

News for Abraham Chen's Doctoral Public Defense on T.C. Chao's Christology

The Editorial Committee of IJOFSWS

Abraham Chen is approaching the end of his doctoral studies. The Faculty Council (Faculty of Theology, University of Helsinki) has in March granted him a permission to defend his doctoral thesis in public; his public defense took place at 12:00 o'clock, 11 June, 2014. The location of this event was on 3rd floor, Fabianinkatu 26, Helsinki. The supervisors of Abraham Chen were professor Miikka Ruokanen and Paulos Huang. The opponent was prof. Philip Wickeri, and custos was acting professor Pekka Kärkkäinen.

Abraham Chen has been a faculty member at Nanjing Theological Seminary (Nanjing, China) since early 1990s. Before he came to Finland for his doctoral studies, Chen was also an assistant editor of *Nanjing Theological Review* for nearly 20 years. Chen's doctoral research on T. C. Chao's Christology is motivated by his serious concern with the construction of a Chinese theology in general and a Chinese Christology in particular. Chen's thesis is titled "Chinese Christ: The Christology of T. C. Chao." T. C. Chao was the most important Chinese theologian of his time, one who attempted to construct a contextual Chinese theology. Chen's present thesis aims at analyzing T. C. Chao's interpretation of Jesus Christ in the Chinese cultural and socio-political context of his time as it appears in his publications from the late 1910s up to 1950. Chen's analysis of Chao's Christology also leads to his own proposal for a Chinese Christology.

Abraham Chen's thesis is composed of eight chapters. After the Introduction, Chapter 2 describes T. C. Chao's life and depicts an overall picture of his struggle for a Chinese Christology in the cultural, ideological, religious, theological, social, and political environment of his time. Attention is paid to his background, both historical and intellectual, which is formative for the emergence of Chao's thinking. In Chapter 3, Chen analyzes the concept of the person of Jesus Christ in Chao's early Christology, which focuses more on the "human-divine" Jesus rather than on the "divine-human" Christ. Chapter 4 analyzes and discusses the work of Jesus Christ in Chao's early thinking. In Chapter 5, Chen analyzes Chao's understanding of the person of Jesus Christ in his later Christology, which is characterized by the fact that he made a shift from the "human-divine" Jesus to the "divine-human" Christ. Chapter 6 focuses on the work of Jesus Christ in Chao's later Christology. In these four chapters (2-6) Chen observes how Chao was trying to establish a balance between the uniqueness of Christianity and Christ, or the orthodoxy of the faith as he understood it, and the necessity of creating indigenous theology relevant to the Chinese context of his time. Chapter 7 contains a brief comparison between Chao and five other Chinese theologians (Wu Leichuan, Wu Yaozong, Xie Fuya, Ding Guangxun, and Wang Weifan), both his contemporaries and those of the next generation. Chapter 7 also includes Chen's own attempt at developing a Chinese Christology of today referring to the relevance of Chao's thinking and proceeding beyond him. In this chapter, Chen

intends to show the necessity and possibilities of drawing an overall map of Chinese Christology during the period in question, demonstrating its continuity with the Chinese theological development of today. Chapter 8 is the conclusion of the study.

In his thesis, Abraham Chen shows well that Chao's Christology always deals seriously with the context in which he was doing his Christology for the Chinese people and Chinese Christians, and in which he attempted also to deal seriously with the encounter between Christianity and his context. Chao attempted to develop a relevant theology as a response to the context and the rapid social change of China during the period 1910-1950. He always had a good intention to seek the uniqueness of Christianity while aiming at a contextually relevant understanding of the faith.

Abraham Chen also indicates that Chao's contextual theology could be seen as an expression of Steve Bevans' "synthesis model." In both Chao's early and later periods, while applying the synthesis model to his contextual theologizing, Chao also used the "translation model" through which he tried to apply a Christianity that was relevant to the Chinese people living in the midst of the modernization process of society. The difference between the two periods, however, was that his understanding of the very kernel of Christianity was different. This resulted in great variation in his Christological outlook between the two phases. His early Christology was much closer to the Western liberal understanding of Jesus Christ, while the Christology of his later period seems to return to a traditional understanding.

According to Abraham Chen's observation, Chao's Christology focuses on God's creation and humanity, and theology of creation is the starting point of his Christological thought. In the Chinese cultural setting, however, a concentration on humanity may not be the same as an anthropocentric model of Christology; in Chao's own words, Christology could be appropriately defined as "both theocentric and anthropocentric." From the point of view of the theology of creation, Chao attempted to highlight human creativity, dignity, and freedom together with the problem of the sinfulness of human life. In so doing, he always attempted to maintain the three dimensions of his Chinese theology: Christian faith, cultural identity, and social context.

After analyzing T. C. Chao's Christology, Abraham Chen draws a sketch of a Chinese Christological thinking reaching beyond Chao to the context of Chinese Christianity today. With a brief discussion and comparison, Chen aims to discover how Chao's ethically oriented Christology closely relates to the Christological interpretations of other Chinese theologians, both his contemporaries and those of the next generation. Although they have different concerns, all of them make a responsible attempt at constructing a Chinese theology. Along with different approaches and emphases, they share similar themes, such as God's love, the cosmic dimension of Christ, and an ethically and practically oriented Christology. Finally, Chen proposes that a contextual Chinese Christology should be a *Dao* Christology, which needs to be built upon Scripture, Christian tradition, Chinese culture, and the experience of the faith community. A *Dao* Christology is not a Christology of mere thinking but that of following. In believers' imitation of Jesus Christ, the images of the kenotic Christ, the cosmic lover, and the self-giver in human suffering can be highlighted. By following Jesus Christ, the Chinese church, with its rich ethical nourishment, can "produce" many Jesus-like or Christ-like Christians. They are new creatures who can make the Kingdom of God come, the will of God be done on earth as it is in Heaven. This is the significance of an ethically concerned *Dao* Christology.

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