

# Interpreting Christian Faith in our own Time and Context

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## 1

The Resolution on Strengthening Theological Reconstruction passed at the Jinan Meeting in the autumn of 1988 stated that “the Church must be well-run according to three-self principles and the guiding function of theological theory must be mobilized in the building up of the Church.” Since the Jinan Meeting theological reconstruction has become the center of reflection on theology in the Chinese Church and its most important task. K.H. Ting has identified three periods in the fifty-year history of the Three-Self Movement:

1) Identification of the Chinese Church with the Chinese people expressed in patriotism and anti-imperialism, the beginnings of independent decision-making and a church self-run on the three-self principles of self-administration, self-support and self-propagation;

2) A new period of running the church well as a response to the restoration of order in society following the Cultural Revolution. The church proposed its own goal of making a self-administered church a well-administered church; a self-supported church well-supported; and a church in which self-

propagation is done well. Running the church well, however, meant not only increasing the number of churches and Christians, or regularizing church administration. Rather, it meant raising the quality of Christians; that is making Christians better trained in the faith.

3) For this, theological reconstruction is key. Theological reconstruction is “an extremely necessary and basic lesson,” the crucial task for running the church well. And this is the “peak, crucial period in the fifty-year history of the TSPM, its third period, that of theological reconstruction.” Seen in this way, the impetus for theological reconstruction is running the church well, not throwing it into confusion; the impetus is to interpret the faith in its time and context, not to shake its foundations.

In his essay “Understanding the Task of Theological Reconstruction in the Chinese Church,” Wang Aiming states that as early as 1984, in a discussion of theological education in the Chinese Church, Bishop Ting raised three leading issues in the basic orientation of ministry in the Chinese Church: 1) faithfulness to the Bible; 2) faithfulness to the teachings of the historical church; and 3) suitability for the new face of China.<sup>2</sup> Though these three issues were not raised specifically with regard to theological reconstruction, they may be used as guides for its basic orientation. The formulation of these issues is an excellent reminder for us that whether for theological education or theological reconstruction, we cannot turn our backs on the Bible or reject tradition; even less is theological reconstruction a matter, as some imagine, for unease or worrying that the basic faith of Christianity is being threatened. It stems rather from a desire to deal accurately with the relationship between tradition and modernity, history and the present, church and society. Theological reconstruction does not ask us to be unfaithful to the Bible; it calls on us to reflect on how we are to

be faithful to the Bible. It does not ask us to reject the traditions of the faith; it calls on us to reflect upon how we are to be faithful to these traditions, how to uphold basic faith. At the same time, it asks us to be concerned about context and about social progress, thus enabling theological reflection to suit the new face of our nation. Rather than rejecting the Bible, therefore, theological reconstruction lifts up biblical authority.<sup>3</sup> Theological reconstruction is not non-traditional and certainly not anti-tradition, but an heir of tradition, based in the present. Nor is the movement non-faith and certainly not anti-faith, but rather an attempt to better interpret the basic faith of Christianity in ever-renewing, ever-changing times. Theological reconstruction develops on this principle: based on the precondition that basic faith does not change, theological thinking which has fallen behind social realities needs adjustment. Thus, I think it would not be amiss to say that it is an embodiment of the spirit of the age, the Chinese Church exploring ways to keep in step with the times. It is difficult to avoid the challenge posed by the development of the times and the progress of society to theological concepts held by the church. In facing challenges, the fitting approach is not defense of outdated theology and ideas, but rather to adjust outdated thinking and ideas to be consistent with social advancement and the spirit of the times.

It has been over five years since theological reconstruction was proposed at the Jinan Meeting. In these five plus years, theological reconstruction has met with much success and an increasing number of Chinese Christians are beginning to recognize it as a necessity and are gradually becoming involved in the project. Some theological ideas that were not suited to society are in the process of being gradually modified. The program of theological reconstruction is gradually winning sympathy, understanding and support from more and more church leaders, theologians and Christians overseas. But it cannot be

denied that even today, there are still those who are suspicious of and negative about it. Failure to understand or misunderstandings still exist, even to the point that there are still those who think that theological reconstruction is a threat to faith. I think that as long as one does not harbor ulterior motives, misunderstandings or worries can always be resolved. When it is seen that theological reconstruction truly is not a threat to faith, but an attempt to interpret the faith in the midst of changing times and social context, with the aim of providing theoretical guidance for running the Chinese Church well, people's misunderstandings, doubts and worries will disappear naturally.

In fact, in the course of theological reconstruction, Chinese church leaders have repeatedly stressed that theological reconstruction cannot threaten basic faith. This is not a simple declaration of position. Bishop Ting has stated in an essay that the goal and prospect of theological reconstruction is not the destruction of the church, not the shaking of faith, but rather to run the Chinese Church well, enabling it to become a church with rich theology, one that is not against reason, that is more compatible with China's socialist society, a church that can help believers to establish a witness and faith that is more harmonious, rational and convincing. Such a theology will be taken seriously and attended to by our compatriots, especially intellectuals, and international Christianity as well; they will gladly enter into equal dialogue and exchanges with us and will no longer look down upon us, remarking that China has no theology.<sup>4</sup> Looking at this goal and prospect, theological reconstruction has no intention of causing basic faith to vacillate, but rather, in a changing and developing time, to interpret anew the basic faith of Christianity. Theological reconstruction does not attack or change basic Christian faith, but safeguards it. Through theological reconstruction, our basic faith will be expressed in terms that are more accessible and more reason-

able, and this will aid believers in their understanding and will strengthen their basic faith. And non-believers, our friends outside the church, will be more willing to hear the good news the church has for them.”<sup>5</sup> This is where the objective and significance of theological reconstruction lies.

## 2

The purpose of theological reconstruction is interpretation of basic faith and running the church well. For this it is necessary to differentiate between theological reconstruction and basic faith. Basic Christian faith and theological views are qualitatively different. Theological views are proposed by theological scholars who wish to aid believers in accepting or upholding basic faith. They are a necessary interpretation of faith. Theological reconstruction is adjustment and renewal of theological thinking done by the Chinese Church in the face of challenges of context and time; such renewal and adjustment is not meant to touch basic faith, even less to shake it. This point is extremely important. Just as Bishop Ting has said, “Basic Christian faith is not the same thing as theological thinking, and we should make a distinction between them. Our basic Christian faith comes as a revelation from God; it is not a matter of somebody making some pronouncement which then becomes faith. Faith is from God, not something thought up by humans. The Trinity, the Incarnation, the resurrection of Christ: these are basic creeds of Christian faith and do not change.”<sup>6</sup> What some opponents of theological reconstruction are concerned to protect is, often, not basic faith itself, but someone’s explanation of basic faith. They mistakenly make things that can be changed into things which must not be changed.

Basic Christian faith refers to the object and content of our belief. The object and content of basic Christian faith come together to form some basic Christian doctrines. These are based

on the Bible, shaped by history and accepted by the church universal. These basic Christian beliefs are primarily to be found in the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed and other creeds accepted by the early church. These basic beliefs include the Trinity, the Incarnation, creation and redemption, Christ's resurrection, ascension and second coming, the human and divine natures of Christ, the fourfold nature of the church, etc. These basic beliefs are a basic catechism which does not change; they are eternal, the legacy of the historical church. They are the essence of what makes Christianity Christianity. If we apply Calvin's three categories of analysis, this is the soul of Christianity,<sup>7</sup> the fundament of Christianity which cannot be shaken or changed. The interpretation of these basic Christian beliefs by the church in history, however, is not set in stone, neither is the understanding of the essence of Christianity, which often changes as time moves forward, producing interpretations that are in line with their own times, thus forming the development and advancement of Christian theology. This is what Calvin has called the body category. This category is significant, but is not one which cannot change. By borrowing these categories, we are well able to make the necessary distinction between basic faith and theological reflection.

Looked at in this way, basic Christian faith is eternal and unchanging but the interpretation of these basic beliefs can vary, changing according to the changing times. For in every time and in every cultural context, God can make a different revelation. The writer of Hebrews says, "Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son" (Heb. 1: 1-2). Here we see that God's revelation comes "in many and various ways." This does not refer only to historical time and space; there is a layer of culture as well. God always reveals

Godself to different faith communities in unique historical contexts and unique cultural contexts. Thus reception of God's revelation cannot but touch on issues of theology and theological interpretation. Theological reconstruction is the Chinese Church's own interpretation of its unique reception of God's revelation and its unique understanding of faith in specific historical and cultural conditions.

In his essay on theological reconstruction, Tobias Brandner states that the most important goal and end of theological reconstruction are the issue of contextualization and the issue of hermeneutics. The issue of contextualization is, in the specific context of China, to develop a Chinese contextual theology. The issue of hermeneutics is meant to illustrate that Chinese Christianity should overcome narrow biblicism and recognize hermeneutical principles in interpreting the Bible. Brandner believes that Wang Aiming is one of the foremost theologians advocating the hermeneutical path.<sup>8</sup> If contextualization means the Chinese Church interpreting Christian faith in its own unique context, then I can accept theological reconstruction as a question of theological contextualization. But the hermeneutical question seems to be one of methodology rather than goals, and an extremely significant issue at that. Whatever the case, it is not difficult to see from these two points that theological reconstruction is not destructive in nature but rather constructive; not a matter of annihilation, but of re-creation, of bringing forth the new. Thus, it is not done to harm, but to establish; it comes about through a rational explication of faith; it establishes a proper and suitable theological idea.

Many people find theology very mysterious and profound, a matter for theologians, and nothing to do with most Christians. In fact, theology is closely related to the faith life of every Christian. Some theological concepts will find their way into our work or in our speech, intentionally or not and to a

lesser or greater degree. Some theological ideas are appropriate; some may not be so appropriate. This requires renewed understanding. A healthy faith life includes an ongoing reflection on and explication of faith itself. The point of this reflection and explication is not to shake faith, but rather to do a better job of explaining faith, so that our faith may be more in line with reason, easier for society to understand and accept.

Theology is not only an individual reflecting on faith, but is also “the rational reflection of the church or the Christian community on its own life of faith.” Just as the classic definition of theology has it: “faith seeking understanding.” In these terms, theology is “the church in the act of reflecting,” the Christian community thinking. In these terms also, any theology must be in line with the times, local and contextual, and develop in this way. Theology must be able to speak to the community of believers in this time and in this place, responding to the questions they encounter in their life of faith, offering aid to them in their life of faith. Theology must also accept the challenges of the society and culture in which the faith community resides, using understandings unique to Christians to respond to the questions and challenges they raise. Thus theology is not static and unchanging, but lively, always developing and full of vitality. Thus, change and development, even adjustment, are essential for theological views. A static theology can only be a dead theology. Any theology, if it refuses development and adjustment, will be refused by the times and by society.

There are very few Christians who do not believe that the Bible is God’s word revealed by God. The Bible is God’s fundamental revelation, the book in which God reveals to humanity God’s love and God’s action in history. But in another aspect, the Bible itself is a limited reception of a limitless God’s gradual revelation to very limited human beings. It is not difficult for us to see behind God’s revelation in the



Bible the movement of human understanding. Thus, some ideas found in the Bible are theological, changing, developing. For example, in general the God of the Old Testament is a God who rewards good and punishes evil. In the Pentateuch, the historical books and the books of the prophets, the Israelites tend to understand calamity as God's punishment of human sin. This view even influences the thinking of the New Testament. But the Book of Job gives a new understanding: suffering is no longer a tool of God to punish humanity. Rather, in Job's suffering, humanity and God meet and through this meeting of God and humanity in the midst of human suffering, God's abundant grace comes to humanity. Jesus himself has a new understanding of suffering. According to John, chapter 9, when Jesus' disciples saw the man who was blind from birth, they asked Jesus who had sinned that the man was born blind—the man himself, or his parents? How did Jesus answer? He said neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind that God's works might be revealed in him. And Jesus used his own death on the cross, to raise the significance of the cross to its apogee; through his suffering and death, God's salvation came to all. Jesus is the best expression of God's love.

Theological reflection is not static. Theology is the reflection on and interpretation of its life of faith by the community of believers, filled with a very strong potential for self-adjustment. For theological reflection does not hide from the challenges of the times, but responds to all the challenges posed by the times. It strives to suit itself to the times, thereby enabling faith to speak to the age. Thus theology is able to aid us in explaining for our own time the reasonableness, truth and rightness of our faith. Theological reconstruction is a means to this end. It is unadulterated theological activity. Its goal is to better interpret the faith, not to shake it. Like theological reflection carried on by Christians in any other place in the world,

the task of theological reconstruction is to interpret faith, to construct a theology which is both of the spirit and of the world, harmonizing the church with socialism.<sup>9</sup> Through theology, with the precondition of upholding basic faith, it adjusts those theological views which are not suited to the times, thereby guiding the church to fit itself with the times in which it lives, enabling it to be the light and salt in socialist society, that the church may be in harmony with the people, be a church that witnesses to people, an advanced force in the construction of socialist spiritual and material culture.

### 3

Christ's Church always exists in the context of a specific history, culture and society. Thus every church is both universal and local. The universality of the church requires of Christ's Church that it no matter where it is, it maintains basic Christian faith. Otherwise, it will not be the Church of Christ and will lose its universal nature. The particularity of the church requires that each church in its unique context reflect on and interpret basic Christian faith. This reflection and interpretation of the faith by the church in its unique context is theology. This kind of reflection and interpretation does not take place in a vacuum, but in the midst of history and reality. Thus, theology cannot be set in stone. Theology is the reflection and interpretation on its own faith done by the church at different times and in different contexts. Theology is the reflection done by the church and its interpretation of the faith at different times in history. The Chinese Church is ecumenical, a member of the church universal. The Chinese Church holds a common faith with churches in other locales. But in another aspect, it is also local or particular, with its own uniqueness; it must interpret basic Christian faith in its own unique context. This work of understanding and interpretation is the embodiment of the unique

selfhood of the Chinese Church. The Chinese Church is not the same as other local churches, but it is also the same as all other churches, upholding the common faith of the historical church. And this work of understanding and interpretation is the work that theological reconstruction must do.

The universality and particularity of the church require that in interpreting the faith, theology and basic faith must be separate. Only by keeping the two separate is it possible for theology to interpret faith. Only in this way will there be an appropriate amount of space for theological reconstruction to be carried out. Those who are suspicious of theological reconstruction, who are anxious about it or even oppose it, often have not made the appropriate distinction between the two. Making an appropriate distinction between these two is the foundation of theological reconstruction and is related to its success or failure. Bishop Ting long ago saw this point keenly. The appropriate distinction between basic faith and theological thinking was an important development achieved through theological study in the Chinese Church by the TSPM in the decade from 1940 to 1950. This development enabled Chinese Christianity to guarantee maintenance of a pure basic faith while having a lively thinking and witness, and was beneficial to bringing about unity among Christians on the basis of their common basic faith. We cannot but recognize that making the appropriate distinction between basic faith and theological thinking is not something humans could invent on their own; it is the Holy Spirit leading the church.<sup>10</sup> I have said earlier that theological reconstruction is the Chinese Church interpreting faith in its unique historical and cultural context and that this involves a question of extent. It must at the same time be cognizant of maintaining the purity of basic faith and of adjusting some outdated and backward theological ideas. Thus its aim is not to shake or eliminate basic Christian faith. Quite the oppo-

site, its aim is to safeguard basic Christian faith.

Saying this, we have in fact already countered two types of mistaken tendencies: one is the belief that basic faith can change; the other the belief that both theology and basic faith are unchangeable. These two tendencies are both wrong and both are damaging, not helpful, to the healthy development of the church. Both are obstacles to running the Chinese Church well. On the one hand, changes in basic faith would cause the nature of Christianity to change, so that it would no longer be Christianity. Many heresies are born through a change in some aspect of basic faith. They may continue to wave the banner of Christianity but they are no longer Christian.

We can say that this is a characteristic many heresies have in common: to a greater or lesser extent, they have made changes to basic Christian faith in order to adapt it more easily to their own heresy. There are many forms of heresy, but all heresies have, on some points or several points, made changes to basic faith. For example, a basic tenet of Christian faith is belief in a Christ both human and divine. Any belief that Jesus Christ is solely human, or solely divine, is a Christological heresy. Another example: basic Christian faith accepts a Trinitarian God. Any belief that is in contradiction to this is a Trinitarian heresy.

There are many such examples which I will not go into here. On another hand, if theology becomes petrified and unchanging, this will cause the church to become an extremely conservative and backward community. If new theological thinking is not constantly coming into a church, if theological reflection in a church does not keep pace with the times, that church will not be filled with vitality. It will become doctrinaire, petrified, a lifeless church, and will be unable to adapt to society. Such a church can only isolate itself. It is unable to become the light and salt of society and the conscience of soci-

ety. Such a church cannot make a beautiful witness to Christ in its own times.

From the perspective of church history and the history of Christian thought, basic Christian faith has always been unchanging, but the theology which interprets basic Christian faith has always been changing and developing. For example, the Bible and Christian faith both believe in a loving God, creator of the world and of history. Historically the doctrine of justification by faith developed out of belief in this God. It took shape and was developed by Paul and Martin Luther. In Paul it came from the Old Testament prophet Habakkuk. Though both emphasized faith, their particular emphasis differs. Habakkuk was faced with the arrogance and idolatry of the Chaldeans and warned the people of Israel: “the righteous live by their faith” (Hab. 2: 4), while Paul promoted “justification by faith” in order to deal with the Judaizers, to illustrate that it was not through circumcision or works but through faith that people were made righteous.

In the Reformation, Martin Luther directed his efforts against the errors of the Roman Catholic Church, opposing the issuance of indulgences and the then current theory of “salvation through works”. He emphasized justification by faith to show that it was not by good works or indulgences but by the grace of God that we are justified. In this 21<sup>st</sup> century, some in the Chinese Church still mistakenly expand the gap between believer and nonbeliever using the doctrine of justification by faith, creating a situation of self-isolation for Christianity. In fact, this is a misunderstanding of justification by faith.

When Habakkuk, Paul and Luther proposed justification by faith, it was not as a solution to the issue of belief versus nonbelief. This all goes to show that basic Christian faith is unchanging, but theological thinking can and should change. Only through constant change, through constant adaptation to

the times, can theology keep its vitality and stay abreast of the times. This demands of theology that it constantly interpret the faith in new situations.

Another facet of theological thinking that is constantly developing is the position of women. Though the Bible gives women a definite status, overall in the Bible and in church history the status of women has always been rather low. The theological justification of this phenomenon is the belief that since human sin came through Eve, women are more likely to sin. It was also thought that the female soul was of a lower order, not as noble as those of males. Historically, then, women could not preach and could not be ordained as pastors. However, today, no one could any longer be of the belief that women's souls are not of the same rank as men's. Not only are there women pastors, there are women bishops. All this illustrates the changeability of theology. Theology can be in step with the times; it should also be ahead of them. Of course, these changes do not mean faith is not necessary, but rather are a new interpretation of faith, enabling it to adapt to the times and to society.

While I was still a student at Nanjing Union Theological Seminary, our teacher Ms. Jiang Peifen told us a story that now seems a little laughable. In the early 1950s, many people believed that the material things were evil and that the world was under the power of Satan. Ms. Jiang herself believed this. When she went out to buy something and saw all the things for sale in the shops, she would hide her eyes with her hand and then pray that the Lord would protect her through his precious blood. I doubt anyone would do this today. Many Christians today can accept a life of material abundance and would no longer see material things as evil, or as the temptation of Satan. Today we are able with grateful hearts to accept the rise in our standard of living that abundance in our material lives has wrought. We

have no trouble accepting this view: enjoyment of the material life is not evil. We believe that God is not only the creator and defender of the spiritual world, but of the material world as well. This also shows the inevitability and possibility of change and adaptation in theological thinking. Society is advancing and theological thinking must progress along with the times. Through its constant elucidation of faith, theology enables backward theological views to be constantly adjusted, thereby enabling the church to become a force for social progress and not a hindrance to it.

As Christians living in a particular place with a particular cultural and political context, we naturally believe that basic Christian faith is unchanging, but at the same time, we should also accept that theology can change and adapt, and not only is change and adjustment possible for theology, it is essential. Adjustment in theological thinking is beneficial for us as we witness to our Christian faith in our own context. Adjustment in theology is not negative, not done because there is no alternative. It is positive, taking the initiative in adapting to our times and to our society. Time moves on, society moves on and because of this the church cannot, in its thinking and views, stop moving and shut itself off. The theological reconstruction we are carrying out today aims to adjust religious views that are backward and cannot adapt to social development, thereby enabling our church to move with the times and to be able to adapt to socialism.

#### 4

The main goal of my essay is to show that the motive force and goal of theological reconstruction is to interpret basic Christian faith in time and context, and not to shake that basic Christian faith. I want to emphasize this over and over. In this final section, I would like to offer several conclusions.

Firstly, theological reconstruction is a large program currently being undertaken by the Chinese Church; in the reconstruction of theological thinking, just as Bishop Ting reminds us, we cannot mix up basic faith and theology, but should make an appropriate distinction between the two. This is essential. Only by making the appropriate distinction between these two can we make adjustments in theology and safeguard basic Christian faith at the same time. After making this distinction, we must realize that basic Christian faith is unchanging, but that the interpretation of that faith, that is, theology, can, and inevitably must, change. This type of interpretation is the work that theological reconstruction must do, and in explaining faith in new contexts, it cannot but bring about adjustments to theological thinking and views. This is inevitable and very normal. It does not seek to shake our basic faith.

Secondly, adjustments and changes in thinking are always difficult and painful. This asks that we be courageous in facing adjustments in theology. We must know that concepts are acquired, human things; they can change, and should constantly change. We should not make some ideas that we have accepted into things that are eternal or ultimate. To do this is not piety in faith, but rigidity in thinking. God is not a dead God, but a living God. The revelation God gives to humans is given gradually. In the same way our view of God should not be stagnant, but should evolve along with the times. As Christians, we are also part of society and cannot live in isolation from it. Rather the society in which we live is one which is eternally changing and developing in a forward direction. This requires that we reflect on how, in the midst of a society that is changing and developing constantly, we may make known an unchanging Christian basic faith. If this is our aim, our theology must continually be in a process of adjustment, revision and replenishment to the changes of the times and developments in society,



otherwise our faith will easily get out of step and we will be unable to witness to our faith in society. This process of theological adjustment, revision and replenishment, is a process in which the Holy Spirit constantly leads and renews, a process in which God is constantly revealing Godself to us. In this period in the Chinese Church, it is the process of theological reconstruction.

Thirdly, theological adjustment should be carried out on the condition that it is based on and honors the Bible, and does not run counter to or change basic faith. The goal of theological reconstruction is not to shake or abolish basic faith, but to safeguard it and to establish the Church of Christ. In the traditions of the historical church, basic faith is unchanging, but the interpretation of that basic faith always develops along with the times. Thus, theological reconstruction is both new and not new. We say it is new because this is the first time the Chinese Church has said it wants to carry out theological reconstruction and adjustments to some backward theological views. Thus for Chinese Christians today, it is new. We can say it is not new because in the history of Christianity, the western Church has been always and continually adjusting its own theological thinking to enable the church's theological reflection to keep up with the advancing times.

Fourthly, with the condition of safeguarding basic faith, as Christians we should be more open and tolerant. Learning to listen and appreciate may be more valuable than blind opposition and rejection. It is more constructive. Theological reconstruction does not wish to cut the links between the Chinese Church and the traditions of the historical church, but to enrich them. Differences in theological reflection are differences in the interpretation of basic faith, pluralism in theology, not differences in basic faith per se, and should not affect fellowship in Christian faith.

Finally, any church is both universal and particular and the Chinese Church is no exception. The Chinese Church needs its own theology. Theological reflection in the Chinese Church must have its sources not only in things such as the Bible, tradition (Christian faith and theological traditions as well as Chinese traditional culture) and context, but theology in the Chinese Church can only take shape in the relationship between the church and the people, a theology that reconciles with the people. This is defined by the history and context of the Chinese Church. Such a theology neither copies nor breaks with tradition, but seeks to interpret tradition anew, to interpret basic faith. Theological reconstruction seeks, through a new interpretation of our universal common faith, to establish a uniquely local Chinese contextualized theology.

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1 K.H. Ting, "My View of these Fifty Years" *Nanjing Theological Review*, 3(2000): 3. Trans. in Janice and Philip Wickeri, eds. *A Chinese Contribution to Ecumenical Theology: Selected Writings of Bishop K.H. Ting*. (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2002), 111.

2 —. "On Theological Education in China" *Nanjing Theological Review* (Premier issue of new series) (1984): 46.

3 However, lifting up biblical authority is not the same as using it as a superstitious object. Any such making the Bible into a superstitious object, or mechanically accepting the words and passages of the Bible as spiritual, does not lift up the authority of the Bible, but rather damages it.

4 "My View of these Fifty Years,": 4.

5 K.H. Ting, "Adjustments in Theology are Necessary and Unavoidable" *Nanjing Theological Review* 2(2000): 9. CTR 17: 118.

- 6 —. “Theology and Context: Speech on the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the TSPM,” *Nanjing Theological Review* 4(2000): 3. CTR 17: 123.
- 7 John L. Thompson, “John Calvin’s Understanding of What is Essential in Christianity” *Nanjing Theological Review* 4(2003): 90-103.
- 8 Tobias Brandner, “Jianshe Theology” *Nanjing Theological Review* 4(2003): 122, 126.
- 9 K.H. Ting, “Congratulatory Remarks on the 45<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the TSPM,” in *Love Never Ends* (Nanjing: Yilin Press, 2000), 470.
- 10 “Adjustments in Theology are Necessary and Unavoidable,” 10.

## **Faith and Culture: Observations on the Historiography of the Modern Chinese Church**

LI XINNONG

The belief in God revealed in the Bible reflected the ancient Hebrew and early Christian worldview and the methodology by which they grasped their world and themselves. This differed from the modern western-style Christianity that forced its way into China. For when the faith of the Hebrews and ancient Christians evolved into a kind of “religion” and formed specific national or local cultures and political “systems,” this religion colored the state or ethnic worldview and value system to the point that it represented the interests of the state and political group. When Protestant Christianity attempted to merge with a tumultuous and changing modern China, its deep-seated “western” and “colonial” elements exacerbated the tenacious political and cultural resistance it met with in China.

As toilers in the fields of theology, as Christians faced with every sort of complex and entangled factors and opinions in the study of modern Chinese Christian history, what should we say? What kind of methodology should we apply and what kind of approach should we use in dealing with the vast amount of data on modern Chinese Christian history in order to transmit the fabric of Christian faith and achieve our goal of establishing a theology in the Chinese-language context? The histo-

riography of the modern Chinese Church has thus become an interdisciplinary field of study. It is a field which touches on biblical studies, western church history, mission history, hermeneutics, sociology, international politics, etc. It is a field which trains our ability in theological reflection. Thus the exploration of modern Chinese Christian history can be called an integrated and interdisciplinary contextual correlative.<sup>1</sup>

It will be evident in this essay that the author feels that there are three main periods or events in the evolution of views of the Bible, the church and God in the modern Chinese Church. The first is represented by views that remained unchanged for over 100 years from 1807 up to the 1930s and 40s among Chinese Christian leaders. The second was the publication of Dr. Tang Zhongmo's *A Modern View of the Bible* in 1936. The third is the view of the Bible and church advocated by Bishop K.H. Ting under the rubric of theological reconstruction.<sup>2</sup> The Chinese Church has a long tradition of "lifting up the Bible," the question is what sort of theology we should use in looking at and interpreting the Bible.

My thesis begins with the fact that God is at work in modern Chinese Church history. At the same time, God is at work in modern Chinese "secular" history. The study of the history of theology in the Chinese Church and the study of modern Chinese Church history are closely linked because theology guides the Church's actions. The key to whether the church is able to work together with God in history lies in the church's view of God and what sort of theology it uses to look at and interpret the Bible. Thus the success or failure of the church in the modern period is separate from the influence of strong forces outside the church. The church's own view of the Bible and its theology are the deeper reasons for the success or failure of the church. The aim of a historiography of the church is "to learn from history." A suitable view of biblical scripture and

the western church system and a suitable hermeneutical method can help us in establishing a Chinese theology and in understanding what sort of role the Church is to play in China.

The Chinese Church's own theology is the theoretical basis for interpreting modern Chinese church history and for dealing with the vast and complex data of that history. The current program of theological reconstruction has opened the way for study of the Chinese Church's view of the Bible and the church. This is a fine case in point in the modern history of the Chinese Church. The view of the Bible and of the church advocated by theological reconstruction is the ground for my analysis of the modern history of the Chinese Church. Grasping the relationship between theological orientation and the fate of the church, we have a theoretical foundation for analysis of the historical data of the modern Chinese Church. In this way, the work of collecting historical data will not become simply a matter of computer input and fieldwork.

In this essay I will attempt, from a hermeneutical perspective that uses the contextual correlative method, to explore the view of the Bible and the church in modern Chinese church history and the actual evolution of the church. I will investigate the changes in the social and ethical orientations of the church that have followed developments in these areas. Discussion of the path such developments have followed has guiding significance for the collection and identification of materials related to the study of modern Chinese church history. I think that "God and culture" gives an easier reading than "Christ and culture" for the historical encounter of modern Chinese people with the faith in the true Trinitarian God that is modern Chinese church history. For as our Books of Poetry and History show, our ancestors knew God thousands of years ago, while the Protestants who preached the gospel in China and translated "Jesus" and "Christ" did not come along until the 19<sup>th</sup>

century. Moreover, the texts and truth of the Old and New Testaments need not necessarily be hermeneutically understood from a Christological viewpoint.<sup>3</sup> If we were able to do theological interpretation of, for example, the concept of creation by God and the broad spirit of the historical perspective in the Old Testament directly in the cultural context of our faith and use this in our exploration and construction of modern Chinese church history, it might be much easier for Chinese Christians to understand and accept. This is my first point.

Excessive emphasis on salvation theory—that the soul is snatched “from the darkness of the world”—or on the doctrine of justification by faith which was developed in specific historical conditions by Paul and Martin Luther, tends to lead to Christians exalting themselves and despising others. This is my second point. This may have come about in the modern Chinese Church through the enthusiasm of missionaries during the periods under discussion. They attempted to use their own theology and view of the church to subjugate modern China and they waved this flag of Christ conquering China as they came.

The essentials of history are data and theory. The difficulty lies in integrating theory. Data piles up and the scribe’s behavior is to “pass it on without adding anything new,” simply diverting himself. There are two kinds of history: the first a dead record of things that happened in the past; the second history that is written down for people to read. This type of history does everything possible to avoid being just a record of what happened in the past. The words of the historian Sima Qian have something of a religious flavor: “The historian studies the boundary between man and heaven to understand changes ancient and modern.” When we Chinese Christians deal with the modern history of the church and its numerous and complex historical data, we can take a page from classical Chinese mod-

els of history and be further guided by the theology of historians of the Bible itself. This will have the effect of chasing away the clouds and letting the sun shine through and will serve the present theological reconstruction in the church. It will help us to discover the pattern in the modern church and thus provide a historical platform for the ministry of theological reconstruction. This is an excellent time for the establishment of a Chinese Christian historiography: “in a flourishing age, revise history.” The modern history of the church in China is a mirror for theological reconstruction. The aim of revising history is to read history, not to organize files.

We can attempt a theological reading of Sima Qian. Here “the boundary between man and heaven” can be read as the encounter of God and humankind in history; “changes ancient and modern” can be read as the laws of mutual inspiration and response between God’s will and human affairs. The ancients thought alike: the historians of ancient Israel and of the early church had the same spirit in dealing with history as Sima Qian because they wrote history out of the same exhausting and difficult experiences of life and soul, reading history with their own philosophies of life and theology. They certainly did not string together past events just to distract themselves. For example, the Old Testament authors of E and J always look at God’s creation and the stories of the lives of the people’s forbears from different perspectives as they use these to express their theology. The authors of D and P use their experiences in service to the Lord to express the Lord’s will for the people of Israel. And the Deuteronomical historians give a tidy shape to the wondrous history of Israel, editing and appraising what is contained in the lines of text, trying to find adequate laws of history to with which to warn their captive people and bring hope to the despairing Israelites. Based on views of the Bible and the church, a new interpretation is given to the Isra-



elites' history, seeking a new stipulation of the people of Israel's status and identity before God and others following the restoration. The Acts of the Apostles records the earliest history of the church from the perspective of the Spirit's leading, allowing us to see the significance of the Jerusalem meeting in that early church history. In *The City of God*, Augustine used Christian theology to interpret the fall of Rome and the principles of God's action in Roman history in responding to the pagan censure of Christians at the time and Christians' own doubts.

We can learn from the method by which these ancient sages integrated their historiography as we proceed to order the data of the modern history of the church in China. Most importantly, this author thinks, we can no longer be satisfied with perspectives on the modern history of the church based on readings of political history, war history, missionary history or missionary cases. Rather we should use available historical data to dig out what sort of view of the Bible, what sort of view of the church the missionaries brought us—this is one of the deep reasons constituting the historical idea that compelled them to control church organization. And then we must draw on our soul and powers of comprehension to look at history—a history that is not just “church history” but also “secular history”—to see the God at work there, or God acting in history. Perhaps by this approach we may see some of the laws by which history works and answer the question of how the fellowship that believes in God can encounter the Chinese people. Our goal is to probe the lessons of history, summarize experience, construct a view of the Bible and the church that is Chinese Christians' own, love China and strengthen the church. Therefore, this essay must reflect upon indigenization and contextualization in the modern Chinese Church.

The study of original documents is most important. This

includes Chinese and foreign-language books and periodicals published since 1807 by missionaries and by the church itself, as well as related historical cases. For the past twenty years, limited personal and financial resources have not allowed this author to enjoy these sources to their fullest. But if one could gather up those magazines, periodicals and books in Chinese and foreign languages which have been published since 1807 and read them for their views of the Bible and the church—items such as *The Amoy Monthly*; the *Globe Magazine* (*Wanguo gongbao*); the *Life Monthly*; the *Wenshe Monthly*; *Advance*; *True Light*; *The Christian Farmer*; *Tian Feng*; *Jiaocai*; *The Nanjing Theological Review*, etc.—so much would be gained. Historical data are dead; the researcher is alive. And so we must see what sort of standpoint, perspective and interest the researcher brings to the analysis, sorting and study of data and as well as to the writing of history, and the inquiry into the essentials of modern Chinese church history, its developments, changes and patterns. For example, why did the church and the missionaries adopt their particular attitudes to Chinese politics, economics, culture and the Chinese people? Besides their natural connection to “imperialism,” what influence did their view of the Bible, the church and God have on their actions? The answers to these questions can certainly be found in the original materials of our modern church history.

This brings me to my second point: A new look at what sort of view of the Bible was contained in the missionary movement and that missionaries brought to their Chinese listeners and readers. The key point here is an investigation into what the “foreign religion” brought to its Chinese adherents around the time of the Opium War. What should have been brought to Chinese believers, but was not?

Yahwist faith, the Christian Church and its earliest theology, was born in Palestine, in Asia. Jesus and his twelve clos-

est disciples were all Asians. “Asia is the cradle of all world Scriptures, including that of Christianity, though Christianity left Asia very early and several centuries passed before it returned in the guise of a stranger, of an invader.<sup>4</sup> The earliest Christian kingdom was born in Asia, not in the West. The famous church of Antioch and those that followed were in Syria in West Asia, between the two rivers, Persia and even India and Tang China. The Church of the East continued for a dozen centuries and today in India there is still a church in the St. Thomas tradition. All these churches belong to the ancient Church of the East, which developed its own eastern theology.

Yet, from ancient times, Christianity was spread to the West. Its historical theological development took place in the context of western history and culture. Because the eastern church had not shaped its own powerful and unified theological and church traditions, it was the western theological model that influenced the eastern church, especially its theological models, view of the Bible and the church brought by the missionaries of the Euro-American revivalist movement. It is necessary in this essay to look back at the evolution of western theology in context. All the various thinking of western church historiography which seminary textbooks take as the standard, does not come from our own cultural and historical traditions. The thinking behind them is “alien.” In the 19<sup>th</sup> century the western missionary movement was in the ascendant and when it entered China, these foreign visitors truly became aliens who found it difficult to acquaint themselves with Chinese religion and culture and identify with the plight of the Chinese people. But the historical facts are these. The missionaries’ theology and view of the church, their views of the Chinese people and Chinese culture, did become for a time the dominant thought of the modern eastern church (the colonized church). Our question is: What kind of view of the Bible and of the church was it

that the missionaries brought us? From this perspective, seeking out the path by which the view of the church and the view of the Bible were shaped in modern Chinese church history and the events that mark it seems extremely important.

“The great majority of missionaries in China in the 19<sup>th</sup> century were fundamentalist and evangelical; liberals gradually increased in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>5</sup> The source of the fundamentalist and evangelical passion for spreading the gospel was the Christian revivalist movement in Europe and America. For their proselytizing tactics, and even for their imperialist political attitudes toward China, their views of the Bible and the church had the greatest impact. And they influenced Chinese pastors and believers. Toynbee is instructive on the subject of the evil effects of religious wars between Catholicism and Protestantism in Latin Christendom, feeling that the spirit of tolerance that came down to us from our 17<sup>th</sup> century forebears has been eroded by secular ideology to the point of Pharisaical intolerance and extremism.<sup>6</sup>

What is meant by secular ideology and extremism here can be understood as forming the missionaries’ own views of the church and the Bible, in their own context and colored by their own cultures and worldviews. This statement can also stand as a characterization of the commencement of the Chinese Protestant Church. Between the view of the Bible and church in *Good Words to Admonish the Age*<sup>7</sup>, by Liang Fa, the first Chinese pastor, and *A Modern View of the Bible* by Tang Zhongmo, the Chinese Church experienced over one hundred years of struggle.

Liang Fa preached from a full measure of religious zeal. He saw the church as the domain of God. Outside this domain was a world of darkness and sin which was not of God. Therefore to expand the sphere of the church, it was necessary to spread the gospel to the full extent of one’s energy. This kind

of spirit came from the 19<sup>th</sup> century missionary movement. Its inner theological basis was to see the Bible as a kind of mechanistic book of heavenly revelation, overemphasizing it as a book of salvation history.<sup>8</sup> But the later modern history of the Chinese Church proves that such a view of the Bible and the church could not ensure that the modern Chinese Church would take root in China. It was inadequate as a compass by which each individual person in the church could find refuge and live in peace.<sup>9</sup> This did not change substantially in the hundred years that followed.

The resources for our theological reflections should include a proper and correct hermeneutics, the heritage of the faith of the church and common experience with humanity outside the church. Therefore, any point of reflection in Christian historiography is three-dimensional and cannot be separated from the foundations of truth in the scriptures or its interpretations in the concrete context. If we look at the evolutionary course of the Bible, the faith of the church and the history of bloody struggles in the western church, the meaning of the existence of the church can only be as a vessel for God to complete God's work of mission. Only the suffering love of God can set humanity free from tribulation. The church as an institution cannot achieve this. The only model for the church is the Incarnation that is Christ's *kenosis*. Thus, the best approach for doing theology and being Christian is to be disciples of the Lord among people, gaining with them the good of the gospel, worshipping and awaiting the Lord of salvation and the Lord of all creation with them. For the salvation brought to humankind by the Incarnation of Jesus Christ enabled people to gain liberation. Through the bitterness and sacrifice of the cross, Jesus Christ overcame all forces that would oppress and humiliate persons. He identified with people's despair through a self-sacrificing love; he was broken by suffering, but in res-

urrection proclaimed his power and brought hope to people.<sup>10</sup>

In this regard, we can find inspiration in K.H. Ting's God is love theology and his concept of the Cosmic Christ. Our church and Christians do not seek to overcome the world through a "church as fortress" mentality. Rather, by emulating God the Father, they seek to unite with their neighbors through love and take part together in God's work of creation. Christ is Lord of the cosmos, how then shall we use human strength to overcome the world? This is not a denial of Christ's great commission, but a deepening and expansion of our own mission. Thus Chinese theology and Christian historiography are not a journey from western church ideas to eastern Church ideas but a sublimation and theoreticization that allows the church to take root among the people and be embodied in their lives. It is the practice of loving God and loving people.

God is the center of the cosmos, yet as a human institution, the church is not the center of the world. "An understanding of the church should not be limited to definitions of identity or to a depiction of abstract concepts. The church should not be a glorified thing sitting on high. The incarnation of Jesus Christ in human form, living among people and the church, should allow the truth of the incarnation to continue in history, integrating with every actuality of the social environment, of culture, politics and the economy...only in the actual experience of people can we find the role and identity that the church should have."<sup>11</sup> A contextualizing theology adapts and changes with the context. For example, Chinese contextual theology and the liberation theology of the Philippines are different. The key lies in the contextualizing mentality. I think this could be a description of theological reconstruction in the Chinese Church today.

In this the situation is like that of the Israelite theologians in the Old Testament who summed up the historiography of

their faith fellowship and their characteristic identity thusly: the Jewish people are a people who excel in introspection; when their people face a great turning point, they always look back on and reflect on how the gracious hand of God is leading them. In a complex and changing context, they give expression anew to God's new grace and old love. From the perspective of Israel's prophets, Israel was specially chosen by God from all creation to be the mediator for all peoples to know the name of Yahweh. Yet from time to time the Israelites offended against their status as creatures and did not bow to the might and merciful love of the Lord of creation; thus they were often in difficulties and struggles. Theology and context were very intimately linked in this people's history. Most obviously, several major events, such as the Exodus, the entry into Canaan, occupation and restoration, all engendered revolutions in Hebrew theology. Subsequently, in the spiritual history of the Israelites there emerges, like a kind of symbolic chord running through, these vicissitudes of fate, throwing back a true reflection of God's guidance of this band of people through their complex historical context.

This enlightens, telling us that the fellowship of those who believe in God must proceed from the revelation in scripture and the faith system of the church in reflecting on the history of our faith, just as the Israelites did in their time. From the data we have at hand, we can see that in the one hundred years from 1807 to 1907, very few among fundamentalist and evangelical preachers were able to achieve this in their reflections on views of the church and the Bible. The publication of the translation of the *Christian Classics Library* and *A Modern View of the Bible* must be counted among events that embodied this spirit of reflection. And these were events of the 1930s and 1940s.

In the 1930s and 1940s, the Nanjing Seminary Publications Office (later the Christian Fuqiao Press and the Christian

Literature Press) began translating and editing the *Christian Classics*. The editor stated: “We dedicate these treasures to the Chinese church, trusting that it will steadfastly reflect the important thinking and central faith of Christianity throughout the ages. ... Since the Incarnation, the world has been filled with a new kind of strength. This collection points to the working of this strength in human life for two thousand years and gives this strength, that is the strength emitted by unshakeable faith, to Chinese readers.”<sup>12</sup> The original plan called for publication of 52 volumes in the *Christian Classics* series, from writings of church fathers in the late apostolic times to late 19<sup>th</sup>/ early 20<sup>th</sup> century classic works by theologians West and East. The editors and translators compared their task to the difficulties Xuanzang faced in his Tang dynasty translations of Buddhist scripture. Theological students today still regard this series as an important reference on the origins of the faith, very important for understanding the system of Christian faith, for keeping Christians from falling into heresy or religious mania.

On the evidence of the historical data available to us, in the hundred years from 1807 to 1907, there was nothing to equal it in the literature work of foreign missionaries in China, for these missionaries were mostly fundamentalists and evangelicals from the revivalist movement (Morrison belonged to the London Missionary Society and Gutzlaff had a strong Moravian Brethren background) and they disdained the establishment of a church and faith erudite and profound, and did not preach this to the Chinese Church.

The other event was the publication of *A Modern View of the Bible*. The author, Tang Zhongmo, says in his preface: “Readers of scripture should not be ignorant of the authors’ background and origins for this will result in quoting out of context and distortion of meaning. The Bible should not be seen rigidly as a book of heavenly revelation and the reader



should not be a stickler with a stubborn bias for strange expressions.”<sup>13</sup> This book was used as a text in the Central Anglican Seminary and at Nanjing Seminary. The view of the Bible it introduced was earth-shattering for those with a fundamentalist and evangelical view of the Bible (which saw the Bible as near-dictation from God and accepted the doctrine of inerrancy, though such a view is difficult to define). This book stressed that God’s salvation, words and revelation were fulfilled in the biblical authors’ real lives and struggles, through human intelligence and a spirit of reflection. This significant book has realized its potential today. In 2000, Bishop Ting proposed that it be reprinted in a new edition (which first appeared in the *Nanjing Theological Review*) initiating in the Chinese Church a huge theological discussion on the view of the Bible. Its publication was a significant first step in deepening Three-Self and theological reconstruction. One of the important items here was a simultaneous emphasis on the messages of salvation and creation found in scripture and in the fabric of the faith.

In today’s prosperous society, lifting up the spiritual authority of the Bible and emphasizing a balanced biblical theology of salvation and creation, that salvation is an essential stage of creation, can elicit many important Protestant ethical teachings. This can teach people—especially those among us who have already been “saved,” who have received the fullness of life—to have an appropriate view of their place among others and before the Creator. It can help us to avoid emphasizing solely the doctrine of salvation, an approach that leads, wittingly or not, to arrogance on the part of those who believe in the Lord. Though we, like our brothers and sisters, have all been created by the Lord and are under the Lord’s dominion, this tendency toward arrogance leads to separation from others. We are stewards of the garden God has given us to “tend

and watch over.” Just as Isaiah said, the Lord has absolute power which will not diminish through time. This is an action and story that has its origins in antiquity and is already fulfilled, but creation also implies that God is ever in the process of sculpting and sanctifying his people, right up to the “new creation” that Isaiah prophesied and Lord Jesus promised. In our theological reflections in the church today, we should also have the capacity to reflect on our own faith history, the history of the development of doctrine and the word of God in the biblical scriptures, so that we can fully discern the role of the church and its place and function in the modern history of China.

This brings us to our third point: Reflection on theology in the faith history of the western mainstream churches can lead to discussion of the foundations of theological theory in modern Chinese church historiography.

There are international and social reasons, as well as internal reasons in the church, for the rise of the missionary movement. At the same time as the missionary movement took shape, capitalist countries were expanding the capital market. The colonial movement on the one hand satisfied the need for overseas markets and sources for capital and also aroused the westerners’ spirit of adventure. It was a movement that brought Christian influence to bear on both Africa and Asia. The theological reasons for the missionary movement were also of crucial importance. The views of the Bible and of the church that missionaries adopted were ones which were useful to the mission boards and to their own interests. Their theology certainly did not comprise the whole of the venerable theology of mainstream western churches. We see reflected here the impact of the “profit mechanism” on the church’s view of Bible and church and on the trend in social ethics in the church. The missionaries were unable to give expression to the agony of the Chinese people and Chinese Christians. China was a nation

with a store of poverty and weakness, the victim of brutal aggression in which the church could not stand on its own feet.

Therefore missionaries' views of the Bible and the church are no substitute for our analysis of the modern history of the church in China and of the relation between modern Chinese history and the history of the Chinese Church in this period. "The earliest and most important influence on the 19<sup>th</sup> century high tide of the foreign missionary movement, in addition to international social interaction, was the 18<sup>th</sup> century rise of the evangelical revivalist movement. This movement engendered the modern Protestant missionary movement. Its theology roused a missionary fervor and this caused the entire missionary movement to be profoundly colored by evangelical theology."<sup>14</sup>

Dissertations and books written by mainland Chinese in the field of modern Chinese church history in recent years and the historical data uncovered, all illustrate this point. Examples of recent works are *History of Missionary Cases in China; From Morrison to Leighton-Stuart; Christianity and Modern Shandong Society; A Short History of Chinese Christianity; Forging Ahead through Difficulties*; etc. The 18<sup>th</sup> century English Baptist missionary William Carey's *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens* truly expresses the sort of thinking within the missionary movement that it must strive to expand the territory of the church. The missionary fervor of the English church led and influenced other European and American countries to organize overseas revival boards which coalesced in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The most resonant slogan of the period is "Christ conquers China." The most influential is the theory in theological history that "there is no salvation without Christ." These two ideas fully express the missionaries' attitude toward the church and the Bible as well as their attitude toward the world out-

side the church while proselytizing.

The idea of “no salvation outside the church,” was a formulation of Pope Boniface VIII (1294-1303) in his famous bull *Unam Sanctam*. The key here is how we, today, understand the church. If the church is understood simply as an organization or an institution, a “fortress” in human society, then, tragically, such thinking will lead to so-called “ecclesia-centered” thinking. The one mission of the church will become to make the church on earth the center of activities that expand the church’s forces. This is what shaped the missionaries’ attitude of expansion and subjugation toward others.

Of course we should not this reject the opportunity the missionary movement provided for contact between cultures of the East and West because of this, nor the opportunity for Chinese people to come into contact with the truth of the Bible. But at the same time, these attitudes created errors in the Chinese Church’s understanding of many issues, such as identification with its context, God’s work in China and culture. Christianity came to Asia and came into contact with Asian culture through the missionary movement. Historians have called the nineteenth century the “century of missions.” Due to the mission work of European and American mission boards then, churches were established all over Asia. The depth and breadth of this missionary movement can be illustrated by the case of China (the largest missionary district). In 1907 when the church in China celebrated the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the arrival of Christianity in China, there were in China 3,745 missionaries, from over 60 different sending agencies.

But it cannot be denied that there was among the missionaries an attitude of cultural imperialism that went so far as to equate the gospel with western Christianity, ignoring the need to identify with the people. “Missionaries filled with fervor to spread the gospel came to the Third World to preach the

gospel to the heathens; their belief was that if the heathens did not have the gospel of Jesus, they would certainly live in darkness, and though there were some missionaries who attempted to learn the local language and live together with the local people, most took their own nation as the standard, believing that their own culture and religion were superior to those of the local people.”<sup>15</sup>

But in fact, the literati, most rural people and intellectuals in the isolated realm of the late Qing kept to their heritage of Confucian political thinking and philosophy of life as the foundation for lives of peace and quiet. Thus the “foreign religion” brought by the missionaries met with two-fold resistance from late-Qing politics and culture. Because missionaries came to the Chinese people with the attitude of conquerors, the foreign religion’s view of the Bible and of the church could not wholly represent the truth revealed in the Bible, a truth that might be accepted by anyone under heaven. Of course, some among the missionaries, like Gutzlaff, also tried wearing Chinese dress and reading the classics in an attempt to draw closer to the Chinese people, but they were not very successful. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, some awakened Chinese Christians began the movement for indigenization.

In the past, missionary theology and the missionary movement developed by the western church took the “Jewish-missionary” Paul as guiding spirit. The tree of salvation was grafted on to Israel and the Christian Church; so-called “mission” meant converting “Gentiles” to Christianity, “accepting” this tree of salvation. Israel and Christianity are one body, together becoming “salvation history” and Gentiles can only be taken aboard. For Paul, Jews were the nucleus. When missionaries came to China, they believed the nucleus had expanded to include all Christians. The church remained aloof, even hostile, to those outside the Jewish-Christian nucleus. Such

an attitude, carried to the extreme, became church “as fortress”: the church is surrounded by darkness and heathenism and the church becomes a base of evangelism. “Mission” as found in the Bible is simplified as evangelism. Bringing people to Christ, adding to the numbers of people in the church becomes the primary task of the church. Come to Christ—join the church, confess the faith and become a member of the institution. The meaning of “conversion” becomes abandoning all else to be a member of the church.

Though sending of missionaries overseas by European and American churches in the 19<sup>th</sup> century resulted in the construction of many churches and the spreading of the seed of the gospel, yet these missionaries lacked an understanding of the local cultures, history and tradition. They caused harm to these people’s cultures and traditions by the frequent bias or prejudice with which they viewed them. At the same time they subjectively saw the theology of their own culture as absolutely universal. Missionaries demanded that people accept the gospel, but at the same time, they wanted these people to accept their cultural traditions. This put Christianity in an embarrassing situation. In its encounter with the local culture, this gospel, in spite of having reached the Third World, was unable to have much of an effect because it had no relevance to the lives of the people there. It could not realize the true significance of the gospel. And so Christian missionary work had to turn to the spirituality of the life to come, a step which led to the Christian tendency toward hostility to this life.<sup>16</sup> In fact, this is the “alien” attitude spoken of above, a simplification of the church’s mission of incarnation. Though we know the church is a fellowship of those who have been saved, it is also the continuation of Christ’s incarnation in time and space. Theological inquiries by the Chinese Church into ecclesiology are quite weak. This leads to our question: What is the meaning of

the church's existence and growth? How should we implement the commission to evangelize and bring the implications of the Incarnation to bear on what is actually happening in the church?

This is a question that must be answered by the historiography of the modern Chinese Church and by Chinese theology. It is a question which must be taken into account when collecting and collating relevant historical data. Only in this way, will the modern Chinese church history we write be able to offer people in the church today an opportunity for introspection and reflection; "history as a lesson." The modern history of the Chinese Church written by human hands cannot simply be a statistical record of church growth and social programs or a rehashed narrative of field visits.

We must see God as a God doing the work of creation and salvation in the history and context of China. We must use the history, culture, religion and reality of China as the sources of theological reflection, use our own experience and culture to complete a Chinese theology, to construct our own fabric. The reason theology can become "reflection on faith" is because the church is in the act of thinking. Theology is not simply metaphysical "knowledge about God." We will not again trod the path of western church historiography, of metaphysical mysteries and doctrinal wrangles. We can discover and we can draw on things God has already accomplished in our own history and culture. For "Christ" and "culture" are not two sharp opposites.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century western missionary movement, Henry Venn (1725-1797), Rufus Anderson (1796-1880) and others developed the idea of indigenization, meaning how the unchanging gospel could be transplanted to another cultural milieu. It included such issues of indigenization as the relationship among liturgy, faith and traditional culture, social restraints, church

architecture and methods of preaching the gospel. It was because these efforts were inadequate that a “slum-dwellers mentality” appeared among Chinese Christian groups in the modern era and that mission bodies were able to cause colonialism to wreak havoc in China. Perhaps the term “foreign religion” came from this.

The historical reality is that the modern Chinese Church seldom concerned itself with the overall context in which it was situated, and this caused a separation between Christian groups and society: “One more Christian means one less Chinese.” Any contextualized theory of theology must also be a kind of practice; we are not only to seek theoretical evidence in the Bible, but interact with it and from this allow the text and the Spirit of God to speak. The process of interpretation is the process of the church participating in God’s work of salvation and creation in history. K.H. Ting’s comprehension of the Cosmic Christ and God is Love is this kind of practice. This is pioneering work in contemporary Chinese church history. This theory can answer for us why the modern Chinese Church cast about without finding a place among the Chinese people. Of course, the Christians who formed the Literature Society as a mild theological and cultural response to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century “anti-Christian movement” also represent a type of awakening to the predicament of the church. Y.T. Wu, who then initiated the path of renewal in the Chinese Church, was a prophetic leader.

In the same way, Minjung theology, grassroots theology, homeland theology and Japanese theology are also reflection and practice by the church in context. Even though some of these foreign theologies have been short-lived, they still represent the self-reflection by the Christian church in context on its historical successes and failures and these can be references for us. The pity is that theological students have little



interest in Asian theology.

We need to realize that culture in context can reflect a general revelation of truth. Our responsibility is to bring this back to the Lord, to connect the context and the scriptural truth. This is the hermeneutical task.

In his 1985 lecture at Nanjing Seminary (published in his collected writings) “Inspirations from Liberation Theology, Teilhard de Chardin and Process Theology,” Bishop Ting demonstrated how we may absorb and draw lessons from other theologies and add to the number of good models for theological reflection in the Chinese Church. I was a student at the seminary then, lucky enough to hear Principal Ting expound on the subject for more than two hours. And since that time, many papers and dissertations have been done at the seminary on related topics.

My understanding of culture in this paper is not static or abstract, but dynamic; therefore H. Richard Niebuhr’s definition of culture,<sup>17</sup> which is basically a scientific understanding, is not completely appropriate to the context of the Chinese Church. Culture and the lives of living breathing people are interconnected. We need to approach from another angle, that is, to look at culture from the perspective of human experience. The creation and salvation of the Incarnation are embodied in Chinese culture and in modern Chinese history; God is also working in modern and contemporary Chinese history. Unfortunately, we have not clearly made use of the historical data we have to analyze this. When, in its modern history, China was in peril, could God not express God’s love and care for China through the Bible and the Holy Spirit? And did Chinese Christians at the time identify themselves with the will of God? This reminds us that as we are researching a theory of the modern history of the Chinese Church, we must avoid being tourists of theological concepts, rather we must be practitioners of

life—that is, we must do a theological reading of Chinese church history and look at Chinese history with theological eyes. We should not see church history as “sacred,” nor see history of the world outside the church as “secular.” For the relationship between “Christ” and “culture” should not be seen dualistically as one of absolute opposites.

The interests of the Chinese Church and the interests of the Chinese people are not in opposition; the modern history of the Chinese Church is one entity with the modern history of China, for Chinese Christians and the Chinese people together experienced the humiliation of their nation and their people. The goal of the hermeneutics and proselytization by missionaries in mission history was to expand the domain of the church. At times they even represented the interests of the colonialists in China and could not appreciate the agony of the Chinese people. Today’s theological reconstruction is in the interests of the development and strengthening of the fellowship of faith and even more to strengthen the unity between the church and the people, to seek the common interests of the Chinese people and to seek a better tomorrow.

We affirm that God is at work in modern Chinese history. We affirm the doctrine that God is both Lord of creation and Lord of salvation. Beginning with this doctrine, we will discover the wisdom and biblical insight that is nurtured in our own culture. All this is reflected from the depths of the human heart as it seeks the origins and meaning of life and reflects the mystery of God’s creation. We should have theological freedom to move between the world of the Bible and modern Chinese history, to expand our theological horizons, to embody more profoundly God’s work of creation in and outside Christian history. This is to say, we should see through to our context and this will make us better able to know clearly the special ways in which God works in China and to know more clearly

what God wants us as theologians to do in China. In this way the task of Christian theology is not to rationalize or defend universal doctrines, but to enable us as Christians to open ourselves up to the different ways God is at work. God works in different ways in different places, at different times and among different peoples. From this perspective, modern Chinese church history is a history of the fellowship of faith in God searching high and low in the context of China, seeking God and seeking our own place.

This is an age when we should be seeking an eastern church. What do I mean by this? The Antioch school in ancient West Asia had defined the eastern church: heir to the apostolic teachings, a stress on the literal-historical interpretation and ethical content of the text, an emphasis on the human nature of Christ and a rigorous ecclesiological system, an intense spirituality, shining in history.<sup>18</sup> This is the product of the mentality and lifestyle of eastern peoples, Chinese among them, and also a treasure of theology which we in our study of the theory of the history of the church have not given enough attention. For we are used to speaking of Greece and Rome, the Latin church and Augustine, Martin Luther, Calvin, John Wesley, Karl Barth, Buber and H. Richard Niebuhr.

But in *Love Never Ends*, Bishop K.H. Ting used an analogy from the *Daode jing*, comparing the Tao to water, to illustrate his understanding of Christ's nature and Christ's self-emptying. Bishop Ting also fully emphasizes the Bible's view of creation and its ethical teachings, which is easier for Chinese to understand and accept. He has also used the classical philosophical idea "with great kindness Heaven carries all things" to interpret the nature of God. Continuing down this path, we will certainly find the Chinese Church's place in social ethical practice.

I believe that such theological reflection uses sources of

truth and beauty from China, the East, to interpret the beautiful witness of Christian faith, and is a pioneering undertaking in ecclesiology in the Chinese Church. The “disciplines” in the research and pedagogical realms of theological workers—biblical theology, systematic theology, historical theology and practical theology—are of course very important, but the goal of all courses and study should be to lead students to establish for believers in the Chinese Church their own view of the Bible and of church history and their own ecclesiology, that the theology and actions of the church have a foundation in scriptural truth and reflect the nature of a church.

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1 David Tracy, *Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope*. Trans. Feng Chuan. (Shanghai: Joint Publishing, 1989), 1.

2 A forum on views of the Bible was held in Weihai, Shandong, under the auspices of the CCC/TSPM in the summer of 2000 and a volume of papers was published.

3 See Zhang Lue, “The Bible of the New Testament” *China Graduate School of Theology Journal* 24 (1998): 230-231.

4 Kwok Pui Lan, *God in the Midst of Asian Peoples*. (Hong Kong: CCLC, 1994), 58.

5 Tang Qing, *Centenary History of Chinese Christianity*. (Hong Kong: Taosheng Press, 1987), 66.

6 Arnold Toynbee, *An Historian’s Approach to Religion*. Trans. An Kejia and Zhang Longhua. (Chengdu: Sichuan People’s Press, 1998), 326.

7 Liang Fa, *Good Words to Admonish the Age*, in *Materials of Modern History*, no. 39. (Beijing: Modern History Institute of the Academic Sinica).

8 Also see Bobby E.K. Sng, *I Must Sow the Seed*. (Singapore: Trinity Theological College, 1998), 14-27. Also Li Xinnong, "Liang Fa: the First Chinese Pastor" *Nanjing Theological Review* 1(1994): 65-68.

9 See also Li Xinnong, "Liang Fa's *Good Words to Admonish the Age*" *Nanjing Theological Review* 2(1994).

10 Huang Pohe, *Theology Journeying to Asia*. (Tainan: Tainan Theological College, 1986), 64.

11 *Ibid.*, 69.

12 "On the translation and editing of *Christian Classics Library*". In *Selections from Early Christian Literature*. Reprint. (Hong Kong: CCLC, 1995), 5.

13 See Tang Zhongmo, *A Modern View of the Bible*. Zhonghua Shengong hui (Chinese Anglican Church), 1936. Reprints: 1950, 2000, 1-2.

14 Huang Pohe, 62.

15 Kwok Pui Lan, 51.

16 Huang Pohe, 44.

17 H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*. Trans. Lai Ying. (Hong Kong: Southeast Asian Graduate School of Theology, 1992).

18 I have discussed this in more detail elsewhere.

## **Christ and Culture: Reflections of a Chinese Christian**

CHEN YONGTAO

Jesus posed two very important questions to his disciples in Caesarea Philippi: “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” and “But who do you say that I am?” To the first question they replied: “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” Simon Peter answered the second question for all of them: “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God” (Mt. 16: 13-16; Mk. 8:27-30; Lk. 9: 18-20). Not only are these two questions inescapable questions of faith, they are inescapable theological questions. The answers also touch on the issue of the relationship of Christ to culture. That is to say, humans’ knowledge and understanding of Christ is always linked to culture, it cannot be separated from the cultural context of the one doing the understanding.

As H. Richard Niebuhr said, the question of Christ and culture is an eternal one. Jesus Christ is wholly God and wholly human. As a human being, he lived in a particular culture: He lived and died a Jew. As a Jew, the incarnate Jesus had to deal with Jewish culture and when he did so courageously and resolutely while on earth, the issue of Christ and culture had been

broached. Klausner sees Jesus' rejection by the Pharisees and Sadducees as a Christ vs. culture issue, in that the Pharisees and Sadducees rejected this Nazarene Jesus because Jesus was a threat to Jewish culture. But he also notes that Jesus was a product of Jewish culture and so his ethical and religious admonishments in the gospels in all cases run parallel to Jewish codes.<sup>1</sup> Not only are there countless ties between Jesus and Jewish culture, people's understanding of Jesus cannot be separated from culture either. God's revelation in Christ can never be separated from the culture that mediates it. Apart from culture, we have no way to understand and accept the revelation of God, nor is there any way for true links to be found between our lives and Jesus Christ.

Precisely because of this, for Christians, the issue of Christ and culture is an inescapable one. There is an unbreakable bond between Christ and culture; because of this we can only speak of Christ, can only preach Christ within culture and when we do speak and preach Christ, we can never escape the issue. Again, because of the features of human culture, humans are cultural creatures and human understanding is always a cultural understanding. It bears the mark of culture. Thus when we as humans speak and preach about Christ to other humans, there are two senses in which this question cannot be avoided. On the one hand, we are people who live in culture; our speech about Christ cannot be separated from the intermediary of culture. On the other hand, our listeners and receivers also live in culture: their understanding and reception of "speech," too, cannot be separated from the cultural context in which they live. We can say that speech and understanding about Christ always takes place in culture. Wherever there is speech about Christ, there is culture.

## 1 Christ and Culture: Niebuhr's typology is inadequate

The relationship of Christ to culture is extremely complex. H. Richard Niebuhr said that on the one hand, Christ turns toward God, leading people away from the secularism and pluralism of culture. On the other hand, Christ himself belongs to a certain kind of religious cultural tradition. He sent the disciples to preach the Gospel; to accomplish this, they needed to act in culture. Thus, the mutual relationship between Christ and culture develops and moves forward through affirmation and denial, reconstruction and compromise, and new types of denial.

The relationship between Christ and culture has been a highly disputed issue for two thousand years. Niebuhr's greatest contribution is his five types for discussion of the relationship between Christ and culture.<sup>2</sup> His types certainly make discussion of the Christ and culture issue convenient. But the problem is that Niebuhr's divisions are oversimplified and theologized, a theologian's idealized models far from the reality of history. Strictly speaking, because of this his typology lacks flexibility. I fear no believing individual or belief community in history can be neatly tucked into one of his models. Because of this, there has been a constant stream of people revising his typology.<sup>3</sup> I will focus on two of them.

The first is the evangelical scholar Charles H. Kraft. Though he adheres to Niebuhr's types, he has modified them somewhat. Professor Chen Zemin of Nanjing Union Theological Seminary has provided a good summary and introduction to Kraft's types.<sup>4</sup> Kraft himself believes that God both transcends and penetrates culture. In his view, though God exists entirely outside culture, and humanity exists entirely within culture, yet God chose human life within its cultural environment as the site of God's intersection with humanity.<sup>5</sup> God is absolute and limitless, yet God freely chose and utilized hu-



man culture. Moreover in interaction with humanity, God, at some important moments, restrained God's self to adapt to the limits of human acceptance.<sup>6</sup>

My second example comes from a Professor of Law at the University of Chicago, who feels that if the realities of Christian life are used as the basis for dealing with the issue of Christ and culture rather than abstract theological principles, a new typology will come to light. He proposes dividing the Christ against culture into "the church outside society" and "the church in contradiction to society." And he proposes combining Niebuhr's third and fourth types into "the church adapting to culture," for though the two emerge from different theological principles, they are in fact the same. He also proposes changing "Christ transforming culture" to "the church influencing culture." In addition, he proposes adding two types: "the church dominating culture" and "culture dominating the church."<sup>7</sup>

In discussing Christ and culture, Niebuhr saw culture as pointing to the whole course of human activity, parallel to revelation. Culture is a human processing of the natural environment: it is an "artificial, refurbished environment" which includes language, habit, ideas, beliefs, customs, social organization, the fruits of civilization, technological process, value, etc. It was in this broad sense that Niebuhr used the concept of culture, pointing out several features. First of all, culture is social in nature; it cannot be separated from human social life; secondly, culture is a human achievement, a product of human effort; thirdly, the world of culture is the world of value. It is concerned about human benefit. Fourthly, culture in all its forms is concerned with the realization of all value in this world and in material terms. Finally, all culture is "pluralistic." The values culture desires to bring about are complex.<sup>8</sup>

Niebuhr's typology and his use of the word culture have

been the object of a great deal of criticism,<sup>9</sup> but in theological terms, in discussing Christ and culture, setting Christ and culture, grace and nature in relation to each other (and not in opposition) is feasible. Grace is a necessity in the Christian life: this cannot be denied. But culture cannot be evaded. Without culture, we have no way to understand nature. Just as humans cannot leave nature behind, they cannot leave culture behind, for a purely natural human being does not exist. Humans live in different cultural contexts.

## **2 Christ and Culture: a symbolic reading of several biblical passages**

Understanding—and misunderstandings—of Christ are all related to culture. To see that Christ and culture is an issue both unavoidable and rather complex, let us first turn to the Bible. In what follows I will focus on a symbolic reading of three biblical passages.

The first is Matthew 5: 17-19, part of the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus says, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.” The law and the prophets can be taken as representing Jewish culture. Jesus has come not to abolish Jewish culture as represented by the law and the prophets, but to fulfill it. What is revealed here is the key point of the relationship between Christ and culture, that Christ becomes incarnate in a specific culture; Christ’s work cannot be separate from culture. This is to say that Christ’s gospel is neither unrelated to culture nor in opposition to culture: the two, Christ and culture, are interrelated. Christ is the fulfiller of Jewish culture, not its destroyer. Christ is also the fulfillment, not the destruction of other cultures. Only because this is the case, is it possible, and meaningful for Chinese Christians to discuss the relationship between Christianity and Chinese culture.

My second passage is Luke 9: 51-56. In this passage we see that prior to Jesus' ascension, he decided to go to Jerusalem. He and his disciples passed through a Samaritan village, but the villagers would not receive him. Why? The reason suggested by the biblical text is very interesting: it was not because he was Jesus, but because he had "set his face" to Jerusalem. Here Jerusalem can be seen as a cultural symbol. When the Samaritans met Jesus, this was what they saw. It was not Jesus' gospel itself that the Samaritans rejected, but the culture in which the Jewish Jesus lived.

My third passage is Luke 15: 11-32, the parable of the prodigal son, a parable which undoubtedly has meaning for personal spirituality, pointing to repentance and mercy for the sinner. But some believe that this, too, is a story with meaning for all of Israel, especially with regard to its captivity and restoration. In Jesus' time, many Jews felt they still lived in captivity. This was because in terms of historical geography, though the Jews had been freed and returned to their own land for some time, yet the great promise of restoration had not yet been fulfilled. They believed that Israel would one day truly return to her land and be redeemed. Her sins would be taken away and the covenant renewed. All that God had done for them in the exodus formed the important background to their expectations. For the common people of the time, these expectations were in the process of coming true. Their genuine release from captivity (including the resurrection of the dead) truly took place in the mission of Jesus himself. Those who did not truly welcome all that was taking place can be classified as those who had not experienced the captivity. They were opposed to the people returning. The elder son of the story represents those opposed to change.<sup>10</sup> In this sense, this parable points to the latitude of the relationship between the gospel and culture; acceptance of the gospel implies cultural ad-

justment and renewal.

This parable suggests that Israel's history was at a turning point and that this transformation was taking place during Jesus' own mission. The parable affirms the tradition of God's continuing relationship with Israel as well as the renewal of God's relationship with the Church. In the parable we can see both a kind of continuity—continuity with Jewish tradition—and a kind of disconnection—a different understanding of tradition. The parable gives us a certain kind of thought background for the Jews of the time while allowing us to see that our understanding of any object involves both continuity and disconnection. Our human knowledge of faith in Christ is the same: inseparable from tradition, but at the same time limited by tradition: inseparable from the faith tradition, from the cultural tradition and the cultural context. For this reason, both our human understanding of Jesus Christ and our understanding of faith are rich. Every sort of understanding touches upon the truth, but at the same time, is never the whole truth. Christ could only be incarnated in culture; culture is the carrier for Jesus' coming among us.

### **3 Christ and Culture: the hermeneutical perspective**

The concept of culture used by the anthropologist Clifford Geertz is essentially a semiotic one. Like Max Weber, he believed humans were creatures caught in webs of meaning they had woven themselves. For him these webs were culture and therefore he sought to explain them. Cultural analysis was not an experimental science or the pursuit of scientific laws, but rather a scientific exploration of meaning. As Cassirer said, humans are symbolic creatures. Human existence is inseparable from every sort of sign or symbol. Cultural activities, namely symbolic constructions, understandings and advantage, like everything else, are all social events.

The issue of Christ and culture is also in fact a hermeneutical question. When Christ meets culture, or when culture meets Christ, there will be a collision. This collision will be a process in which Christ and culture read each other. Christ is one; culture is many. The one Christ can meet and collide with different cultures. There will be many and various understandings of the one Christ in different cultures. But every culture's reading of Christ is an interpretation of the truth of Christ and not Christ's truth itself. Reflections of the moon in many rivers are reflections of the one moon, but none is the moon itself. Cultural understandings of Christ are like this. Cultures read the same Christ. Culture is a finger pointing to Christ, but it is not Christ himself.

Christ lives and so Christians' knowledge and understanding of Christ must also be alive, dynamic and developing. If we hold with a deadly fastness to some doctrine of faith, then what we know and accept can only be a dead Jesus, not a living Christ, a dead Christianity and not a living faith. Such a Jesus, such a Christianity can hardly speak to us in our present cultural context. And it is precisely in this sense that our conviction that our understanding of Christ is correct and rational does not necessarily imply that we should reject as incorrect other, differing understandings of Christ. This recognition can bring with it tolerance in faith and richness in theology and is far removed from a dictatorial faith and linguistic hegemony in theology.

There is a question of hermeneutical perspective here. Different perspectives produce different understandings and different grasp of issues. When I was studying at the Graduate Theological Union in California, a Hispanic professor told a story in class. It was the story of a Mexican boy's understanding of God's creation of humanity, and though his understanding was very naïve, it was very revealing. When God created

human beings, the boy said, it was like the baker baking bread: some that were left in the oven too long became black people; those that were underdone became white people; those who were only slightly underdone became yellow people—Asians—and those baked just right became brown people—Mexicans. I think that if the boy had been Asian, he would certainly have thought that the Asians were those baked or created just right. If he had been African, the boy would certainly have thought Africans were those created just right. And a white boy would have thought white people were the ones created just right. It is a matter of perspective and status. When we speak of the issue of Christ and culture our cultural location and status are in fact part of the discussion.

People will have different readings of a text based on different perspectives. What looks like a mountain range straight on, looks like a peak when seen from an angle; height and distance effect their own changes. If this is true of our view of nature, then our understanding of theology, our reading of a text, is at times affected in the same way. The same issue, from different cultural perspectives, can produce different understandings and different responses. Since Christianity is a religion of revelation, as Christians we both believe and accept God's revelation. But this is not the same as saying that we can monopolize the truth of God's revelation. Christians who live in a specific culture can only have a partial understanding and grasp of Christ's truth—like the old fable of blind men trying to define an elephant by feel; each is able to touch only part of the whole animal.

As the Bible says, God's revelation is "many and various." This implies that God acts in the midst of culture, using culture as a medium to reveal Godself by different means to different communities. Therefore, in some sense, apart from culture, God has "no means" by which to reveal Godself to

human beings. This is not to say that God's revelation of self is limited by culture, but that the reception of that revelation by human beings who are its objects is always limited by culture.

Christ is the revelation of God's self, and on this level, Christ transcends culture. On the other hand, in order to establish a connection with human beings, Christ always becomes incarnate in different cultures. Thus he is always intrinsic to the culture. And what is more, our understanding of Christ always takes place within culture; apart from a specific culture, we have no way to speak of God and Christ to people who live in specific cultures. A human being is a creature of culture. As human beings, we Christians' understanding of Christ is unavoidably stamped by culture. It is just in this sense that the incarnate Jesus Christ is not absolutely unrelated to culture and even less is Jesus Christ essentially against culture. Just the opposite: Jesus was born in a manger and into a specific culture. For Christians, the manger is not simply a receptacle; it has theological and cultural connotations. When Christianity and different cultures meet, each and every culture can become a manger to receive Jesus.

The New Testament itself illustrates this. The New Testament witnesses to one and the same Jesus, but different people have all sorts of understandings and witnesses to Christ. We can say that because the authors of the New Testament were not of a single cultural context, their audiences were also different, and this led to the early Christian documents each having their own distinct perspective and goals. They exhibit the diversity of faith experience and theological understanding of first century Christians. But in spite of these differences, the commonality of their understanding of Jesus is crystal clear. Among the many differing understandings in the New Testament, it is the same Jesus we see: the Incarnation of God. Due to the fact that the readers for which it was written differ, due

to the fact that the cultural context differs, the Jesus they understand and witness to also differs. But every understanding and witness is correct, while at the same time each is incomplete.

From another aspect, in the relationship between Christ and culture, Christ is not simply a text to be read. In relation to Christ, culture also becomes a text. Through the believing community, culture must also be subjected to a reading, and thus the relationship between Christ and culture becomes an interactive one, one in which a mutual reading takes place. And it is through this mutual reading that different faith communities are able to construct their own local theologies. These local theologies bear the marks of both Christianity and the local culture. For Chinese Christians, a genuine Chinese theology must be a reading of Christ's gospel in Chinese culture. Just as Bishop Ting put it, it can only concern itself with two C's: Christ and China.

Theology is "faith seeking understanding"; it is the church reflecting. Theology must not only answer the questions believers meet in their lives of faith, providing them with help in their lives of faith, but must accept the challenges raised by the society and culture in which the believing community lives, and respond to their questions and challenges out of a particular Christian understanding. Thus, theology must in fact produce a dual interpretation of Christianity and culture, and through such an interpretation, in its own cultural situation, reconstruct Christian faith. It is precisely in this sense that theology and culture are closely related. And it is in this sense that the main task of Christian theology is not to rationalize and defend "universal" doctrines, but to enable us Christians to move toward opening our hearts toward all the ways in which God works.<sup>11</sup> For people's culture is the raw material of Christian theology. The most important thing for building a Christian theology in Asia is theological insight into this culture. In the culture of



the people, we touch the soul of humankind, we are filled with the spirit of God and gain the ability to drive history and change its direction.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, theological reflection cannot be separate from culture. We might say that any theology is theology in culture. In this sense, “Chinese theology” must be both Christian and Chinese. It must be the reflection and response made to the issues they face in their own cultural and social context by the Chinese Church and genuine “Chinese Christians.”

#### **4 Christ and Culture in China**

One Asian theologian believes that what theology has essentially to deal with is not God, but human beings. This appears to be wrong, but is actually right. It must be “human talk” (about humans) more than “God talk” (about God). If we overlook the actuality of human beings, we will have no way to spot the reality of God. The actuality of human beings is the substance of theology.<sup>13</sup> What this theologian reveals here, which he calls the essence of theology, might better be called the essence of Chinese culture. This essential feature of Chinese culture, its humanism, is very different from the theism that marks western Christian culture. How to approach Chinese culture becomes in some sense an essential question for Chinese theology and for the Chinese Church in its explorations of Christ and culture.

*Christianity and Chinese culture.* Christianity is a belief, faith in God and in Jesus Christ. Christianity is also a culture, a culture that carries in it the sacred and the transcendent. It is impossible to cut Christianity and culture apart. If Christianity is to be spread in China, it must encounter Chinese culture and meld with it, enabling these two cultures, with their essential differences, to be mutually complementary.

In historical terms, the history of Christian evangelization in China, like the history of the eastward spread of Christian-

ity, is one of “clashes and misunderstandings.” Surveying the history of the church in China, Christian evangelization in China has a history of nearly 1400 years.<sup>14</sup> During this time, the path of evangelization has had its ups and downs. First, when Tang Emperor Wuzong banned Buddhism, Nestorianism suffered by association and vanished from the Middle Kingdom. Then, Yelikewen and Yuan dynasty Catholicism disappeared with the collapse of the Yuan dynasty. In the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, Matteo Ricci’s policy of preaching Christianity by assimilation caused Christian evangelization at that time to be fairly successful, but unfortunately, because of the Rites Controversy, the Qing government banned religion and Christianity was once again blocked in China. When Christianity was once more preached in China, it was closely tied to the Opium War, inseparable from imperialist political and military aggression in China and therefore bound to meet with rejection. There were repeated missionary cases and anti-religion movements.

But somehow Christianity did finally spread in China. Following the establishment of new China and the initiation of the Three-Self Movement especially, Christianity more and more gained the recognition of the Chinese people. And even though up to now we have not yet established a true “Chinese Christianity,” consciousness of its selfhood has awakened in the Chinese Church. It is no longer a dot on the western missionary map, but a self-governed, self-supported and self-propagating Chinese Church.

For Christianity to become a truly Chinese Christianity, it must take root deeply in the soil of Chinese culture, but as we strive to make Christianity fuse with Chinese culture, we should avoid several errors in our awareness of Chinese culture. There are at least three kinds of erroneous tendencies we should be aware of.

1) Nihilism—thinking that traditional Chinese culture is devoid of all merit and should be completely rejected and entirely replaced by Christianity.

2) Blind optimism—failure to see the inadequacies of Chinese culture, failure to distinguish the essence from the dross, the deadwood from what remains vital. This is a tendency to think that traditional Chinese culture is superior and does not need to interact with other cultures, to be complemented by and draw lessons from them, and even less that it is in need of the light of the truth and life of this religious culture, Christianity.

3) Cultural relativism—the idea cultures are self-sufficient, that any culture coming from the outside (especially in the spiritual realm) is alien, that cultural exchange and dissemination are of no benefit and are in fact harmful, and that therefore cultural propagation is unnecessary. Cultural revisionism sees the propagation of any form of Christianity to others as a kind of cultural aggression, trampling on and wreaking havoc on the cultures of other peoples. These three errors in thinking are all harmful to dealing with the relationship between Christianity and Chinese culture.<sup>15</sup>

Chinese culture has its fine points as well as its weaknesses; it is imperfect. But Chinese culture is of long standing and well established. It can be the soil for the growth of Christianity in China; it is beneficial to the propagation of Christianity in China. Just as Jesus Christ came not to destroy Jewish culture, but to fulfill it, he will certainly not destroy our ancient culture, but fulfill it. Christianity can supplement the inadequacies in Chinese culture and Chinese culture can become rich soil for the growth of Christianity. Though Christianity and China are different by nature, this does not mean they must clash. Most elements in Chinese culture are neutral. The truth, goodness and beauty that are part of Chinese culture are not in

conflict with the truth, goodness and beauty of Christianity. Their relationship is that of parts to a whole, of sharing to possessing, of a reflection to its object. As Paul said, "Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made" (Rom. 1: 20). Christianity includes God's special revelation, God's universal revelation to humankind. These elements of universal revelation are the essence of the thinking of the Chinese people, generative components of all human truth, goodness and beauty. They are the true points of convergence between Christianity and Chinese culture and the rich and fertile soil where Christianity can put down its roots in China.

The editor of *Chinese Humanism and Christian Spirituality*, Wu Jingxiong, stated that if the East does not find the West in Christ, it will never see and admire the West. If the West does not find the East in Christ, it will never see and admire the East. If the East is westernized, it will be worse than the West and if the West is easternized, it will be worse than the East. If the West and the East marry outside Christ, their marriage will not last, because it is simply the result of a moment of passion and can only give birth to a monster. Only when they are joined as one in the bosom of Christ can they love each other through the love of Christ and only then will their union produce a new humanity.<sup>16</sup>

In contrast to this comparison of the relationship between Christianity and Chinese culture as a marriage, in the reflections on indigenization during the 1920s, the Chinese church historian Wang Zhixin used John 12: 24 as a comparison for the relationship between Christianity and culture. He said that Christianity is like a grain of wheat, which may be scattered on any ground. But there are two things to which attention must be paid: first, it must fall into the ground and be fertilized by local

fertilizer, which is to say that it must enter into the local culture; and second, it must die and then it can grow and produce fruit.<sup>17</sup> In his opinion, if Christianity is to become “Chinese” Christianity it must put down roots in the soil of Chinese culture and fuse with it.

What, then, is Chinese culture? Chinese culture is a very vague concept, which is very difficult to define appropriately. Normally when we discuss Chinese culture, we discuss its main features. Here, according to my own limited understanding of what Chinese culture is, I will point out some of these.

1) It is humanist and not theist. Though Chinese culture speaks of the union of humankind and heaven, the human is taken as the foundation. In this sense, Chinese culture lacks a sense of awe.

2) It is inclusive and not exclusive. Among and between the three great religions of China—Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism—there has long been a trend toward intersection, overlapping and fusion. Buddhism is not a religion native to China, but by blending with Chinese culture, it has become part of it. Chinese have usually maintained a tolerant attitude toward matters of religion, tending to think that one is as good as another. Thus, though there have been conflicts between religions in Chinese history, there has never been a religious war.

3) It is ethical and not metaphysical. Chinese culture is more concerned with ethics than with abstruse reflection; more concerned with the present world than with the world to come; more concerned with life than with death. Chinese culture does have a concept of immortality, but always of this world: “one’s virtue, achievements and teachings” are termed the “three imperishables.”

4) Its pattern of thinking is holistic and seeks unity; it is not dualistic and oppositional. In Chinese culture, heaven and

earth, gods and humans, *yang* and *yin*, light and darkness, the mutual promotion and restraint among the five elements: all these are the unity of opposites and absolute opposites in a dualistic sense.

5) The special essence of the culture is collective and not individual. In Confucian culture, the person is ethical by nature and lives among the five relationships. These feudal human relationships based on position and seniority form a net and the individual is but a knot in the net. Apart from this net, the person cannot exist. That is to say, the “individual” does not exist.

6) It is a culture of the Golden Mean and not of radicalism. Chinese culture appreciates a Golden Mean that is neither excessive nor deficient and is opposed to going to extremes.

7) It is a culture of optimism and not of guilt. Human nature is originally good. Even Xunzi’s theory of evil nature was founded on the concept of that nature as originally good.

8) It is a culture of enlightenment through education; a culture in which people are educated rather than redeemed. Whether it is Mencius’ “seek for the lost mind” or Buddhist koans, all are a type of enlightenment through education, a kind of self-redemption through education, and not salvation that comes from outside. In these features, we see the differences between Christianity and Chinese culture.<sup>18</sup>

*Culture-related issues Chinese Christians face.* 1) Chinese Christians do not live in a vacuum but in the midst of a long and richly vital cultural tradition. We must ask ourselves how we speak of Christ in this cultural context. As Chinese Christians, how do we deal with the relationship between Christianity and Chinese culture? Should Christianity be Sinicized? Or should Chinese culture be Christianized? Or should Christianity and Chinese culture be brought into conformity with one another?

2) Like some other Asian countries, China is a multi-religious country, with a plurality of religious traditions. Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism and Islam have a huge effect on Chinese society. In this situation, how does a rather exclusivist Christianity co-exist with these other religions? How does it become a co-impetus with these other religions for the stability and development of society?

3) China today is a nation which has experienced liberation and is rapidly developing; it is a socialist nation under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party. How can Chinese Christianity fuse with this society? How can it adapt to a socialist society? How can it become an active force for social advance and development? Chinese Christians live in a social reality dominated by an atheist ideology. Though the Three-Self Patriotic Movement gave Chinese Christianity a new lease on life, enabling the church to develop by leaps and bounds, especially since the era of reform and openness when the number of believers increased rather quickly, yet Christianity remains, without a doubt, a secondary culture, a minority group. Christians account for only slightly more than one percent of the total population. How then shall Christians expand the space for their existence? How shall Christianity influence the society in which it exists? How shall it witness to Christ in such a society?

4) The policy of reform and openness has achieved a great deal. The economy developed rapidly and people's material lives have greatly improved. China is more democratic politically, the legal system is sounder and the level of social spiritual civilization is higher. But it cannot be denied that reform and openness have brought some negative elements with them. The gap between poverty and wealth has grown, the evils of corruption, drugs, etc., are rampant in society. How can Christianity help the government to raise ethical standards in soci-

ety? What contribution can it make to the construction of spiritual civilization? These issues are all, to a greater or lesser extent, related to the issue of the relationship between Christ and culture. They are questions every Christian concerned about the development of the church should reflect upon, questions which church leaders and theologians are even now pondering. As a secondary culture, if Chinese Christianity seeks greater space for itself in Chinese society, it cannot isolate itself, but must keep an open mind.

*Chinese Folk Christianity.* Though folk Christianity is a very vague concept, whose boundaries are difficult to discern, it does indeed exist and the number of believers is large and scattered over a wide area. Folk Christianity has at least the following traits:

1) spiritual path: one of seeking signs and visions, speaking in tongues, along with spiritual experiences like going into trances, etc.

2) Pragmatic traits: They are even more concerned about the life of this world. Many have come to the church because of illness and they pray for health, good jobs, marital blessings and even riches. We hear many such witnesses. Much of this is plainly the influence of Confucian pragmatism and Chinese folk religion.

3) They pay attention to moral teachings: many see becoming Christian as “learning goodness” with the goal of becoming a good person. To be a Christian is to be a good person and a good citizen, for goodness is repaid with good and evil is repaid with evil.

4) Superstitious elements: if we say organized Chinese Christianity is orthodox, then folk Christianity may be seen as unorthodox. The unorthodox is not heresy, but at times may include elements that are heretical or superstitious. Superstition in this case does not refer to spiritual beliefs, but to cer-



tain types of ignorance and blindness in the life of faith. The superstitious elements in folk Christianity have brought about certain serious problems in society and raised certain theological questions. These elements are expressed as non-Christian, anti-social, feudal, heretical and immoral, etc. Many heresies are related to folk Christianity.

5) Other elements: these include the low educational level of leadership, many of whom are lay believers; loose organization among the Christian community; individual worship, etc.

Folk Christianity is influenced by folk religion and culture. The understanding of Jesus Christ in folk Christianity is mainly ethical and pragmatic: as Healer—the belief that Jesus can heal the sick causes people to join the church to be healed from illness; as Protector—the belief that Jesus maintains peace and belief will bring peace, to individuals and to families; as Teacher—belief in Jesus means learning to be good and Christianity can help people learn to be good and improve their relationships with others; as the One who blesses—belief in Jesus brings blessing, not only in the next life, but in this one; as Provider—Jesus provides believers with all they need, ensuring sufficiency in their material lives; as Comforter—Jesus is the comfort and help of those in difficulty. And it is for these reasons that in some places, folk Christianity and folk religion are mixed together, so that some people think Jesus does all the folk gods do and thus Jesus replaces these folk gods; others see Jesus as being exactly like the folk gods, that he will help them when they need it. In the eyes of some believers there is no difference between God and Christ on the one hand and the folk gods on the other. There is much that is reasonable in the faith of folk Christianity, but there are also irrational elements. In order to run the Chinese Church well, correct guidance for folk Christianity is of extreme importance.

The issues raised for the relationship between Christ and

culture by folk Christianity are worth our further discussion. Here I have just set out some phenomena and have not touched on the issues that form the background of these phenomena as they relate to the issue of Christ and culture.

As a Chinese Christian, facing the issue of Christ and culture, it is essential to maintain one's unique identity. We are Christians; we have our own faith and commitment. We believe that Jesus Christ is our Lord and Savior, not merely for our own salvation and blessing, but that we might witness to this Christ and share Christ's grace with others. On the other hand, we are Chinese; we live in a particular cultural environment. We do not live in a culture-less vacuum. Then how can we be vehicles to witness to Christ in this culture? How do we witness to Christ in China? This is a question for every Chinese Christian to ponder, though there may be no easy answers to it.

It is to Christ that we must witness, Christ we must preach—not the doctrines of Christianity. Doctrines are a discussion about Christ, not Christ himself. Understanding of doctrine is a theological activity and is related to culture. Culture is developing, full of vitality. Though Christ is eternal, and the truth of the gospel is eternal, human knowledge of the gospel truth is always developing. The purpose of theological thinking of the Chinese Church, just in the process of opening up, is to make a better witness to Christ in the cultural situation of China and to better preach the gospel.

*Nanjing Theological Review* 3(2004): 41-58.

1 From H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (Hong Kong: Southeast Asian Theological Assoc. Publishers, 1992) 5th edition, 2.

2 These are: 1) Christ against culture; exclusivity. 2) Christ of culture; inclusivity. 3) Christ above culture; synthesis. 4) Christ and culture in paradox, dualism. This typology affirms that there is a kind of tension between the authority of Christ and the authority of culture. Christians are located in two types of ethical domination, between the two extremes of Christ and culture. 5) Christ transforming culture. Christ is the transformer of humankind living in culture and society, this transformation has yet to depart from culture and society.

3 See Charles H. Kraft, *Christianity in Culture*; Charles Scriven, *The Transformation of Culture: Christian Social Ethics after H. Richard Niebuhr*; Glen H. Stassen, D.M. Yeager and John H. Yoder, eds. *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture*; John F. Wilson, "The Last Type in Christ and Culture and the End for which it was Created," and George Marsden, "Christianity and Culture: Transforming Niebuhr's Typologies."

4 Chen Zemin, CTR 1992 (vol. 11).

5 Kraft, 114.

6 Ibid., 115.

7 George Marsden, "Christianity and Culture: Transforming Niebuhr's Typologies." *Insights* (Autumn, 1999): 13.

8 *Christ and Culture*, 29-34.

9 The Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder gives the most representative critique of Niebuhr's use of the word. Yoder feels Niebuhr uses the term indiscriminately to the extent that it is tinged with anti-traditionalism. See John H. Yoder, "How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned: A Critique of Christ and Culture."

10 See N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, chapter 4. (Fortress Press).

11 Kwok Pui-lan, *God Among the Peoples of Asia*, 26.

12 Ibid., 31.

13 Ibid., 26.

14 Scholarly opinion places the earliest historical appearance of Christianity in China in 635. Since this advent of Nestorianism during the Tang, nearly 1400 years have passed. Others place it even earlier, during the Eastern Han dynasty, when the apostle Thomas is thought to have entered China from India. See Wei Zhuxian, *Views of God in Ancient China* and A.C. Moule, *Christianity in China Before 1550*.

15 I raised this point in an essay I wrote ten years ago under the pen name of Shu Ning, "On Christianity and Chinese Culture from the Perspective of Cultural Dissemination," *Nanjing Theological Review* 9(1991).

16 From *On the Greatness and Smallness of Christ*, Chinese translation. (Beijing: Academica Sinica, 1998), 226.

17 See Wang Zhixin, "Discussion of Indigenization in the Chinese Church," in Dai Xiping and Zhuo Xinping, eds., *The Search for Indigenization: Cultural Theories of Chinese Christianity in the 20th Century* (Beijing: China Radio and TV Publishers, 1999), 236.

18 On the features of Chinese culture, see Chen Zemin above, 126-128.

## ***Koinonia* and Ethical Thought in Paul's Epistles**

WANG PENG

Interest in Paul's ethical thinking has grown recently among scholars and every periodical and book on the New Testament seems to include research on the topic. The subject has become important as a point of entry into the study of Paul's thought. One factor behind this interest is the belief that the multi-cultural background of the church in Paul's time is similar to the context of the church today. Thus study of the ethical thought in Paul's epistles can help us to see these epistles more clearly in their own context and to understand what internal principles regulated the lives of early Christians. Secondly, a focus on ethics allows us to reflect on some of Paul's more controversial theological views from another angle. Thirdly, it helps us see the early church and Paul's thought as parts of a whole. In the past, scholars tended to concentrate on Paul's controversial theological views. For example, the study of Romans would focus on understanding "God's righteousness" and overlook other passages (Rom. 1:19-32; Rom. 12ff). In Galatians being called righteous became the focus, while the call at the Jerusalem meeting to remember the poor found in Galatians 2: 10 would be overlooked.

In this essay I will begin with *koinonia*, an important term relevant to the life and ethics of the early church and investi-

gate its use in Paul's epistles and its role in Paul's ethics, taking as examples the "right hand of *koinonia* (fellowship)" a gesture marking a relationship between apostles and the command to remember the poor (Gal. 2: 10) to analyze the theology of ethical practice in the early church.

### **Trends in the study of Paul's ethics**

Just as Paul did not establish a complete system of theology in his epistles, neither did he develop a system of "Christian ethics." He did not provide us with a "Life in Fellowship Manual" of the sort discovered in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century as part of the Dead Sea Scrolls. Or at least we have not found one in his epistles. This is related to the reason for which Paul composed his epistles. They were for the most part pastoral letters written to the churches he had established, guides for resolving practical issues that arose in local churches after his departure. They were addressed to Christians of different cultures, religions and customs. Many of the problems were occurring for the first time and there were no precedents to follow. In solving these various problems, Paul could be uncompromising. He would not compromise on the issue of circumcision for Gentiles, for example, for this was a fundamental issue of "another gospel." Or he could be more cautious, as he was on questions about marriage or the single state and remarriage. "Now concerning virgins, I have no command of the Lord, but I give my opinion as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy" (1Cor. 7: 25). "But in my judgment she is more blessed if she remains as she is" (1Cor. 7: 40). This should alert readers that he is stating his personal opinion. It is clear that this Gentile disciple avoided no problem, but always sought to offer a solution.

Our question is whether there is a direct relationship between the moral exhortations and ethical characterizations in

his epistles and his preaching. Were his moral exhortations linked to the moral views of the Greco-Roman world? Did he “borrow” from traditional ethical resources without thinking? Is there an inner logic linking Paul’s ethics to the gospel he preached? Or is Paul’s theology separate from his ethics?

Many New Testament scholars have written on these points. Martin Dibelius, the creator of form criticism, compares Paul’s epistles to the style found in Greek letters of the time. His view is that the ethical discourse sections of Paul’s epistles fall into the category of *parenesis*, or “general rules.” These were not the main content but were simply mentioned in passing. For Dibelius, the moral teachings of chapters 5 and 6 of Galatians and chapters 12 to 15 of Romans are equivalent to the moral wisdom and teachings common in Greek culture at the time and had no direct link to the gospel preached by Paul.<sup>1</sup>

Hans Dieter Betz, a New Testament scholar known for his rhetorical reading of Galatians, believes that Paul did not offer the Galatians a particularly Christian ethics, rather Paul indicates the proper behavior for an educated Greek.<sup>2</sup> If there is no essential link between Paul’s ethics and his theology as a whole, then the ethical depictions in his epistles basically follow the traditions of Greek and Roman culture and have no Christian “particularity.” Especially in the last dozen or so years, a clear trend has been to stress that Paul’s ethics were colored by the general ethos of the times and to regard this as their essential element.

Some scholars stress the Jewish background, especially the understanding and practice of the Law by Jews living in Gentile communities.<sup>3</sup> Others scholars stress the value models of the Greek cultural background (influenced by the Stoics and Plato), especially examples of good and bad behavior, family relations, etc.<sup>4</sup>

Most scholars see Paul’s ethics as a unique part of his

theology. They may adopt a Christological perspective, making the *imitatio Christi* the central foundation of a Pauline ethics.<sup>5</sup> In Philippians, for example, Paul does not resolve the dispute threatening the church at Philippi through preaching or giving instructions to be followed. Rather he begins with the famous verses from chapter 2, verses 5-11, the “self-emptying” passage, exhorting the two sides in the dispute to “let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.” Knowledge and emulation of Christ should guide their actions.

Other scholars, influenced by New Testament scholars of the last century, stress the eschatological angle. They focus on Jesus’ death and resurrection as the end of the old age and the beginning of the new; Christians are God’s “new creation” in Christ, “new humans.” In setting out his moral landscape, they feel, Paul was always filled with the eschatological vision<sup>6</sup>: filled with the hope of the fulfillment of God’s promise, a realization in this time and this place of a life “worthy of the calling to which you have been called.” *Parousia* is the specialized term used in Paul’s letters for “the Lord will come again.” Paul was filled with urgent hope for this coming; unless we understand this, we cannot understand the teachings on marriage in First Corinthians 7. But it is just on this point, following changes over time, that Paul himself reflected theologically.<sup>7</sup> He realized that errors in the church’s understanding of *parousia* could easily arise. And so, in Thessalonians, he responds positively to church members on the question of Christ’s coming again, while on the other hand, reflecting on his own faith experience, he finally understands that Christ’s second coming would not, as he had imagined, take place during his own lifetime. He also noticed that some people abandoned their work with the excuse that “the Lord is coming again,” and a group of idlers emerged in the church. While correcting errors in the understanding of the message of



Christ's second coming, Paul expounded on the meaning and value of work.

This issue has also been studied from the ecclesiological perspective, among others. Whatever perspective is used, all give glimpses of understanding into Paul's theology and ethics and into how they are related. What then is the internal relationship between them? What is the motive force of Paul's ethics? What is it in Paul's theology and ethics, between ethical principle and practical application that constructs a dynamic, creative interplay? Perhaps we can seek the answer to this question in the rich connotations of the term *koinonia* as it is used in Paul's epistles.

### **Use of the term *koinonia* in Greek culture and in the New Testament**

*Koinonia* was in common use in the early Christian era and previously in the Greek world. It was used of war, the life of citizens, marriage relations (including sex), worship life, business partnerships, friendships, etc.<sup>8</sup> It occurs in many proverbs and sayings found in Greek literature and philosophy.

In traditional Greek thought, some Utopian philosophers, Pythagoras in particular, developed marvelous depictions of their ideal society. The *koinonia* life they looked to was a life of philosophy lived among philosophers.<sup>9</sup>

In the New Testament, occurrences of the word in a sense close to that of the Greek are few. Luke 5:10 records Jesus' calling of the first disciples. "His" (Peter's) partners (*koinonia*) James and John, the sons of Zebedee. "Partners" here means that Peter and James and John were often together beside the Lake of Gennesaret where they fished together. It was a working partnership in the usual sense of the word in Greek. The word occurs only once in Matthew 23:30 in the sense of "confederates or fellows," another common Greek

use at the time.

The sole use of the term in Acts is found in Acts 2: 42: “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship (*koinonia*), to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” This is a depiction of a small group of believers in Jerusalem who had a profound spirit of life in fellowship. We might call this a pre-Pauline church life. They worshipped in two places: the Temple (Acts 2: 46) and at gatherings in the homes of Christians (Acts 2: 26 and 5: 42). Superficially their worship and method of prayer was very Jewish, but the content of the preaching was completely Christian. They preached Jesus Christ’s actions, his death and resurrection, his ascension and the meaning of his being lifted up: those things that became the core of the New Testament. They worshipped together daily, received the Eucharist together, prayed together and shared their belongings. They ate together as well, joining in this act the Eucharist to their daily food and drink in an expression of fellowship and sharing at table. These activities facilitated communion among believers and deepened their knowledge of the doctrine that all are one in Christ. This life and worship in common coalesced into a new Christian understanding of *koinonia*: a deep brotherly fellowship.

But most scholars believe that chapter 2 of the Acts that came from Luke’s pen, which give a picture of a simple and beautiful life of the kind that people yearn for, is actually modeled on the Greek world, with the aim of praising a union of values and the preciousness of friendship,<sup>10</sup> achieving by another means Pythagoras’ utopian ideals. In this view the *koinonia* of Luke 2: 42 is a common Greek usage and Luke’s depiction of the early church is simply a reflection of traditional Greek thinking. This clearly does not accord with the background provided by the surrounding verses. Richard B. Hays adopts a kind of compromise view. He believes that this

is a realization of genuine friendship in the Greek Utopian way of thinking as well as a realization of the brotherly type of fellowship found in Deuteronomy<sup>11</sup>: “If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns within the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor. You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be” (Deut. 15: 7-8).

### **Theological connotations of *koinonia* in Paul’s epistles: fellowship, care, sharing**

As they explore the origins and features of the early church, scholars cannot adequately assess the importance of the special use of *koinonia* for they are unable to understand the term as Luke does in Acts chapter 2: 42.<sup>12</sup> But after all, Luke uses the word *koinonia* directly a very limited number of times. If we want to understand the special connotations of the word in the New Testament, we must peruse Paul’s epistles, for it is here that the word *koinonia* occurs most often and it is this Gentile apostle who bestows on the word its new Christian connotations.

Paul first expounds on this special meaning of the word, as it differs from the general Greek usage, in First Corinthians. In receiving the Eucharist, Christians are joined to Christ: “a *sharing* in the blood of Christ”; “a *sharing* in the body of Christ” (1Cor. 10: 16). The original *koinonia* is here rendered as “sharing.” Today’s Chinese Version (TCV) has the Chinese word for sharing, *fenxiang*. The Lü Zhenzhong version (LU: NT, 1952; complete Bible, 1970) translates this as “each one having a share”; the Catholic Studium Biblicum version says “joined in common.” Through the Eucharist, Christians’ mutual communion, fellowship and union in the Lord are expressed. What Paul calls the breaking of the bread

is our sharing in Christ's body, connecting the believers who receive it in the body of Christ, uniting them in Christ. What *koinonia* expresses here is not some mysterious organization, but that in receiving and sharing the sacrament of the Eucharist, Christians are joined vertically to Christ and horizontally to the other members of his body.

Being joined to Christ is Paul's richest understanding of *koinonia* for Christians.<sup>13</sup> In First Corinthians 1: 9, Paul invests the word with abundant and profound meaning; this is also the most difficult verse to translate: "God is faithful; by him you were called *into the fellowship (koinonia)* of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord." Here, the TCV says "have fellowship"; LU translates "taking part ...in fellowship"; the Catholic version says "joined as one." None of these are ideal. Sharing with Jesus Christ in the love of God is sharing in his sonship.

Being joined to Christ implies not only sharing in his glory, but being joined to his suffering. The *sharing (koinonia)* in the suffering of Christ that Paul mentions in Philippians 3: 10 is an indispensable part of the Christian understanding of *koinonia*. Philippians 2: 6-11 is crucial: Paul calls the believers in the church in Philippi to model themselves on that Christ who "emptied himself."

Being joined to the Lord is being joined to the God in Three Persons of the Trinity. Paul goes on in Second Corinthians 13: 13 to express the communion of Christian fellowship with the Triune God: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the *communion (koinonia)* of the Holy Spirit be with all of you." The late Prof. Luo Zhenfang has said that the Chinese term *gandong* (to touch, to move) in the Chinese Union Version is inaccurate and cannot convey the sense of the original.<sup>14</sup> The correct translation should be fellowship (*tuangqi*), which is used in the TCV and in LU, or *jiaotong* (link, connec-

tion) or *xiangtong* (communication, interlinked) as used in the Catholic translation. Here we approach the understanding of the Triune God in the sense of fellowship and herein lies also the mystery of Christians being joined to one another.

A fellowship joined to the Triune God is a fellowship of love. In First Corinthians 13 Paul says that “the fellowship of love” is the nature of the church. This is the inner mystery of the unity of the church. In the church at Corinth, there were people who sought solely after signs or knowledge or proficiency in preaching or speaking in tongues: all this led to a certain level of chaos and division in the church. Through his affirmation of a “fellowship of love.” Paul overcame the tendencies toward individualism and divisiveness in the church.

*Koinonia* essentially means “caring,” what Paul calls for in Romans 12:13 where he asks Christians to “contribute (*koinonia*) to the needs of the saints.” The object of the verb contribute is those who are materially needy, those who lived a state of poverty in the mother church at Jerusalem in those days, and widows.

This, with its connotations of sharing (*fenxiang*), meaning “to give and to receive,” is the primary use of *koinonia* in Paul’s epistles. “Sharing” has many meanings. There is sharing of material things, “pleased to share their resources” as in Romans 15: 26, and Second Corinthians 9: 13, “by the generosity of your sharing with them.” And there is spiritual sharing, as in Romans 15: 27, “to share in their spiritual blessings.” And even the sharing of all that is good, as in Galatians 6: 6, “Those who are taught the word, must share in all good things with their teacher. ” The TCV translates this as “those who have been taught the true words of Christ share all good things with the teacher who has taught them. ”

In other words, “fellowship” means not only mutual sharing in the spirit but sharing with the whole body, things both

material and spiritual.<sup>15</sup> The meaning of *koinonia* that is most important in Paul's epistles, then, is not simply mutual support and glad affection between partners found in secular literature of the time, but the mutual sharing of the life of the community in Christ.

### **How ethical practice in the early church relates to *koinonia***

Seven epistles in the New Testament have been called “the core epistles” of Paul or the “original Pauline epistles”: Romans, First and Second Corinthians, First Thessalonians, Galatians, Philippians and Philemon. These are the primary sources for the study of Paul's thought. In Galatians 2: 9-11 and Philemon v. 17 we find two uses of *koinonia* that are Paul's most concrete explanation of the spirit of fellowship. In what follows I will attempt to analyze the relationship between the idea of *koinonia* found in Galatians 2: 9-10—“the right hand of fellowship” (*koinonia*)—and ethical concepts in the early church.

Paul had a special understanding of *koinonia*: contributions to the church in Jerusalem. By this he meant especially material support of the saints in the mother church by Gentile churches. Why should Gentile churches like that in Corinth, whose members had never met the poor of Jerusalem, want to come to the material support of those strangers? This was a challenge to traditional views of the time, especially for Romans, because the possession and protection of personal wealth was encouraged among Roman citizens.

Second Corinthians chapters 7-8 are an important source for the study of Paul's economic ethics, for Paul's theological thinking on raising money can be found here. Though in their Eucharistic ritual (1Cor. 10: 16) Christians in the church at Corinth had moved beyond the Greek sense of “friendship” in their understanding of *koinonia*, it would have been far too

early to say that they thus had an ecumenical vision for the church in Jerusalem. How then could Paul excite their enthusiasm for giving?

We can find an answer in the famous recounting in the passage in Galatians 2: 9-10: "...and when James and Cephas and John, who were acknowledged pillars, recognized the grace that had been given to me, they gave to Barnabas and me the right hand of fellowship (*koinonia*) ... They asked only one thing, that we remember the poor, which was actually what I was eager to do." This tells us that for believers, the decision to "remember the poor" follows the ritual of the "right hand of fellowship." This is a very special use of *koinonia* as well as an important "handshake" in the history of the church. Paul deepens the meaning of this clasping of hands between the disciples of the church in Jerusalem and the disciple of the Gentile church, this sacred expression of communion in fellowship, by expressing it as the "hand of *koinonia*." The disciples' mutual recognition and fellowship is expressed in this handclasp; it is also made clear that they will preach in different areas, but they are, from then on, inseparable. And Paul's special mission to raise among the Gentile churches the money and goods needed by the poor of Jerusalem is conferred through this clasping of hands.

This historic Jerusalem meeting gave Paul a special mission: "to remember the poor." The hand of *koinonia* between the apostles joined the needs of the poor in Jerusalem to the generosity of the Gentile churches.

In Second Corinthians 8-9, Paul explains that the contributions from the church at Corinth came from the "call to raise money" and were not a heavy burden placed upon them. At the very beginning of chapter 8, Paul offers the generosity of the churches of Macedonia as a model and calls this a "grace" from God to the Macedonian churches (8: 1). He goes on to

describe the Macedonians as “begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints” (8: 4). LU has “allowing them to offer their grace and fellowship for the needs of the saints.” There are three important Greek words in this verse: grace (*charin*), sharing (*koinonia*) and service (*diakonia*). The relationship among these terms truly lies in the special meaning of *koinonia*. Sharing is a response in service to God’s grace, just as the Macedonians understood it. Here, taking part in the fellowship of sharing becomes a ministry of response to Christ’s gospel. Thus, in Romans 12: 13 “contribute to the needs of the saints,” the form of contribute is *koinonountes*, a usage arising from this understanding.

Paul wants “joyful giving” to be basic to the Christian understanding of donation. Paul “was actually eager” to follow the instruction to “remember the poor” that accompanies the “hand of *koinonia*.” (Gal. 2: 10). Service must come from within and not from external pressure: “Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver” (2Cor. 9: 7).

Justo Gonzalez, analyzing Paul’s theology of giving in his book *Faith and Wealth*, sums this up as a principle of willing giving and a fair balance of wealth.<sup>16</sup> This thinking runs through not only the New Testament, but the entire Bible. In chapters 1-6 of Acts, we can see that helping the material needs of the poor and widows was a primary goal of the selection of the seven men of good standing.

The hand of *koinonia* resulted in the assignment of separate areas of preaching for the apostles, which in this case meant the independence of the Gentile churches. It also brought the call “to remember the poor.” This was a bond joining the two sides, a concrete action embodying the unity, an affection as between hands and feet, that the Holy Spirit brought to the churches, Jewish and Gentile, on Pentecost. The new spirit of



fellowship was a huge challenge to Jewish Christians, as represented by Peter and James. On the one hand, they held out the hand of *koinonia* to Paul and Barnabas; on the other, they felt the fetters of old ideas holding them back. In Galatians 2: 11-14, Paul severely criticized Peter's methods in the church at Antioch, because this sort of behavior not only severed the just established fellowship; more importantly, it was inconsistent with the truth of the gospel.

### **The challenge of the *koinonia* tradition for the Church and the individual today**

We find from the above that Paul's theology and ethics are inseparable. As Karl Barth said in his *The Epistle to the Romans*, writing of the beginning of chapter 12, "I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God": "We are not now starting a new book or even a new chapter of the same book."<sup>17</sup> "The mercies of God" is another way of saying "God's love." This is the bridge Paul builds between the theological discourses that begin his epistles and the ethical exhortations that conclude them. Sometimes his theological discourses and his ethical exhortations are interlaced, as in Philippians, where the two enhance each other. Behind the generous actions of the Corinthian church is the Christology of "for your sakes he became poor," the call to remember the poor, the *koinonia* that is the spirit of the gospel.

Ethics has never existed in a vacuum. Chinese society today is in the midst of rapid development, from the coast to the interior, from east to west, causing a widening gap between poor and rich. How should the church respond to the call to remember the poor? Should it build up churches without regard for the conditions around them? Or should it take the needs of its brothers and sisters in poverty to its heart and act by participating in important social tasks to eliminate poverty?

More than simply a structure of *koinonia*, our church should have a *koinonia* heart.

As individuals in a modern society that encourages consumption, how can we avoid escapism or rejection of the material world while at the same time avoid the emptiness and anxiety that obsession with the material produces? From the perspective of the Bible and Christian tradition, a moderate view of consumption is the appropriate use of material wealth; enjoying what God has given. Appropriate implies modeling Christ's simplicity and humility, not pursuing luxury. At the same time, knowing how to use things implies stewardship of material things and not enslavement to them.

Among Paul's teachings in his New Testament epistles, duty to the church and duty to society go hand in hand. "So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith" (Gal. 6: 10). We should not limit our vision to our own small circle.

The final thing that needs to be said is that Calvin understood trade through the meaning of spiritual "connections" (*koinonia*). He believed that goal of trade was to guarantee the needs of every individual, making human life liveable. The function of commerce should be to reflect the unity of the collective interest according to the order of God. Thus, any commercial activity that was dishonest was not only an error in human moral terms, but more seriously, a distortion of God's created order.<sup>18</sup> Such a view offers us a much broader vision as we seek to understand and practice the ethical thinking of *koinonia* found in Paul's epistles.

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## **Grow in Stature and Wisdom: On Chinese Theological Education**

WU BING

For over two thousand years, theological education has been the most powerful method for training evangelists and building up the body of Christ. We can say without exaggeration that theological education has existed since the beginnings of Christianity and only through theological education, has Christianity been able to pass on its faith, foster talent, witness to the gospel and bear fruit in this world. The importance of theological education is such that it cannot be replaced by any other religious ritual.

Theological education began to develop in China with the entry of Christianity. From the church schools set up by missionaries in the early period to Chinese Christian theological education today, Christian education in China has experienced several periods of change and renewal. Along with the growth and development of new China, with the deepening of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement and theological reconstruction, theological education has become more prominent and important. The Church has been for decades seeking how to nurture in China evangelists who uphold the Three-Self standpoint, but also have a heart for ecumenism; who are both filled with the Spirit and of lofty virtue, but also seek knowledge and

the growth of wisdom. During that time there have been tests and struggles, ups and downs and smooth stretches.

Having weathered fifty years of storms, we are today facing the opportunities and challenges modern Chinese society offers Christianity. How do we adjust and adapt ourselves to a constantly changing and open world while maintaining our two thousand years of great tradition? How do we bring together indigenous Chinese culture and social reality in spreading the word of God, and how will we protect our basic faith, rooted on the stumbling block of the Bible, lofty and unmoving? Faced with these questions, we can say that Chinese theological education has also come to a crucial point. If we are to run the church well, we must first run theological education well. The body can only be strengthened if the foundation is solid.

### **Characteristics of theological education and the state of theological education in the Chinese Church**

What is the state of theological education today? Before we can gain the necessary understanding of this question, we must first clarify what theological education is. How does it differ from religious education in the general sense, such as Sunday School and church training classes? To put it another way, we must define the boundaries of theological education.

The first characteristic of theological education is that it is not spiritual nurturing in the simple sense but a type of education, scientific in nature. When we say “theology” we first imply that it is a field of study, a science. We need not go into whether it is legitimate to call it a science here. In his *Science of Theology*, Thomas Torrance has said that theology is an independent science focused on knowledge of God.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, activities for theological education must be quite scientific in nature. This is also where theology and most confessions differ. Training classes, large and small, that local churches run

for believers about to be baptized would not be included in this first category because they are in some sense purely spiritual training. Though they may include a great deal of discussion of doctrine and faith, they are not of a systematic, scientific nature.

The second characteristic of theological education is that it should be in line with general educational principles and methods and be organized in line with the organization for general education. In spite of the fact that no Chinese seminary can join the national education system, we can differentiate the standard organizational system of our seminaries and the non-standard system of theological training courses. According to our second characteristic, we must exclude all religious education bodies with non-standard organizational systems such as training courses and evangelistic meetings. We can see lay training courses as near-theological education or preparatory theological education, but it is very difficult to see them directly as theological education.

The third characteristic of theological education is education where the goal is for the believer to take what he or she has learned to participate in and reflect on a faith. According to John Macquarrie, theology can be defined as that field of study which through participation in and reflection on a religious faith strives to express in the most distinct and consistent language the content of this faith.<sup>2</sup> In other words, theology is not only the acceptance of a kind of objective knowledge and method, but requires more—the researcher's commitment, participation and reflection. This is decided by the characteristics of theological education itself. In this sense, then, we must also exclude the religious studies departments and religion specialties in universities.

Beginning with this understanding, it seems we may set some boundaries for religious education in China. It is inde-

pendent of the national education system, but near it in structure (a full day schedule; instructors who are specialists in their fields; recorded as an institution of higher education by the Religious Affairs Bureau; providing B.D., M.Div., and post-graduate studies; degree-granting). Those undertaking academic theological teaching and inquiry, and those receiving the education are Christians committed in their faith. Schools such as these we call Chinese seminaries and theological schools. At present it is difficult to get a grasp of how many Chinese seminaries satisfy or primarily satisfy these conditions, but according to CCC/TSPM statistics, such institutions number between 17 and 18,<sup>3</sup> with an enrolment of not more than 3000 students.<sup>4</sup> But in terms of meeting the needs of the 16 million Christians, a number that is constantly growing, there is certainly a huge shortfall.

Let us also look at Chinese theological education from another perspective. A reading of K.H. Ting's "Theological Education in China," published in *Nanjing Theological Review* in September 1984 and reprinted in 2002 shows that there has been a great change. The magazine *Jiaocai*, published by the Correspondence Course has become a great favorite of Chinese Christians, and evening theology courses and short courses in theology have been replaced by lay training courses. Courses leading to the B.D., M.Div. and post-graduate studies in theology in our seminaries are gradually getting on track. We could say that Bishop Ting's original six rankings in our theological education have been replaced by six new ones, as follows.

- 1) Correspondence courses (from Nanjing Seminary), completed by nearly a million students.

- 2) Local lay training courses and centers; examples are the Inner Mongolia Lay Training Center; Qinghai Province Lay Training Center, etc.



3) Bible Schools; among the better-equipped are the Jiangxi Bible School and the Jiangsu Bible School.

4) Regional seminaries offering the B.D., such as North-eastern Seminary, Sichuan Seminary and Guangdong Union Theological Seminary.

5) Regional seminaries and Nanjing Seminary offering M.Div. degrees: East China, Yanjing and Zhongnan.

6) The post-graduate program at Nanjing Union Theological Seminary.<sup>5</sup>

I believe that with continuing development in the church and with seminaries' own efforts to raise their standards, these six rankings will change in their turn, as in the recent news that Guangdong Union Theological Seminary will begin granting M.Div. degrees. Moreover, looking at the present situation, nos. 1 and 2 cannot really be included in formal theological education, nor do some Bible Schools meet the standards spelled out above for formal theological education. But a movement upwards in rankings can be seen and there is a clarification of the levels of a system of theological education.

### **Opportunities facing Chinese theological education**

As Chinese Christian theological education enters the 21<sup>st</sup> century, along with the further implementation of religious policy and the increased opening in the nation as a whole, seminaries are beginning to welcome a springtime of development. This is an unprecedented opportunity for development: a time for review and analysis.

Along with the further implementation of religious policy carried out under the guidance of the Party's policy of the "three represents," the treatment of religion has already been liberated from the approach that stipulates "abolishment" and from the opium theory. In a recent essay by a researcher in the central United Front Department published in the journal *Con-*

*temporary Religious Studies*, it was stated that “the reality of development of Protestant Christianity in China in recent years has challenged our preconceptions.”<sup>6</sup> In the same issue of the journal, Wu Weifeng and others co-authored an essay titled “On the historical position of Jiang Zemin’s Views on Religion,” which states: “... Jiang Zemin’s views on religion, in essence show a new understanding for religions as they in fact exist in socialist society ... and this understanding supercedes the past understanding which was entirely negative; i.e., the simple understanding of religion as the “opiate of the people.”<sup>7</sup> Under a guiding thought which actively promotes the adaptation of religion to socialist society, strengthening the nurturing and education of patriotic clergy becomes an important point for promoting the self-construction of religious groups. The Vice-Director of the national Religious Affairs Bureau, Wang Zuo’an, in his latest work, *Religious Issues in China and Religious Policy*, states “whether considered from the perspective of the needs for self-development of religions or considering strategies for ensuring that China’s religions develop in the direction of adaptation to socialist society, to support and assist religious groups in a planned methodical way to foster patriotic and law-biding young and middle-aged clergy of higher religious attainments who will form a ‘love country love religion’ mainstay in religions has become our urgent task.”<sup>8</sup>

With China’s entry into the WTO, the national environment has opened further and contacts inside and outside have grown. This has made it much more convenient for the religions to send students overseas, invite foreign faculty to teach and accelerate the return of those studying overseas for careers in religion in China. Nanjing Union Theological Seminary has been inviting foreign faculty to teach there for years. Foreign faculty have taught theology of Old and New Testa-

ments, history of thought, feminist theology, ethics, conversational English, etc., raising students' theological and language level, and the results have been excellent. In addition there are frequent overseas visits, bringing the cutting edge of international scholarly ideas in theology into the seminary, a powerful impetus to the theological reflection of our students and faculty.

### **The beginning and growth of theological reconstruction**

Since the Jinan Meeting in 1998, the deepening and development of the TSPM which is theological reconstruction, advocated by Bishop Ting, has struck root in people's hearts. The call to strengthen and advance theological reconstruction and to run the church well increases. This has also brought new vision and impetus to theological education. From the first day theological reconstruction was initiated, seminaries have been at the forefront and much theological reconstruction has found its way into the teaching at seminaries. As Bishop Ting himself remarked at the celebrations for the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Nanjing Union Theological Seminary, "The majority of staff at Nanjing Seminary are in favor of and have involved themselves in theological reconstruction."<sup>9</sup> Other seminaries have also actively joined in, for emphasis on theological reconstruction leads directly to emphasis on teaching, and thus toward a further emphasis on theological education.

### **Improvements at our seminaries**

The five main departments in our seminaries today—systematic theology, biblical theology, historical theology, practical theology and the study of religion—developed as departments of theological pedagogy in three aspects— theology, Bible and church history. The 2003-2004 course curriculum at Nanjing

Union Theological Seminary lists fifty courses, including political study. Candidates for the M.Div. must write an academic thesis to graduate and to receive their degrees; candidates who fulfill the requirements receive a degree in theology. Post-graduates who fulfill the requirements receive an M.A. in theology. There is a group of young and middle-aged faculty who fulfill their duties with enthusiasm, so it could be said that this has gone some way to alleviate the situation of inadequate faculty. Student admissions proceed smoothly and set patterns have emerged; equipment which can be described as “hardware” has been much improved, and some seminaries even have their own website and home page: Nanjing, Yanjing and Guangdong, for example. Many seminaries have their own theological journals or other publications, some appearing only occasionally. Nanjing, Guangdong and Yanjing have theological journals, while Yunnan Seminary has its magazine. Since the 1990s, many seminaries have begun to move premises, construct new dormitories, and expand admissions, for example, Guangdong, Yanjing and East China. Nanjing Union Theological Seminary will move to a brand new campus in Nanjing’s Jiangning university district.

### **The rise in the overall quality of Christians**

It should be recognized that although the Chinese Church has not yet cast off its characterization as “a majority of old people, illiterates and women,” the overall quality of the church is slowly rising. Many students, young people, professionals and white collar workers have begun to make their appearance in the churches. Some urban churches that have the resources have special fellowships and services aimed at these groups. Among those who pass the annual entrance exams for Nanjing and other seminaries each year, a good number have had some higher education. Among the twenty-seven incoming students

in the 2002 M.Div. program at Nanjing Seminary, twenty-two had attended senior middle school or above, four had received tertiary education, and one had an M.A. and went into the post-graduate program after the first year.

The general rise in the level of education in the church makes an excellent natural resource for seminaries to deepen theological research and develop theological education. Of course we also see that, due to all sorts of artificial factors and obstacles, there are many talented persons with academic and spiritual potential who are ultimately rejected for seminary education, so how to improve admissions work, and attract students with a background of higher education to enter the seminaries for theological education to better advance theological reconstruction, is, in my humble opinion, an issue that should be put on our agenda.

Of course, at the same time as we see these opportunities, we should see the challenges. People overseas with ulterior motives who wish to trample on and damage our three-self principles; seminary academic standards that fall behind those at universities—and the gap is getting worse; the system of theological education in general is far from being standardized; and so on. These are factors that intermittently impede the development and deepening of theological education.

### **Goals of theological education**

The goal of Chinese theological education should be focused on what sort of person we want to nurture. What is it that a seminary does? What sort of people does it produce? Unless these questions are answered we have no way to develop the sort of theological education we should. It might have the opposite effect.

Bishop Ting has a clear vision on this subject, one that transcends the usual understanding. In all his speeches, he again

and again distinguishes between a Seminary, a Spiritual Academy, and an institute of religious studies. In a recent talk to incoming students, he clearly stated that “the goal of a seminary is for our faculty and students to research theology as an important field of study.”<sup>10</sup> This illustrates that an important task of theological education is to train Christian intellectuals.

As to how Christian intellectuals should be defined, this is a very interesting question. Since the 1990s, the academic debate over “culture Christians” has remained fresh in memory. I will not get into the issue of definitions here, but the fact that our seminaries are nurturing Christian intellectuals should be common knowledge in our church.

What is a Christian intellectual? This is a two-fold identity; an intellectual on the one hand, and a Christian on the other. Intellectual means not only one who possesses knowledge; the term actually implies something about character. In some sense, the term intellectual not only means the person possesses a great deal of knowledge, but that, with this as foundation, she has constructed her own independent character. What should be noted is that the term intellectual, which came into use at the height of the Middle Ages, refers to someone who has ideas and whose profession is teaching ideas.<sup>11</sup> It is clear that an intellectual differs from one who is educated, though she is educated. It differs from being a scholar, though he is a scholar. He or she is one who desires ideas and spreads ideas. Theology is the church’s thinking. To nurture those who use their abundant knowledge to reflect and bring this reflection to bear on making the church well run means nurturing Chinese Christian intellectuals. In this sense, we may be able to distinguish them from “culture Christians.” The mission of Christian intellectuals, especially as this pertains to China, is what I want to discuss below.

Bishop Ting advises students “I think it is your responsi-

bility to hone your virtues, so that we may be able to follow the sort of thinking we need to establish at present and become the materials for building a good Chinese Church. Your time in seminary is a time of honing and perfecting, so that each one of you and each member of staff are citizens with excellent ideals and Christians of excellent ideals.”<sup>12</sup> In these remarks we can also see the mission of Chinese Christian intellectuals which is to build up the Chinese Church, becoming an active part of the constructive power of the nation. This is entirely in line with the traditional sense of the intellectual, the moral training of one who possesses learning that is sound in both theory and practice. It is also in line with the biblical exhortation to be light and salt to the world and return all glory to God. Wang Aiming has written that if we can define Chinese Christian theological education as the practice of being light and salt to the world, we can get a sense of the sacred task Christian citizens that transcends the secular understanding of political science and sociology.<sup>13</sup> We can say that 21<sup>st</sup> century China is a nation in which Christian intellectuals will be constantly and actively taking part in national construction. And in the church, this body of Christian intellectuals will be this new generation that has been produced in our seminaries.

We may be able to sum up what has been discussed above as a general goal and spirit: theological education should nurture Christian intellectuals committed to the church in the new era. I believe this general goal and spirit includes Nanjing Seminary’s pedagogical principles and its requirements for the holistic development of students: spiritual, physical, intellectual, ethical, collective.

Following our discussion of this goal and spirit, we will be able to further clarify the orientation and actions theological education should have.

First of all training Christian intellectuals demands that

we avoid past purely spiritual as well as superficial political positions. The political and social sense of love country love church are first expressed in nurturing persons of independent character who can identify with and contribute to the Chinese Church and Chinese society. Without excellent academic training and moral character, such people cannot be produced. Therefore, in theological education we must stress dissemination of knowledge and liveliness of ideas, but we cannot dispense with moral training. In 1947, K.H. Ting wrote: "Scientific and technical knowledge is important, but even more important is that appropriate people are available to use that knowledge. ... The highest mission of a university is to call upon students to link their life goals to the well-being of all humankind, and in this way pursue a more abundant life."<sup>14</sup> Clearly the nurturing of character is the heart of theological education.

Secondly, producing Christian intellectuals committed to the church gives us another necessary direction. We do not ask students to be abstract intellectuals locked in an ivory tower, nor, satisfied with their own prayer and Bible reading, to be on an other-worldly spiritual quest. What we ask of them is that start to finish, they be aware of their context and their mission. Any reflection and investigation purely to satisfy individual whims and interests apart from the reality of the church, apart from the social context, may be utterly without benefit. We are not utilitarian, but we can not distance ourselves from reality. At the same time that we construct independent character, we even more demand that students care about society and the church and involve themselves in the life of society and the church, entering into its renewal. A whole character is not one that "hears nothing beyond his own window. "

Finally, practical action toward this goal demands that we take a genuinely serious and self-critical look at theologi-



cal education today. How close have we come to the goal? Have we stressed the communication of knowledge and overlooked the building of character? Have we stressed spiritual or external virtues and overlooked the academic factors essential to intellectuals? Too often in running our seminaries we keep our eyes only on the immediate needs of the churches to the detriment of the vision needed for long term needs of the Chinese Church. How many of our graduates each year can be called true “intellectuals”? Or are they simply those who have fulfilled the requirements for graduation? How is the building up of our faculty? What is the academic climate? How much space is there for reflection? How far are our concerns from the realities of the church and Chinese society? How big is the gap between our general academic level and universities or seminaries of the same rank? These are the questions we must ponder and reflect upon.

## **Conclusion**

We have broadly discussed above the features, state, opportunities and needed goals for Chinese theological education, but if our discussion is not truly carried into reality, it is useless. In this final section, I would like to discuss what I think it is necessary to implement at present.

In view of the fact that at present the Chinese theological educational system is located in seminaries and that each seminary is its own master, a situation in which each is independent and there is no unified system or standards, improvements should be made in the work of the Theological Education Commission. Individual seminaries should be urged to strengthen cooperation, ultimately forming a unified theological education system which would regulate theological education standards.

Each seminary should compare itself to the requirements

of ordinary institutions of higher education to regulate the management and standards of pedagogy in seminaries and improve methods of education and teaching. To urge students to develop in a truly holistic way, especially in admissions and assessment work, the regularization, systematization and standardization of such work should be accelerated, to avoid interference from artificial factors in normal pedagogy and work.

Faculty is the main strength of seminaries; therefore we must specially stress the training of our seminary faculty. This training should not be exclusively in terms of theological knowledge, but more importantly in enabling them to grasp the principles and methods of education. I suggest that there be regular or occasional periods for faculties to receive instruction, training and practice in education. Moreover we should show care and concern for them in their daily lives, encourage them to produce academically and pedagogically, that they might better teach and educate.

We should strengthen communication and cooperation with academic circles. We should strive to have seminaries host, as well as hold, conferences. Outsiders should be given the chance to hear the voices of the seminaries which have been, for a variety of reasons, overlooked for a long time. This would be very good for raising our own level.

We must also strengthen seminary libraries, raise the quality of student work and improve grades. I truly hope, that in this new century, Chinese theological education can, in this beneficial environment in and outside the church, keep up with the times, and nurture, for the Chinese Church and for Chinese society, a new generation worthy of what God has entrusted to us!

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- 3 Statistics from the 2004 *Diary* published by the CCC/TSPM. The *Diary* provides addresses for seminaries and training centers. For 2004, 23 are listed: 12 seminaries; 6 Bible Schools; 1 Theology Class; 4 Training Centers. The theology class and training centers train evangelists and cannot be considered mainstream theological education as I have defined it here.
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# **Christianity in a Culture of Ethnic Pluralism: Report on Christianity among the Minorities of Yunnan**

YOU BIN, WANG AIGUO AND GONG YUKUAN

## **Abstract**

This essay is based on our study of the state of Christianity among minorities in Yunnan (including the Li Su, Wa, Hani, Jingpo, Lahu and Dai tribes); a discussion of Christianity's entry into the area, its development and institutionalization and its effect on the tribal way of life, indigenous culture, social organization and inter-tribal relations. It is aimed at certain issues which have appeared; combining these with common social-scientific theories such as multi-culturalism, subculture communities, secularization and culture clash, we will put forward some policy and theoretical suggestions to enable Christianity to adapt to socialist society and promote the harmonious economic, social and cultural development of the minority areas.

## **Foreword**

In March 2003, we initiated our research topic "Christianity and Minorities in Yunnan," beginning field investigations and theoretical research into Christianity and its relation

to the societies and cultures of minorities in Yunnan. Based on our plan, we carried out three field investigations in western and southern Yunnan among the Li Su, Wa, Hani, Jingpo, Lahu and Dai, doing an initial summing up of the situations and problems we identified, then carrying out a scientific analysis of the clashes and fusions between Christianity and the local minority society and culture and suggesting possible ways of dealing with these, which we hope will be useful to the religious work department in Yunnan and for the work of management of minority churches.

## **Background**

Christianity was spread in the minority areas of Yunnan quite early and its influence has been similarly profound and far-reaching; therefore, fairly penetrating research has been done, both by scholars and by government departments. These have included investigations of the state of Christianity in particular areas, the history of Christianity's entry into each minority area and analyses of the impact of Christianity on the culture of each minority. The stance of such research has been objective, the data used quite detailed and the analysis balanced, providing a good beginning for further research. Hence our report is based on the field work done throughout Yunnan from 2002 to 2003, with research into problems as framework for our discussions of the internal relations between Christianity and ethnic minorities in Yunnan. We have also made some proposals from a theoretical perspective for solving new problems as they appear.

## **Christianity and minority ways of life**

According to the *Cihai Dictionary*, "lifestyle" refers to "the sum total of activities and behavior in the areas of mate-

rial and cultural life by social groups and individuals within a specific social order. This includes patterns of work, consumption and social intercourse, moral values, etc. It begins with the basic necessities of food, clothing, shelter and transport, work and social interaction, involvement in social groups and culture, and is embodied through the concrete spiritual and material activities of the individual or the group.” It can be said that the impact of Christianity on the way of life in minority areas in Yunnan is expressed in two aspects: the first is in the reform of the existing lifestyle; the other is in the construction of a lifestyle profoundly influenced by Christian faith and ideas.

### *Salient points*

According to our survey, in general, the religious life of minority Christians in Yunnan is fairly intense. There is a big difference in lifestyle between the Christians and the non-Christian members of the same tribe. When the percentage of Christians within a tribe is 40 percent or higher, the Christian features of the social district where that group is located will be more obvious. For example, nearly 70 percent of the residents of Fugong county (Nujiang zhou) are Christians. The churches are all very striking and built in important positions. The Christians meet five times a week and on Sunday there are no empty seats. During services the mountains ring with their resonant singing.

The impact of Christianity on minority lifestyle can be roughly classified as follows:

*Economic Customs.* When the minorities converted to Christianity, live sacrifices to propitiate the gods were banned. Medicine and prayer took the place of divination and sacrifice. And though this began for religious purposes it in fact

preserved productive forces, maintained normality in people's lives and ultimately enabled people to protect the fruits of their labors, amass wealth and further protect the trade in household goods and livestock and the formation of markets for agricultural products.

Among some minorities, the number of silver ornaments a woman wears is a standard of beauty and wealth. This custom is probably a remnant of a long nomadic period. Because they regularly move from place to place, without building permanent houses or factories, their wealth takes the solid form of the silver ornaments they have always on their persons. When they have a little extra money, they add to their collection. No matter how badly off they are, they do not hesitate to purchase more. But this custom is of no benefit for production or life. After the coming of Christianity, those minorities who became Christians gradually abolished this custom of fancy dress and gave more attention to the neatness of their everyday attire. This strengthened the circulation and accumulation of wealth as well as aiding in the convenience and healthiness of people's lives.

When Christianity came to the minority areas, it was influenced by the fundamentalist theology of the times. Christians were scrupulous in their attendance at church on Sunday; they did not work in the fields on that day, even during the busiest times for farmers. To varying degrees, this did not accord with the needs of agricultural production. In today's market economy, the strict regulation against working on Sunday causes minority people to lose opportunities and is one of the reasons why many small business people and handicraft persons are unwilling to convert. In the church people all know each other and call each other brother and sister and this contributes to the building of trust. In Fugong, the Christians buy their daily necessities at shops owned by Christians. The Christian shops

in the towns have become the distribution centers for Christians in the villages.

Christianity generally thinks of itself as a modern religion and thus better at accepting new things and indirectly quite amenable to new economic concepts. For example, the Lahu were not accustomed to growing fresh vegetables, but those who have become Christians all do. In one county in Lancang, about ten kilometers from the county government, in a village with a concentration of Christians, the vegetables used in the county government are all provided by Christians and this also provides the Christians with some income. The Lahu in the villages around the county government are not Christians and do not grow vegetables. If they want vegetables they have to buy them from the Christian Lahu.

*Customs of food, drink and health.* Among many minorities, though their economies are backward, drinking, smoking and gambling are all common, making their already poor lives even worse. Christianity took aim at these problems among the minorities and made rules against smoking, drinking and gambling. In some areas, the missionaries made these into religious taboos so that many minority people changed their bad habits when they became Christians. On one hand their economic situation was alleviated, on the other they became healthier and their spirits improved.

Because the natural environment in minority areas is poor and the economy backward, sanitation is also very poor. People are used to going for a long time without washing their clothes, taking baths, or even washing their faces; utensils used for food may not be washed at all. Christianity asked that the people take care of health. Among the Lisu attention to health has been made one of the ten commandments of the church. Thus Christians have formed a habit of attention to health. For example, in the past, the Lahu had no toilets, but the Christians now all



have them. The non-believers among the Lahu and the Wa live together with their animals, generally people upstairs and animals downstairs. Christians live separately from their animals, a healthier situation.

Such habits reduce illness and improve health and even have a good effect on people's spirits. At the same time, attention to health can improve not only minorities' lives and lifestyle, it can also improve their view of life and approach to life.

*Marriage and family relations.* Before Christianity, many minority tribes observed many vestiges of backward marriage customs, and in some areas still practiced polygamy. Such customs do a certain level of damage to the quality of the population and frequently clash with a modern society ruled by law. With the coming of Christianity, a strict system of monogamy was put in place, old customs were abolished and intermarriage within three generations of relationship (in some places within five) was forbidden. At the same time Christianity upheld freedom of marriage and non-acceptance of betrothal gifts.

In the family, Christianity advocates love and respect between spouses and such admonishments are preached in the church on Sunday, while in non-believers' homes, due to long-held views favoring males over females, women are treated as inferior. In Christian homes there is less arguing and wife beating.

*Collective spirit of mutual assistance.* Christianity pays more attention to mutual help between believers and friendly relationships. In contrast to minorities' traditions of loose family ties, it is easier to form a collective-style spirit of mutual help among Christians. In Fugong County, for example, the church organizes dinners for believers twice a year. When Christians face difficulties, the church will organize assistance for them among other Christians. In cases of illness, they will or-

ganize visits. If there is a shortage of food, assistance will be given.

In some places in Lancang, some churches have their own stores of food. The church owns property and some land as a base of production and the harvest is given to those families in need. If that family has a good harvest the following year, they return their loan to the church so that other families in difficulty can be rescued. A section chief in the Religious Affairs Bureau in Simao district stated: "In 1990 I did a survey in Laba, an administrative village in Laba formed of three natural villages, in each of which was a church. Nearly all the Lahu there were Christians. The church has a base for production, it can grow grain or cash crops and their yearly income is not bad. This income becomes part of the church's property and when there are shortages, the church distributes some of its stores to those affected to help them get through the hard time. In these areas, where the government should act, the church performs well."

*Minority culture and education.* These minority areas are rather backward economically and socially and thus education has been very restricted. In overall terms, the educational level is rather low. But Christianity is a religion of the Book, with the Bible as its scripture, which it asks its believers to read for themselves. In the missionary past, missionaries created written languages for these peoples and Christians here formed a habit of reading. The way one evangelist in Lancang puts it: "In terms of education, Christians are a bit better, mainly because they read the Bible everyday, and even if they did not, they would have to study it in worship. Reading the Bible, hymn singing and hearing sermons are all helpful in raising the educational level. Non-believers do not have this and their educational level is respectively lower. "

In Christian homes, in comparison to the practice among

non-believers, education of the next generation has two special characteristics: more attention is paid to general knowledge and more attention is paid to Christian thinking, making them more attached to Christian ways of thought.

### *Analysis*

According to basic Marxism, Christianity as a religion is an ideology far removed from the conditions of material life. How then is it able to influence every aspect of the minority way of life? It is necessary for us to integrate the principles of religious studies and give a theoretical explanation for them which will aid us in our work of management of religion so that all of our arrows hit their targets.

1) Religion is a social ideology and occupies a central position in human civilization. Marx described religion as a general theory of this world, its all-encompassing net, its common logic and so on. Thus in these minority areas, once Christianity had replaced the local religions, it would necessarily bring about a whole range of changes in other areas of culture and with it, a new lifestyle.

2) Christianity is quite different from Chinese religions and this is expressed in the fact that it is very strongly theorized, systematized and organized. Christianity is often called “organized religion” as opposed to the “diffuse” nature of Chinese religion and folk religion. This is expressed in Christianity’s stricter organization, emphasizing the central position of the church in the Christian’s life of faith and in constructing a set of ordered, daily practices for organizing believers. And it theorizes its faith, emphasizing the guiding meaning of faith for life in the world, causing its adherents to respect and obey the church’s guidance and admonishments in their secular lives.

3) Christianity has been baptized into the modern secular

world and has been largely integrated into modern civilization. The Christianity that is preached in minority areas is mainly the Protestant Christianity of the Reformation, mostly from the developed western nations. Thus in the course of spreading Christianity, some more modern cultural concepts and advanced skills are also spread, such as habits of sanitation, marriage customs and modern education. Christianity has thus played a specific role in the modernization of minority culture.

For those minorities that have accepted Christianity, especially in those areas where Christianity has become the mainstream of the culture, Christianity is the general principle of their lives, the universal foundation of their conduct; it is also the most extensive net connecting them. In a common saying of the place, "Christianity can be said to be their spiritual atom bomb." To achieve economic, social and cultural integration in the minority areas, and coordinate development, the study and encouragement of the positive elements of Christianity and guiding Christianity to adapt to socialist society is of great significance.

### *Issues & counter-measures*

With the coming of Christianity to the minority areas, a way of life with very special characteristics took shape. In new historical conditions, this lifestyle brings with it new problems and gives rise to new situations.

In some districts, the piety of religious faith is still at odds with abundance in material life. In our investigation, in our discussions with evangelists and church leaders, they were all of the opinion that piety in faith was not in contradiction with material riches. It was their feeling that the material conditions of life should be improved. But in actual sermons, most expressed disdain for the secular life, emphasizing the blessings of the life to come, saying "it is easier for a camel to pass

through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter heaven.” Ordinary believers are even more likely to see a life of poverty as God’s way of testing, a way to can make people stronger in faith, so that they are at peace with poverty, or even happy about it.

In some areas where the economy has recently developed very quickly, the opposite phenomena can be seen. The tides of secularism have mounted a huge attack on modern society and Christianity has not functioned very well as a corrective against excessive secularization. This has been most noticeable in the Jinghong and Siyu areas.

Christianity is a monotheistic religion, with a rather strong element of exclusivity in its faith. In some minority areas where the faith is quite pious, there is a quite strong expression of religious cohesion in the lifestyle, in that Christians mix only with Christians. In choosing marriage partners, it is a case of “believers cannot be yoked together with unbelievers”: Christians must marry Christians; strict enough that it sometimes causes divorce if one partner becomes a Christian. One’s circle of friends and relatives is limited to inner Christian circles. In primary and middle schools in some districts, children from Christian families even refuse to have anything to do with children from non-Christian families.

### *Proposals*

Christianity is a religion with a strong theoretical element; thus, under the basic principles of religious faith, if we want to achieve adaptation of Christianity to socialist society, one effective path is to actively develop theological reconstruction and guidance.

As for the issues discussed above, guidance can be furthered in terms of theory in order that Christianity actively respond to the secularization of modern society. On the one hand,

this can be done through theology and interpretation of the Bible to clarify that Christianity also values the amassing of social wealth and gaining riches through hard work and that Christians should also actively join in the great project of constructing a well-off society. Examples from theology and the Bible include Jesus' parable of the clever steward; the record found in the Book of Acts of contributions to the church made by the wealthy among the first generation of Christians; stories of God's blessings on Abraham and Job in the Old Testament, etc. On the other hand, we should encourage the church to develop its basic principles of seeking spiritual blessings, moral perfection and loving others and to boldly resist the negative side of secularization which takes the form of money worship, hedonism, and selfishness.

As for those sectors of Christianity which, due to the influence of old theological thinking, overemphasize the gap between "belief and unbelief" which leads to rejection of those outside the church and to self-isolation, we should also begin with guidance from theology: for instance: that God is not only a God of salvation, but a Creator God and that everything in the world was created by God, and is therefore worthy of people's love. We should emphasize that one of the goals of Jesus' death on the cross was reconciliation among persons and that reconciliation should begin with the family and the village, move on to Christian with Christian, and to Christian with non-Christian.

### **Christianity and indigenous minority religious culture**

When Christianity came to the minority areas of Yunnan, the majority attitude toward the indigenous religion and culture was one of rejection. This was the case among the Lisu, Miao and Yi tribes in the last century, and among the Jingpo, Wa and Hani in the last decade or so. Not only were some

traditional religious rites opposed, but folk songs and festivals were thrown out with the bathwater as well. Major reasons for this are: 1) Most of the foreign missionaries who worked in the minority areas came from a fundamentalist background and were quite reactionary theologically, emphasizing “no salvation without Christ”; “believers must enter by the narrow gate”; and “the Bible is above culture and should take the place of culture.” Thus they believed that indigenous culture and religion were “of the devil” and wanted to wipe them from the face of the earth.

2) Only by adopting this exclusivist attitude toward indigenous culture and religion, could they shake the indigenous society’s organizing base of “sacrifices” and “shamans” and set missionary authority in opposition to it.

3) With western culture in a position of strength, and indigenous Chinese culture in a position of weakness, the influence of the theory of cultural evolution meant that the thinking was that Christianity was bringing advanced culture, and that indigenous religions represented backward culture and should therefore be completely supplanted.

At the same time, some elements of the indigenous religion began to surface in Christianity through hidden and tortuous ways. The Christianity of the minorities has been folk-religionized and indigenized. In the area of religious doctrine and ritual, Christianity has adopted a strongly judgmental and negative attitude toward the indigenous religion of the minority tribes and their customs which have been deeply influenced by it. But investigating more deeply, one discovers that many elements of folk religion actually lie concealed within minority Christianity today. At the same time that the indigenous religion was broken, these elements gained a new lease on life in minority Christianity. In general, they remain in three areas:

1) Personnel. Some who had been shamans or priests in

the indigenous religion have become evangelists or prophets in Christianity today. For example, in the Lisu area of Fugong, “Christ prophets” have a rather high position among Christians. They mainly prophesy and heal illness through prayer. Some famous ones were once shamans of the indigenous religion who changed to Christianity.

2) Function. Though Christianity has replaced the indigenous religion to become the most important, or even the main religion in places where minorities live, the conditions of life there, medical care, and people’s level of knowledge has not obviously changed, and so the sufferings and illnesses people suffered in the past still exist. People want to find in Christianity a spiritual comfort and a psychological “way out” and this results in Christian pastors and evangelists, in a certain sense, playing the role once played by shamans and priests of the indigenous religion, and the Bible and hymns having to function as talismans.

3) Ethics. Although Christianity cannot condone the religious ideas and operations of the indigenous folk religion, it has adopted an attitude of acceptance toward most indigenous ethical ideas and given them new interpretation based on biblical principles. In Lisu areas, for example, respect for elders and ancestors is an important principle and spirit of folk religion. Worship of the deity is first of all filial piety toward parents. Christianity has taken over this principle as an important part of the Ten Commandments.

### **The policy of religious freedom has been very well implemented**

Though theologically Christianity rejects the indigenous religion, the Chinese Constitution guarantees freedom of religious belief, and thus, in our investigations, we have found that people have a fair amount of freedom in changing religions.



There are those who switch from Christianity to the indigenous religion as well as those who convert to Christianity from the indigenous religion. Though Christian pastors and the indigenous shamans point fingers at each other, they are able to get along tolerably well.

### *Analysis*

Upholding cultural diversity is not the same as cultural conservatism or cultural protectionism. Though some minority indigenous religions and cultures are unsystematic, not profoundly theoretical, and without an institutional structure, still the local government has a duty to protect them. This is because: a) cultural diversity, like biological diversity, is a fundamental guarantee that humanity can maintain its illustrious history with the capacity to overcome any future cultural crisis; b) in these minority indigenous religions and cultures, there is always found the historical memory and tribal identity of a people; once it is lost, there is no getting it back and the group will ultimately lose its consciousness as a people; c) the primitive religion of some minorities contains some of the earliest patterns of ancient human civilization; they may be “living fossils” of the history of human civilization; d) the oral histories and poems of some minorities contain the history of the movement and merging of the different peoples of ancient China and these have definite value for the study of the history of ancient Chinese peoples.

Christianity occupies a position of strength relative to minority indigenous religion. In itself, in terms of thought, organization and structure, Christianity is well-organized and systematic; in spiritual terms it is strongly expansionist; externally, Christianity has undergone a baptism into modern culture and is fairly well integrated with modern communications. Indigenous religion has not been systematized (in thinking) and

it is diffuse in organizational terms. Faced with Christian proselytism, it can only find itself in a position of weakness. Therefore, to safeguard the diversity of Yunnan minority cultures, strengthening protection of traditional minority religion and culture is an urgent task.

### *Issues & counter-measures*

Christianity entered China as a foreign culture and this made relations between Christianity and minority indigenous religion very complex. Problems were caused on both sides, primarily as follows:

Indigenous religious culture was in danger of being obliterated. Christianity was superior in thinking and organization in comparison to the indigenous religion and it was both strongly expansionist and missionary. Thus in some minority areas where Christianity developed more rapidly, it is very difficult to find traces of indigenous religious or cultural activities. Christianity has become the main religion. Over the long term, the diversity and richness of Yunnan minority culture will be seriously damaged.

On the other hand, though superficially it would appear that Christianity has completely replaced the indigenous religion, because the standard of material life and social conditions remains at its original level, some elements of indigenous religion have slipped into Christianity unawares, and Christianity, too, is in danger of becoming folk-religionized, becoming akin to witchcraft and even superstition. In quite a number of minority areas in Yunnan, people have a very low level understanding of Christianity, bringing some abnormal variables to normal religious activities. This is an important reason why abnormal religious activities and nascent heresies are frequently found in these areas.

## *Proposals*

Christianity should correct its fundamentalist or extremist standpoints, thus enabling it to have a theologically open attitude to traditional minority cultures. For example, to stress that all patterns of human culture can be seen as God's creations, and thus, that each has value. The Bible itself is the product of the merger of many cultural traditions. If the Bible is to be widely spread, it must be integrated with modern culture and draw on the sources of indigenous culture in spreading the gospel.

In religious work, in addition to emphasis placed on the traditional five great religions, we also need to pay attention to the indigenous folk religions in their significance for maintaining local culture and ethnic identity, as well as the positive role these indigenous religions and folk cultures have played in preserving human culture and the way folk religion has functioned in fulfilling the local peoples' psychological and social needs. For all this, we need to provide them with definite support. For example, specific cultural diversity protection areas should be defined. In terms of personnel, some folk religious clergy who have special functions and identity should receive education and training to raise their cultural level, etc. Minority autonomous regions, can, though legislation, protect their ethnic group and local religion and culture.

We should be on guard against and protect Christianity from the further absorption of superstition and abnormal tendencies. For example, there are in Christianity some teachings concerning the end times. This was originally just an understanding within theology, but becoming mixed with some simple and rude thinking in indigenous religion, it might turn into abnormal social conduct in the real world, such as "waiting to go to heaven.". This is another case where we must ask Christianity, in its preaching, to give more prominence to its moral

teachings such as “love” and “justice,” preaching less on doctrines of the end times or judgment.

### **Christianity and minority social structure**

One of the most obvious ways in which Christianity differs from Chinese religion and minority indigenous religion is that it is highly organized. It is not only a religious organization, but a social organization embedded in the social fabric. It has its unique social function and an interactive and complex relation with other social organizations.

#### *Salient points*

Christianity has both a consolidating function in society and to a certain degree a divisive one. Social consolidation means that Christianity can take what were diffuse systems of blood relationship like the family and clan and join them in closer consolidation. Prior to Liberation, some minorities still lived in a clan society and the level of social consolidation was very low. When Christianity became prevalent throughout these areas, it leapt the bounds of the old branches and systems, enabling people to have a unified social consciousness, and through Christianity’s particular church structure, joined people more closely together. The appearance of daily church gatherings, regular church activities, annual church festivals and an ordained Christian clergy, all increased levels of social consolidation among these minorities on a much broader scope. At the same time, to a certain degree, Christianity caused new divisions within minority society, the most apparent of which is the division into Christian and non-Christian, so that social units such as family and clan are further divided.

Christianity and the original structure of minority society clash in certain ways. Christianity as a meaning system is quite different from minority indigenous religion, and so the social

system it constructs clashes to a certain degree with the social organization of the original indigenous society on some issues. For example in some Hani villages there is a tree which is thought to be the tree spirit protecting the village and every March there are sacrificial rites for the tree spirit, praying for blessings and peace. But Christians see these activities as devil worship and refuse to take part. This does not accord with the ethnic customs and the elders and non-Christians of the village will blame the Christians, which may cause head-on clashes.

In areas where Christianity has become the main religion, relations between Christianity and the government are rather marvelous and complex. These are what is often called relations between “spiritual power” and “state power”. This happens first because Christianity is rather systematically organized. In minority areas, for example, the management positions in the churches consist of pastor, evangelist, teacher and elder, which means that the Christian personnel framework is quite complete. Where Christianity occupies the main spot, its organizational structure becomes even more numerous and complicated. This has meant that a number of well-known church leaders in the locale possess a strong attraction for people and an inhibiting function in the carrying out of government activities. Secondly relations among these leaders are very interactive. For example in Fugang county, some churches have unique management styles, particularly the democratic management system of the church. Christians have already formed the habit of democratic voting and this impacts the way grass roots government authority is produced. It has function rather well in promoting political democracy.

### *Analysis*

Christianity is a religion “in the world”; it is also a “universal” religion that advocates no divisions on the basis

of race, position or gender. Thus it has a very strong “social cohesiveness.” Christians take the church as their unit, hold daily services and annual festivals, gathering together to collectively embody religious “mass nature.”

Christianity and traditional Chinese religion have widely different worldviews and social views and matured in different historical and cultural milieu. In terms of relations to state power and, different from the widely existing tradition in Chinese religion that says “without reliance on the state, it is difficult to establish Buddhist rites.” In its western cultural milieu, Christianity has often been a force to restrict state power. In western society today, Christianity is still a very lively political force.

#### *Issues & counter-measures*

As stated above, between Christianity and the original minority social structure and grass roots political power, there exist marvelous and complex relations. In areas where Christian influence is greater, the complexity of the relationship is greater as well.

We would like to put forth some counter-measure proposals.

When clashes between Christianity and the original minority social structure are involved, Christian clergy and believers can be guided to make a distinction between religious events and ethnic customs. Emphasis should be on distinguishing some ethnic customs and activities which have lost their religious meaning, stressing that at the same time that they are Christians, Christians are also part of the ethnic group. Taking part in these ethnic customs and activities that no longer have religious meaning is theologically tenable. Ethnic harmony and concord among tribe members and their fellow citizens is not in contradiction to maintaining Christian faith. For example

we find such a teaching in Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, chapter eight, verse ten.

The significance of Christianity's strong organization is two-fold: on the one hand, it gives Christianity higher prestige among believers, which may work to restrict the authority of the government. On the other hand, the government can draw support from the church to mobilize and organize the masses to undertake economic construction and social governance. Looking at the significance of this latter, the government can guide theological reconstruction on the one hand, while on the other hand, by means of organizing all sorts of training classes, it can foster dependable church leaders.

### **Christianity, ethnic identity and inter-ethnic relations**

All the issues discussed above are closely related to one at a deeper level, that is, that as minorities accepted Christian faith, they gained a new religious identity outside their traditional ethnic identity, that of Christian. How this religious identity is related to their traditional ethnic identity lies at the core of all the issues discussed above.

#### *Salient points*

According to our observations, among the eight main minorities in Yunnan that are Christian, religious identity is more important on a daily basis than ethnic identity. Identity as Christians has widely become the most important indicator of identity. In the course of our interviews with Christian members of the Lisu, Wa, Jingpo, and Hani tribes, nearly all of them felt that their Christian identity was more important than their ethnic identity. For example, as far as holidays are concerned, the universal opinion was that the most important holidays were Christmas and Easter and that tribal holidays or Spring Festival were secondary. In some places they went so far as to iden-

tify their own traditional religion and culture as the sources of their people's backwardness.

The traditional ethnic network is also an important channel for the spread of religion. In some areas which already have a translation of the Bible in the local language, some people actually believe that Christianity is their ethnic religion, because the Bible and hymnal they use are all written in their own language. When asked who they should care most about in religious terms, they respond by saying they should have greatest care for their own people and that first of all their own people should be the objects of their proselytism. In fact, in minority areas, the channel and network for evangelization draws support from and begins with the ethnic group, clan relatives and blood relations. In terms of leadership and management of the church it can be seen that traditional ethnic kin relationships play a role.

Christian identity is helpful to the affections that bind ethnic groups together. Among some minorities in Yunnan, old scores or struggles over land have caused deep estrangement between tribes and there is no contact between them. This is true of relations between the Yi and the Lisu, for example. But along with Christian evangelization among these groups, Christian feeling has transcended the old resentments. The majority of interviewees all felt that if a member of a hostile tribe was a Christian, they could not be estranged, and should even feel emotionally closer than to members of their own tribe. From this we see that Christianity has been a link among tribes and has been helpful in shaping an organic whole from pluralistic tribal peoples.

### *Analysis*

According to anthropological identity analysis, people are complex organisms constructed from multiple identities. Among



these identities, there sometimes exist relations of conflict, or synthesis, even consolidation. An example of the former would be Chinese Christians during the rites controversy; an example of the latter would be the Arab people and Islam. People's identity is always in a state of flux, with the possibility of accepting a new identity or of losing an old one.

When people accept a new identity, they are to a certain degree distinguishing themselves from the collective of their original identity, becoming a so-called "subculture community," as, for example, when minority Christians form a small-scale new group within the original ethnic group. The identity this subculture group has accepted is a Christian religious identity. Religion has taken the place of their original ethnic identity and become their most important sign of identity. And with this new identity as foundation, they judge their old cultural identity, a judgment expressed as a particular tension in the relationship between religion and ethnicity.

### *Issues & counter-measures*

As was stated above, the tense relationship between Christianity and the indigenous minority culture with its old social structure can be said to be due to the fact that once the new religious identity was established, it did not entirely fuse with the traditional minority identity. The changes this brought about in lifestyle were mainly beneficial to social development among the Yunnan minorities. However, the shock it gave to the social order and the fact that the attitude toward the indigenous culture was divisive if not exclusive and in some areas might still cause a definite degree of social instability: this should be avoided at all costs.

Here we would like to propose some counter-measures from the perspective of religious identity, ethnic identity and inter-ethnic group relations.

Efforts should be made to bring about equilibrium among believers and to balance their religious and ethnic identities. The religious identity and the ethnic identity are not identical but they are intimately related. Every Christian is a “citizen of heaven” and a “member of an ethnic group.” On many issues, these cannot be set in opposition to each other. A Christian taking part in traditional ethnic cultural activities will certainly do no harm to his religious faith. And a Christian should be a good compatriot, able to identify with his own traditional ethnic culture and to make a contribution to the development of the ethnic group.

Yunnan is a multi-ethnic area; it is crucially important to safeguard the unity in pluralism of the Chinese people. As an ecumenical religion, Christianity can be a component part of the pluralistic culture making up the Chinese people. And the role it plays in fostering ties between ethnic groups should at a definite level be strengthened and elevated.

## **Conclusion**

The coming of Christianity into the magnificent multi-ethnic culture of Yunnan added a new hue to the mix. Our discussion above covers only some topics of general significance. Concrete issues in Yunnan Christianity such as Christian training courses, Christian anti-drug clinics, etc., have their own particular significance and these will be discussed in a supplement.

To sum up, the spread and development of Christianity among the minorities of Yunnan has its good side, such as raising the level of consolidation and the capacity for organization in minority society, forming a systematic ethical view, bringing many advanced cultural elements and so on. It has also brought new problems and new situations for our ethnic and religious work, such as the relation between “spiritual power”

and “state power,” and clashes between Christian culture and indigenous religion and culture. As for our management work among minority Christians in Yunnan, we need to look dialectically at the contributions and the problems Christianity has brought to minority society and culture.

The crux for dealing with minority Christianity in Yunnan lies in management and guidance, and the crux of this guidance lies in strengthening theological reconstruction. Just as Jiang Zemin stressed in his three statements on religious work, the government’s religious work can be summed up as having its basic goal in guiding religion to adapt to socialist society. Christianity is a religious organization with a long history and a rather broad mass base in minority areas. In order to make a smooth and long term adjustment in relations between Christianity and the government, indigenous social structure and minority culture, and to take first steps in constructing a minority theology that at its core stresses harmony between God and humankind, human harmony, social harmony and ethnic harmony, we must enter by the door of theology.

Theological reconstruction in Yunnan minority Christianity must also take into account the particular cultural, social and historical background of Yunnan minority society in the construction of a theological tradition with minority characteristics. Yunnan minority society and culture is quite different from the Chinese language and culture of the central plains. It will not be very effective to simply transfer some Chinese-language theology to Yunnan. Only by integrating theological reconstruction and biblical interpretation with the life and traditions of Yunnan minorities can Christianity be enabled to truly benefit Yunnan minorities.

The broad impact of Christianity in Yunnan minority areas has brought out the potential of the positive sides of Christian doctrine, regulations and ethics, contributing to the con-

struction of minority spiritual civilization, public order and social construction. Just as we said before, the coming of Christianity contributed to minority lifestyle and culture and education, and in the future it should strive even harder to correct new problems appearing in minority society through use of Christianity's special identity and role. In recent years, minority churches in Yunnan have done a great deal in anti-drug and AIDS prevention work and have gained much experience in these areas. For example, in the Nujiang district, Christianity has played a positive role in anti-drug work and perhaps in future it can play a similar role in the rehabilitation of drug addicts.

As for some social issues which Christianity has given rise to among minorities in Yunnan, we should see the general nature of these issues, as well as their complex nature and mass nature. In governing, we can only apply general governance measures. Religious questions which have arisen in minority areas are, in most cases, just other social issues expressed in religious form. Governance of these issues cannot be limited to a discussion of the religious aspects. A comprehensive approach to governance should be undertaken, strengthening the entire level of economic development in society, strengthening ties and communication between minority areas and non-minority areas, etc. Some abnormal religious activities, such as incidents which have appeared mainly in minority areas in Yunnan, can only be resolved through comprehensive measures of governance.

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## **Greater Trust, Greater Tolerance: On the One Hundredth Anniversary of T.C. Chao's Birth**

K.H. TING

T.C. Chao was an outstanding idealist. Inevitably his idealism clashed with the realities of his day, but he did not turn his back on it. Because of this, my impression is that he must have been a lonely person, one misunderstood by others.

After Liberation a popular saying in Christian circles (attributed to the Chinese masses) was, "One more Christian; one less Chinese." It is understandable that a saying like this would be used to promote patriotism among Christians, but whether or not it really reflected the facts is questionable. A growing body of historical evidence is now available which shows that prior to Liberation many Christians, including church leaders, were indeed patriotic, sympathizing with and supporting the people's struggle for liberation in one way or another. T.C. Chao was one of these.

I first met T.C. Chao in war-time Kunming during the resistance against the Japan. If Mr. Chao's heart had not been that of a Chinese who loved his country, he would not have made the long journey from Beijing to work in that remote and desolate area.

Our second meeting took place in 1948 in Amsterdam dur-

ing the organizing meeting of the World Council of Churches. It was also the eve of Liberation in China. He was a bit apprehensive about the changes taking place in China, but his hope and anticipation outweighed his fears. In Amsterdam he did not mingle with American delegates such as John Foster Dulles, but spent most of his time with patriotic Czech and Hungarian theologians who were supporters of socialism. They had much to say to each other and both sides felt these exchanges had made the occasion all the more worthwhile.

After Liberation, Mr. Chao was quick to produce articles for American church periodicals expressing his enthusiasm in welcoming the liberation of China. These articles had a positive impact and were very influential internationally.

I mention all this to show that T.C. Chao was a patriot. He was a patriot before Liberation, and he continued to be a patriot after Liberation.

T.C. Chao never claimed to be a Marxist. He was a patriot in the commonly accepted sense of the word, but patriots of this sort may not always be appreciated. They may not even be trusted or tolerated. People who treat such patriots this way might say “Let a hundred schools of thought contend,” but the hundred schools are really only two schools, and only one of these is right. T.C. Chao meant to be patriotic, but patriotism such as his was naturally brushed aside.

Lu Xun once criticized those who wanted to “teach people a lesson about revolution” saying: “they . . . make revolution into something that frightens the wits out of most people, showing them the evil face of ultra-leftism, as if to say that when the revolution comes, the opposition will be annihilated. They instill in people a terror of revolution, when in fact revolution is meant to bring not death, but life.” These are the kind of people T.C. Chao ran up against.

It was ironic that one who so enthusiastically reported to

friends abroad the good the revolution wrought for the Chinese people should himself become an object of criticism at home. When the Korean War broke out, the World Council of Churches issued a resolution condemning China's support for North Korea. Seized with anger, Mr. Chao tendered his resignation as a Council president. But in China he was accused of acting out of ulterior motives. He sought sympathy within the church, hoping to find fellowship and support, but some people in the church wanted only to "draw a clear line" separating themselves from him.

Thus, for quite a long time, he longed in vain for friendship. People distanced themselves from him. Isolated and lonely, he was a tragic figure of an intellectual.

I want to close with a quotation, the words of a very famous person. "You praise the constant changes in nature, its inexhaustible pleasing diversity and rich resources. You do not ask the rose and the violet to emit the same fragrance. Then why demand that the most precious thing—the spirit—have only one form of existence?" It was not Jesus who said this. Nor was it some theologian or proponent of liberalism. It was Karl Marx.

As we commemorate the hundredth anniversary of T.C. Chao's birth, the most important message we might bring away with us is this: More trust, more toleration, a greater variety to fragrance, a greater acceptance of the many different forms in which the spirit expresses itself. Only thus can we hope to create a civilization of greater abundance and color for humankind.

Delivered April, 3, 1988 on the hundredth anniversary of T.C. Chao's birth. Also translated in *China Notes*, Spring 1988: 467.

## **Eucharistic Homily**

K.H. TING

As we begin our Eucharist, let me first offer my thanksgiving to God for bringing us together these days, and express my thanks to you for coming, and for all the careful decisions you have made and all the hard work you have put out in during these years in helping us in the building up of that part of the body of Christ that is in China.

We are expressing our thanksgiving by celebrating together the Lord's Supper. It occurred to me that this is something so personal and so national, and has become so universal.

I am inclined to think that there were certain connected things which Christ did often, and which his disciples became familiar with—taking over the bread, elevating it, thanking God for it, blessing it, breaking it, giving it to his friends and to the people around. The New Testament speaks of this process in several places. The disciples have got used to his particular way of doing it. Thus, after his resurrection, it was in the manner in which the bread was broken that the disciples recognized the stranger to be Christ himself. So this is something very personal and intimate. And that is an important ingredient in Christian spirituality.

On the second level, this was something particularly Jewish and national. It was an occasion of commemorating and reliving the all-important national experience of liberation from



the yoke of Egypt by the hand of God. It was something patriotic.

Then, on a third level, it has transcended races and nationalities. It is the universal language of those who accept in one way or another the fact that Christ is all-important for our own wholeness and salvation, as well as for the wholeness and salvation of the whole of humanity, and who see the appropriateness and goodness of rendering thanksgiving to God constantly for the gift of Christ as well as for all other gifts. I sometimes think of the Eucharist as the embodiment and the offering of all our imperfect particularities to God through Jesus Christ, to the enrichment of God and of the Church Universal.

Especially in these days of our anticipation For Easter, let us remember that, because of Christ, death is not the last word and ashes are not the ultimate state of human existence. God being Love, everyone and everything that is of some worth in his sight, no matter how imperfect and incomplete and tainted by sin, Christ will take over. He elevates it, adds to it, corrects, sublimates and completes it, blesses it and offers it to God.

As I grow older, and as more and more of my friends, relatives and loved ones have passed away, a prayer for the dead which is used each time we celebrate the Eucharist according to the liturgy in the 1928 American Book of Common Prayer has come to mean more and more to me. It says not only are we to learn from their good examples, but also “grant them continual growth in thy love and service.” I say this prayer when I think of my mother, for instance, who died at the age of one hundred and one and was the person in the world who prayed for me the hardest, and she is still growing in the light and presence of God, and still praying and serving. This is a greater idea than just “rest in peace.”

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