John and those around him looked forward to a new city, not built by Rome - a city where, in contrast to the squalid Conditions of the urban masses, "death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more."

Thus, contrary to what we would expect, and contrary to much of its later history, the church in the changing society of the first century, rather than simply bemoaning change, posited and announced even greater change.

This is not so different from the society in which I live. The United States was a multicultural society from the outset, for there were always Native Americans, and very soon there were other minorities whom the dominant majority either conquered (as in the case of Mexicans) or imported in order to benefit from their labor (as in the case of African slaves and Asian laborers). But in the fifty years since the Second World War things have changed drastically in two directions. First, the suppressed minorities have gained greater voice and begun making a more visible impact on society at large. Second, immigration has rapidly accelerated. The result is that the United States is rapidly becoming a multicultural, multilingual society where voices previously silenced are coming to the foreground - much as Near Eastern voices silenced by Alexander's conquests were making themselves heard in the first centuries of the Christian era.

At this point, one is reminded of the society of the Eastern Mediterranean at the time when the church was born. It too was a society in which people of different races and cultures met each other, but where many resented it and even legislated against it. We are all aware of the tensions between Gentile and Jew in Palestine, and even between Judean and Galilean. In North Africa, in and around the city of Carthage, there were clear lines separating Roman from Punic, and Punic from Numidian.<sup>5</sup> Probably the area of the Roman Empire whose social life and interaction we know best is Egypt, where the abundance of papyrus and the dry climate have served to preserve documents whose counterparts have been lost elsewhere. In Egypt, the lines separating Romans, Greeks, Jews, and native Egyptians from each other were strictly enforced, not only by custom, but also by Roman law, which according to one of the foremost students of the period amounted to an ancient form of apartheid.<sup>6</sup> At approximately the same time of the ministry of Jesus, the Jews in Alexandria gained access to a number of privileges previously reserved for Romans and

---

<sup>5</sup> W.H.C. Frend, *The Donatist Church: A Movement of Protest in Roman North Africa* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1952), has shown that this social division was an important factor in the Donatist schism and its aftermath.

<sup>6</sup> Naphtali Lewis, *Life in Egypt under Roman Rule* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1983), especially pp. 32-35.

Greeks. The resentment was such that a few years later, in A.D. 38, there was a major massacre of Jews.

While the encounter of many cultures is intellectually enriching, there are those who resent it. As the old certainties provided by a fairly parochial worldview are challenged by the growing multicultural situation, many respond in fear and anger, just as many in the ancient Roman and Hellenistic aristocracies responded in fear and anger. And, since most of the positions of power and prestige are still held by people of Western European stock, people of other cultures and traditions find that they must constantly struggle for a place in the sun. The result is increased racial tension, often to the point of violence.

Of all the possible texts in the New Testament to deal with the issue at hand - the church amidst the changes of a multicultural society - there is none that is more explicit about the variety of peoples coming into the church, and specifically about the variety of their cultures, than the book of Revelation. Indeed, seven times do we find in the book, with slight variations, the theme of "every tribe and language and people and nation."

The book of Revelation, however, does not idealize cultures and their variety, as many of us are wont to do today. Of the seven passages where this phrase appears, three are not all that positive.

1) In Revelation 11, John offers us the vision of the two witnesses. It is not necessary for our purposes here to enter into the discussion as to whom these two witnesses might represent. What is important is that, after the two witnesses have completed their testimony and are killed, "for three and a half days members of the peoples and tribes and languages and nations will gaze at their dead bodies and refuse to let them be placed in a tomb; and the inhabitants of the earth will gloat over them and exchange presents, because these two prophets had been a torment to the inhabitants of the earth." In other words, that, if the glory of heaven is to be shared by a great multitude out of every tribe and nation and people and language, so are the Lamb and its witnesses to be opposed by others out of every people, and tribe, and language, and nation.

2) Revelation 13 makes that point even clearer. There John is speaking of the beast from the sea, which appears all-powerful, and is therefore worshiped by the whole earth, and he says: "It [that is, the beast] was given authority over every tribe and people and language and nation, and all the inhabitants of the earth will worship it, everyone whose name was not written from the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who was slaughtered." Multiculturalism may be an important trait in the very nature of the church; but it is also an important trait in the powers of evil.

3) Thirdly and finally among these negative texts, look at Revelation 17. This is the vision of the great harlot "who is seated on many waters." This is obviously an allusion to Jeremiah 51:13, where the prophet is speaking against Babylon: "You who live by mighty waters, rich in treasures, your end has come." It is also a reference to a theme that appears repeatedly in ancient iconography, where a city is often depicted as a goddess enthroned by a river. The reason for this is that in ancient times most long distance transportation took place by water

rather than by land. Thus, to depict the great harlot as "seated on many waters" was another way of saying that it was a rich city; a city to which, as in ancient Babylon, all the riches of the world flowed.

The angel explains the meaning of the vision to John: "The waters that you saw, where the whore is seated, are peoples and multitudes and nations and languages" (Rev. 17:15). In other words, that the great harlot is rich, but she is rich because she sits on all these various nations and cultures, exploiting them and having their wealth flow to her like many waters.

What do we learn from all of this for our theme, the church in a changing multicultural society? We certainly learn that we must not romanticize culture and multiculturalism.

More importantly, we are reminded that culture always exists in a political and economic context. John of Patmos seems to be well aware of that: "The waters where the whore is seated, are peoples and multitudes and nations and languages."

If we accept the most common interpretation, that the great harlot is the city of Rome and its imperial power, it follows that John of Patmos has a very realistic understanding of the wealth of Rome. Rome is wealthy, not because she is particularly productive, and certainly not because her people work harder than the many peoples, tribes, nations and languages she has subjected, but rather because she has devised a system whereby the wealth of all these nations flows to Rome, as so many rivers.

The first century was a time of great mixing of cultures. Some celebrated this fact, and others bemoaned it. But it was John of Patmos who most clearly saw that the nations, and tribes, and peoples, and languages were present in Rome, not simply out of cultural exchange, but also because Rome was the great harlot sitting on many waters, and the many waters were the "peoples, and multitudes, and nations, and languages" who actually produced the wealth that made the harlot great.

It is important for us to realize this, for the cultural encounters of our day do not take place in abstraction of economic and political systems. It is not just that world travel has become easier, and therefore people of different cultures meet more often than they used to. It is also that the world order - or rather, the world disorder - is such that people are forced to leave their traditional homes, and move to new lands in search of safety, security, freedom, and work. All other things being equal, most people would rather live where they grew up, in their own homelands and in the context of their own cultures.

But all things are not equal, and therefore people cross borders and even oceans seeking the safety and the opportunities that are often denied them in their own homelands. When the rivers of wealth flow in one direction, it is only natural for population to flow in the same direction.

Let me give you an example. In the last twenty years, thousands and thousands of acres in Mexico have been turned from corn and beans and other such staples for local consumption, to vegetables and flowers for export to the United States. As vegetables flow from Mexico

across the border, growers north of the border find it difficult to compete, and must seek cheaper labor. That labor is then provided by Mexican workers, probably the same workers who until recently were growing beans in Mexico, but have now been displaced by export crops and are looking for work. Thus, while the newspapers carry all sorts of reports about people crossing illegally under the bridge, those people are in a sense following the tomatoes that are crossing legally over the bridge. Where the rivers of wealth flow, there too flow the rivers of population.

Or look at Great Britain and France, where there is now a strong backlash against all the immigrants who are coming to those countries from their former colonies. The Europeans may not like it; but the reason why such migrations are taking place, and precisely to those particular countries, is that those very countries previously colonized the lands from which those immigrants come. For decades, the colonial powers were enriched with the wealth of the world. Today, they should not be surprised by the resulting demographic shifts. Where the rivers of wealth flow, there too flow the rivers of population.

John of Patmos had it right. The multicultural society of the Roman Empire was not just the result of cultural exchange. It was also the result of economic exchange supported by political military might.

Then, the listing of tribes, nations, peoples and languages appears in two other settings having to do with preaching.

The first of these passages having to do with preaching appears in Rev. 10, of which I read selected portions:

And I saw another mighty angel coming down from heaven. . . . He held a little scroll open in his hand. . . . Then the voice that I had heard from heaven spoke to me again, saying: "Go, take the scroll that is open in the hand of the angel who is standing on the sea and on the land." So I went to the angel and told him to give me the little scroll; and he said to me, "Take it, and eat; it will be bitter to your stomach, but sweet as honey in your mouth." So I took the little scroll from the hand of the angel and ate it; it was sweet as honey in my mouth, but when I had eaten it, my stomach was made bitter.

Then he said to me, "You must prophesy again about many peoples and nations and languages and kings."

Clearly, this passage is patterned after Ezekiel 2 and 3, where the prophet is given a scroll to eat. But before we turn to that text, we must look at John's vision of the little scroll in the context of the book of Revelation itself.

This is a "little scroll." And it is open. It is not the great scroll with the seven seals, which only the victorious Lamb could open. Furthermore, it is held in the hand of an angel. It is not like the great scroll with the seven seals, which is held by the right hand of the One who sits on the throne, and passed directly from the Almighty God to the Almighty Lamb.



Presumably, this little scroll does not contain the entire mystery of God's purposes, as the larger scroll does. It is much more modest than that. It is the word given to John to proclaim to the churches. In order to proclaim God's message to the churches, John does not need to digest the entire scroll with the seven seals.

If we now compare this passage with its literary background in Ezekiel 2 and 3, the parallelisms are obvious. There is no need to dwell on them. What is more striking, however, are two significant differences. The first is that, while Ezekiel says "I ate it, and in my mouth it was as sweet as honey," John says: "it was sweet as honey in my mouth, but when I had eaten it, my stomach was made bitter." Ezekiel speaks of a sweet word of God. For John, the word he is to proclaim is bittersweet.

The second difference has to do with the scope of the message of each of the two prophets. Ezekiel is told: "Mortal, go to the house of Israel and speak my very words to them. For you are not sent to a people of obscure speech and difficult language, but to the house of Israel - not to many peoples of obscure speech and difficult language, whose words you cannot understand." In contrast, the mighty angel tells John: "You must prophesy again about many peoples and nations and languages and kings."

There are a number of theories as to why John says that the scroll made his stomach bitter. I prefer to see a connection between the two particular traits in John's vision vis-à-vis Ezekiel's: the bitterness in the stomach and the wide scope of the message.

If any writer of the New Testament was a Jew, and steeped in Jewish culture and traditions, that was John of Patmos. It has been pointed out that there is hardly a verse in his book that does not have an allusion to the Hebrew Scriptures. His Greek is full of Hebraisms, perhaps due in part to his greater familiarity with Hebrew and with Aramaic, and perhaps as a result of his constant literary dependence on the Hebrew Bible. And he quotes that Bible, not from the Septuagint that all the other New Testament authors employed, but either from an unknown translation or from his own, which he does as he goes along.

He is well aware of the mission given to the prophet Ezekiel when he ate his scroll: Ezekiel was to speak only to the house of Israel, and they would not believe him. Now he, John, is not told to whom he is to speak, but *about whom*. (With the preposition *epi*, a genitive case would have meant that John was to prophesy *to* many peoples and nations and languages and kings. An accusative case would have meant that he was to prophesy *against* them. But the dative case, used here, means that he is to prophesy *about* them, as the NRSV correctly translates.) The difference between Ezekiel's vision and John's is not that Ezekiel is to go to Israel, to a people who understand his language, and John is to go throughout the world, to many peoples and nations and languages and kings. The difference is rather that John is to go back to his audience, presumably the seven churches and other similar communities in Asia, and speak to them *about* the many peoples, and nations, and languages, and kings. And that is why the word of God, the little scroll that will be John's message, although sweet to the taste, is hard to stomach.

John the Jew; John who can quote the Hebrew Scriptures back and forth, apparently without even bothering to think about it, is given a message to proclaim to his congregations. His congregations are probably also mostly Jewish. Otherwise, they would hardly be able to understand this book he is writing to them, so full of allusions to the Hebrew Scriptures, and even to more recent Jewish traditions. And now he is told that he is to speak to these congregations, not just the word they expect, that those who are faithful until death will receive the crown of life, or that everyone who conquers will receive some of the hidden manna, and a white stone with a secret name, but he is to speak to them about "many peoples, and nations, and languages, and kings."

I submit to you that this is the most difficult aspect of becoming a multicultural church in a multicultural world. Bringing people in from other nations, and tribes, and peoples, and languages is not difficult, as long as they are brought in to the same church, dominated by the same nation, and tribe, and people, and language. Throughout its history, whenever the church has taken the Great Commission seriously, it has been willing and even eager to prophesy to many nations, tribes, and peoples. It has also been willing to prophesy in many languages, and to that end missionaries have translated the Bible into thousands of languages, and have even devised methods for reducing hundreds of languages to writing.

But that is not what John is told to do. He is not told to go and speak to many peoples, nations, languages, and kings. He is told rather to speak to his congregations about many peoples, nations, languages, and kings. And he finds that bitter to his stomach.

The vision which John the Jew has is a vision of a Gentile church; a church where the Gentiles would come and take their place right next to the tribes of Israel, and all together would claim the ancient promise made to the people of Israel, that they would be a kingdom of priests. That is a vision sweet as honey, for it shows the fullness of the mercy of God; but it is also a vision bitter to the stomach, because it shows that no people, no tribe, no language, no nation, can claim a place of particular honor in that fullness. And it is bittersweet, because it involves radical change in the very congregations where John has served and which he loves.

In some ways, that is the challenge facing the church today in the changing society of the United States. And, as in John's case, that church is finding it a bittersweet challenge, and is not always responding to it with total openness.

Then there is a second passage in which our phrase appears in the context of preaching. It appears in Rev. 14:6-7:

Then I saw another angel flying in midheaven, with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who live on the earth - to every nation and tribe and language and people.

Unfortunately, we do not have the time to study this passage in detail. Suffice it to say that, in the context in which it appears, it is a very freeing passage for any who believe that their task is to preach the Gospel. John exiled in Patmos may have felt frustrated that there was so much preaching to do, and he was confined to a tiny island. But no. The preaching of

the Gospel is not finally up to him. It is also the task of the angels, and it will be done. The church in the United States, confronted by changes it often does not understand, and the church in any changing society, must draw comfort from this vision. We may not be equal to the task; but John saw, and we must also see, an "angel flying in midheaven, with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who live on the earth - to every nation and tribe and language and people."

Finally, there are two passages in the book of Revelation where our phrase appears in the context of the eschatological promise:

1) In Rev. 5:9-10, we are told of a heavenly choir singing to the Lamb: "You were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation; you have made them to be a kingdom of priests serving our God."

2) And in Rev. 7:9 the Seer tells us "After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands."

As we deal with the challenges to the church in an increasingly multicultural society, these two passages, more than the others we have studied, must provide our vision and guide our action. The first three passages deal with the power of evil in the present age. The next two deal with the responsibility of preaching a different order. But these two provide the vision for the interpretation of the present order, and the power for preaching the coming order. Because they are a vision of the end from which God is calling, they are the real force behind the church's response to a changing society.

My father-in-law was an avid reader of mystery stories. He had wall and walls of bookcases with nothing but mysteries. But we used to snake fun of the way he read mystery stories. Whenever he got a new book, he would immediately turn to the last chapter, and read it. Then he would go back to the beginning, and see how the author got to the intended end.

It is a strange way to read a mystery. But, on second thought, that way of reading mystery stories has much to commend it. We tend to look at things from beginning to end; from past, to present, to future. If you want to understand something, you study the previous events that produced it.

What has made this view particularly prevalent in modern society is the success of the physical sciences. In the physical sciences, to "understand" something is to be able to explain its causes. And, when we today speak of "cause," we mean what the ancients called "efficient cause."

But that is not the only way to look at reality. In fact, throughout most of history most of humankind has believed that things are ultimately caused, not so much by other events as by a purpose; not so much by their beginning, as by their end. This is what medieval philosophers called the "final cause," or the "teleological cause." Things happen, not merely because some-

thing happened before, but also and above all because they are being called from a future towards which they are moving. Thus, when medieval philosophers said that God was the ultimate "cause" of the universe, they meant not only that in the beginning God made all things and set them in motion, as a first efficient cause, but also that God calls all things from the future, as their final teleological cause.

We may find this difficult to understand, because to us "cause and effect" are a sequences that follows along chronological lines, always from the past, to the present, to the future. In this, modernity has been profoundly influenced by the practical success of the physical sciences, which are precisely sciences that study efficient causes.

But, when you stop to think about it, that is not really the way we live our lives. The reason why I came here was not only that an airplane brought me to Nanjing. The reason is also that, when I was back home, I envisioned and wished my presence here, and so bought a ticket, and so got on a plane, that then brought me here. And the reason is also that someone here in Nanjing envisioned my presence here, and therefore extended an invitation. Thus, although in a way the cause of my being here is that I got on that plane, that is true only in a very limited way - as an efficient cause. In fact, the teleological cause is closer to the truth: I got on that plane because I was to be here today.

And so it is with all of us. When we leave our homes, we determine which way to turn on the basis of where we are going - in other words, the future is the cause of our decision.

Now let us think again about my father-in-law reading a mystery book, and beginning at the end. From the point of view of purely efficient causes, that is a crazy way to read a book. But it is probably much closer to the way the book was written. Most likely, the author decided the solution long before the first word of the book was ever written. The entire book, from cover to cover, makes clearer sense when you read the story, not simply as the result of dozens of separate events that unfold in chronological order, but rather as the result of that final event, which pulls all the rest to itself. If we read the book from page one to the last page, it is not until the last page that we find that the cook will turn out to be the murderer. But if we have a glimpse at that last page, as my father-in-law was wont to do, then as we read the book we understand things differently. When the phone rings on page fifty, we can have a glimpse of the meaning and purpose of that event in the mind of the author, in light of the fact that the cook will be the murderer.

In a way, that is also true about society and history. We can study society in all its details, limiting ourselves to efficient causes, and think we understand it. We can study historical events thoroughly according to their efficient causes, and think we understand them. But that is like reading the book from page one, and coming to page fifty where the phone rings. We understand that the phone rings because someone called. But in truth, the reason why the phone rings on page fifty is because on page 250 we are to be told that the cook is the murderer. Likewise, we do not really understand creation, or society, or history until we have a glimpse of the end for which creation was made, and the purpose towards which history and society are moving.

I said earlier that, in a radically changing society, where the city of Rome had set out to cify the world, and where this was creating enormous upheaval, the early church proclaimed a vision of an even more radical change, of "a new heaven and a new earth," and a "holy city, the new Jerusalem." Now we see also that in a world where languages, and cultures, and nations were clashing, where they were being exploited by the imperial power of Rome, where they were made to serve the powers of evil, the church proclaimed a vision of even greater cultural interchange, of an even greater sharing of power and prestige and authority, for the Lamb who was slain has ransomed from God "saints from every tribe and language and people and nation," and made them a kingdom of priests serving God and reigning on earth.

Reading these passages, I feel as my father in law must have felt when he opened the last chapter of a mystery novel. Aha! The cook did it! So that is what it is all about! Aha! A kingdom of God, where God and the Lamb shall reign forever. A kingdom from all tribes, and peoples, and nations, and languages, where they shall all be a royal priesthood. A kingdom where they shall wear their white robes of victory, and wave palms of jubilation, celebrating the victory of the Lamb in a multitude of languages, for they are people from every tribe and nation. So that is what it is all about!

If that is what it is all about, the task of the church in a changing society is not simply to preserve the values of the past which are threatened with extinction, as the more conservative elements in the United States seem to believe. Nor is it even to help people cope with the changes that are taking place, as the more liberal elements tell us. The task of the church is to proclaim an even greater change, to look at the present in the light of God's future, and to live as those who truly believe that this is the future from which God is pulling history and society.

This is a task which the church in the United States cannot fulfill without the help and guidance of the rest of the church throughout the world. It is for that reason that we come to this Consultation, asking our Chinese brothers and sisters to help us discern God's future, and be faithful to it.

*Justo L. Gonzales is Executive Director of the Hispanic Theological Initiative, Candler School of Theology, Emory University.*

### 3. Churches in a Changing Society – Walter Bruggemann

#### *The Emergence of New Issues: Preliminary Comments*

I begin with five preliminary points which help pose our general issue in a way in which it touches my discipline of Old Testament study.

1. My principle learning from my participation in our 1991 "Traveling Seminar" in China and our 1992 consultation at Columbia Seminary is that I do not understand the church in China or even the issues with which it had to struggle. Thus my first preliminary awareness is that I will seek to comment only upon my own church and societal context which I understand somewhat better.

2. Because I am an Old Testament teacher, it is necessary for me to transpose the question of "church in a changing society" into something resonate with the Old Testament. I shall focus on the move in the Old Testament from monarchal society into exile, with the collapse of the domination by a royal-temple hegemony, and Jewish marginalization into increasingly universalizing empires, Persian, Greek, and Roman. I shall argue that that profound disestablishment in ancient Israel is in important ways paralleled in the United States, by the emergence of something popularly called post-industrial, post-Enlightenment, or post-modern society.<sup>1</sup>

3. In previous articles I have suggested that the metaphor of exile may be understood among persons in the United States in two distinct ways.<sup>2</sup> First, in a broadly cultural way the "homeland" in which all of us in the United States have grown up has been defined and dominated by white, male, Western assumptions. "Exile comes as those values and modes of authority are being effectively and progressively diminished."<sup>3</sup> With that dismissal, we are now required to live in a new situation that for many of us seems less like home. In such a context, folk need pastoral, theological help in relinquishing a "home" that is gone, and entry into a new, dangerous place that we sense as deeply "other."

Second, I have suggested an ecclesiological (church) exile in the same context. "Serious, reflective Christians find themselves increasingly at odds with the dominant values of consumer capitalism and its supportive military patriotism, there is no easy or obvious way to hold together core faith claims and the social realities, around us."<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Concerning the exile, the standard works are Peter R. Ackroyd, *Exile and Restoration: A Study of Hebrew Thought of the Sixth Century B.C.* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1968), E. Janssen, *Juda in der Exilszeit: Ein Beitrag zur Frage der Entstehung des Judentums* (FRLANT 69; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Reprecht, 1956), Ralph W. Klein, *Israel in Exile: A Theological Interpretation* (OBT; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), and Daniel L. Smith, *The Religion of the Landless: The Social Context of the Babylonian Exile* (Indianapolis: Meher-Stone, 1989).

<sup>2</sup> Walter Bruggemann, "Rethinking Church Models Through Scripture," *Theology Today* 48 (July, 1991) pp. 128-138. "Preaching to Exiles," *Journal for Preachers XVI*<sup>4</sup> (Pentecost, 1993) pp. 3-15, and "Cadences Which Redescribe: Speech Among Exiles," *Journal for Preachers XVII* (Easter, 1994) pp. 10-17.

<sup>3</sup> Bruggemann, "Preaching to Exiles," p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

Christopher Seitz has shown that the situation of exile in ancient Israel created profound disputes among Jews over a correct reading of historical experience, and over reshaping communal power and authority.<sup>5</sup> Our own situation, a situation of problematic pluralism is, I suggest, an approximate parallelism, in which a variety of interpretive voices compete in order to establish their version (or sub-version) of reality as correct.

4. The evidence we have from that ancient displacement is that exile produced rich and varied theological literature which provides the main substance of the Hebrew canon, which is essentially a product of the exile.<sup>6</sup> These new articulations which became Canon include:

a) *The Deuteronomist* re-visioned the whole of Israel's remembered past in terms of the Torah and issues of obedience and disobedience.<sup>7</sup>

b) *The Priestly tradition*, primary competitor to the Deuteronomic tradition, paid little attention to "Torah obedience" as sponsored by the Deuteronomist but reflected primarily upon the Crisis of God's presence (and absence) in a seemingly abandoned world.<sup>8</sup>

c) The completed *book of Job*, likely dated to this same exilic period, takes up old speech patterns of ancient Israel in order to construct a profound argument about the character of God, the reliability of God, and the fairness of God. The writer entertains the thought that God's moral order is unreliable, and that human courage is required to move beyond old absolutist claims.<sup>9</sup>

d) Finally I mention the great prophetic efforts of the exile, *Jeremiah*, *Ezekiel*, and *If Isaiah*.<sup>10</sup> These poetic, imaginative figures looked the discontinuity of experience in the face, and then dared to posit an unextrapolated newness ... new covenant, new shepherd, new homecoming . . . wrought by the very God who moved into new dimensions of faithfulness.

---

<sup>5</sup> Christopher R. Seitz, *Theology and Conflict: Reactions to the Exile in the Book of Jeremiah* (BZAW 176; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1989).

<sup>6</sup> Rainer Albertz, *Religionsgeschichte Israels in alttestamentlicher Zeit I and 2* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Reprecht, 1992) has taken as the defining reality of Israel's religion the fact of pluralism. He shows, moreover that the canon is itself a work of compromise among competing voices.

<sup>7</sup> For a general introduction to the issues. see Terence E. Fretheim, *Deuteronomic History* (Interpreting Biblical Texts: Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1983).

<sup>8</sup> In addition to the work of Albertz cited in n. 6. see Robert B. Coote and David Robert Old, *In the Beginning: Creation and the Priestly History* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991).

<sup>9</sup> On the social location and function of Job, see Samuel Terrien, "Job as Sage," *The Sage in Israel and the Ancient Near East* ed. By John G. Gammie and Leo Perdue (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990) pp. 231-242, and Rainer Albertz, "The Sage and Pious Wisdom in the Book of Job: The Friends' Perspective," *ibid.*, pp. 243-61. Concerning the utilization of older forms in Job, see Claus Westermann, *The Structure of the Book of Job: A Form-Critical Analysis* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981) and Katherine J. Dell, *The Book of Job as Sceptical Literature* (BZAW 197: Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1991).

<sup>10</sup> See Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology II* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1965) pp. 220-77, Walter Brueggemann, *Hopeful Imagination: prophetic Voices in Exile* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), and Albertz. *Religionsgeschichte* 2, pp. 427-59.

No single party or position was permitted total domination as Israel moves toward a normative canon. Pluralism lives at the very core of the Judaism worked out in the shadow of the exile.

5. Finally, in my preliminary comments, I want to focus on an article by Sigmund Mowinckel published in the *Journal of Biblical Literature* in 1934.<sup>11</sup> Mowinckel, a distinguished Norwegian scholar, observed a remarkable distinction between the early ecstatic" prophets (including Elijah and Elisha) and the Reform Prophets, the ones we usually mean by the term "prophetic" (Isaiah, Amos, Jeremiah). Mowinckel observed that the early prophets rely upon the "spirit of Yahweh," but in the Reform prophets, such as Isaiah and Jeremiah, the "spirit of Yahweh" plays almost no role, for these prophets are bearers of the "word of Yahweh." With the coming of the exile, at the end of the period of the reforming prophets, the spirit reappears in the rhetoric of Isaiah 40-55 (in limited ways), and much more in Ezekiel and Isaiah 56-66. The point suggested to me is that in highly organized, institutionalized Yahwism of the monarchal period, the spirit had no room in which to operate. In the exilic period, however, with the termination of institutional support and restraint, Israel's life becomes again an arena for the reemergence of the "spirit of Yahweh" as a driving, compelling, liberating force.

#### *Texts of "Spirit"*

I now propose to consider a series of texts that are conventionally dated in or just after the exile. My purpose is to consider specifically how this "changing society" of the ancient Jews was the place where God's spirit came, and the ways in which the community of faith in this context found itself unexpectedly moved by the spirit and was responsive to the spirit.

1. Isaiah 42:1-4. In Isaiah 42:1, the first mention of the servant who is chosen and upheld by Yahweh, the servant has a crucial mission, for which the coastlands wait. Three time in these verses, it is the work of this unidentified servant, presumably Israel, to bring justice in its most sweeping scope:

He will bring *justice* to the nations . . .  
he will faithfully bring forth *justice* . . .  
he will not fail or be discouraged,  
till he has established *justice* in the earth.

In the context of Isaiah 48-55, commonly dated to the exile, "justice among the nations" apparently means an act which liberates all the exiled Jews, an act of power that confounds the "host" empires and gives to the outcast Jews freedom and impetus to return home to their own life.

No "servant" could initiate such a daring possibility. The spirit of God is an inscrutable empowerment that permits action, which are completely disproportionate to capacity (v. 1). The spirit undoes all conventional notions about what is possible and addresses itself in the

---

<sup>11</sup> Sigmund Mowinckel, "The 'Spirit' and the 'Word' in the Pre-Exilic Reforming Prophets," *JBL*. LIII (1934) pp. 199-227.



very historical process to what the world regards as impossible. The poem ends in 42:9 with the assertion, "New things I now declare."

2. *Ezekiel 37:1-14*. The "valley of dry bones" is a scenario permeated with the reality of the spirit. At the very outset, the narrative begins:

The hand of the Lord came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord, and set me down in the middle of a valley (v. 1).

The whole of the (vision?) experience is initiated by the spirit. God announces what will be done with the dry bones of Israel:

I will cause spirit to enter you and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put spirit in you, and you shall live (vv. 5-6).

This verdict by Yahweh in vv. 5-6 is now implemented. In v. 8 there come sinews and flesh and skin . . . but no spirit. The rush requires a second word of command from Yahweh (v. 9). In this verse, God addresses spirit and commands spirit with an imperative, as an agent of Yahweh. Finally the spirit comes into the bones and they live (v. 10)! We watch the inscrutable process from death to life.

In vv. 11-14 this remarkable scenario is interpreted. The bones are the whole house of Israel. The dryness is loss of hope, i.e., loss of any prospect for a future, completely cut off. Then the rhetoric escalates:

I am going to open your graves and bring you back from your graves. O my people, I will bring you back to the land of Israel. You shall know I am Yahweh, when I open your graves and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit within you and you shall live. And I will place you on your own soil. Then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act.

It is *the wind* that is God's self-starter in working a miracle, to bring the people of God to a new historical possibility, when all available possibilities have been nullified. Israel is indeed a "new thing" after it had entered its null-point.<sup>12</sup> Israel's new life in a new social circumstance is indeed *ex nihilo*. It is completely taken out of its own hands, something unthinkable before the coming of the exile.

3. *Ezekiel 18:31, 36:27*. In Ezek. 18, the prophet offers a program of repentance for the wicked, which concerns the three "biggies" of idolatry, sexuality, and economics.<sup>13</sup> The intent of the chapter is to urge repentance. "Turn then and live . . . Get yourselves a new

---

<sup>12</sup> The phrase "null point" refers to the terminology employed by Walther Zimmerli, "Plans for Rebuilding After the Catastrophe of 587." *I Am Yahweh* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982). He refers variously to "the blessing of the nadir" (p. III), "the opportunity of point zero" (p. 115), and "the blessing of point zero" (p. 133).

<sup>13</sup> On this important chapter, see Paul Joyce, *Divine Initiative and Human Response in Ezekiel* (JSOT Supp. 51: Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989) chapter 3.

heart and a new spirit." The imperative assumes that Israel is capable, by its resolve and choice, to operate in a wholly different spirit.

In 36:27, however, Israel's resources and capacity are spent and exhausted. Now, if there is to be anything different, it will be done by Yahweh for Israel, who on its own is helpless. The prophet speaks, on God's behalf, a series of sweeping promises (vv. 24-27). Whereas in chapter 18, Israel is to "make" a new spirit for itself, here it is Yahweh who will put a new heart and a new spirit, a new intention and a new capability that will make serious obedience possible, and will give well-being in the land (vv. 28-30).

4. Isaiah 61:1-7. When we come to Isaiah 56-66 in perhaps 520 BCE, we are into a quite different world of theological reality. Our text begins with the spirit (Is. 61:1). In this chapter all the transformative actions now to be taken are to be taken by a human agent. Powered by the spirit, the human agent moves beyond self to do what is humanly impossible. Yahweh, the one who sends the spirit, is the one who anoints and sends, who authorizes and dispatches, who turns loose in the world a human agent whom "the force" attends. That human agent who has been "enspirited" now goes well beyond any conventional human possibility. That human agent is to enact the Jubilee Year anticipated as long ago as Leviticus 25 (Is. 61:1b-3b).<sup>14</sup> This text becomes programmatic in Luke for the evangelical transformation of society (Luke 4:17-21).

5. *Zechariah 4:6*. Just after the return from exile, the prophet Zechariah anticipates the rebuilding of the temple and perhaps the restoration of Davidic political power. The chance for restoration is not propelled by the depleted resources of Judaism:

Thus the word of the Lord to Zerubbabel: Not by might, not by power, but by my spirit, says the Lord of hosts.

Human might and power will not produce Israel's rehabilitation. How then? By my spirit. By the "force" of God which neither Jewish despair nor imperial policy can thwart.

In like manner Haggai counters the despair of the returned exiles:

I am with you, says the Lord of hosts, according to the promise that I made you when you came out of Egypt. My spirit abides among you; do not fear (Hag. 2:4-5).

6. Joel 2:28-29. Finally I come to the appropriate conclusion of this inventory. The text is familiar to us:

Then afterward

I will pour out my spirit on all flesh;  
your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,  
your old men shall dream dreams,

---

<sup>14</sup> Concerning the Jubilee Year, see John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus. VIII Agnus Noster* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972) pp. 34-40, pp. 64-T and passim, and Sharon H. Ringe, *Jesus, Liberation, and the Biblical Jubilee: Images for Ethics and Christology* (OBT: Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985).

and your young men shall see visions.  
Even on the male and female slaves,  
in those days, I will pour out my spirit.

By the gift of the spirit everyone in the community - sons and daughters, young men and old, male and female, slaves and free-will have liberated imagination. The gift of the spirit is for prophesy, dreaming, and seeing visions, able to re-vision reality out beyond every debilitating convention.

The gift of the spirit suggests that this community of old and young, free and slave, male and female, is not so committed to the visible and the given, but is energized to entertain a genuine and profound alternative to what the world regards as settled.

This Joel text becomes the theme text for Peter's great Pentecost sermon in Acts 2:14-36. Peter imagines that under the imperative of the spirit the future of the world in the resurrection is more reliable than the closed, settled world of the empire. That strange gift in Acts 2 sets in motion this odd, inexplicable tale of a church that turns the world upside down (Acts 17:6), thereby confounding the rulers of this age.

This is an extraordinary array of texts that envision a force set loose in the world, that none of the assumed givens can finally withstand.

### *A Church Invaded By the Spirit*

It is this move from *word* to *spirit* that I suggest befits the church in a society moving to a disordered sort of pluralism in which old certitudes of knowledge and power are deeply at risk. In the world of Israel before 587 BCE, things were settled and ordered enough to permit "word theology." There were prophets who spoke the word. There were kings to be addressed. There were courts and temples where the word was sounded and uttered.

In exile and beyond exile, however, those settled ways of powerful utterance were no longer adequate or credible. A more desperate, disordered situation required a more wild, undomesticated mode of life exposed to the staggering, invasive "force" of God which blows where it will. I suggest ours is a time like that, when the church cannot assume institutional supports, but is freed and required to be open in ways unfettered and unsupported.

Five dimensions of church life and practice may suggest a parallel to the disestablished exilic Judaism which focuses on the spirit of Yahweh.

1. Under the aegis of the spirit, the possible relations of church and culture are much less precise and much more porous than our usual models. The enlivening, transformative spirit may turn up in all kinds of places and modes that lie outside the control and beyond the horizon of the church.

Specifically, greater attention may be paid to *the arts* as a way in which the edges of pain and possibility in society come to availability. It is no accident that what has been called "the

work of the spirit" is now much more likely to be taken as "imagination." Art, like dream, may move forward to conjure new configurations of reality not yet available in more cognitive modes. Thus it is not accidental that much of the most compelling and poignant art comes from the wounded and margined who construe reality alternatively. God is not tamed by the church and may lead us to go where we had not intended.

2. We may rethink what a *spirit filled* piety might look like. Its *liturgy* must be bold, so as to counter grief and despair. The liturgy may penetrate denial over loss, in order to express the grief as sadness, rage, and a sense of abandonment. Such protests, when fully voiced, may readily move to promises which are specific and which move well beyond common social expectation. A liturgic enterprise of rage and vision is a model very different from an accent upon guilt and repentance which characterizes most establishment liturgy.

The *sacramental dimension* of such liturgy is important to recover. Of course sacraments can also be made into gestures of social stability. But the prayer for the spirit to come upon the waters of baptism and the *epiklesis* at the center of Eucharist mean that the moving, surging spirit of God is central to sacraments for a church given over to transformation. Each of the sacraments may be understood as a vehicle whereby God's spirit works newness.

Piety in much of our church tradition is focused upon *morality*. The commands of the gospel are indeed urgent. A church without a social hegemony to support, however, can learn to reread the commands of the gospel through social criticism, to see that they emancipate the spirit-filled church to address orders and principalities that violate the liberating, healing, caring promises of the gospel. "Morality" in such a church has less to do with purity than it has to do with energy, courage, and freedom for social transformation.

The piety of such a church surely includes personal *prayer and devotion*. Such a practice for believers in a posture of openness may be pondering precisely in the yet inchoate coming kingdom, in order to anticipate and receive gifts where they are given, to discern signs of its coming, and to position ourselves for its enactment among us.

In its *liturgical-sacramental, moral, and devotional aspects*, this piety is a waiting, expectant, receiving posture of faith. It may be genuinely alternative to every settled reflection upon the *status quo*. In his rich and suggestive report on Jewish devotional life, Jacob Neusner proposes that the rituals of Jewish faith are supports for acts of imagination, whereby one may imagine that he or she is a Jew.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, says Neusner, being a Jew is fundamentally an act of imagination. If one does not so imagine, Jewishness evaporates, and one disappears into the landscape of assimilation. In post-establishment Christianity, one must imagine one's self to be a Christian who has "renounced the vain glories of the world" (thus baptism) and who "proclaims the Lord's death until he comes" (thus Eucharist). That is, we may each day imagine ourselves to be Christian.

---

<sup>15</sup> Jacob Neusner, *The Enchantments of Judaism: Rites of Transformation from Birth Through Death* (New York: Basic Books, 1987). On p. 214, he writes, "*We are Jews through the power of our imagination*" (Neusner's italics).

4. It is more difficult, but no less urgent, to think about spirit-filled polity. We shall have to think of drastic ways to overcome the bureaucratic mind-set and the corporation model that tend to move in terms of large budgets, programs, organizational charts, and full-time, life-time staff.

Our usual ordering of the church cannot make it easy for the spirit. The losses in such a "light" notion of the church would be considerable, but not as great when we recognize that most of the glory of dominance has already departed from the church. In fact, the evangelical issues in our society are too urgent for the disproportionate energy that tight polity requires. The polity questions invite us to ask, not how to "maintain decency and order" but how to become energized for urgent mission.

The spirit may call the church to new forms of being that are not Episcopal, Presbyterian, or Congregational, but more like a network of all those baptized into a dangerous identity. Such a possibility of course is not absent when we ponder the early church in its work of contagion in the midst of the empire.

5. From the crisis of polity, of course, comes the crisis of policy. A church made up of exiles inevitably has many diverse notions about how to posture faith over-against a dominant culture that now largely ignores the noise of the church. If the church is not taken so seriously by culture, it can afford to acknowledge in honest ways its own uncertain pluralism. In its new situation, the church may take more risks in speaking the truth. Such a church might more honestly admit that we, most of us, are ambiguous, ambivalent, and double-minded, and do not want to decide.

Such an openness, however, requires the conviction that others (who seem completely wrong) are living in good faith, may also be led by the spirit, and must be prayed for, in their very odd form of witness. Hans Frei, a recent important theologian at Yale, speaks of a "generous orthodoxy"

which would have in it an element of liberalism - a voice like the *Christian Century* - and an element of evangelicalism - voice of *Christianity Today*.<sup>16</sup>

If the church is able to trust the spirit, it can afford to be generous in its orthodoxy and in its notion of right living. And indeed it must be generous, if in our pluralism beyond hegemony, we do not wish to excommunicate all but ourselves.

6. What finally matters decisively is a *spirit-filled faith*, a conviction that the core narrative of the gospel has quite concrete credibility, out of which we are prepared to act and toward which we are prepared to witness. Faith in this mode is relatively simple. It asserts trust in this other Character who in great weakness enters our life in powerful acts of surprise which transform and heal. The new situation in a post-hegemony church is to see if our walk and our talk can be put together in freshly compelling ways.

---

<sup>16</sup> Hans Frei, "Response to [C F H Henry] 'Narrative Theology: An Evangelical Appraisal,'" *Trinity Journal* 8 NS 11987) pp. 21-24. I am grateful to Charles *Campbell* for this reference.

*Led By the Spirit, Unfettered and Unafraid*

Finally I raise questions about the juxtaposition of word and spirit.

1. Can the church move out of its *logocentric* posture which has assumed privileged certitude, which is found by many to be unhelpfully authoritarian?

If the church moves from its long-established logocentric posture, it means that it gives up something of its conventional modes of authority and certitude. This does not mean, of course, that a church ceases its proclamation and transformative utterance. The mode, mood, tone, and posture of the church may become the voice of uncredentialed power, passion, and resilience. Such a church need not utter universal claims, but bears witness to the odd, concrete, and unexpected ways in which "the force" has been evidenced in ways that defy all of our symmetrical, domesticated categories.

2. Can the church rethink the *filioquy clause*? What seems a very small grammatical debate is in fact a discussion of enormous importance, because the abandonment of the clause permits the acknowledgment that "God the Father" may do things in the world that do not look all that much like "Jesus."

I am sure that I do not grasp all of the theological problems in the Eastern alternative. It is in any case a consequence of the Eastern formulation (without that clause) that the spirit is confessed to be alive and visible in the ways of the world, apart from any Christological claim. Thus all of creation is known to be an arena for the work of the spirit. Now it may be that all such is possible with the filioquy when a high view of logos is affirmed in trinitarian thinking. But in practice it has not worked out that way.

It is possible to acknowledge that the creator God has unleashed God's own life-giving "force" everywhere in God's creation, in many modes and cultural forms, well beyond the confessional horizons of the church's Christology. The consequence is that the church recognizes its own theological position as a marginated witness to the great transformative actions wrought by God's spirit. Thus the absence of filioquy has the practical consequence of minimizing the church's authority in defining and identifying the liberating threat and healing gift of the spirit.

3. What can the church in such a culture of transition like ours learn from the book of Acts? I am no restorationist, and I have no romantic notion of a destructured church. It may be, however, that in a pluralistic culture where the church is increasingly dislodged from prominence, and its old modes of impact and domination are diminished, we may learn afresh from that model of church.

a) The account of the church in Acts is about the disruptive, generative, originary power of the spirit, in a society that assumed no newness could disrupt the authority of the "super-power" (Rome).

b) While the narrative of Acts focuses upon the force of the spirit, the actions taken are characteristically those of emboldened human agents. It is a narrative of the unafraid.

c) The thematic quote from Joel 2:28-32 (Acts 2:17-21), concerns old and young, slave and free, male and female, who dream dreams and see visions. The quote is set in a social context in which alternative possibilities are given to the church by the spirit.

d) The church in Acts, of course, is no stranger to controversy. But the vision of Peter in Acts 10:11-16 and the decision of Acts 15:19 places the church venturesomely on the side of generous grace and inclusiveness, which seemed to violate all old, treasured protocols.

e) The church is persuasive and bold in the face of the authorities, refusing to be silent, cowed, or accommodated to the policy-makers (Acts 20-24).

The reconsideration of the church in a society where old forms and old privilege are in doubt has enormous import. It is, entirely plausible, given our past, that the very "force" to whom we may bear new witness is the very force which compels and permits this reconsideration. Spirit-language is one way in which our people have uttered the unutterable, which lies outside all of our conventional, more congenial, controlled categories.

Walter Bruggemann is William Marcellus McPheeters Professor of Old Testament, Columbia Theological Seminary and former President of the Society of Biblical Literature.

## 4. Making Connections: Christianity and Culture in the Sino-American Dialogue – Philip L. Wickeri

Several years ago, one of China's younger theologians spoke to me of the dilemma which he saw facing his generation of Christians. "We have to work on two fronts," he said. "On the one hand, we have to address our own churches, where the people are very conservative, inadequately grounded theologically, and resistant to change. But on the other hand, we need to speak to intellectuals outside the Church, people who are interested in Christianity, but who would not want to identify with the church as it now is."

The dilemma is one which Christians face the world over, though in different forms. What I find significant is that this young man placed the Church right at the center of the problem of Christianity and Culture. The church grounds the dialogue in a realism which takes account of the questions which ordinary Christians must face on a day to day basis. Without the church, dialogue among Christian intellectuals on any subject can easily become a shallow exercise for the advent-guard, no matter how profound the issues it raises.<sup>1</sup>

Dialogue with and within the church is just as important for Christians in North America as it is for Christians in China. And it means that the concerns of the church must intrude into our discussion whether we like it or not. The fact that our Sino-American dialogue is taking place at a theological seminary, with representatives from a Chinese theological seminary, should ensure that such concerns are kept in the foreground.

To put the church in the foreground of an international dialogue on culture means that an ecumenical concern is also part of our interest. Ecumenical means "one world" as well as "one church" and the question of Christianity and culture is very relevant to both. Although the signs of the times indicate that we cannot be at all sanguine about future prospects of the ecumenical movement, I want to reaffirm the ecumenical importance of the dialogue in which we are engaged.

In recent years, there has been an increasing discussion about the need for a "paradigm shift" in the ecumenical movement. Konrad Raiser, the newly-elected General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, has suggested that such a shift would involve a reinterpretation of the "oikumene" as the "one household of life" (Cf. Eph. 2:19), which would include "an understanding of the one church in each place and in all places as a fellowship in the sense of a community of those who are different from one another."<sup>2</sup> Within

---

<sup>1</sup> K.H. Ting has made the same point: "With all the importance given these days to contextualization, it may not be in fashion to say that in our view theology must be in conversation not only with the social and cultural context within which the church finds its being, but also with the minds and hearts of the masses of Christians within the fold of the church . . . Theologians and rank-and-file Christians need to be in a give-and-take relationship of mutual learning and nurturing. Dialogues with culture, with natural and social sciences, with philosophy and with theologians' international community are valuable only insofar as they can be channeled to serve the needs of rank and file Christians." See his "Preface," *Chinese Theological Review: 1985*, pp. vi-vii.

<sup>2</sup> Konrad Raiser, *Ecumenism in Transition: A Paradigm Shift in the Ecumenical Movement?* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1991), p. 79 ff. I prefer the term "household of God" to "household of life"



the oikumene, the "household of God" extends the hospitality and provides the space in which discussions between different communities become meaningful, and possibly creative.

Discussions among members of the "household of God" also help to clarify our understanding of mission. David Bosch has spoken about the need to create a new ecumenical paradigm of mission for our "post-modern" age. As the church responds to the gospel in each new age, it reinterprets mission, and draws on different sources of biblical teaching. This reinterpretation, according to Bosch, is proceeding in many areas, one of which is the dialogue on culture and inculturation. "Christian faith never exists," he writes, "except as 'translated' into a culture."<sup>3</sup>

Our role in dialogue is to compare the translations with one another, and with the original text. The point is not to test for accuracy, but to see how our translations, all of which are imperfect, can lead us to a deeper understanding of the text. Dialogue, therefore, is important both culturally and ecumenically. It helps us gain a clearer understanding of ourselves and of one another, as we learn that each translation, including our own, is but a local example, a case among cases. In this way we can come to a better sense of the richness of the household of God, and its role in the wider oikumene.

Dialogue among Christians from different places and different churches also prevents Christians from surrendering to their contexts. In the present case, it is important for Americans to break through our false idea that "everyone is like us," for this is at the root of all forms of imperialism, and involves a "universalization" of our own situation. It is also important for Chinese to break through the false notion that "no one is like us," for this is what is behind the closed-door mentality that has held China back for centuries, and represents a "particularization" of the Chinese situation. As Chinese Christians have repeatedly stressed, "self-isolation" is not one of the three-sells.

For a genuine dialogue on Christianity and culture, we need each other, even though our Chinese and American journeys are very different. At the very least, such dialogue will help to stimulate thinking about the creation of a new ecumenical paradigm.

#### *American Christian Understandings of China*

The changes which began with the end of the Cultural Revolution era and the normalization of Sino-US relations provide the preconditions for this dialogue. Since that time, the Chinese Church has been in a period of renewal and rebuilding, as it has emerged from the difficult years of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Since that time also, American Christians have been doing a great deal of soul-searching. I have been away from this country for most of the last twelve years, but I am very much aware of how the mainline denominations and the ecumenical movement have been increasingly marginalized during this time.

---

and I am not sure why Raiser redefines the term from Ephesians. In what follows, I will use the biblical term.

<sup>3</sup> David Bosch, *transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll: ()This Books, 1991), pp. 448 ff.

It has also been during this time, we have begun to reestablish relationships with brothers and sisters in China. In the process, American Protestants have developed two very different pictures of Christianity in China, largely depending on whether we come from "mainline" or "evangelical" backgrounds. Over the last ten years, I have met a great many Americans from both groups (though more from the former) and I have read hundreds of their articles and reports. Both mainline and evangelical positions represent sincere attempts to understand what is happening to Christianity in China, but they are laden with assumptions which are derived come from the American context, and are then applied to China.

The American mainline position assumes that the church in China can and should develop positive forms of interaction with Chinese culture, although exactly what that culture is is left undefined. In this context, American mainline churches have understood the need for Chinese Christians to establish their own "post-denominational" church in the Chinese context, and have affirmed the importance of the Three-Self principles. The active involvement of the church in society is presupposed, although there tends to be an under-estimation of the difficulties which Christians experience vis-à-vis the state. Questions put to Chinese Christians are concerned with the role of women, human rights, the church's prophetic stance, and its response to other ecumenical social issues which are important in the American context. In very broad terms, this is the viewpoint of most of us at this conference, and indeed, it is this position which has made a conference such as this possible.

The American evangelical position on China has a very different starting point. It presupposes the opposition between Christianity and Culture in China (though not in America), because no compromise can be made between Christianity and communism. There tends to be an over-estimation of the difficulties which ordinary Chinese Christians experience vis-à-vis the state, and so the church is viewed as a persecuted minority. The authority of the China Christian Council is not widely accepted in evangelical circles, and many American evangelical groups encourage and support "underground" missionary activity in China. American evangelicals understand the evangelical roots and Bible-centeredness of the Church in China, especially in what they term the "house church movement." There is an absence of any self-conscious social perspective in this understanding, and the ethics of Chinese Christians is largely seen as an individual affair.

These two positions have been sketched in very broad and probably exaggerated strokes, but the picture is clear enough. Both positions in this sketch are American, not Chinese positions. They represent the two sides of what sociologist Robert Wuthnow has termed "the great fracture" in American religion. In both cases, although very different understandings of the church and its relationship to culture are presupposed, the popular assumption is that the relationship we have established between Christianity and culture here will somehow be similar to what should prevail in China. In other words, we universalize the American experience, and it somehow becomes normative.

This is precisely where the problem arises. For example American evangelicals fail to see that Chinese evangelicals are not necessarily anti-communist, and that they might be just as patriotic about their country as evangelicals are here. Also, they fail to see that their own

assumptions about the church owe as much to American experience as they do to the Bible. Although mainline churches have developed positive and very fruitful relationships with churches in China, we too are limited by our own cultural understandings. For example, we project our own contextual-political-prophetic dynamic onto the Chinese Church, and expect that Chinese Christians are raising the same questions about their society that we are about ours. Also, I believe that most American mainline Christians, unlike their evangelical counterparts, have an inadequate grasp of the evangelical core and Bible-centeredness of Christian faith in China, which may also say something about our own approach to faith and life.

### *Chinese Culture, Christianity and the Cosmic Christ*

The Chinese Church before 1949 inherited a great deal from American Christianity, and this inheritance is still very evident. However, there have been significant changes in the church in China over the last forty years, and these have changed the ways in which Christianity relates itself to Chinese culture. This should be evident from the excellent papers included here by Rev. Chen Zemin and Rev. Wang Weifan.

These changes are very important because Christianity in China is being received with new openness and appreciation by men and women from all walks of life. More books on Christianity have been published in China in the last five years than in the previous forty. A prominent Chinese churchman recently told me that in China today, there is a more open and appreciative attitude of intellectuals towards Christianity than there has been at any time in the past - more than during the Nestorian period, more than during Matteo Ricci's time, more than at any time before or since 1949. Given the wide-ranging discussions which are now taking place on the future of Chinese culture in society as a whole, this is very significant development.<sup>4</sup>

Young people in China are very much involved in all of this, especially as they search for new values to live by. Beginning with the generation which emerged at the end of the Cultural Revolution era, there has been a restlessness among youth and an openness to new thinking. Many observers have commented that what is involved is a new search for life's meaning. This is captured in the haunting words of the poet Gu Cheng,

The night has given me dark eyes,  
I use them to search for the light.

This search reconnects us to the question raised at the beginning about the need to work on "two fronts." How is the church to respond to the pastoral needs of the increasing body of believers, and at the same time reach out to a new generation of intellectuals? It cannot

---

<sup>4</sup> For two survey articles on this theme, see "Christianity and Chinese Culture," *China News Analysis*, 15 January, 1992; "Fragmented Fractals: Towards Chinese Culture in the 21st Century," *China News Analysis*, 15 June, 1992. The latter is an analysis of selected essays from the important Hong Kong based periodical on the exploration of Chinese cultural themes, *Twenty-first Century*. The *Christian Culture Review*, edited by Liu Xiaofeng, is an important mainland-based periodical focusing on cultural themes.

develop two different languages, one for use within the church, and one for speaking within the academy.

How does the Chinese Church respond theologically to the challenge of culture? The most fruitful answer has come from Chinese theologians who have drawn on the image of the cosmic Christ as expressed in Colossians, Ephesians, Hebrews and John's Gospel, as a way of linking the concerns of the church with the concerns of the world. It should be stressed that China's cosmic Christ has emerged from a very conservative-evangelical church which finds itself in a culture which has traditionally valued social ethics and a "man-in-nature" approach to cosmology. For Chinese theologians to speak of Christ as the Lord of Creation is not to separate Christ from the faith of the church, but to broaden that faith to embrace more of history and nature.

This is consistent with the best values from traditional Chinese Culture. I recently attended a conference in Hong Kong on Christianity and Culture in which two separate speakers, unknown to each other, quoted the same poem in order to illustrate the connection between a Chinese "natural theology" and faith in the creator and redeemer God of the Bible. The poem is by "hang Weiping (1780-1859), a scholar-official from the Qing dynasty, who himself had no connection with Christianity.

The Creator does not speak, but is very sympathetic.  
You can discover her presence, while you see the winter turn into spring.  
For he has arranged a colorful nature,  
Which will come into being, while the new thunder echoes from afar.

The sympathy of the creator (in Chinese, literally "the emotional attachment of the creator to creation") in this poem may be compared to the wisdom and compassion of the Christ-Logos in the ongoing process of creation and redemption.

The Christ-Logos helps Chinese Christians promote a greater understanding of the universal extent of Christ's domain and "concern in their churches. It allows them to see the good which goes on outside the realm of the church. Christ is the one who sustains the universe, who holds the world together, and who brings the world to its fruition when love, justice and peace become the rule. Creation, redemption and sanctification are all part of the same process in the world as a whole, all incomplete, but embracing goodness, truth and beauty inside as well as outside the church.<sup>5</sup>

The cosmic Christ is active not only in nature, but also in history. It was the ethical challenge of Marxism-Leninism which was especially significant for progressive Christians in the China of the 1940s, 50s and 60s. They saw the good being accomplished by Chinese

---

<sup>5</sup> K.H. Ting, "The Cosmic Christ." unpublished manuscript, 1991, passim, for this and what follows. For other English language sources on the cosmic Christ in Chinese theology, see the *Chinese Theological Review*, 1985 - , (CTR) especially essays written by K.H. Ting, Chen Zemin, Wang Weifan Shen Yifan, and Luo Zhenfang. For contributions by younger theologians on (lie theme of Christianity and culture, see the essays and sermons by Wang Xuefu, Zi Zhu, Bao Zhimin, Wang Shu, Kan Baoping, Peng Yaqian. Ji Tai and Zhang Xianyong in the CTR for 1990 and 1991. In different ways, these essays and sermons presuppose an understanding of the cosmic Christ, at least implicitly.

revolutionaries under the Communist Party as a strong challenge to the church. And they were inspired by the goodness and high moral standards of the Chinese revolutionaries. But then came the Cultural Revolution which shattered much of this earlier optimism, especially for the younger generation.

To continue to speak of the challenge of Marxism in light of the changes which have taken place in China and the world in the last few years may seem strangely out of place as we approach the end of the twentieth century. But this perspective continues to be important, for understanding the standpoint of the Three-Self Movement, but also for appreciating the social perspective of Christians who do not see the fall of communism in Eastern Europe as an invalidation of socialist ideals. In recent years this perspective has been both restated and modified in China, and it is worth repeating here. In the words of K.H. Ting:

Human nature being what it is, historical movements with high aims have a tendency to relapse and even to develop into their opposites unless there is constant, thoroughgoing criticism and self-criticism. With the gradual passing away of revolutionaries of the earlier generations, there is a decline in revolutionary spirit and overall moral standards. Bureaucracy and corruption have crept in, as you have heard. But let us not easily write off the spirit of dedication on the part of the revolutionaries so many of whom are hard working and self-giving even today. It is not a phenomenon of no consequence, but one that makes Christians in China stop and think. It challenges us to a good understanding and explanation from the point of view of our faith.

The perspective which Chinese theologians have used more than any other in interpreting the Cosmic Christ to the church and to the world is God's love in Jesus Christ. In the words of K.H. Ting, God is a "cosmic lover" rather than a tyrant or punisher, working by education and persuasion rather than by coercion and forced obedience. Love is patient, kind, and gentle, never rude and selfish. Love exists not as a principle or a truth to be learned, but as a relationship, and only as a relationship, with God and with our fellow human beings.

To speak of love as God's major attribute has helped to promote unity, reconciliation and reconstruction in the Chinese Church. It has helped liberals and conservatives to move beyond their theological conflicts, to a certain extent. The practice of Christian love and its witness in deeds creates a bridge between church and world, providing at least one feature of Christianity (besides the obvious reality of sin) which can be readily understood by those outside the church. This entire emphasis is of course related to the theology of incarnation which is so important for Chinese Christianity.

The cosmic Christ, love as God's major attribute and the theology of incarnation are also related to the church's approach to the state. Christians in China emphasize compromise and co-operation rather than confrontation in church-state relationships. American Christians may find it difficult to see the value of accommodation and flexibility in church-state relations. But it is a very reasonable approach for the Christian minority in China, and one which has a long history in Chinese culture. The strength of the bamboo is that it can bend

with the wind, and not be broken, just as the strength of the church is in the power of weakness.

Since 1989, many Chinese dissidents have also argued for this perspective in the struggle for democracy. For example, Chen Ziming, who is serving a thirteen year jail term for his role in the June events of 1989 has recently written that interest groups in China should seek to "resolve their differences through compromise, rather than relying on confrontation."<sup>6</sup> In the present situation, the alternative would mean "smashing eggs upon a rock" and would be of no practical use. Compromise and co-operation are based on a pragmatic approach to social change and political reform for Chinese Christians and non-Christians alike.

The theology of the cosmic Christ does not underestimate the difficulties which the church faces in China, nor does it only play up the bright side of things. Not everything which happens in nature and history is part of God's design. The church in China continues to face a great many difficulties, and these may have increased rather than decreased in recent years.<sup>7</sup> Evil still has its place in our world. But the cosmic Christ affords a different perspective on the present situation, reminding us that evil will not have the final word, and that the future is still open. Because we believe that the world, despite all its ambiguities, is in God's hands, Christians should be able to involve themselves in struggles for justice with a feeling of patience, calm, hopefulness and confidence.

The risk in all of this is that the cosmic Christ can come to mean anything anyone wants it to mean. This will be clear to anyone who has read Matthew Fox. However, unlike Matthew Fox, the cosmic Christ of Chinese Christians is rooted in the experience of the church and grounded in the Jesus of the Gospels. Chinese theologians do not separate themselves from the lives of ordinary Christians, although they continue to challenge them to embrace a broader view of history and nature.

#### *What we can learn from one another*

Learning from one another in the church is not a process of mutual edification for cultural uplift. Ecumenical learning is rather a means of seeing ourselves in the other, and the other in ourselves. We see each other working on different translations of the same text, and we need help in determining if we have it right. Such learning is never direct. What we learn is only suggestive, in the way that a poem or a parable suggests. This kind of learning reflects the all too human experience of knowing, forgetting and having to relearn, a situation where our "answers" need to be continually tested and reformulated in practice.<sup>8</sup> It should help us in the search for new ecumenical paradigms.

The Chinese understanding of unity and reconciliation in a post-denominational church, interpreted in light of the cosmic Christ, has a great deal to offer to American Christians and

---

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in "Literary Work for Jailed Activist," South China Morning Post, 8 June. 1992.

<sup>7</sup> See my "Reordering Relationships: Ecclesiology and Church-State Relations in Contemporary China," *Verbum, S.V.D. (1991:4)*, pp. 359-376.

<sup>8</sup> This was said in a similar context of the poems of Anna Akhmatova, see Amanda Haight, *Anna Akhmatova: A Poetic Pilgrimage* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1990) p. 134.

to the to the ecumenical movement as a whole. It is not an approach which challenges and compels, but one which charms and attracts. Since the Edinburgh 1911 world mission conference, the Chinese "way" of Christian unity (and indifference to denominationalism) has exerted a creative impact on the ecumenical movement. T.T. Lew's motto that "we should agree to differ and resolve to love" is as important as it was when it was coined in 1922.

The China Christian Council's understanding of post-Christian unity has been embodied in the recently approved "Church Order for Trial Use in Chinese Churches" (1992).<sup>9</sup> This document deserves to be carefully studied in future ecumenical discussions of faith and order. It is very much a preliminary document, derived from the experience and practice of the Chinese Church, which means that it needs to be evaluated in light of what is actually going on in Chinese churches. But in the ways in which this new church order attempts to reconcile differences among Christians from a wide variety of denominational backgrounds, it may be able to rekindle ecumenical discussions elsewhere

To be meaningful such discussions must be based, as they are in China, on a powerful experience of Christian faith and personal Christian commitment. This may in turn be relevant for coming to terms with one aspect of the "great fracture" which separates mainline and evangelical Christians in this country. Perhaps one thing we in the mainline denominations need to learn from the Chinese experience is how to reconnect with biblical faith in ways that suggest more fruitful avenues of conversation with American evangelicals. After all, this is what is behind the post-denominational phenomenon and the dialogue between mainline and evangelical Christians in China. Such reconnecting will also help to challenge our continuing propensity towards the universalization of our own experience of faith in particular denominations.

Chinese Christians are not in danger of universalizing their own position but of particularizing it. In the last few years, an increasing number of Chinese intellectuals have stressed the need to get away from a preoccupation with "China" in order to deal with the more general human condition. For example, Leo Ou-fan Lee has spoken of the Chinese "excessive obsession with their homeland" which has deprived Chinese intellectuals of developing a true global perspective. Similarly, Liu Xiaofeng emphasizes the constraints which Chinese culture exercises on its intellectuals and which prevents them from seeing broader human realities.<sup>10</sup> To break through the cultural preoccupation with all that is special about "Chinese characteristics" can enable Chinese intellectuals to see their situation in a different way, and work for reform more effectively.

Chinese church leaders have observed that ecclesiology has been one of the blind spots in their theological reflection. Ecumenical discussions in this area from other parts of the world might therefore be a fruitful area of inquiry. Given the China Christian Council's interest in

---

<sup>9</sup> See Amity News Service, 1:2 (March, 1992) or CTR::1991, pp. 21-30 for a full translation. The revised Order was formally adopted in 1997.

<sup>10</sup> See "Fragmented Fracials: Towards Chinese Culture in the 21st Century," *China News Analysis*, 15 June, 1982, pp. 6-7. For Liu's "culture Christian" perspective, which has helped him move towards more universal human issues, see his *Towards the Truth of the Cross* (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing, 1990).

this area (as expressed in the new church order for trial use, in "running the church well" and in "building up the Body of Christ"), the theology and practice of the church in other parts of the world may be a relevant concern for Chinese Christians. Churches in North America suffer from being over-institutionalized, but Chinese churches are generally under-institutionalized. Greater attention to the development of church institutions, and the positive and negative experiences of other churches, may help the Chinese Church in at least three ways:

- 1) It can provide more adequate grounding for a minority Christian community in China, and facilitate "running the church well." This has important implications for continuity and stability, especially in a time of change and transition in church and society,
- 2) Attention to institutions will promote democratization in the churches. Democratic governance grows more effectively under a system of institutionalized rules and regulations. Such a system makes possible the transfer of leadership to a new generation, a concern which has been repeatedly voiced by the China Christian Council;
- 3) Ecclesiology helps Christians develop greater concern for the importance of liturgy and the sacraments in the life of the church. This will be attractive to younger Chinese intellectuals who have deeper cultural needs. Liturgical practice can also help to raise the "cultural level" and theological understanding of Christians in the countryside. Finally, attention to ecclesiology may encourage dialogue with Chinese Catholics.

The process of mutual learning and "comparing translations" which is suggested here is intended to provide a contribution for the emergence of the new ecumenical paradigm. Dialogue within the "household of God" is important for the direction it gives, but also as an end in itself, insofar as it strengthens relationships among churches and Christians in different parts of the oikumene. The second or third century Epistle to Diogenetus proclaimed that "it is Christians who hold the world together." This continues to be the challenge of our vocation today.

Philip Wickeri is overseas Coordinator of the Amity Foundation in Hong Kong.



## **5. Christianity and Chinese Intellectuals: History and the Present – K.H. Ting**

After all the disconcerting reports on the widespread persecution of religion in China in recent decades, it may sound alarming for me to make the observation that, actually, Christianity is enjoying a better receptivity from Chinese intellectuals than at any time since its first arrival in China in its Nestorian form in 635.

Nestorian missionaries tried to justify their presence by showing that the faith they represented was not after all so different from the dominant Confucianism and Buddhism. The Christian message of the Nestorian tablet is marked by the use of dozens of Confucian and Buddhist terminologies. Later, Jesuit missionaries incorporated a number of native Chinese practices into their Christianity. Syncretism was not condemned as long as survival demanded it. The vogue of condemning syncretism in missionary approach was associated with a much later awareness of colonial power in subduing national culture. For centuries missionaries to China needed rather to overcome the Chinese intellectuals' suspicion. In the nineteenth century humiliation was added to suspicion as a result of the unequal treaties which put missionaries and the church under Western political and military protection. With the rise of the people's revolutionary movement and of the materialist worldview, the Chinese intellectuals' age-old inclination to distance themselves from religion in general and from Christianity in particular was intensified under the two slogans of religion as an opiate of the people and of Christianity as a tool of Western imperialist penetration. These two slogans became ultra-leftism's tenets on religion. This tendency culminated in the Cultural Revolution of 1966-1976.

A new chapter of criticizing ultra-leftism nationwide in all its manifestations began some fifteen years ago. In religion this criticism has brought about certain important affirmations among a wider and wider circle of intellectuals: 1) making a distinction between religion and superstition; 2) criticism of the simplistic formula equating religion and the opiate; 3) treating religion as a part of human culture and as contributory to its enrichment; 4) viewing theology as a branch of Western philosophy; 5) recognition of the compatibility of religion and socialism. At the same time there has occurred in China a practical rehabilitation of the "Five Natures of Religion in China," an analysis coming from the leading circles of the Party in the fifties and subject to criticism with the ascendancy of ultra-leftism in the sixties, namely, the rootedness of religion in the masses of the people, its affinity to ethnic minority groups, its wide international connections, the long life it has before it, and its complexity.

While ultra-leftism dies hard, a greatly changed atmosphere has been ushered in for the existence and witness of the Church and for intellectuals in their approach to religion. Hence the observation made in the opening paragraph. I do not mean that there is now a widespread enthusiastic welcome to Christian faith in society, nor does the observation endorse any wild conjecture regarding the influx of converts into the church. What is noticeable is the common assumption that Christianity is not adverse to modernization and national interest. There is an almost complete disappearance of attacks on Christianity in national and provincial

newspapers. Cheap caricatures of religion can still be found occasionally in papers on the county level.

It is important to add that, apart from criticism of ultra-leftism nationwide, efforts made by the various religions themselves, for instance, the movement of the church to achieve self-government, self-support and self-propagation, have contributed greatly to bringing about the change.

In this more favorable environment, how do we approach our new friends in dialogue and witness'?

Fundamentalist groups are trying hard to convert intellectuals to their kind of Christianity. But most intellectuals are not open to obscurantism and reject the blind alley of treating all biblical narratives as literal history. On the other hand, any adaptation of liberation theology calling for a basic revolutionary change in society has no appeal to Chinese intellectuals either. They rather think of China as belonging to a post-liberation stage of history and of themselves as having taken part in the bringing about of that liberation. They do not like to see social order uprooted.

What I visualize as the good approach to our Chinese intellectual friends is to focus on the personality of Jesus as a great lover. Jesus tells us about the father who has trust in the prodigal son and waits for his return, about the shepherd who has his ninety-nine sheep in the fold and yet cannot bear to lose one that is missing. We see a Jesus who weeps with those who weep and rejoices with those who rejoice, a Jesus who loves and protects a person who has erred and asks her not to err again, a Jesus who has loved his friends and loves them to the end, who washed his friends' feet on the eve of his departure from them. This Jesus introduces a new scale of value in which Sabbath rules are subordinated to human needs. The picture we get of him in the New Testament is fragmented but touches the chord in all that is best in human nature: the lonely man, homeless and self-forgetful, with his outpouring of love and sympathy, his suffering and agony, his tender words on the cross, and his victory over ruthless power. On the basis of our understanding of the universe and of history as creative process, I would try to help them see somehow that, at the back of this process and guiding it, is the very love as exemplified in Jesus. Instead of bringing in the question of the divinity and humanity of Jesus, I would like them to see the Christ-likeness of this Love with a capital L which Christians call God.

The philosophy of struggle has been made the ruling philosophy in China for decades. It culminated itself in the Cultural Revolution when people were taught to degrade love, to understand that the love of persons is "soft" and yielding readily to tender emotions, and unmindful of the class structure of society. Men and women should be first of all objects of suspicion as possible enemies. The vigilant revolutionary must look for class struggle everywhere. It is love that China needs. The reality of love as shown in Jesus and as the very essence of the whole creative process in the universe has a freshness and vibrancy that is nothing short of a gospel. God is the Cosmic Lover, not the Cosmic Tyrant. Love is God's supreme attribute, over and above all his other attributes and subordinating them all. Love is the force directing God's ever-continuing work of creation, redemption and transfiguration.

Even when he is not recognized under a conventional name - even when he is not named at all - he is the inescapable energy of love which moves through all things and works in all things for the creation of the richest possible good. In this process the whole world and all humanity are half-made products and finding their fulfillment in being co-workers or co-creators with God.

In China many intellectuals identify themselves as atheists. This does not need to alarm us. They can be led to see that the concepts of God whose existence they deny come from primitive, puerile religious forms, viewing God mainly in a punisher-rewarder complex. They are far from those of the God whom Christians believe in. We can join forces with them in combating false notions of God, in the course of which a degree of common theological language can emerge in mutual respect and dialogue.

Bishop K.H. Ting recently retired as President of the China Christian Council and Chairperson of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement. He remains Principal of the Nanjing Union Theological Seminary.

## 6. Chinese Theology and Its Cultural Sources – Wang Weifan

The last two hexagrams in the Chinese classic *Yi Jing*,<sup>1</sup> the 63rd and 64th respectively, are *ji ji* and *wei ji*. The second character in each term, *ji*, means "to cross the river." *Ji ji* means "having crossed the river," while *wei ji* means "yet to cross the river." By extension, the two terms can be understood to mean "having accomplished, yet not completed," "having succeeded, yet not arrived," or "having attained, yet not fulfilled" ("inaugurated" and "yet to be culminated"). That *ji ji* is not the final hexagram is important - *wei ji* has been added to bring the classic to the fullness of completion, indicating that history, nature and human life are to be viewed as a gradually ascending spiral, not as a straight line that moves forward without returning, nor as a closed circle without beginning or end. These are the philosophical foundations of the spirit of the Chinese people, made up of an ongoing dynamism, an unceasing creativity and a constant striving for renewal. These two concepts, *ji ji* and *wei ji*, are the theme of this preface and it is against this background that my discussion unfolds: to what extent has there been a fusion between Chinese theology and traditional culture and where are further efforts required. My aim is both to undertake a retrospective and summation, and to look forward to what the future holds.

There are four essential conditions for the establishment of Chinese theological thinking for the church in China: revelation, tradition, culture, praxis and experience. Like four pillars, these support the edifice that is a (Chinese) theology with Chinese characteristics. The Christian Church in China, especially the Protestant Church, has its historical roots in American revivalism and European pietism. The Reformation principle of *sola Scriptura* has never gone out of fashion in China. Divergent views never get further than seminary classrooms. This means that any view not founded on the revelation of God or "footnoted" on Biblical authority will be theologically unacceptable to the Chinese Church. A theology that is out of touch with the Chinese Church or unacceptable to the Christian community in China can hardly be considered a "Chinese theology." Chinese Christians may accept a theology which is somewhat above their intellectual level or one which contains notions not entirely within their understanding, but they will flatly reject one which contains anything "heretical" (that is, against their "received tradition").

To speak of a "Chinese theology" in no way implies a distancing from or a rejection of the rich spiritual heritage which has accrued through the centuries since the time of the Apostolic Church. However, just as we do not reject anything blindly, neither do we accept indiscriminately. "To copy without creating something of one's own"<sup>2</sup> is unacceptable on two counts. First, reiterating what our forebears or others have said (about the gospel) is not enough. We must be able to absorb from what is received that which will be beneficial to the building up of a Chinese theology. Failure to create something new is complacency and stagnation, and leads nowhere. The northern Song scholar and poet Su Dongpo (Su Tungp'o,

---

<sup>1</sup> Also known as the *Zhou Yi*, the *Yi Jing* was written during the time of Emperor Wen of the Zhou period (770-221 BCE). Some 3000 years old, it is China's oldest classical book. Though the title is most frequently translated into English as *Book of Changes*, the *Book of Simplicity*, *Book of Transformation* or *Mutability*, or *Book of Immutability* (since the relationship with nature, life and history is immutable) might be more accurate.

<sup>2</sup> Taken from the *Analects of Confucius*, chapter 7.

1037-1101), said in appraisal of the Tang artist Wu Daozi: He "brings out the new from within the old." Likewise, a Chinese theology must have continuity with the faith and doctrines that have been passed on through the apostolic tradition while producing its own new and creative theological thinking, a theology which disappoints neither our forebears nor the expectations of the Church universal.

Theology is a form of theory. Like any other theory, theology is derived from practice. Again, like any other theory, theology can serve to guide future practice, in this case the faith and spiritual practice of both the church and individual Christians. And the practice and experience of Chinese Christianity is perhaps unique in the world. The fortunes of Christianity in China have undergone a series of ups and downs seldom seen in Christian history: in the Tang (618-907) and Yuan (1271-1368) dynasties, in the late Ming (1368-1644), in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in the 1950s, and most recently in its death during and rebirth after the Cultural Revolution. From this practice and experience, we must extract the riches of theological thinking which can be refined into a theology with Chinese characteristics. This Chinese theology will guide the Chinese Church and Chinese believers through the process of modernization in China and will make a fitting gift to the Church worldwide.

When the revelation of God and the gospel of Christ enters a particular culture,<sup>3</sup> it must "put on" the flesh of this culture. People nurtured in this culture will understand and interpret the gospel and revelation in terms of the philosophical, ethical and religious concepts of that culture, and these will differ from the standpoint of theologians from another culture. Thus we can say that while the basic faith and tenets of Christianity do not vary, (Christian) theology does. The former stands firm through the vicissitudes of time; the latter varies with time and place.

Among the cultures of the ancient world, only the Chinese culture endured five thousand years unbroken, its many sources to be found in the various schools of thought from pre-Qin times (221-207 BCE) to the early years of the Han dynasty (206 BCE-1 220). In terms of cultural geography, China is a landlocked "Middle Kingdom," which has been blessed with cultural stability. From the point of view of holistic ecology, the various schools of thought have complemented each other, bringing life and vitality to the Chinese tradition down the centuries. The spirit found in the concepts of *zhong* (middle, in balance) and *he* (harmonious) are intrinsic to the culture, serving as its internal regulators. The foundation of the culture is solid; its strength (superiority) lies in its ability to assimilate and absorb other cultures without this assimilation affecting it at deeper levels. Chinese *Chan* (Zen) Buddhism, for example, no longer conforms to its original Buddhist form; and the number of Christians in China has never exceeded 6 per cent of the population. The former of these two facts shows that for a religion to establish itself in China, it must transform itself into a religion with Chinese cultural characteristics, while the latter shows that Christianity faces immense difficulty in wedging itself into a cultural framework that has been fixed for five thousand years.

---

<sup>3</sup> In John 1:14, "the word becomes flesh," becomes can also be interpreted as "put on" or "wear."

Chinese culture has faced three very serious challenges in the last hundred years. The first, that of the May Fourth Movement (1919), set traditional Chinese culture and morality in opposition to democracy and science. Radical young people of the time denounced and rejected tradition, chanting "Down with Confucianism." However, this was a hasty, unexamined rejection, such that T.C. Chao (Zhao Zichen)<sup>4</sup> later commented: "The old ethics were cast aside, along with the spirit that informed them. The Chinese virtues of loyalty, filial piety, moral integrity and righteousness were jettisoned in favor of a retrograde evolutionism. Even the determination, struggle and moral fiber, the tears and blood, behind the tradition were all discarded in one fell swoop . . . . The New Thought Movement has yet to make a real contribution to moral reconstruction in China." The second challenge came in the shape of the Cultural Revolution which brought disaster upon the traditional culture of China. Its severity was not simply a matter of the damage done by Red Guards to countless priceless treasures, historical relics and rare books. Much more serious was the sweeping critique and utter repudiation of the ethics and value system of Chinese culture in all its ramifications. The disjunction in Chinese cultural history thus created deprived many young people of the opportunity to be brought up and nurtured in their own traditional culture. The third challenge arises from China's present policy of reform and openness, by which gates locked for thirty years suddenly stand wide open. Many people have been overcome by greed, and for them traditional culture is the "root cause" of China's poverty and backwardness. They have turned to the pursuit of material comforts devoid of spiritual or moral substance. But having reached rock bottom the third time, many scholars, noting that some developed countries have absorbed spiritual nourishment from Confucius and Lao Zi, have once again undertaken sober reflection on the tradition, separating the essence from the dross. A hundred years of tempering has burned away the impurities, refining the pure gold of Chinese culture for the China of the twenty-first century.

For our research in Chinese theology, this century of testing and refining of Chinese culture has much to offer. Western missionaries, coming to China in the late Qing period, depended to a certain degree on the economic and political advantages accorded them by the unequal treaties. These missionaries did not take Chinese culture seriously, as did the Nestorians or Matteo Ricci and this is one important reason for the impoverishment of Chinese theology today. The greatest contribution of the Protestant missionaries was perhaps their translation of the Bible. China also benefited from their medical work and educational institutions. Yet the pages of Chinese theology remained blank until after the May Fourth Movement, eighty years after the entry of Protestant missions into China, when people like T.C. Chao (1888-1979), Jia Yuming (1880-1964),<sup>5</sup> Xie Fuya (1892-1992)<sup>6</sup> and Y.T. Wu (1893-1979)<sup>7</sup> began making their entries. Without exception, all these theologians were nurtured by traditional Chinese culture, marked by and immersed in traditional Chinese thinking in the course of their theological formation. They became the bright stars in the

---

<sup>4</sup> A well-known Chinese theologian and theological educator, Chao was head of the Yagjing (Yenching) School of Theology in Beijing and a Vice-President of the world Council of Churches in 1948. He is also the author of the well-loved hymn "Golden Breaks the Dawn."

<sup>5</sup> A theological educator and evangelical theologian.

<sup>6</sup> 'Also known in the West as N.Z. Zia, Xie was a Christian philosopher who devoted his later years to the construction of an indigenous Chinese theology.

<sup>7</sup> YMCA and church leader who took up the missionary notion of "three-self" in the 1920s and was instrumental in founding the Chinese Protestant Three-self Patriotic Movement in 1954.

dark sky of Chinese theology in the 1930s and 40s, the group referred to by Xie Fuya as "Christian gentlemen scholars." They were explorers, seeking a Chinese theology with a style and form nurtured by Chinese culture and mores. As their descendents, our generation falls far short in this effort. If we want to do Chinese theology, if we want to create something of our own with Chinese characteristics, we must provide ourselves with a "a style and form nurtured by Chinese culture and mores." Without this, we can contribute little to a Chinese theology.

Nestorians<sup>8</sup> in the Tang dynasty and the *Yelikewen*<sup>9</sup> among the Mongols during the Yuan dynasty were the fruits of whirlwind mission efforts by the Eastern Church in China's Northwest. This represents the first entry of Christianity into China. The second wave, that of Catholic Christianity, represented by Matteo Ricci,<sup>10</sup> took place in the late Ming. The third influx followed the Opium War, with both Catholic and Protestant missionaries evangelizing under the protection of the unequal treaties. This third entry came to a close in the early 1950s, when the church in China became independent and the missionaries left. In the 1980s, with the policies of openness and reform, there has been an upsurge of interest in understanding, studying and learning from the West, a trend which has included the translation of over 300 works related to Christianity. This represents a 180-degree turn in the attitude of intellectuals toward Christianity from the days of the May Fourth Movement (1919) and the anti-Christian Movement (1922) some sixty years ago. This new interest can be compared to the Chinese monk Xuanzang's journey to India in Pursuit of the Buddhist scriptures during the Tang dynasty. It would be only a slight exaggeration to call this present trend the fourth entry of Christianity into China. Unlike the previous three entries, when Christianity was brought to China by foreigners, its fourth appearance in the 1980s has been initiated by Chinese intellectuals looking to the West for truth and spreading Christianity through their writings and translations. We have termed these young and middle-aged intellectuals who are friendly to Christianity and who have indirectly assisted the propagation work of the church "culture Christians." A small number of them have been received into the church through baptism.

While we are grateful to these "culture Christians," we must point out that their tireless efforts are limited to the introduction of Western Christianity and theology. It is Chinese Christians ourselves who must tread, one step at a time, the long path of Chinese theology. Of course, we are not standing at the starting gate. Beginning with the Nestorians in the Tang dynasty, continuing through Matteo Ricci and May Fourth, right up to and including the many Christian thinkers of today, the "baton" of inquiry into Chinese theology has been passed on repeatedly, even though at times the chain has been broken and the way confused. The pattern of Chinese theology varies with the times, and this is related to which aspect of Chinese culture predominated during a given time. Chinese culture is like a mighty river, a confluence of streams including Buddhism, Taoism and the thinking of other ancient sages.

---

<sup>8</sup> Known in Chinese as the *Jing* religion, which means blessed or luminous.

<sup>9</sup> The Mongolian form of Nestorian Christianity which flourished during the Yuan dynasty. The name in Mongolian means "the blessed." In 1289, five years before the Franciscan John of Montecorvino reached Beijing, Kublai Khan had set up an office of religious affairs to oversee the *Yelikewen* and those who followed "Mar Jesua" and the "Rabbans" (teachers).

<sup>10</sup> The famous Jesuit missionary who reached China in 1582. On his arrival in Beijing in 1601 he introduced Western science, technology, astronomy and mathematics, as well as Christianity.

Taking a cross-section of a particular entry of Christianity into China, we might find Confucianism predominant, or perhaps Taoism, and these philosophies themselves changed constantly over time. Thus, though Chinese theology has lacked continuity, there have also been times when it has blazed into splendor. The aim of my study is to gather these instances of splendor from the last 1300 years of history and to seek among them those sparks which already exist but which have yet to be refined into theology. The river flows now from the East and will not revert to a Western course; still, whichever cross-section we examine we will find ancient cultural sources for a Chinese theology. Today, these sources (whether in an active or static state) are preserved in the “classics” of Chinese culture - the *Book of Poetry* and the *Book of History*, the *Yi Jing*, the *Book of Rites*, the *Spring & Autumn Annals* and the writings of other ancient Sages - and they are likewise stored up in the cultural heart of the Chinese people. When a Chinese who has been raised in this culture does theology, his or her efforts will have the color and rhythm of China and will, inevitably, be more easily appreciated and accepted by the sons and daughters of the yellow Emperor - and welcomed and treasured by the Church ecumenical.

Wang Weifan is Professor of Biblical Studies and Chinese Theology at Nanjing Union Theological Seminary, as well as a poet and popular author of devotional literature. This essay is the preface from Rev. Wang's forthcoming book-length study, *Chinese Theology and its Cultural Sources*.



## 7. Inculturation of the Gospel and Hymn Singing in China – Chen Zemin

Hymn singing is that vital part of church life that most convincingly illustrates the possibility, necessity, desirability and multiformity of inculturation of the gospel. It is vital because it grips the heart and soul of the congregation. In an average worship service or "meeting" of eighty minutes in China (sometimes lengthened to two hours or more in the rural churches) at least one-third of the time is devoted to singing, in which the whole congregation participates heartily. The sermon, unfortunately, may not always be powerful and interesting. When it gets too long and boring, the listeners may become absentminded, doze, or day-dream. The scripture lessons, read by one or two persons and often without much active congregational participation, may be "far-fetched" and perfunctory. The prayers, if voiced simultaneously and out-loud, may seem mutually distracting and confusing. But when hymn singing is announced, every one becomes alert and eager to join in, either to learn a new song or to savor some beloved familiar hymns that reverberate in the soul. Hymn singing never fails to bless a church with vibrant life, and to attract newcomers to be "touched" by the gospel. I am not belittling the importance of the sermon, the Scripture and prayer in the life of Christian communities, nor the need for inculturation in all these aspects. In fact, all these must be contextualized or inculturated in order to be effective if the Gospel is to change the life of a community or individuals. In this paper I want to focus on hymn singing and try to examine how it has been (or has failed to be) inculturated in the contemporary Chinese context.

Hymn singing, understood as group vocal rendering of a text expressing praise or prayer to a deity, is as old as Chinese civilization itself, with a history of over four millennia in China. It was first closely connected with and formed an integral part of religious ceremonies. The *Book of Rites* (one of the Confucian *Five Classics*) contains a good part of *Yue Ji (Book of Music)* which records the theory and teachings on the importance of music in the political and social life of the nation and in personal cultural and spiritual formation. In the Zhou dynasty (c. 1027-256 BCE) music was one of the four subjects required for the education and upbringing of gentility. Although Confucianism has never existed as an established religion with a church and priesthood, the emphasis on music by Confucian scholars has left its stamp on traditional Chinese culture as a means of calming the passions and aspiring for peace and harmony, rather than as a secular pastime. When Buddhism and Taoism were established as Chinese religions in the Han dynasty (205 BCE - 220), each had developed its specific traditional style of religious music, mostly in the form of chanting with instrumental accompaniment. These three main streams of Chinese religious ceremonial music, with later additions of folk singing, especially of the minority ethnic nationalities, constitute the "indigenous" background and sources of Chinese traditional "hymn singing." Of course they are not Christian, or as some may think, "pagan." It is for us Chinese Christians to imbue Chinese musical form or garb with the essence of Christian gospel in order to create and develop a truly Chinese hymnody.

Christianity was first introduced into China in the Tang dynasty in the form of Nestorianism (in Chinese, *Jingjiao*, the Luminous Religion). During the period of its

dissemination over about two hundred years (c. 635 - c. 840), many hymns must have been written and sung among the believers. Among the Nestorian documents unearthed at Dunhuang in Gansu Province in 1907, the great *Hymn to the Holy Trinity*, written around 800) has been treasured as one of the oldest extant Christian hymns in China. The text shows some degree of syncretism, but careful reading reveals creative use of Taoist and Buddhist terminology to convey Christian faith. Unfortunately the original music had long been lost. A modern tune composed by Liang Jifang (1934) rescued it from oblivion, but it is rarely sung by modern congregations. (No. 2. of *Hymns of Universal Praise*, 1st edition, 1936, No. 385 of *New Hymnal*, CCC, 1983).

During the Yuan dynasty (1297-1368) Christianity was again introduced into China under the Mongols. Believers in this specific form of Christian religion were called *yelikewen* (a transliteration from the Mongol language, which means "the blessed"). Probably they were a mixture of descendants of the extinct Nestorians and Chinese converts to Roman Catholicism during the time of John of Montecorvino (arrived in China 1293; d. 1328) and after. The *yelikewen* flourished for about one century, and after the fall of the Yuan dynasty disappeared almost completely in China. In recorded history nothing is left of their hymn singing.

With Matteo Ricci (1552-1610), Roman Catholicism came to China again and this time was to remain, though with many ups and downs. Ricci's Jesuit policy of accommodation is well-known and acclaimed. Had it not been for the strong opposition of the Franciscans and Dominicans, and the ensuing "Chinese Rites Controversy" which led to the ban on Christianity by the Emperor Kangxi (1721), one would expect Roman Catholicism to have been received more enthusiastically and thus to have flourished. One famous hymn attributed to Emperor Kangxi (before the ban) *The Seven Words of the Cross* has come down to the present, and is included in the 1936 edition of *Hymns of Universal Praise*. It is a beautiful hymn written with exceptional literary skill according to Chinese classical poetic genre and form. There is some controversy among historians about the genuineness of imperial authorship. Whoever the real author might be, it has been treasured as one of the best Chinese hymns and beautifully acculturated. Unfortunately there is no trace of the original music. Congregational singing was not the common practice at that time, and was little known beyond the liturgical chanting, reserved almost exclusively for clergy. Another beautiful hymn *Lord, Before All Time Thou Wast*, attributed to the Chinese Catholic painter-poet-priest Wu Yushan (1631-1718), has also been preserved. Perhaps it was not originally meant for congregational singing, and the music, if there was any, has been lost. The beautiful tune included with it in our *New Hymnal* (No. 386) was arranged in 1920 by Qiu Changnian, based upon a melody used by Confucian literati for reciting classical poems. The Nanjing Seminary choir sings it in a counterpointal arrangement with Chinese instruments. I wish we had more examples like these. They may be taken as illustrations and proofs for the *possibility* and *desirability* of putting the gospel message into Chinese literary forms.

Real congregational hymn singing came with the Protestant missionaries. When the first Protestant missionaries came to China in the early nineteenth century, they brought with them two books - the Bible and a hymnal. They lost no time in learning the Chinese language, (accommodating to the Chinese indigenous culture), and undertook to translate the Bible into Chinese. Of course this was an important process of inculturation. But since the

Bible has been canonized and regarded as "the Word of God" with absolute authority, it must be translated with immaculate care and linguistic scholarship to be exactly true to the original texts. There is not much freedom for accommodation. (Of course Eugene Nida and others have contributed much to the translation of the Bible into various languages through the concept of "dynamic equivalence"). But next to Scripture reading, and perhaps preaching, which was to some extent rather clumsily adapted, it was hymn singing that distinguished most effectively those early communities as *Christian*. So the next thing the early missionaries did was to translate the hymnal. Robert Morrison of the London Missionary Society came to China in 1807. He and his associate William Milne concentrated their efforts on the translation of the Bible and some hymns, and the compilation of a Chinese-English dictionary. The first Chinese hymn book, published in 1818, included thirty hymns selected and translated from contemporary English hymnals. Morrison's second collection of Chinese hymns which formed part of a Prayer Book was modeled after and translated from *Morning Service of the Church of England* and published in 1833. This work was done in collaboration with his first Chinese convert Liang Fa. From 1819 to 1850 several Chinese hymn books were compiled and published outside mainland China, in Malacca, Bangkok and Batavia by Western missionaries. All these were translated in the "literary language," difficult for the common people to understand and sing.<sup>1</sup> The first attempt to use the vernacular style for hymns was made by the Scottish Presbyterian missionary W.C. Burns, who, following the principle of Paul in 1 Cor. 9:20-22, "I have become all things to all people that I might by all means save some," had published the first vernacular hymnal in Fuzhou dialect in 1861. According to David Sheng, from 1851 to 1879 over fifty hymnals were published in mainland China, most of them in vernaculars, some even printed in various systems of romanization.<sup>2</sup> Of course this was convenient and useful in popularizing hymn singing and scripture reading in the southeastern areas, especially among uneducated or illiterate Christians. But no matter what dialect is used, in most parts of China, the written Chinese characters remain the same, whether in literary style or in the vernacular. So when the gospel reached the central and northern provinces, where most people use some kind of mandarin or *putonghua*, the tendency was to use *putonghua* as the chief means of propagation of the gospel. After the May Fourth Movement of 1919, when *baihuawen* (the written vernacular) prevailed over the old classical literary style all over China, and with the publication of the Union Version of the Bible in the mandarin vernacular (1919), the use of local dialects, let alone the romanized versions, gave place to a more or less unified style of printed hymnals.

We cannot go into the details of the history of Chinese hymnals here.<sup>3</sup> However, the publication of the following hymnals marked important steps in the popularization and updating of contemporary Protestant hymn singing in China.

(1) *Fellowship Hymnal*) and *A Hymn Book for the Masses* edited by T.C. Chao and Bliss Wiant, Beijing, 1931.

---

<sup>1</sup> David Sheng, *History of Chinese Hymns*. D.M.A. diss, 1964, part 1.

<sup>2</sup> *Op. cit.*, part 2.

<sup>3</sup> To the best of my knowledge, David Sheng's History remains the best account on this topic: but it is still far from complete or exhaustive.

(2) *Hymns of Universal Praise*, edited by United Hymnal Committee, Christian Literature Society (CLS), Shanghai, 1936.

(3) *New Hymnal*, edited and published by the Hymn Committee, China Christian Council (CCC), Shanghai, 1983.

Dr. T.C. Chao's *Hymnals*, with his creative and beautiful poetic expression of Christian spirituality in a plain and easy to sing vernacular, marked an important attempt to indigenize Christian hymn writing. *Hymns of Universal Praise* was a comprehensive and well-selected collection of hymns, including many original new hymns written by Chinese Christians and set to Chinese tunes. It was universally used in the churches in China until 1966. When CLS moved to Hong Kong in 1950 it continued to publish this volume and produced several revised and enlarged editions under Dr. Heywood Wong. The *New Hymnal* (1983) was published to "fill the vacuum" left by the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), and has been universally accepted and widely used in churches in mainland China. It has gone through six printings (over four million copies). In the last five years four hymnals for various ethnic groups and a new collection of 640 short songs (20,000 copies) have been compiled and published by the CCC. The *Short Songs of Praise* includes 300 "Scripture hymns" and 340 original texts set to simple tunes of traditional origin or newly composed by Chinese Christians. All these consist of a single stanza, and are intended to be sung in unison repeatedly. The music is more or less a combination of Western gospel songs with Chinese pentatonic melodies. The book is printed in numerical notation, without accompaniment, and the melodies can be easily picked up by congregations. It has become very popular in rural churches, including the so-called "house churches," where the longer and more traditional hymns of the *New Hymnal* (1983) are felt to be too difficult to follow.

This brings us to the contemporary period - the post Cultural-Revolution era since 1979. In what follows, I will discuss aspects of the current situation which show the possibility, necessity, desirability and multiformity of inculturation of the gospel in congregational hymn singing in China.

### *A Singing Church*

There has been rapid church growth since its revival in 1979. The total number of worshipers is conservatively estimated to be over fifteen million.<sup>4</sup> The number of "churches" has increased at an average rate of three churches in every two days since 1980, with a current total of over ten thousand, plus over twenty thousand "meeting points" (congregations without permanent church buildings which depend mostly on lay leadership). Many churches are large enough to hold over one thousand worshipers, and many have to hold two or three services on Sunday (or Saturday). Most congregations spend about half an

---

<sup>4</sup> This is a controversial issue. The total number of Protestant Christians has been variously estimated as 10 million, 12 to 15 or even 50 million. If we accept the lowest, it is at least more than ten times the pre-1949 total. See "How Many Christians Are There in China?" *Amity News Service*, Hong Kong: August 1995. For the so-called "House Church Movement" or "home meetings," see Bob Whyte, *Unfinished Encounter: China and Christianity* (Collins Fount, 1988), pp. 317-9; 400-4.

hour in hymn singing before and during services. Over half of the churches have choirs (some have two or more choirs) to help congregational singing and for special "sung offerings". Many newcomers are attracted to the church by hymn singing.

### *Western or Chinese?*

Most Christians are accustomed to and prefer Western hymns and gospel songs. Over 90 per cent of hymns sung by congregations (and choirs) are Western. Many foreign visitors have observed that almost all the hymns sung in the services are those that are quite well known in the West. There is no reason not to treasure the great traditional hymns like *Holy, Holy, Holy, O God, Our Help in Ages Past, O Master Let Me Walk with Thee, Rock of Ages, Jesus Loves Me*, etc. Three-fourths of the 400 hymns in the *New Hymnal* are Western in origin, and over half of these are "gospel songs."<sup>5</sup> Some hymn leaders and choir directors, especially in the city churches, have shown a tendency to regard the few Chinese hymn tunes as "secular," "pagan," or even "vulgar" and not "Christian" enough; therefore not suitable for a worship service. Even the use of Chinese instruments as accompaniment or solo during worship services is thought too secular. They tend to think that Western music is "superior" to Chinese. It is very difficult to change this pro-Western mentality. Some have asked "Why Chinese? Is it not sufficient to be just Christian?" According to these people to be Christian means Western. But rural areas where most worshipers have not cultivated this kind of pro-Western "mind-set" often show a special liking for Chinese hymns and enjoy singing them. They find it difficult to sing the half-tones (4th and 7th in the Western heptatonic scale), and delight in singing simple pentatonic melodies. I have seen whole congregations in many rural churches spiritedly singing indigenous Chinese hymns accompanied by the *er-hu*, *pipa*, bamboo flutes and other instruments. I think they are more worshipful in this way than they would be listening to Bach's B-minor *Mass*.

In compiling the *New Hymnal* in 1981-82, the Hymnal Committee made special efforts to encourage the writing of original Chinese hymns with Chinese tunes, and after screening hundreds of "contributions," finally decided to include about fifty "new" hymns in the *Hymnal*, (the other fifty Chinese hymns were considered "old" as they were written before 1949). I have heard many Western visitors who, after hearing these hymns sung in the churches or from cassette tapes, comment that they sound "very Western" to them. Now, what is it that makes a hymn Chinese? What are the valid criteria by which one can judge whether a hymn is really Chinese or not? These are very difficult questions to answer. Some hold that it is the nationality of the composer that determines the Chineseness. Others believe that it is the subjective feeling or reaction on hearing the hymn. Perhaps different people give different answers. This is not a question of better, less good or bad hymns. The issue is that as the Chinese Church is trying to change the former infamous and unwelcome image of Christianity as an "imported foreign religion" into one that is really *Chinese*, whether it is necessary, possible and desirable to change its hymnody to make it more *Chinese*. The purpose of the Hymnal Committee is to try to encourage production of more hymns that will

---

<sup>5</sup> It is difficult to distinguish between traditional "hymns" and "gospel songs." By the latter I refer roughly to songs composed and usually used during evangelical and revival meetings in late 19th- and 20th-century America. These were introduced into China in the thirties and forties, with *In the Garden* and *Amazing Grace* being favorites of young people.

appeal more to the sensitivity of Chinese Christians at large, to their minds and hearts in public worship and private devotion. Personal taste and liking may have a part to play in making judgments. I believe majority opinion and time will be the court of final appeal.

*Assimilation with Traditional Classical or Folk Music*

China has a rich historical cultural legacy in music. The repertory of *gu qin* (a long lute or zither with seven strings) and of other classical instruments is an abundant wealth and resource to be tapped and appropriated for religious uses through reproduction and arrangement. The late great hymn writer and hymnologist Prof. Ernest Y.L. Yang must be taken as our exemplary mentor.<sup>6</sup> Forty years ago when I tried to dabble in the art of *gu qin*, it suddenly dawned upon me that some of the tunes could be used with the words of the Psalms for congregational singing. That was how I came to experiment with Ps. 100 and 103 (Nos. 380 and 381 of the *New Hymnal*). Sometimes it is the motif or idiom of a piece of music that ignites one's imagination, and there is more freedom for creative accommodation. No. 178, *The Miraculous Pen of Divine Work*, a developed from the motif of a well-known lute tune (*Descending swans over the beach*, attributed to Zhu Quan of the Ming dynasty) is an illustration of this. These arrangements seem to be well accepted by congregations in China. Folk music, both vocal and instrumental, also provides a wealth of resources for assimilation. The following are some illustrations from the *New Hymnal*:

No. 30 *Great Are Thy Mercies, Heavenly Father*, words by T.C. Chao, tune (Song of the Hoe), a popular folk song in north China.

No. 43 *Gracious and Loving is our Lord*, words by T.C. Chao, folk song tune from north China.

No. 51 *Sweet and Holy Jesus' Name*, words by C. Goodrich (1836-1925), who used a Chinese folk-song tune *Moli hua* for his famous hymn found in (1911).

No. 59 *May the Holy Spirit's Sword*, words by T.C. Chao, the music I derived from (As If Dreaming) a tune for chanting ci poetry.

No. 83 *Shout the Glad Tidings*, using the melody of the folk instrumental *ensemble*, included in (1921, 1934, 1939, 1940), a Christmas hymn very popular throughout China.

Nos. 379, 382, 383, 384 : Psalms 23, 121, 133 150. The tunes for these Psalms are taken from traditional folk music of unknown origin. They are all well-loved and sung by almost all congregations all over China.

A special project to collect and publish hymns written and composed by Chinese Christians in mainland China, Taiwan and overseas in Southeast Asia was launched in Singapore under the sponsorship of Trinity Theological College, with Mr. David Yap as chief-editor. As a result, three issues of *Huaxia Shengshi* have been printed in Nanjing and

---

<sup>6</sup> Several of his arrangements from ancient *gu qin* tunes are included in *Hymns of Universal Praise* and the *New Hymnal* (Nos. 13, 195).

the fourth in Singapore. Each issue contains twenty to twenty-five hymns and short anthems composed by Chinese musicians or arrangements from traditional folk tunes. A new *Popular Edition* in numerical notation was just published in 1996 (Singapore: Trinity) for distribution among Chinese speaking churches in Asia. All these appear to have been warmly welcomed by congregations both in the cities and rural areas in China.

### *Music of the Minority Ethnic Nationalities*

Of the fifty-three ethnic nationalities in China, many are well-known for their talents in dancing and singing. Korean and Miao Christians are exceptional in the use of harmony in their choral singing. The tune to *Behold, There Came a Cloud So Bright* (No. 115), composed by the Chinese-Korean minister Rev. Wu Ai'en of the Xita Korean Church in Shenyang, is one of the most popular hymns for Ascension. I have heard a recording of a Miao nationality choir in Yunnan singing my anthem *The Easter Morn* in four-part harmony beautifully without instrumental accompaniment. The Miao have compiled a hymnal with four-part staff notation, but they are accustomed to sing in harmony spontaneously (faking) by ear, usually *a cappella*. I think the Chinese ethnic nationalities are a rich mine of talent which we should make special endeavors to tap and excavate for the development of church music in China.

### *Is There a Role for Buddhist and Taoist Music?*

One of the earliest Chinese hymns to be included in many Western hymnals is *God, We Praise You for This Lord's Day* (words later revised by T.C. Chao). The tune name is *Pu-to*, the name of an island off the coast of Zhejiang province, known for the famous Buddhist monastery situated there. The tune was originally the melody of the chanting of the monks in the temple. As a Christian hymn, it was sung in many churches in southern China in different local dialects. Perhaps it was the very first Chinese hymn tune to be included in many Western hymnals. Recently I learned that it had been used to set a poem written by Dietrich Bonhoeffer to music. Most congregations in China did not know it had originated in Buddhist tradition, and found it quite congenial to their faith, But when its Buddhist origins became known to the learned hymnal editors, it was discarded because of its "syncretistic nuances." Over eighty per cent of Chinese Christians are fundamentalists, and any suggestion of assimilating Buddhist or Taoist elements in hymn singing (or in translating) would be immediately met with opposition and protest. (There was a heated argument over the translation of the word mystery in the great hymn *Holy Holy Holy* as because the expression was thought to be Buddhist usage!) When I tried to arrange the beautiful ancient lute tune (all monastery chanting) for Ps. 103, I changed the tune-name (Hymn for Universal *Peace*). The first two characters in both names sound exactly alike, and the tune was accepted without ado.

Now Buddhists and Taoists in China have developed their temple music to an amazing degree, and have produced many high quality recordings for propagation and distribution. Most are traditional in style and very beautifully performed. But occasionally I seem to detect in their temple ensembles some resemblance to Western melodies and even phrases or lines of Christian hymn tunes wrapped up in traditional instrumental accompaniments plus modern electronic sound mixer. Perhaps Buddhist and Taoist believers are less afraid of

being "contaminated" by the Christian religion. It may take some time before we can have interfaith theological dialogues in China, but would it be possible and profitable to begin right now to try to have some interfaith musical dialogue? I like to quote Paul's admonition in Phil. 4:8 for our Chinese Christian friends who are afraid of being syncretistic in hymn singing, as well as in other areas of Christian expression:

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

In the course of writing this paper, two things came to my mind.

First, I was recently given a small book entitled *I Don't Like That Music*, by the author.<sup>7</sup> He has taught church music for over forty years in many countries and areas, and is a hymnologist well-known for having a personal collection of over 7,500 volumes of hymnal material, with an emphasis on non-Western hymnody. The analyses and advice in this book can be taken as guidelines for contextualization of hymns in the non-Western world. "Why don't we sing new songs to the Lord?"<sup>8</sup>

Secondly, a consultation was recently convened by the Hong Kong Chinese Christian Churches Union in Hong Kong, September 6-8, 1996, on the theme "Whither Chinese Church Music in the Future?" Invited to this consultation were church musicians from mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan, among them the editors of the CCC *New Hymnal* (1983), Dr. Heywood Wong, editor of *Hymns of Universal Praise* (Editions 2 to 6), and Dr. I-To Loh, editor of *Bamboo* (The Christian Conference of Asia). The theme of this consultation indicates that the necessity, possibility, desirability and multiformity of indigenization of hymn singing as one important dimension of inculturation of the gospel is now being made a priority.

In conclusion, I want to turn to the illuminating paper by Prof. Justo L. Gonzales which is included in the present collection. In his conclusion, he makes reference to two passages in the book of Revelation. Both passages make direct reference to hymn singing:

They **sing a new song**: you are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God, **saints from every tribe and language and people and nation**; you have made them to be a kingdom and priests serving our God, and they will reign on earth (Rev. 5:9-10).

After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, **from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages**, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, **robed in white, with palm branches in their hands**. (Rev. 7:9).

---

<sup>7</sup> Robert H. Mitchell, *I Don't Like That Music* (Hope Publishing, 1993).

<sup>8</sup> Op. cit. Chapter 6.



*This paper is based in part on my presentation Recent Developments in Congregational Singing in Mainland China, made at the 1996 Annual Conference of the Hymn Society in the United States and Canada, July 14-18, Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio.*

Chen Zemin is Vice-Principal of Nanjing Union Theological Seminary where he is also Professor of Systematic Theology. He is a past Vice-President of the China Christian Council and a respected authority on church music.

## 8. Gospel and Culture: Interpretation and Reinterpretation – Ji Tai

Gospel and Culture is a topic which cannot be avoided among missionaries and theologians in this time of encounter between Western and Eastern cultures. Various models of the relationship have been proposed, such as Richard Niebuhr's five possible models of the Christ-Culture relationship: Christ against Culture; the Christ of Culture; Christ above Culture; Christ and Culture in paradox; and Christ as the Transformer of Culture.<sup>1</sup> A Chinese Christian scholar has given us four similar models of the religion-culture relationship: Religion against Culture, Religion suiting Culture; Religion above Culture; and Religion creating Culture.<sup>2</sup> Which model, however, should be the "right" one? This is a puzzle. It is very difficult to give a Christian answer to this question for, as Niebuhr noted: "Neither extension nor refinement of study could bring us to the conclusion that enables us to say, this is the Christian answer."<sup>3</sup>

What is the real crux of this question? The problem is that, consciously or unconsciously, we often consider gospel and culture as two equal categories. This approach is too superficial to deal with the problem we are facing. In fact, gospel and culture are related, but quite different, categories. Let us first re-examine them, and then try to find out their essential relationship.

### *The "Original Gospel": the Interpretation of the Event in Cultures*

Almost all missionaries would claim that the gospel they brought with them is the "pure gospel" or the "original gospel." I am very skeptical about that claim and will ask what "gospel" really means. We know the word gospel in Greek is *evangelion* and means good news. However, in practical use the word has at least two different meanings: first, it means the gospel which the foreign missionaries brought to us, second, it means the "original" gospel, i.e., the gospel according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and apostolic tradition obtained from the New Testament. Let us look closely at each one.

#### 1) The Essence of the Gospel

There were many manuscripts about Jesus Christ in the first century (Lk. I : I ); we accept four as canon. But what is the essence of these gospels'? According to Jesus the essence is actually the coming of the kingdom of God, which is what Jesus proclaimed (Mk. 1:15). This gospel of the kingdom of God is concretely present in Jesus. Therefore he says "The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed; nor will they say 'Lo, here it is!' or 'there!' for behold the kingdom of God is in the midst of you" (Lk. 17:20-21). So the gospel which the apostles proclaimed in their first sermons was the birth, preaching, suffering, resurrection, and the second coming of Jesus, or, briefly put, the crucified Jesus is Christ (Acts 2:36). The gospel is composed of the Event of Jesus. Therefore, we can say that

---

<sup>1</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, New York: Harper & Row, 1975, p. 231.

<sup>2</sup> *Papers Presented at the Conference on Gospel and Chinese Culture*, Singapore: Trinity Theological Seminary, 1989, pp. 51-55; 63.

<sup>3</sup> Niebuhr, pp. 32-33.

the essential part of the original gospel in the New Testament is the Event of God's salvation through Jesus Christ. The evangelists have recorded the very Event. Paul points it out: " It is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith" (Rom. 1:16). Here we can see that the essence of the gospel is the Event of Jesus Christ.

## 2) The Extent of Culture

Now let us investigate what culture is. According to the traditional Chinese concept, *wenhua* ( the Chinese word which is usually equivalent to the English word "culture") means to reign in a non-violent way and to cultivate. Niebuhr agrees that "culture is the artificial, secondary environment" which man superimposes on the natural. It comprises languages, habits, technology, and values. He also thinks culture can be considered as "human achievement."<sup>4</sup> So we see that the extent of culture is very broad. Today we Chinese seem to realize that fact more and more. For example, food culture, tea culture, and even ghost culture are being researched. The concept of culture is much more comprehensive than we customarily think it is. And do not forget that the Bible was produced by the material of culture.

## 3) Gospel and Culture

Now that we are clear that the essence of the gospel is the Event of God's salvation in Jesus Christ and that culture is the summation of all human achievements, we can deal further with the relationship between the two. What is that relationship? I think the relationship between gospel and culture is an Event-interpretation relation, i.e., when the Event of God's salvation in Jesus Christ was proclaimed in words and written down as scripture, it was already an interpretation. The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ in the books of the gospel is an illustration of this.

The book of Matthew begins with the genealogy of Jesus and mentions David first. Jesus Christ is the son of David because "Matthew stands in a church strongly influenced by Jewish/Christian tradition."<sup>5</sup> Matthew interprets the birth of Jesus in this way: "All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet," namely, "a virgin shall conceive and bear a son" (Mt. 1:22-23). This interpretation is entirely from Jewish culture. David was king of the Jews in a time of great prosperity. He was the symbol of the united kingdom of Israel. The prophets had predicted and all generations throughout the ages expected that God would save them by raising up a new King David (Is. 11:1; Jer. 30:9). A virgin conceiving and bearing a son is considered the special "sign" by which Jews can recognize God's great work (Is. 7:14). Seeking signs - a positive way of thinking - is one of the characteristics of Jewish culture. As Paul says: "Jews demand signs" ( I Cor. 1:22).

In comparison, the book of John says nothing about the virgin giving birth or about the Old Testament prophecy. The interpretation of the Event of God's salvation in Jesus Christ according to John is that "the Logos (Word) became flesh" (Jn. 1:14). This interpretation is obviously from Greek culture, for most Greeks thought Logos is the Principle by which all

---

<sup>4</sup> Niebuhr, pp. 32-33.

<sup>5</sup> Walter Orundmann, *Das Evangelium nach Malrhaus*, Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1997, S. 27.

things in the cosmos were made. This interpretation might be the "conception of the late Jewish-Greek speculation of truth."<sup>6</sup> Thus we find that the so-called "original gospel" of the Bible is, in fact, an interpretation by Mediterranean culture of the Event of God's salvation in Jesus Christ. In the Bible there are different cultural interpretations by different writers for different readers. In short, the "original" gospel is an interpretation.

*"The Contemporary Gospel": A Reinterpretation of the Event or Message in Culture*

When missionaries bring this "original gospel" (which in most cases has been reinterpreted to fit their own cultures) to another country, the encounter will no doubt be an encounter among three cultures. We also have to consider another confusing issue: how to deal with cultural differences. Can culture be good or bad? What does it mean to people in another culture if we understand that the "original gospel" is a cultural interpretation of the Event?

1) Differences in Cultures

Some scholars believe that cultures can be classified as good or bad, superior or inferior. In the time of the Old Testament, cultures outside Israel were superstitious, i.e., it was quite popular in the Near East to circumcise males in order to drive out devils, while circumcision in Israel held no element of superstition - it was the sign of the covenant. In Babylonian culture, the seventh day was a day for avoiding devils, while in Israel its purpose was to remember God's Sabbath or rest following creation. These examples are considered as "an adaptation of the culture of the time, having a creative effect."<sup>7</sup> It seems that the Israelites created a superior new Jewish culture from inferior cultures around them. Similarly, as Christians we often think the so-called Western "Christian culture" is superior to the backward and feudalistic Chinese Culture.

I cannot agree with this view. What these two examples - the circumcision and the Sabbath in the Old Testament - show us is that there are no superior or inferior cultures. Culture itself is neutral. The Event here was that God made a covenant with Israel to show His saving will, and this saving will must be expressed through the form of culture. Circumcision was a social custom, or we may call it a superstitious practice, in the ancient Near East, but it reflected culture at that time. Therefore, God adopted it as a sign of a covenant. God did not reject circumcision as being a component of an "inferior culture," but gave it a totally new interpretation (Gen. 17:9-14). The God of the Bible did not want to create a new "circumcision culture." Otherwise the Apostles would not have decided that Gentile Christians do not have to observe this tradition (Acts 15). The same logic applies to Sabbath keeping. God "hallowed" this day because of His fulfillment of creation (Gen. 2:3). This is a new interpretation of the seventh day. The God of the Bible did not want to create a new "Sabbath culture" either, or the Apostles would not have gathered to do service on the first day of the week instead of on the Sabbath (Acts 20:7).

---

<sup>6</sup> Johannes Schneider, *Das Evangelium nach Johannes*. Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt. 1985, S. 33.

<sup>7</sup> *Conference on Gospel and Chinese Culture*, p. 63. 106

In fact, although there are different characteristics or stages in the cultures of different nations, one can hardly make value judgments such as good or bad, superior or inferior. Bertrand Russell, a British scholar considered an expert in comparative studies of Sino-Western culture, says: "The development of Chinese traditional civilization in the past was almost totally independent from Europe. Compared with Western civilization, Chinese civilization has obviously its own particular merits and demerits. It is fruitless to try to reach a conclusion on the merits and demerits of Sino-Western civilizations."<sup>8</sup>

Nevertheless, the differences among Cultures would become frequent obstacles, hindering the communication of the Message. When the Event of God's salvation through Jesus Christ became "gospel," it was first interpreted through Hebrew and Greek-Roman culture and then through the Cultures of the countries from which the missionaries came. Now the problem is a cross-cultural one rather than a gospel-Culture one. Paul Tillich rightly observes: "The difficulty with the highly developed religions of Asia, for instance, is (not) so much that they reject the Christian answer . . . as that their human nature is formed in such a way that they do not ask the questions to which the gospel gives the answer."<sup>9</sup> This statement shows us the problems in the encounter of different cultures, including "Christian culture."

## 2) The Universality of the Event or Message

If we get rid of the "bandage" of culture and turn to the essence of the gospel, namely the Event and later the Message in the Bible, we will find that the Event or Message itself has universal suitability. All nations need God's salvation. That is true for the Jews, Greeks, Europeans, Americans, and Chinese. It was true for ancient peoples, and it is true for us. This is the religious nature of humans. Paul says the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ is for all who believe "for there is no distinction since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rome. 3:23).

With this presupposition we come to the most crucial and difficult question: how can we overcome the obstacles of culture while at the same time using culture to carry the universal Message, the "true gospel," to people of different cultures? How to bring the "contemporary gospel" to people here, and today, has always been a theological issue.

## 3) The Contemporary Gospel

We believe that if we want to bring the gospel to people here, today, we must reinterpret the Event or Message in the Bible in terms of our own culture for "religion is the substance of culture, culture is the form of religion."<sup>10</sup> But this reinterpretation can hardly be completed without great effort. Concerning the problem of interpretation, Paul Ricoeur feels that: "The relation between writing and the word and between the word and event and its meaning is the crux of the hermeneutic problem. But this relation itself appears only through a series of

---

<sup>8</sup> Bertrand Russell, *Chinese and Western Civilization Contrasted* (in Chinese), Beijing: Chinese Workers Press, 1993, p. 19.

<sup>9</sup> Paul Tillich. *Theology of Culture*, New York: Oxford University press. 1980 pp. 204-205.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

interpretations. These interpretations constitute the history of Christianity itself to the degree that Christianity is dependent on its capacity to reconvert this scripture into the living word."<sup>11</sup> Such reconversion can, in a sense, be considered our reinterpretation.

First, we have to go back to the Event or Message itself by decoding the interpretations of gospel in another culture or even several other cultures. Second, we have to put this Event or Message in terms of our own culture and reinterpret it. For example, a missionary from America brought the Gospel to the Chinese saying the human being is born Sinful. Therefore he or she must repent and receive Jesus as savior. We have to note that the English word "sin" is already an American cultural interpretation of the biblical message because to Westerners "sin" probably means "crime."<sup>12</sup> It is not too difficult for those who have a legal tradition to understand the definition of "sin" as "breaking God's law; behavior that is against the principles of morality."<sup>13</sup> This definition is very close to that of "crime." But for most Chinese, the formulation of the sinfulness of human beings can hardly be understood and accepted. What is the problem? It is a problem of cultural differences which hinder the communication of the Message. The first step toward solving the problem is to return to the Bible.

In the New Testament we find that Paul does not simply adopt the Greek philosophical concept *hamaritia* to define sin when he talks about the sin of all humans. He differentiates between the Jews and the Gentiles, for the law was given to the Jews but not to the Gentiles. Therefore, "all who have sinned without the law will also perish without the law; all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law" (Rom. 2:12). That is, there are different criteria for "sin." Note that this is the interpretation in the "Pauline" Greek culture of the Old Testament message "human beings are sinful."

Although there are several words in the Old Testament which can be translated as "sin," such as *ht'*, *awon*, *shanh*, as von Rad has pointed out, the Old Testament very seldom speaks abstractly about 'sin.'<sup>14</sup> It is mostly put in very concrete terms. According to earlier Yahwist sources, the beginning of sin was the eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Again, this is an interpretation in Hebrew culture of the message, "human beings are sinful." Von Rad explains: "the word *jda'* (to know) means also the knowledge of all and to become almighty over all things and secrets; for good and bad here are not used simply in the normal sense, but should be understood in the sense of 'all'."<sup>15</sup> I concur with this explanation, and summarize the message "human beings are sinful" in one sentence: sin is the arrogance of human beings against God's will.

What does this Holy Message mean for us? We have to reinterpret it through Chinese culture. The Message can be reinterpreted by means of two Chinese characters *-fan shang*

---

<sup>11</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, London: SPCK, 1981, pp. 49-50.

<sup>12</sup> Lei Dunhe, "The Chinese Form of Expression and Sin," *Logos and Pneuma*, Shanghai: Joint Publishing, 1995, p. 648.

<sup>13</sup> *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English*, Oxford University Press, 1980, p. 800.

<sup>14</sup> Gerhard von Rad, *Theologie des Alten Testaments*, Munich: Band I, Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1966, S. 167.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

(to go against one's superior) which is neither a criminal offense nor a moral evil, but a kind of fault or transgression. It is quite right that some scholars suggest that the "sin" in the Bible should be translated as *guo* (fault) in the sense of "could not reach perfection"<sup>16</sup> Philosophically speaking, fault, in this sense, means to not fit the golden mean.<sup>17</sup> This interpretation can be well understood and widely accepted for we Chinese all know the classical teaching: people are not saints, so how can they be free from faults? This kind of reinterpretation can remove unnecessary obstacles to accepting the gospel, especially for Chinese. Meanwhile, the return to and reinterpretation of the Event or Message correctly expresses Christian faith.

### *Conclusion*

In summation we note that gospel and culture are not simply two parallel categories. The so-called "gospel" which people usually hear is, in fact, an interpretation by different cultures of the apostolic gospel. For Chinese Christians, what the Western missionaries brought was interpretations of the gospel in their own cultures. When we trace back to the Bible we realize that the text itself is also an interpretation by the ancient Hebrew or Greek culture of the Event or Message of God's salvation.

The right method to deal with the relationship between gospel and culture is first to pass beyond all cultural carriers, retrieve the message, and then reinterpret it in our own cultural terms just as the digital tectonic does. Therefore, evangelization should not be a transplanting of culture, but a reinterpretation of the Event or Message of God's salvation for a different culture. If we could be clear about this concept, the real gospel would be spread correctly and more effectively.

Ji Tai is an Associate Dean of Studies at Nanjing Union Theological Seminary, where she teaches Old Testament and Homiletics.

---

<sup>16</sup> He Shirring, *On the Indigenization of Chinese Theology*, Hong Kong: Chinese Christian Literature Council, 1987, pp. 125-126.

<sup>17</sup> Li Zuyuan, "Another Look at the Translation of "Sin" in the Chinese Bible," *logos and Pneuma*, Shanghai: Joint Publishing, 1995, p. 637.

## 9. Theology in the Contemporary Chinese Context – Kan Baoping

Protestant theology in China as a whole has always been in some ways a copy of the Western theology<sup>1</sup> that was brought into China by Western missionaries in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. That theology has not always quite fit the Chinese context. However, God's light shone into China, and some Chinese Christians made an effort to make Chinese faith meaningful to Chinese in a Chinese way. In this paper I will deal with the issue in three chronological parts. The first is the pre-1949 period when some Christian scholars tried to share their thoughts concerning how Chinese Christians express their faith in a Chinese context with other Chinese Christians. The second period is from 1950-1979,<sup>2</sup> when Chinese Christians experienced social upheavals. During that time their theology was closely connected to the context. The third part, the most exciting and challenging era of the Chinese Church, started in 1979.<sup>3</sup> The Chinese Church has been growing tremendously, but struggling with vital issues that could defeat all its gains of the past years.

It would take a church historian to draw a complete picture of the history of the Protestant Church in China. That is not my intention here. I cannot suggest what contemporary Chinese theology is.<sup>4</sup> What I can do is to describe what some Chinese theologians have done toward the creation of a theology relevant to the Chinese context. I will make some points about the characteristics of Christian theology in China during the three periods, set against the context of each. I will also suggest what we need but have not done.

### *The Emergence of a Chinese Theology*

When the Protestant Church in China was virtually a Western church, some Chinese Christians realized that the Western style was not suitable to China. All kinds of theological jargon and "spiritual abracadabra" that were direct translations from English or other languages, and the broken Chinese spoken by missionaries became formal church language. The solemn and glorious anthems echoing in church buildings with steeples pointing to the sky did not sound familiar to Chinese people. Chinese culture stresses harmony, with other people and with the world. The missionaries, however, told the Chinese to hate the world. Could such a Christianity make any sense to Chinese? Would the Chinese benefit from such a religion? Would it be possible for Chinese Christians to achieve salvation through such a belief? "A Chinese Church must have its theology done by Chinese."<sup>5</sup> T.C. Chao's claim corresponded to that of many Chinese Christian intellectuals.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> By Western theology I mean the old theology from the West that stresses doctrines and salvation above all else Without consideration of social issues.

<sup>2</sup> The period from the birth of socialist China to the end of the Cultural Revolution.

<sup>3</sup> The period since the reopening of China and the revival of religions in China

<sup>4</sup> Just as there is no American theology or Canadian theology, so there is no such thing as Chinese theology. A theology must deal with certain issues. In South America, for example, theology deals with liberation, thus liberation theology. In the U.S. racial issues have given rise to Black Theology. Theology in China has not so far been able to deal with concrete social issues, therefore theology in China remains traditional theology, that is, it is only concerned with doctrines and salvation.

<sup>5</sup> T.C. Chao (Zhao Zichen), *Four Talks on Theology*, p. 2.

<sup>6</sup> TC. Chao, a leading theologian, graduated from a *U.S. seminary* in 1917.



Many Chinese theologians put their efforts into developing a Chinese theology. The paths they took, however, differed.

Theology was developed in two ways in China. One of these was characterized by its emphasis on the transcendence of God and the separation of church and society. In the early twenties a democratic movement with socialist emphasis arose in many parts of the world. A great number of Chinese became involved in the movement to change the corrupted and vicious society into a new one. What the church in China then suggested was for people to stay home and pray. The rationale was that God will take care of everything. That theological stand is apparently fundamental.

The other path placed great emphasis on the immanence of God and called on the church to take an active part in society. That trend was influenced by the ideas of Rauschenbush and his social gospel movement in the early twentieth century.

In *his book, Four Talks on Theology*, T.C. Chao raised the issue of contextualization of a Christian theology in China by stressing the importance of the Chinese context. For him, theology must be done against the concrete context in which it find itself.<sup>7</sup>

One of the reasons why Chao raised the issue of contextualization is that the particular Chinese context had been over-looked by Chinese Christians. For many of them Christian gospel transcended Chinese culture and any social status. Therefore, culture and social situation should be ignored in order to maintain "pure gospel." It seemed that real gospel was abstract. This same philosophy was the reason why anti-society, anti-intellectualism, and an otherworldly faith became the characteristics of Chinese theology, if indeed there was one. Chao put all his efforts into developing a theology integrated with Chinese culture and in accord with a Chinese context. He claimed his *Christina Philosophy* as the "first book on religious philosophy by Chinese Christian."<sup>8</sup> There Chao writes:

(T)he Western missionary realized that we are not two side divided by an uncrossable gap between us. He can come across to our side, and we can go to his side. The love of God he talked about made sense from his standpoint. He does not believe that human beings are able to save themselves while they are trying their best to be good persons. We believe that human beings are both able and unable to save themselves while we are trying our best, too, to be good persons. What he believes we do not reject, but we have clear and sure knowledge that we cannot abandon. What he claims to be certain we are willing to claim to be certain, too. Our experience and idea of morality, however, shine onto us, and we have to follow the light. The Western preacher is of an age when it is hard for him to change his theological perspective. We do not blame him for that inability but rather love him. What we find strange is that many young preachers who have time to learn and think would rather become

---

<sup>7</sup> *Four Talks on Theology*, p. 2.

<sup>8</sup> *Christina Philosophy*, Chinese Christian Literary Press. 1925, p.11.

like the people in the fourteenth century who could believe in anything rather than like the people in the twentieth century.<sup>9</sup>

What Chao is trying to clarify is that the old fundamental theology the missionaries brought to China did not consider Chinese culture seriously. His criticism was that forcing a Chinese to accept the old Western theology was like pulling his or her body out of shape so it would fit into a Western suit. To his way of thinking:

(t)he time has come when people shall have the free spirit and new personality to make a choice of belief freely. This also holds true for the spiritual freedom of Chinese churches. At such a time, old history will not be able to confine new life, and the old theology will have to examine its way of thinking.<sup>10</sup>

What then is the old theology? The old theology that still lingers in China carries all five characteristics of the so-called TULIP theology of John Calvin or, to put it more accurately, of his followers. According to the old theology, human beings are completely corrupted and therefore worthless and hopeless. God makes his own decision about each person's next life according to his will, and that decision has nothing to do with human effort. There are many believers, but only a certain number of them will be saved to make up the number of lost angels. One who lives a peaceful life is blessed by God, and one who lives a troubled or bitter life is punished by God. Once one is baptized, salvation is achieved forever. This kind of faith makes it impossible for Chinese Christians to remain an integral part of society. This theology must be changed.

Y.T. Wu, another leading Chinese theologian, found the same sort of difficulties in the old theology. He rightly pointed out that Christianity in China was not fulfilling its role and that the situation of Chinese Christians was lamentable:

(w)hen China is undergoing tremendous changes that had never happened before, Christians in China could not say or do anything except (adopt) an attitude of self-pity and escapism.<sup>11</sup>

Wu, who was influenced by the social gospel movement in the United States, attempted to interpret that movement in a Chinese way. Soon after his theological stand regarding the character of the social gospel movement became clear, he was labeled as "having no faith" by those who claimed to be "conservatives."

Then the political climate changed suddenly, and theologians such as Wu and Chao found themselves faced with a new task.

### *The Shaping of a Chinese Theology*

After a new China was born, Western missionaries could no longer play a leading role in the Chinese Church as they had before. Chinese Christians took over the leadership and made

---

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., pp. 274-275.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid pp. 293-294.

<sup>11</sup> Y.T. Wu, *The Light and Darkness*, Shanghai: YMCA Press of China, 1949, p. 183.

their decisions according to the needs of the Chinese Church. Following the Outbreak of the Korean War, missionaries were expelled from China since the countries from which they came joined allied forces fighting against the Chinese army which fought with the Northern Korean army to defend North Korea from American troops. The Chinese Church then became independent, and Chinese theologians had a chance to develop their theology.

According to theologians such as Wu and Chao, the task for the Chinese Church at that time was to play its prophetic role in the society. A prophetic role then was to call Christians to participate in the construction of a socialist new China. Wu re-examined Christian thought in the social context and concluded:

What can Christianity contribute to the present world? It does not have a concrete program for either social reform or world peace. What it can contribute are some principles, a kind of spirit, an attitude. All of those, however, are too abstract, . . . .<sup>12</sup>

Wu raised an issue about the role of the Chinese Church. For him, Christianity by itself cannot save China. It cannot make concrete contributions to new China either unless it accepts the socialist idea. The basis of his theory is that Christianity and dialectical materialism are not contradictory but rather mutually enriching.<sup>13</sup> For Wu, the event of Incarnation reveals the love of God. Christianity, therefore, must manifest that love in a new society.<sup>14</sup> He called on the church to take an active role in the construction of a socialist new China. The Three-Self Patriotic Movement is part of that effort.<sup>15</sup>

Wing-hung Lam found that Chao had some real doubts about communism before communism finally won out in China. After experiencing the new society, he came to this point:

Now, a native theology starts to take its shape. It covers creation theory, historical philosophy, the idea of life, and the atonement theory of Christ. If such a theology develops, it may not be in a very systematic way, but it must have something to do with Chinese Culture and the dynamic immanence in Marxism.<sup>16</sup>

They both supported the social programs initiated by the People's government. It was a time of dialogue between Christianity and Marxism. It was also a time when Christianity revealed its ability to have a functioning social commitment.

Before a Chinese theology with a new outlook could take firm shape, "the Great Cultural Revolution" began. Churches, along with schools and universities, were closed, and theologians had to stop their endeavors to contextualize theology.

---

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 319.

<sup>13</sup> *Y.T. Wu, No One Has Ever Seen God*, Shanghai: YMCA Press of China, pp. 95-127.

<sup>14</sup> *The Light and Darkness*, p. 56.

<sup>15</sup> The three-self are self-administration, self-support and self-propagation. All three pointed to independence of the Chinese Church from foreign mission board control.

<sup>16</sup> Wing-hung Lam, *The Life and Thought of T C. Chao*, Hong Kong: China Alliance Press, 1994, p. 294.

## *A Struggling Church*

In 1979 the church in China was reopened. Since then it has been growing rapidly. Many Christians both within and outside China are so excited about the growth in numbers that they expect China will soon be Christianized. Is the future of the Chinese Church all bright`?

Two theological themes have emerged which reflect the experience during the Cultural Revolution. One is sharing among Christians regardless of theological or denominational differences, behavior based on the story in the New Testament of the five loaves and two fishes. The other theme, reunification, stresses Christians identifying with their fellow Chinese. It did not take too long before the fervor of building new churches and making vast numbers of converts overcame the development of the two themes.

Chinese Christians, for the most part, are conservative even in evangelical circles. The five characteristics of TULIP theology are still dominant. Anti-social-involvement and anti-intellectualism are safeguarding the old theology. A theology developed by the Chinese according to the Chinese context is still a dream. People talk about Wu and Chao, but nothing concrete has been done. Bishop K.H. Ting appears to understand what they were trying to do. He calls Wu a forerunner of a theology according to a Chinese context. He notes:

Y.T. Wu was an outstanding Christian figure in China. He distinguished himself by consistently carrying on a dialogue with his times; he always advanced with the times.<sup>17</sup>

That observation is correct. Wu's understanding of the function of the Christian Church in China reveals a fundamental issue. It is sad that his thought has not received much attention in China since the reopening of the church. Without theological support, the Chinese Church is not able to govern such a fast growing church.

The China Christian Council is not a decision making body. Its relationship to provincial Christian councils is consultative as is the relationship of provincial councils to local councils. Faced with the difficulties and issues arising from this fast growth, local churches find their own ways of dealing with problems. What kind of church polity will be able to direct the development of the Chinese Church?

The Chinese Church is now in a post-denominational stage. The revival of denominations and sects, supported by some Chinese individuals and organizations overseas, however, is challenging the church. What is the theological basis for safeguarding unity? A well-shaped ecclesiology is an urgent need.

Church members are flocking into churches and church buildings are mushrooming everywhere in China. At the same time, all kinds of heresies<sup>18</sup> with more or less Christian

---

<sup>17</sup> K.H. Ting, "What Can We Learn from Y.T. Wu Today'?" in *Theological Writings from Nanjing Seminar*, Nanjing: Amity Printing Press, 1992, p. 236, translated in the *Chinese Theological Review*: 1989.

characteristics attract hundreds of thousands of people including Christians.<sup>19</sup> One reason people, including Christians, are so easily attracted by heresies is that the theology taught by pastors and preachers in their churches is usually outdated. They are not able to respond to the issues arising from the present context, and their teaching is not always relevant to daily life. A theology must be developed through serious study of the Bible in the context of then and now if a church wants to safeguard Christianity and Christian gospel.

China is undergoing social reform. The speed of economic growth in China is like a miracle. Chinese people are content with their standard of living. But, because of the freedom people enjoy, a growing crime rate is disrupting the reform process. Secularism is ruining the society and challenging the church. What can the church offer to society at such a time? What is the function of the church in society at such a time? Is the only function of the church just to blame the society? What is our theological position on all kinds of social issues? The Christian Church in China seems impotent to deal with or respond to social issues.

Christian faith in China is generally seen as personal conviction. It is very easy for Christians to equate social service with secularism.<sup>20</sup> As a result, the church in China cannot really perform its social function. What is the meaning of a church in society if it does not have a social function?<sup>21</sup> How shall we theologize that issue or, in other words, interpret the full meaning of the prophetic role of a church in society theologically? Christian ethics are necessary for the church in China to correctly examine its role.<sup>22</sup>

All the issues raised above are contextual issues. If the church is to discover its identity, a prerequisite is that it must have a prophetic role in society. Walter Kasper finds two extremes. If a church intends to fulfill its social responsibility, it is very likely in danger of losing its identity. If a church attempts to maintain its identity, however, it may fail in performing its social function.<sup>23</sup> The way for the church to survive seems narrow. Jesus' advice is to "Strive to enter by the narrow door" (Lk. 13:24). He also says:

---

<sup>18</sup> These are called heresies not simply because of their heretical teachings which interpret the Bible wrongly and sometimes in a purely political way, but also because of their illegal activities which disturb the social order; there have been allegations of group sex, swindles, etc.

<sup>19</sup> Many leaders of heretical groups claim to be Jesus or God. Some Christians are attracted by these extravagant claims and unusual teachings and leave their churches to join these groups. Some even become active participants.

<sup>20</sup> The libido for secularism is the desire to separate from the community for the sake of sensual satisfaction of the individual. Thus secularism is always closely connected with materialism (though not in the Marxist sense of the word materialism) and individualism. If a church confines its role to making converts, it is in danger of falling into secularism.

<sup>21</sup> Some may argue that a church should not have a social function, that it should cause individuals to repent, i.e. conversion. A society cannot be purified (if indeed it ever can) only when every individual repents. The issues are: 1) Can an individual attain innocence through repentance when a social structure makes sin necessary? 2) The prophetic role of the church in society is not only to tell people of the reality of the kingdom of God and of hell, but also to assure it is on the right track. This is what the prophets did in Old Testament times.

<sup>22</sup> Christian ethics are usually understood as New Testament ethics, and treated as a personal matter. Is it really Christian morality that an individual's behavior is without social implications?

<sup>23</sup> Walter Kasper, "Contemporary Issues in Christology," in *Christian Culture Review*, tr. Yang Deyou. Guizhou: People's Publishing House, 1990, vol. 1, p. 231.

Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide, and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow, and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few (Mt. 7: 13-14).

Jesus' words suggest that it is not contradictory for a church either to keep its identity or to fulfill its social responsibility. The truth is the other way around. A church will not be able to keep its identity if it does not have a social function. By the same token, a church will not be able to fulfill its social function if it fails to maintain its identity. A contextually done theology will correlate the two.

China is developing. The church in China is growing. However, the two movements are not integrated. China has accomplished a great achievement in economic development that improves people's standard of living. The church in China preaches to its congregation mainly about how to achieve personal salvation. When the crime rate is rising because of reform, Christians focus on indoor contemplation.

The church will cool down from the excitement of its numerical growth. It is time for it to review and reexamine its past. Based on the results of this re-examination, it shall also reinterpret the Bible in terms of the Chinese context to see what God says to our context. Tradition is where we have come from. We must energize that tradition by leading it to a new future and giving it a new meaning.

Kan Baoping is an Associate Dean and a lecturer at Nanjing Theological Seminary in the areas of systematic and historical theology, with a special interest in the contextualization of Christian theology.

## 10. Doing Theology in Chinese – Richard X.Y. Zhang

The title of this paper sounds self-contradictory one way or the other. The topic, however, is relevant to the theme concerning Gospel and cultures, and therefore worthwhile, no matter in which language it is dealt with.

First, as a Chinese writer, I should naturally clarify briefly the title of my paper. Here by saying IN CHINESE, I do not simply mean IN CHINESE CONTEXT, although the language itself cannot be denied as an important element of any context, whether socio-economic or cultural-historical. Nor do I mean by referring to IN CHINESE that the enterprise of doing "Chinese theology" has to be solely undertaken BY CHINESE. No, not at all. What I actually have in mind when I say IN CHINESE, is no more or less than an emphasis on the language in which people are doing theology.<sup>1</sup>

For readers of the *Chinese Theological Review*, it might be of interest to point out that its Chinese title is at odds with its original English title. The Chinese title, a translation, literally means either *China's Theological Review* or *Theological Review in China*, or more questionably, *"A Review of Chinese Theology."* My point here is simply that CHINESE in "Chinese Theology" is itself very ambiguous, linguistically and perhaps more so theologically.

### *Why "Doing Theology?"*

In the context of mainland China, there is indeed a long tradition of studying and teaching theology, while doing theology has not yet come of age there. When Nestorian missionaries<sup>2</sup> came to China in the seventh century, efforts were made to let theology speak to the Chinese audience, but even their ordinary Chinese contemporaries would have found it difficult to

---

<sup>1</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951), among others, is particularly well known for his emphasis upon language as life experience or living reality. Here are a few relevant quotations: "*The limits of my language mean the limits of my world.*" (*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 5.6; Cf. 5.62c), The term " 'language-game' is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the *speaking of language* is part of an activity, or of a form of life." (*The Wittgenstein Reader*, ed. by Anthony Kenny, Oxford UK/Cambridge US: Blackwell, 1994, p. 47) "And I will now describe the experience of wondering at the existence of the world by saying: it is the experience of seeing the world as a miracle. Now I am tempted to say that the right expression in language for the miracle of the existence of the world, though it is not any proposition *in language*, is the existence of language itself." (*Lecture on Ethics, Culture and value*, cited from *The Wittgenstein Reader*, p. 295).

<sup>2</sup> Recently, Tu Shihua, a scholar of the Chinese Catholic Church, has claimed, not without echoes and applause from others, that Chinese *Jingjiao* (Luminous Religion) should not be regarded dogmatically as heretic Nestorianism or ecclesiastically as schismatic, but rather as a branch of the orthodox Eastern Christianity which was by the end of the thirteenth century accepted by Rome. (See his "Nestorianism in China as a Case in the History of Catholic Missions," *logos and Pneuma: A Chinese Journal of Theology*, No. 5 [Fall 1996], pp. 1.50-165) The point he makes might be more relevant when addressed to a Western audience. To identify *Jingjiao* with a Nestorian mission is not basically an error; how to interpret Nestorianism today is another matter altogether.

comprehend the message embodied in extant Buddhist-and Taoist jargon-ridden documents.<sup>3</sup> Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) and his fellow European Catholic missionaries tried very hard indeed to enable the gospel to be understood by the Chinese, having appealed to the Confucian tradition and the gentry or Confucian literati who represented that tradition at the time.<sup>4</sup> But the "rites controversy" arose in China and interrupted this immature experiment.<sup>5</sup>

Robert Morrison's arrival in China marks the beginning of a new era for Protestant missions. Protestant missionaries launched many social services along with their evangelistic activities, but still fell short in making the Gospel fully understandable to the Chinese. It is unfair to generalize and jump to the conclusion that missionaries paid no attention to Christian literature and translation projects. It is, however, quite safe to say that the twisted tongue of translation often sounds foreign to the Chinese ear. The authentic message of salvation was carried across western-clad. Is this a tragedy or a comedy'?

More regrettable is the fact that Chinese theologians like Timothy T.F. Lew (1892-1947) and T.C. Chao (1888-1979) were never able to put what they had learned in the West into doing theology in China on a large-scale. *Teaching or preaching* theology was obviously present. Then what about *doing*? T.C. Chao claimed in an article written in 1950 that the lack of authentic experience in their own milieu prevented Chinese theological works from ascending to master status.<sup>6</sup> In saying this, he might well have been making a self-criticism above all. In any case, his remark serves quite well here as a proof for my argument.

### *Is There a "Chinese Theology?"*

Denial is no easier than affirmation, because the attributive "Chinese" calls for clarification. if we answer in the affirmative, we must then ask: What do you mean by this Chinese theology?" As I understand it, there are at least three distinctive meanings based on the usage of the word CHINESE, that is, the political, ethnic and linguistic implications. Politically speaking, Chinese identity is not shared by all ethnically Chinese and Chinese-speaking people, because there are overseas Chinese - these include, for instance, ABCs<sup>7</sup> and

---

<sup>3</sup> Yang Senfu in his *Chinese Indigenous Christian Theology in Retrospective and Prospective and A Study of the Rise and Fall of Christianity in the Tang and Yuan Dynasties* even attributes the decline of Christianity in the Tang and Yuan dynasties partly to its mingling with Buddhism and Taoism.

<sup>4</sup> Stephen C. Neill explains the reason why Ricci and his colleagues were able to secure the favor of the Chinese: they could do so simply "by their achievements in astronomy and by introducing striking clocks, *learning Chinese*, and *adopting many Chinese ways*." ("Christianity in Asia," *Encyclopedia of Religion*; italics mine) But their critics felt Ricci and his colleagues "were prepared to go much too far toward adaptation of the Christian gospel to Chinese custom and tradition." (ibid.)

<sup>5</sup> See Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of the Expansion Christianity* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1940), Vol. 111, pp. 350-355, for a brief description of this controversy. P. Joachim Bouvet's (1656-1730) significant study of Houji in the *Book of Poetry* is even echoed today. (See, for instance, Wang Weifan's "The Motif of Maternal Love in Chinese Literature and Chinese Theology," *Nanjing Theological Review*, No. 22-23 (June 1995)). Bouvet's manuscript was brought to light by Gen6ier Javary in an article which appears in a 1993 collection of papers translated into Chinese on the Jesuit enterprise in Mig and Qing China.

<sup>6</sup> See T.C. Chao: "On Possibilities of the Development in Chinese Christian Dogmatic Theology During Next Four Decades" in *Nanking Theological Review* vol. 26 [1950] nos. 1-2.

<sup>7</sup> r American born Chinese, whom Mr. President Clinton will definitely put into his category of Asian Americans. They might be called Chinese Americans rather than American Chinese. This is a good example of the grammar of political correctness: Which is the substance and which is the modifier?



people in Taiwan. But the Chinese image has been repeatedly reinforced and sometimes dogmatically imposed on the peoples in the People's Republic of China. This is largely done through patriotic propaganda, a practice hardly any nation in the world can claim to be innocent of.

Speaking from an ethnic perspective, being Chinese is not as self-evident a fact as many would presume. It is better known now that on the China mainland there live 56 officially recognized ethnic groups, of which the Han nationality alone enjoys majority status, while the other 55 groups are generally called national minorities or minor nationalities. No matter how the ethnic make-up in China appears, China is beyond all question ethnically pluralistic. To include Chinese communities overseas adds a more colorful dimension to the picture.<sup>8</sup> The central government of the People's Republic always insists that all nationalities living under its regime belong to "one big family of the *zhonghua* nationality,"<sup>9</sup> no matter whether ethnically one is a Korean, a Tibetan or a Mongolian. Therefore, we have to realize that ethnic identity in our context is also intermingled with political and cultural considerations.

From a linguistics perspective, the meaning of the word CHINESE depends on the use of the word. What constitutes Chinese as a language is also under dispute among linguistics. But generally speaking, the English word CHINESE refers to the speech of the Han nationality, which has also become kind of *lingua franca* in China through centuries. There are various dialects of the language, and Chinese-speaking people in different communities have their specific name for the language which they use. As a result, the term CHINESE in English can be elusively sweeping.<sup>10</sup> Here is an illustration. During a stay in Hong Kong one summer, Professor Kwok of Trinity Theological College in Singapore invited me and a doctoral student from Beijing to have dinner with him at a seafood restaurant in Shatin. The waitress, when she realized that we were not local people, immediately apologized that her *guoyu* was not good enough, etc. I replied then jokingly, "It doesn't matter, because none of us three speaks *guoyu*. Mr. Kwok comes from Singapore and speaks *hwayu*; Mr. Cao and I are mainlanders, and we both speak *putonghua*." In fact, this was not just a play on words. The English word CHINESE cannot grasp the changed and still fast changing reality of our life, let alone simply missing the nuance of various expressions.<sup>11</sup> In the English-speaking world, one is likely to come across a more specific and less ambiguous term, namely

---

<sup>8</sup> The three common terms used for a "Chinese" person, i.e. (*hanren*), (*huaren*) (*zhongguoren*), are not unconditionally interchangeable. Here the English "Chinese" comes to an *impasse*.

<sup>9</sup> It seems almost impossible to find an appropriate English rendering for this *zhonghua* 4K, which is usually vaguely translated as "the Chinese nation." During the Anti-Japanese war (1937-1945) when Chiang Kai-shek addressed overseas Chinese, he often used the term "true sons of Hwang Ti" (the Yellow Emperor) ("A Call to Overseas Chinese," *The Collected Wartime Messages of Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, Vol. I*, New York: The John Day Company, 1946, pp. 238-244).

<sup>10</sup> The same holds true for major European languages as well. Needless to say, ambiguity plays more than a negative role in human life. Poets and *homo multarum literarum* sometimes appeal to it. (See, for instance, William Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, London: Chatto & Windus, 1949.)

<sup>11</sup> One might say that these three terms, namely (*guoyu*) [term for "mandarin" Chinese favored in Taiwan -Ed.] (*hwayu*) [term used by overseas Chinese -Ed.] and (*putonghua*) [term in use on the mainland -Ed.], are only different names referring to the same substance. But for us, there is much ado about nothing serious. Just think of the medieval scholasticism. In this case perhaps we are more in line with frowning nominalists than with realists.

Mandarin;<sup>12</sup> but strictly speaking, it is not a linguistically precise term. For me Mandarin sounds both "foreign" (its Chinese equivalent being *guanhua* and "newly-born" (compared to the long history of the Chinese *lingua franca* before the Manchu empire). So in conclusion, if one says "Chinese theology" with emphasis on the language, it is possible and actual at once; but then to play fair, "Chinese theology" does not have to confine itself within the political state or the nationality.

### *Why Theology in Chinese?*

What does faith mean to theologians'? What relevance does their doing of theology bear to their life situation (die *Lebenswelt*)? These are questions not simply for theologians in China, but anywhere else as well. As for the particular situation in China, I believe it is of primary importance for theologians to engage their country people with theology in an appropriate language.<sup>13</sup> Theologians could do theology in foreign languages, especially when we take into account the fact that to date quite a few of them have been trained in North America or the United Kingdom. But this possibility, or at most probability, cannot be equated with actuality. To be well versed in a Western language is no easy job for a Chinese who learns it as a foreign tongue, just like the frightening Chinese language has remained Greek to quite a few Western enthusiasts who have a hankering for *Chinoiserie*

Another point to be clarified has much to do with cultural traditions. Those who crave "Chinese theology" usually desire to deprive Christianity of its foreign image. To do so is commendable, but one has to be very cautious and discerning. Chinese society has also been a quite pluralistic society for a long time, if not so in terms of politics, at least culture-wise. As theological workers, we have to understand properly this pluralistic reality. After so many years of efforts made by Christians Chinese and non-Chinese, one has no right to deny the actual role Christianity plays in our society and the place Christianity has in our cultural tradition. It is a very false conception today, when referring to Chinese culture or cultures, to still think merely of Confucian, Taoist and Buddhist traditions, or at best to add some contributions made by national minorities in China. We can surely say Christian tradition has already been more or less integrated into our cultural and spiritual tradition at large. Tens of millions of people living in mainland China, Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan as well, whose way of life has been changed or influenced by this faith in Jesus Christ, consist of a living

---

<sup>12</sup> *The Wordsworth Pocket Encyclopedia* takes it for the equivalent of *putonghua*: "Nowadays, *putonghua* ('common speech'), based on the educated Peking dialect known as 'Mandarin' Chinese, is promoted throughout China as the national spoken and written language." (Newly rev. ed., Ware, Hertfordshire 1995, p. 77).

<sup>13</sup> For theologians language is surely important. What Wittgenstein is basically concerned with is philosophy, but the affinity between his thought and the reflections of a considerable number of contemporary theologians is quite evident. I am not only thinking of his famous proposition "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent." (*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 7), but also his references to St. Augustine. Theologians, who in Wittgenstein's words are in a "perfectly, absolutely hopeless" situation, have to repeatedly "run against the boundaries of language," or in another word, "against the walls of our cage." Therefore we have works such as Professor Heinrich Ott's *Das Reden rum Unsagbaren: Die Frage nach Gott in unserer Zeit* (Stuttgart: Kreuz, 1978, *The Discourse on the Unspeakable: The Question Concerning God in Our Tittle*). Dietrich Bonhoeffer once made an interesting statement: "Christologie ist Logologie." (Wer ist unde wer war Jesus Christus? Hamburg: Furche 1962, S. 10: Cf. Edwin H. Robertson's English translation *Christ the Center*, Harper & Row, Publishers, 1978, p. 27f.) The tension between the human word and the Word of God exists not only in Christology but in theology in general.

and most convincing testimony, which can discredit any counter-argument, no matter how eloquent it may sound.<sup>14</sup>

From the sociological and cultural-anthropological point of view, it is only natural to admit the existence of a variety of cultures in a mature society in the making, although scholars have created different names for this culturally pluralistic reality, among the more frequently heard are mainstream culture, dominant culture, sub-culture and counter-culture. Of course, we are not blind to the fact that Christianity in China has a long, long way to go, whether to be more Chinese or more Christian is another question. But which of China's other cultural elements has no need for further development? Humanity on the way could point to a pilgrimage.<sup>15</sup> I can hardly see any point in accusing Christianity in China excessively and unduly of foreignness.<sup>16</sup>

But on the other hand, a language emphasis, that is to say, one that does not aim at the development of a theology "with Chinese characteristics"<sup>17</sup> but tries to do theology in Chinese, can also be regarded as an effort to engage the gospel more relevantly with the Chinese audience. And in this connection I also want to make it clear that "by whom" is not a big problem. As some of those Chinese scholars who are doing theology in Chinese are well aware, their task is by no means an exclusive one. On the contrary it must also be shared by non-Chinese theologians who have the vision and are equipped for such an undertaking. Doing theology, in whatever language, is so great a cause that is bound to break down worldly barriers and get across boundaries, whether national or geographical. Personally, I welcome all efforts made by "foreign devils"<sup>18</sup> to do theology in Chinese.<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Xi Wen's mild comment in "The Position of Religious Culture in China Today" (*China Study Journal*, Vol. 10, No. 2 [August 1995], p. 10). In response to various views and opinions, I have a favorite illustration to offer. In Easter week four years ago I accompanied a Friends of Amity group visiting grassroots churches in Jiangsu. One day we found ourselves in a relatively small but very hospitable congregation in northern Jiangsu. After the gathering a middle-aged woman came to me, asking in a low shy voice a question which obviously had puzzled her ever since she caught the first glimpse of this international team of Christians that afternoon: "Are there Christians in foreign countries, too?!" Before we accuse others we should look to ourselves!

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Hebrews 11:13-16. There are a huge variety of interpretations on the first verse of *Tao Te King* (*Dan de jing*) made by commentators and translators, but I wonder if anyone has rendered it as "way leads forward," or "Via trita. via tuta," or "*Verbum* can be introduced," etc.

<sup>16</sup> Along this accusatory line of thinking, the foreignness of Christianity is more often taken for Western colors than for the Gospel's incompatibility with the sinful nature of human beings or its transcendence of multifarious forms of the worldly institutionalization. In rebuking the exaggeration of the Christian population in China, Bishop Ting rightly points out the task of leading people to the Gospel is by no means an easy one, for in words of St. Paul, this Gospel is "a stumbling-block" or "foolishness" in human eyes (I Cor 1:18, 23). Dr. Liu Xiaofeng addresses a similar issue in a somewhat different manner, maintaining the Gospel as the essence of Christianity is no less foreign to the cultures and nations in the West. (See Liu Xiaofeng: "Editor's Preface", in *Duo versus Logos: The Encounter of humanitatis cultus in China with dei cultus*. Shanghai: Joint Publishing, 1995, especially paragraphs 2, 4, and 5.)

<sup>17</sup> This has become a catch-word among Chinese mainlanders ever since Deng Xiaoping preached his socialism with Chinese characteristics. In Chinese it has an unmistakably political orientation.

<sup>18</sup> Here I quote some humorous missionaries to China without malicious intention. Dr. James A. Scherer, my advisor at Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, who spent some years in China and has written about the concluding period of the missionary enterprise there, would agree that sometimes this harsh phrase is used among the Chinese masses merely as an alternative for foreigners. But can ordinary English-speaking people who do not speak Chinese understand this?

### *In Chinese - But Which?*

For the sake of clarification, two illustrations must be given here. First, the spring of 1994 saw a religious publication reappearing in Hong Kong after many years of repose (since 1979). The reissued journal bears the same title as its forerunner - *Dao Feng* - but has gained a new subtitle of "A *Chinese Journal of Theology*".<sup>20</sup> Then what is the purpose of publishing this journal? What is new about it? According to its editor: "Theology in Chinese has a threefold meaning. First, it is based on cultural-historical thought sources in the Chinese language and social experiences in the Chinese-speaking world, aiming at the shaping of a Christian theological culture out of the intellectual culture in the Chinese language tradition. Secondly, its goal is to establish theology as a special subject of learning in the Chinese-speaking intellectual and academic world, and to engage itself in a scholarly dialogue with Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism as well as various thought trends in the modern world. Thirdly, it is a common cause for the scholars of religious studies throughout the Chinese-speaking world, including all the Chinese communities over the world such as in mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Singapore, and North America."<sup>21</sup> The third point deserves our special attention with regard to language.

Secondly, I would like to mention in brief the first roundtable conference of Chinese-speaking theologians held from August 3-8, 1996 in Malaysia. At the conference, the term *hanyu shenxue* or theology in Chinese caused much discussion. The conference participants came from various Chinese communities, namely from mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia and the United States.<sup>22</sup> A columnist dedicated an article to the occasion in the local Chinese newspaper *Sin Chew At Poh* (Malaysia) under the telling headline "Theology Begins to Speak in Chinese".<sup>23</sup> At least two of the thirteen papers presented at the conference discussed the language problem in great detail.<sup>24</sup> The conference was conducted in the so-called Mandarin, but most participants agreed that doing theology in Chinese should be further promoted, although at the present time *the* standard term for the Chinese language in question could not be agreed upon.<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> I am afraid a different theological stance could be more divisive among people who speak the same language than language barriers or national differences. See my contribution to the *Christian Forum* with the title "Circles: Within and Without" (Nos. 439-441 [January 28 to February 11, 1996]).

<sup>20</sup> Its editor, Dr. Liu Xiaofeng, Ph.M., Beijing University and Dr. Theol., University of Basel, is generally regarded as the most eminent representative of the so-called Culture Christian group in mainland China. He is a prolific writer, but only a very small portion of his writings is available in European languages, German and English in particular. *China Study Journal* once published four of his papers in English (Vol. 7, No. 3 [Dec. 1993]).

<sup>21</sup> *Logos and Pneuma: A Chinese Journal of Theology*, No. 1, pp. 8-9. The original Chinese style is difficult to translate, and my rendering only gives the reader some hints about what the author tries to express. "Theology in Chinese" here is after the original *hanyu shenxue*.

<sup>22</sup> The theme of the conference was "Theology in Chinese and Modernity: Context of East Asia."

<sup>23</sup> July 29, 1996.

<sup>24</sup> These are Dr. He Guanghu, "Theology in Chinese: Its Rationale and Significance" and my "Theology in Chinese and Nationalism in China." The most articulate treatise on doing theology in Chinese to date is Dr. Liu Xiaofeng's "Christian Theology in Chinese and Its Modern Context;" in *Logos and Pneuma*, No. 2, pp. 9-48.

<sup>25</sup> *Hanyu*, *huayu* and *zhongwen* were three most favored terms while *hanwen* was also suggested [All terms usually translated as Chinese -Ed.]. For more information about the presentation and discussion, see a report on the conference in the forthcoming issue of *Jian Dao: A Journal of Bible and Theology*.

These events only seem more impressive and meaningful when seen against the background of a somewhat heated debate in regard to doing theology in the Chinese-speaking world, which lasted more than six months in Hong Kong.<sup>26</sup>

*What is the Current Situation?*

The question "What is currently happening in the cause of doing theology in Chinese?" can be transformed into a spectrum of specific questions, such as: How does it relate to the church with its denominationalism, theological traditions, and living faith communities? How will one interact with people who have done, are doing and will do theology in other languages? How is the cultural and spiritual legacy bequeathed by the commonly called Chinese civilization understood? How does it face present challenges felt locally, regionally and globally? etc. Such a list of questions may extend almost endlessly to consume the reader's patience and exhaust the writer's interest. In the following paragraphs, I will simply share some short reflections upon the aforesaid.

First, one has to admit that theological work in the Protestant churches in China is not very impressive. Bishop K.H. Ting has asserted on several occasions that, in order to maintain harmony among various Protestant Christian groups, the price of holding back creativity in theological reflection on the mainland must be paid.<sup>27</sup> It is not altogether unexpected that Bishop Ting should hold high the idea of harmony as nearly the *summum bonum*. But I am very doubtful about this proposition. According to our tradition, harmony points rather to a willing unity of diversity, which is opposed to the make-believe of solidarity with a hidden scornful condescension, theologically and/or ecclesiastically. Certainly, it behooves one to love; but it is equally true one should love naturally and genuinely.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, harmony is also longed for by other Christian communities throughout the world, but has this same craving for harmony failed to work damage to their theological reflection either? From our experience there must be a story untold.

If we are not satisfied with the "professional or conventional theology" within the church, then what about the amateurish and experimental theological efforts in society at large? Bishop Ting seems to feel happy and appreciative of these. He praises very highly the writings and translations done by those whom he calls "culture Christians." He has also been reported as saying that the future of Chinese theology counts on culture Christians like Liu Xiaofeng. Personally I can see his point. But as a church leader, does he regard that as the

---

<sup>26</sup> The debate is often called the discussion on "Chinese Apollos" (the name Apollos taken from Acts 18:24-28), and at least eight people were given the floor by the Hong Kong-based weekly *Christian Forum*. All the published contributions to the discussion will be translated into English and published in book form.

<sup>27</sup> In recent years he has made such statements on different occasions. His "Preface" to *Theological Writings from Nanjing Seminary: 1952-1992* (see p. 2), written on Sept. 11, 1992, is more clearly a development in this direction.

<sup>28</sup> This reminds me of a comment of Dante on love: "Nor creature nor creator was ever without love, natural or rational. The natural is always without error, but the other can err by having an evil object or through too little or too much vigor. Hence you may understand that love is the source of every virtue in you and of every deed which deserves punishment." (*The Viking Book of Aphorisms: A Personal Selection*, by W.H. Auden and Louis Kronenberger, Dorset Press 1981, p. 83).

solution to the problem? Or will it lead to an increase in tension between church theologians and culture Christians?<sup>29</sup>

My observation is that Chinese theologians such as Bishop Ting working within the church have more limits - if not to say they are under more pressure - in terms of doing theology than those who keep a distance from the institutionalized church body. But does this make sense to an English-speaking reader with no Chinese experience? Recently Bishop Ting has often mentioned the obsolete nature of some theological terms popular among Chinese Christians. Indeed he would also have made some effort to update them, were he more vigorous. This shows us the crux of the issue: it has a language problem, if it isn't a problem of language.

There has been for some time a need to voice a middle-of-the-road position concerning the credibility of Christian theology among Chinese intellectuals. The traditional church jargon does not interest these intellectuals any more, and the amateurish discourse has been an *in-thing*.<sup>30</sup> This may to some extent also be the case with Christian communities in Hong Kong. Will the church as a whole change her language or usage? Not likely. But Christians who constitute the human part of the church are using new expressions every day, although sometimes not without frustrations. Hence what seems to me beyond doubt is that doing theology in Chinese as pursued and promoted by Dr. Liu Xiaofeng, who makes no secret of his being an essentially non-ecclesiastical Christian thinker with less sympathy for pre-phenomenological theologians, could also make a valuable contribution to theological reconstruction of the church in China. My concern at present is with this common cause of doing theology in Chinese and how Christians of vision can work together to bring forth a fruitful theology in future for various Chinese communities around the world.

Richard X.Y. Zhang is a member of the faculty of Nanjing Union Theological Seminary currently pursuing graduate studies in Basel.

---

<sup>29</sup> I hope the phrase "church theologians" here is taken by all as an example of tautology. Jaroslav Pelikan has pointed out, a theologian is, "in Origen's classic phrase, 'a man of the church' " (The *Christian Tradition*, Vol. 1, p. 3). But here comes a more urgent question, "What is the church?"

<sup>30</sup> One must be also aware of the fact that all the popularity of theological as well as philosophical systems, dominant as they may be for a time, is certainly transient.