

Sino – Christian Theology: A Theological Qua Cultural Movement in Contemporary China

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Sino – Christian Theology: A Theological Qua Cultural Movement in Contemporary China, edited by Pan – chiu Lai and Jason Lam. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2010. Hard cover, ix + 237 pages, including an appendix.

This extremely valuable collection of essays by eleven distinguished Chinese scholars from Greater China and the United States most helpfully introduces the English reader to the past, present, and potential of Sino – Christian Theology. It builds on the foundation laid in *Sino – Christian Studies in China*, edited by Yang Huilin and Daniel Yeung in 2006.

An opening chapter by the editors, titled “Retrospect and Prospect of Sino – Christian Theology: An Introduction,” first surveys the contents of the volume and then offers an illuminating description of the rapidly – evolving state of this field, along with some suggestions and forecasts for the future.

Basic characteristics of Sino – Christian Theology

Especially in its early days, and even to a large degree even now, Sino – Christian Theology (SCT) has been distinguished by several characteristics; (1) “takes hanyu or the Chinese language as the medium of expression”; (2) “takes seriously the contemporary Chinese context” (as distinct from traditional Chinese culture); (3) takes the Chinese academy, especially universities, as its institutional base; (4) emphasizes the “intellectual, cultural and humanistic nature of theology rather than its ecclesiastical function”; (5) “employs the methods shared by some other discipline in | the | humanities without excluding the method(s)” particular to Christian theology.

Definition

From the beginning, scholars have struggled to find a precise definition of SCT. The editors clarify the situation by offering two: A “narrow” definition refers to “the theological thinking of some cultural Christians, i. e., a kind of philosophical expression of personal faith gaining a footing in the academic society of the humanities and social sciences.” It is different both from church – based dogmatics and the “indigenous theology” of the earlier 20th century.

More “broadly,” CST can be viewed as “any theology written in the Chinese language,”

especially that produced within the Chinese academy, and written “ from historical and sociological perspectives rather than from philosophical or theological perspectives,” and potentially including even modern indigenous theology.

Recent developments and future prospects

In recent years, though the core characteristics remain, new developments have significantly altered the original flavor of SCT. Briefly:

1. Though still in the minority, more and more younger SCT writers identify themselves as committed Christians, and are more open to “healthy interactions” with churches.

2. More scholars, especially younger ones, “identify themselves as ‘Christian Scholars’ (jidutu xueren) in order to distinguish themselves from ‘Cultural Christians’ who do not have [a] clear commitment to Christianity.” They also believe that one must employ distinctly theological methods in this task, rather than just the methods of the human sciences.

3. SCT is moving away from dependence upon translated western works to “the creative re-interpretation of western theologies and the articulation of innovative theological discourses with Chinese characteristics.”

4. More studies are employing more the methods of “the social sciences, including sociology, and anthropology,” to reflect the reality that Chinese Christianity is a social phenomenon.

5. The scope of SCT is continually becoming broader, especially since younger scholars are now trained in the biblical languages.

6. As a result, SCT hopes to make a contribution to the international scholarly community by offering a “brand new type of scriptural theologising” with Chinese distinctive.

7. SCT is “moving towards a full-fledged study (or studies) of Christianity,” including theological and non-theological studies, such as Christianity and culture. SCT is becoming “Sino-Christian studies” ranging over “all ... aspects of Christianity.”

Thus, though SCT is still in its infancy stage, there is great hope for the future.

Overview of the book

With that introduction, let us very briefly glance at the contents of each chapter. The following is only a slight sampling; each chapter should be read in its entirety to mine the riches of this volume.

Part I: Historical Review

“The emergence of Scholars Studying Christianity,” by Jason T. S. Lam, first offers a “description” of the phenomenon of the recent “production of theology” in the universities of China, including the research interests of various scholars and their degree of commitment to Christianity. “A historical and sociological analysis” provides a brilliant and penetrating explanation for the rise of SCT in a communist nation. The “analysis of the nature of theology” coming from this environment concludes that SCT retains the flavor and speaks the language of the social and human sciences. Lam’s “theological reflection on the typology of theology” ends with a powerful challenge for theologians in Asia to produce works that can gain the respect of scholars throughout the secular academy.

Li Qiuling offers “Historical Reflections on Sino-Christian Theology” which trace the rise of

SCT from the original thought of Liu Xiaofeng, in cooperation with Daniel Yeung (Yang Xinan), who became Executive Director of the Institute of Sino-Christian Studies in Hong Kong, and who offered Liu the necessary institutional base and resources to pursue the development of SCT. He notes also the early and formative influence of He Guanghu. Their goals were to (1) "develop Christian theology and its culture by means of the historical philosophical resources and social experiences of Chinese-language culture, in order to form a Christian theological culture imbued with Chinese-language thought and culture"; (2) "develop the subject of theology within the academic field of Chinese language thought," and to establish dialogue with other Chinese religions; (3) to make it "the shared enterprise of Chinese-language religious studies scholars from all social areas within the Chinese-speaking world."

They hoped to see the "entry of Christian theology into mainstream Chinese culture" to enrich the resources of Chinese-language thought, and to incorporate Christian theology into "Chinese humanistic scholarship." This ambitious program raised fundamental questions, of course, which Li skillfully probes. The growth of the movement has come with translation of western Christian classics; publication of journals by the Centre in Hong Kong; sponsorship of scholars; and convening of conferences.

Li also explains how SCT grew out of particular social and political circumstances, meeting the need for Chinese scholars to understand Christianity and explore its potential role in Chinese culture and society, at a time of "ideological adjustment" in China. Finally, he briefly explores certain problems for SCT, namely, its relationships to the "tradition" of Christian theology; to traditional Chinese culture; to "the universality of Christianity"; and to the organized church. In each case, he advocates greater mutuality, so that SCT may draw upon the riches of both the Christian tradition and Chinese linguistic and cultural resources, and may make its unique contributions to worldwide Christianity theology.

Continuing the historical survey, Peter K. H. LEE narrates the early discussion in Hong Kong of "the 'Cultural Christians' Phenomenon in China." Of interest mostly to scholars from Hong Kong, the record of the debate that took place in 1995 and 1996 still sheds light on the origins of the movement as well as the important role that Hong Kong has played, and continues to play, in the maturation of SCT.

Shun-hing CHAN offers reflections on that debate in "Conceptual Differences between Hong Kong and Chinese Theologians: A Study of 'the Culture Christians.'" He finds that there are differences among theologians in Hong Kong, as well as between them and practitioners of SCT on the Mainland; in addition, there are similarities between Hong Kong theologians and some of those in China. He applauds the debate for its "genuine, conceptual interaction" between these various groups.

Issues involved included: the relationship between church tradition and creative thinking; the relationship between confessional orthodoxy and academic research; the potential relationships between Hong Kong and Mainland Chinese writers of theology. He hopes that in the future all these scholars will engage in mutually-beneficial interaction.

Part II: Theoretical Reflection

The crucial question of the relationship between Chinese and western theology is concisely examined by LAI Pan-chiu in "Theological Translation and Transmission between China and the West."

He first reviews the two most prolific periods of Chinese theological production: The 1920s/

1930s and 1990s/1990s. In the first period, Chinese Christians began to wrestle with the possible relationships between Christianity and traditional Chinese culture, producing works of "indigenous theology," and then turned to the urgent question of the relevance of Christianity to China's social and political crisis in the "contextual theology" movement. They not only translated (mostly liberal theological) books from the west, but wrote creative new theological works. Even their "translations," however, became works of interpretation and adaptation to the Chinese context. In all this, they reflected the larger situation, in which "modern China has been subject to the influence of more than a few Chinese translations of foreign writings" and ideas, including democracy, Marxism, socialism, scientism, evolutionism and materialism.

In the second period, there arose another "revival" of Chinese theology in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Mainland China, again in response to local conditions. In Hong Kong and Taiwan, indigenous theology gave way to contextual theology (especially in Taiwan), as political conditions seemed to call for Christian response. Starting with the translation projects of Liu Xiaofeng, western theological thought – mostly neo-orthodox and liberal – was re-introduced to China, while in the institutional church Ding Guangxun drew upon western philosophy to propound his theology of the Cosmic Christ.

He concludes his chapter with a call for "bilateral translation and transmission," urging both Chinese and western theologians to learn from each other and to contribute to each other.

In "The Value of Theology in Humanities; Possible Approaches to Sino-Christian Theology," YANG Huilin surveys 19th and 20th-century German and French hermeneutics to show how liberal theologians and linguistic philosophers have tried to elucidate a legitimate theory of interpretation. His sophisticated analysis leads to the conclusion that while we cannot fully understand truth and reality, nor can we allow the destruction of all meaning. He believes we can learn from the ways in which German thinkers have tried to balance both the subjective nature of faith commitment and the objective nature of authoritative texts and indeed of all reality.

This is because "theological hermeneutics is the source of activities in textual interpretation" and "the absence of theological hermeneutics leaves the questions of 'power discourse', 'openness of text', and other basic hermeneutical problems unsettled." In other words, all the humanities need theology as a fundamental discipline if any meaning is to survive.

"Sino-Christian Theology: The Unfolding of the 'Duo' in the Chinese Language Context," by ZHANG Qingxiong, emphasizes the fundamental role which language plays in human life. Language not only describes our world and experiences, but "is also the frame for our understanding of the world and for organizing our thoughts."

Analyzing the development of Buddhism in China into three stages: "(1) mission; (2) determination of teachings . . . ; and (3) establishment," he opines that Christianity in China is still in the mission and determination of teachings stages. Only when Chinese thinkers fully absorb Christianity in the light of their culture and experience will they be able to "establish" it as a truly Chinese faith, not only answering questions common to all people, but especially answering those posed by Chinese. A complex discussion of human and divine Word and the relationship between natural law and experience is followed by the statement that "the attitude toward miracles is a watershed between Church Christians and scholars of Christianity" in China, especially since miracles are central to the biblical narrative.

He concludes his essay with his confidence that Sino-Christianity will someday make a major contribution to world Christianity, expressed in two sentences: "We live in the body of Jesus, and Jesus lives in our hearts. In philosophical language: We live in duo, and dao unfolds in the world and in our hearts."

In a bold, even stunning chapter, CHIN Ken – Pa presents the program of Liu Xiaofeng as a “Paradigm Shift: From Chinese Theology to Sino – Christian Theology.” He begins and ends with Paul’s characterization of the gospel of the Cross of Christ as “foolishness to the Greeks and a stumbling block to the Jews,” adding, and “savagery to the Chinese” because of their commitment to humanistic moralism. Previous attempts to “domesticate” Christianity, such as indigenous theology and contextual theology, bring it under submission to both traditional Chinese moralism and the pervasive modern drive for national salvation.

Liu believes that all efforts to “sinicize” Christianity in order to make it acceptable to Chinese intellectuals have failed to retain the core of this necessarily “foreign” faith: the doctrine of the Cross, implying as it does the transcendence of God and the need of all mankind for salvation. “Sino – Christian theology” identifies with the “foreigner” and starts from “the truth of the Cross.” Rejecting the inherent assumption of the superiority of Chinese culture, SCT presents a message that challenges all culture. Actually, Christianity seeks to save not cultures, but individuals who are suffering from the existential aporia of modernity. SCT rejects both cultural nationalism and state nationalism, and renounces all aspirations of becoming “acceptable” to Chinese intellectuals as one aspect of Chinese culture or a servant to the state.

Nor does he accept the idea that Christianity is a Western religion; rather, it is a universal faith revealed by God to bring people of all cultures to a knowledge of himself. “Christian theology is the result of the encounter of the divine Word with the individual existential experience, rather than the encounter of the divine Word with national ideology.” The “basic proposition” of SCT is “the forming of the divine Word in Chinese,” that is “the formation of a kind of existentialism – oriented grammar of individual faith.” It thus seeks to break free from “‘the grand national narrative’ as the tool of indigenization.” It “cannot arise out of Chinese context,” but will “impact Chinese culture” by offering the only way to heal the “split” that modernity has caused in the human spirit.

Part III: Rereading Tradition

LAI Pan – chiu addresses the important question of relationships among “Sino – Christian Theology, Bible, and Christian Tradition” in recognition of the challenge from church Christians who cast doubt upon the legitimacy of SCT’s being called “Christian” if it does not take the Bible seriously. Lai agrees that SCT has been weak in biblical studies heretofore and suggests several “legitimate” reasons for this situation. He notes the growing strength of biblical studies as an academic discipline in China and recommends that Chinese academics become aware of the “intellectual” and “academic” nature of solid biblical studies. He also suggests that SCT might make a contribution to biblical studies by bringing Chinese cultural resources, such as Buddhist method of doctrinal criticism, to bear upon their interpretation.

In “Messianic Predestination in Romans 8 and Classical Confucianism,” Yeo Khiok – khng offers a provocative example of drawing up the resources of Chinese culture to enrich our understanding of Christianity with an intertextual reading of Confucius and Paul focusing on the concept of the “messianic” figure who will “save” mankind from violence and injustice. His method, which seems to assume the equal value of both Paul and Confucius, will be considered sub – Christian by some, and quite appropriate by others.

Finally, in “Reflection on Enlightenment: A Proposal of the Focus of Sino – Christian Theology,” LIN Hong – hsin shows that the 18th – century Enlightenment, while claiming to enthroned reason, really produced superstition and tyranny. Blind faith in “reason” inevitably fails to understand

that it is a form of religion. Thus, unless we have a Word from the Creator, we shall not be able to enlighten others. "This should be an important starting point of Sino - Christian theology," he concludes.

An Appendix presents the results of a "Preliminary Survey on the New Generation of Scholars of Christian Studies in Mainland China." Many of them are calling for Christian studies in China to broaden its scope to include other points of view.

Conclusion

In the light of that call for a wider range of sources, may I make a few suggestions?

First, the theological and apologetic works of Zhang Lisheng (章力生, Lit - sen Chang) are worth careful study, for he was a distinguished Chinese academic who was able to communicate Christian thought in language imbued with Chinese language and culture. Furthermore, his English works are being reprinted and two of his shorter books are being translated into English.

Second, there is a growing wealth of excellent biblical and theological studies by Chinese authors, including senior scholars like Choong Chee - pang and younger scholars like Wu Daozong.

Third, the contributors of this book seem largely ignorant of the significant work of American evangelical scholars, including systematic theologian and biblical interpreter Carl F. H. Henry, an abridgment of whose *God, Revelation & Authority* has been translated into Chinese. Henry interacts powerfully with the thinkers who have so influenced ecumenical and liberal theologians in Greater China as well as the main spokesmen for SCT. He deals at length with questions of language, hermeneutics, Scripture, and the relationship between Christianity and philosophy.

I hesitate to make the following criticism, but the overall excellent quality of the book is considerably diluted by the presence of a great many distracting typographical, lexical, grammatical, and stylistic errors, which could have been easily eliminated by a professional, native - English - speaking editor.

Reflecting, analyzing, and summarizing a large and growing literature in Chinese, *Sino - Christian Theology* serves as an essential guide for English readers to this increasingly important field of study; it deserves widespread and careful reading.

中文题目:

体现当代神学与文化运动的汉语神学

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