

# How Do Modern Chinese Christian Intellectuals Read the Bible?<sup>①</sup>

## —The Principles and Methodologies of Wu Leichuan and Zhao Zichen for the Interpretation of the Bible

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**Abstract:** In a culture that embodies long literary traditions and possesses rich classical texts that has constituted a pluralistic religious world, how is the Christian Bible read and interpreted in China? Since modern China is a period in which Chinese Christian intellectuals have been very active in theological construction and biblical interpretation, this paper will choose Wu Leichuan and Zhao Zichen for the case study. Through an analysis of their reading strategies, this paper intends to describe and critique the general principles and methodologies that are used by Wu and Zhao in reading the Bible and to examine their contributions to Chinese biblical hermeneutics.

**Key words:** The Bible, Chinese biblical interpretation, Historical criticism, “Making friends with the ancients,” Evolutionary view

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Today Chinese Christian theologians are searching for viable and suitable principles and methodologies for the interpretation of the Bible within the Chinese contexts. It is a pursuit for not only hermeneutics in general but also for the way in which the Gospels are understood and communicated within Chinese society. China is characterized by its diversity in religion, culture, language, race and class. How to appropriate our faith in Jesus Christ in the context of Chinese cultures, religions, and socio-political scenario is an urgent task to deal with. More specifically, it is also a question of understanding how Chinese Christian scholars, who are nourished by a mixture of both their native and Christian cultures, respond differently from scholars among Western Christians, and how they relate Christian classics to native Chinese culture.

Since Chinese Christian intellectuals have been very active in theological construction and biblical interpretation in the modern period, I have chosen Wu Leichuan (1870 – 1944)<sup>②</sup> and Zhao

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② Wu Leichuan (吴雷川, real name Zhenchun 震春), born in Xuzhou, Jiangsu. In 1898, he obtained the *jinshi* degree and was deployed by the emperor to work in the Hanlin Academy. After the Revolution of 1911, he was appointed Mayor of Hangzhou; in 1912, he acquired a position in the Zhejiang Provincial Board of Education, and was later transferred to work in the Department of Education in the Central Government in Beijing. He began teaching at Yenching University in 1922 and was appointed Professor in 1925, becoming Vice President of the university in 1926, and president in 1929. His representative works are: *Jidajiao yu Zhongguo wenhua* (Christianity and Chinese Culture), *Mozi yu Yesu* (Mozǐ and Jesus Christ).

Zichen (1888 – 1979)<sup>③</sup> for the case study. As distinguished Christian theologians and educators in the history of the Republic of China, Wu and Zhao carried out a discussion on “Why I want to read the Bible and How I read the Bible” in the early 1920s. Through an analysis of their thoughts, this paper will describe and critique the general principles and methodologies used by modern Chinese Christian intellectuals in reading the Bible.

### A. The Beginning of the Discussion

In 1921, Zhao Zichen, Wu Leichuan and Wu Yaozong<sup>④</sup> published an essay in collaboration on “Why I want to read the Bible and how I read the Bible” in the *Life Journal*.<sup>⑤</sup> In this short article, three important Christian scholars in modern China gave their responses to the following two questions: What are my reasons and motives for reading the Bible? What methods do I use in interpreting the Bible? Due to their own personal understanding of Christianity, their answers differed from each other. Zhao Zichen wanted to “read the Bible for life.” Wu Leichuan’s reading aimed at “saving myself and other people.” Wu Yaozong read it because he thought that “Christians are noble – minded and Christianity has a respectable mission.” It would seem that Zhao Zichen and Wu Leichuan had a clearer motive for reading the Bible, which aimed at representing the desire for the Christian faith and the attitudes toward the Bible of their contemporary Chinese Christian intellectuals. We will now discuss their viewpoints in detail.

③ Zhao Zichen (赵紫宸) was one of the most famous Christian scholars and educators in modern China. Born in Deqing, Zhejiang, he graduated from Soochow University in 1910 and went to study at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee in 1914, earning his M. A. in Sociology in 1916 and B. D. in 1917. He returned to teach at Soochow University from 1917 to 1925, being appointed the Dean of the School of Science and Liberal Arts. In 1926, he began teaching at Yenching University and took the position of Dean of School of Religions in 1928. He was chosen to be one of the Chinese delegates to the international Missionary Council in Jerusalem in 1928 and to the Madras Conference in 1938. He was elected as one of the six vice – presidents of the World Council of Churches in 1948 in Amsterdam. His representative works are: *Jidujiao zhenxue* (Philosophy of Christianity), *Yesu zhuan* (A Biography of Jesus Christ), *Shenxue si jiang* (Four Lectures on Theology).

④ Wu Yaozong (吴耀宗, 1893 – 1979), was born in Shunde, Guangdong and graduated from the Beijing Customs College in 1913. He was baptized in 1918. In 1924, he came to the United States and studied at Union Theological Seminary in New York, earning his M. A. in philosophy at Columbia University in 1927. He returned to work at the Shanghai YMCA, being appointed Editor – in – Chief of the Association Press of China of the YMCA in 1932. When the People’s Republic of China was set up, he became the founder of the Three – Self Patriotic Movement. His works include: *Meiyouren kanqianguo Shangdi* (Nobody Has Seen God), *Jidujiao yu xin Zhongguo* (Christianity and New China).

⑤ See Zhao Zichen, Wu Leichuan and Wu Yaozong, “Why I Want to Read the Bible and How I Read the Bible,” *Shengming yuekan* (Life Journal) 1:6 (1921), 1 – 2. It was a famous Christian publication founded by the Peking Apologetic Group, which served as a platform that “Christianity is the greatest need in connection with the regeneration of the Chinese society and that the spreading of Christianity is our greatest obligation.” The Apologetic Group included key Chinese and Western Christian intellectuals in Peking. Most members were the leading figures of Yenching University, such as J. L. Stuart, L. C. Porter, H. S. Galt, and J. S. Burgess, and Chinese church leaders and scholars, such as Liu Tingfang, Cheng Jingyi, Luo Yunyan, Hu Jingsheng, Liu Jingshu, Hong Weilian and Zhao Zichen. In the spring of 1924, the Apologetic Group changed its name to Shengming she (The Life Fellowship). Its publication, *Shengming yuekan* (Life Journal), was conducted by an editorial committee, which had been initially chaired by Wu Leichuan. Through its seven years of existence from 1919 to 1926, the magazine was distributed among the Chinese community. In 1926, *Shengming yuekan* was merged with *Zhenli Zhoukan* (The Truth Weekly) of Zhenli she (The Truth Fellowship) and became *Zhenli yu shengming* (The Truth and Life). Zhao Zichen chaired the editorial committee while Wu Leichuan, Liu Tingfang, Xu Baoqian, Bo Jigen, Mei Yibao, Li Rongfang, Cheng Zhiyi and L. C. Porter worked as members. See Lam Wing – hung, *Zhonghua shenxue wushi nian* (Fifty Years of Chinese Theology: 1900 – 1950) (Hong Kong: China Graduate School of Theology, 1998), 55 – 57. Also see Chu Sin – Jan, *Wu Lei – chuan: A Confucian – Christian in Republican China* (New York: Peter Lang, 1995), 33 – 34.

## B. “Why I Want to Read the Bible”

Zhao Zichen’s response was very clear. He said: “The Bible is a book of life. I read it for life, which I want for the service of myself, of others, of the country, and of the world. I am dumb and humble, but I dare not give myself up (is this translation correct?).”<sup>⑥</sup> For Zhao, a Chinese Christian scholar well trained in Western theology at Vanderbilt University in the United States and strongly influenced by the nineteenth century liberal theologians, Christianity was “an ideology, a positive personal as well as social existence, a new life, which has been fulfilled by Jesus Christ.”<sup>⑦</sup> More specifically, he believed that the Christian faith is not based on the texts but on Jesus Christ. This does not mean that Christians can do without the Scriptures but that “Christianity is not a religion of the texts but a religion centered on Jesus Christ and on life itself.”<sup>⑧</sup> How may we view his statement? In the early years, Zhao used to regard religion and life as the same thing. Under the influence of Friedrich Schleiermacher’s practical theology, he believed that the Bible was a repository of different religious experiences going through historical developments, responding to changing situations and finally establishing itself in Jesus Christ.<sup>⑨</sup> The Christian faith is therefore centered on Jesus Christ. On the other hand, he expressed the idea of evolution, believing that through religious experiences we shall all finally come before Jesus Christ, for human experience can be completely sublimated (what does that mean?) only through Him. He said: “Don’t look for God in the remote unknown, but find Him in the direct communications of the human soul, i. e., in life itself.”<sup>⑩</sup> He believed that we find the existence of God in life and that God reveals His Truth in human life. God pushes our life “forward until its richest meanings are revealed.” In this sense, for Zhao, Christianity was a religion established in life; thus, religion and life are one and the same thing. Since Zhao had published his motive for reading the Bible very early, we do not really know whether his claim about “life” had included so many implications. It is clear, however, that he had always wanted to stress the relationship between Christianity and the individual, especially as regards personal religious and spiritual experiences. Later, in his response to the question of how Christianity was able to have an effect on Chinese society, he brought out a solution that advocated “national salvation through the Divine personality.” Specifically, he argued that the spiritual renewal of individual personality would have to go before social and political reforms in building up a perfect society.

⑥ Ibid., 1.

⑦ See L. M. Ng, *Christianity and Social Change: The Case in China 1920 – 1950* (Ph. D. dissertation, Princeton Seminary, 1971), 96 – 97. The Chinese version of this book is titled as *Jidujiao yu Zhongguo shehui bianqian* (Christianity and Social Change in China), published by Hong Kong Chinese Christian Literature Council in 1981. Also see Shao Yuming 邵玉禧, “Er’shi shiji chu Zhongguo zhishifenzi dui Jidujiao de taidu,” (Chinese Intellectuals’ Attitudes toward Christianity in the early twentieth century) in *Dao yu yan: Huaxia wenhua yu Jidu wenhua xiangyu* (Dao and Logos: Chinese Culture Encountering with Christianity), ed. Liu Xiaofeng 刘小枫 (Shanghai: San Lian Publishing House, 1995), 283.

⑧ Zhao Zichen, “Xuanjiaoshi yu shenli,” (Preacher and Truth) *Shengming yuekan* (Life Journal) 3:3 (1922), 9.

⑨ Schleiermacher claimed that religion is human experience accessed through feelings: “Religion is to seek this and find it in all that lives and moves, in all growth and change, in all doing and suffering. It is to have life and to know life in immediate feeling, only as such an existence in the Infinite and Eternal.” (*On Religion; Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*, 36) He goes on to say: “...true religion is sense and taste for the Infinite.” (*On Religion*, 39) In a summary, Schleiermacher places religion in the realm of feelings, making it an interior, personal experience with an element of the unknowable and the mysterious.

⑩ Zhao Zichen, *Jidujiao zhexue* (Philosophy of Christianity) (Chinese Christian Press, 1925), 340.

Wu Leichuan's response was different from Zhao's. Wu said: "I studied the Bible before I established my faith and made up my mind to be a Christian. After I became a Christian, I had a better understanding that a Christian would have to do more sharing of his faith with others than improving his own spirituality. Without studying the Bible, I would not have known where I could start. For the purpose of saving myself and saving others, I have kept on reading the Bible for the last five years."<sup>①</sup> Wu's view was characteristic of the motivation for reading the Bible among the traditional intellectuals in modern China. Before his conversion, Wu had been a Confucian scholar. He worked together with Zhao Zichen at Yenching University of which he later became the chancellor. Without the background of any Western education, he read the Bible and Christian classics only in the Chinese translations. He was sad about that and commented, "The teachings of Christianity are universal and applicable in all times. It is a pity that I don't know science and philosophy. Neither do I understand a foreign language. I cannot read anything about Christianity without translation. Whatever I understand through reading is superficial. What I can say in response to this discussion is that I read the Bible every day in order not to forget that I am a Christian. Moreover, reflecting on what I have read from the Bible, I can keep myself on the right track so that my life as a Christian is not wasted."<sup>②</sup> His background and knowledge (why 'structure'?) did not hinder his enthusiasm in reading the Bible.

He argued that before his conversion, he had read the Bible in order to come to faith, in other words, to save himself. After he had become a Christian, he read it in order to increase his spirituality. Through his reading, he wanted to improve his Christian knowledge and reflect on his daily behavior. But reading the Bible for self-improvement did not conform to Wu's outlook of life. His deep-rooted Confucian ethic had convinced him that "the only principle of life is that the individual should contribute all his talent and potentials to humankind, both in speech, virtues and service."<sup>③</sup> Therefore, to share his faith with others in order to transform society and the life of all people became his second motivation for reading the Bible. Actually, during his life of thirty years of Christian faith he focused all of his academic studies on how Christianity was going to "save the world and save the people." He believed that "saving the self" was both preconditioned by and fulfilled in "saving the people." Christianity was for him not only a personal gospel but a social gospel as well.

Examining Zhao and Wu's different motives for reading the Bible, we see that although both of them were concerned about the contributions of the Christian faith to China in a specific historical period and that they both advocated their views of saving the nation through the Divine they followed different paths. Zhao had an emphasis on individual salvation and spiritual improvement while Wu dwelt on the practical and social functions of the faith. In this sense, reading the Bible "for life" and "for saving the self and others" demonstrated their contrasting orientations in interpreting the Christian classics.

### C. "How I Read the Bible"

Having established their principles of biblical interpretation, Zhao and Wu responded differently to the questions of "How do I read the Bible?" or "What methods do I use in reading the Bible?" Zhao's answer was very simple. He wrote: "I use the two methods of criticism and friend

① Zhao Zichen, Wu Leichuan and Wu Yaoming, "Why I Want to Read the Bible and How I Read the Bible," 1.

② Ibid. .

③ Wu Leichuan, "Renge: Yesu yu Kongzi," (Personality: Jesus and Confucius) *Shengming yuekan* (Life Journal) 5:3 (1925), 5.

-making. By 'criticism' I mean to inquire into the specific details of the characters, places, times, expressions and implications in every book so that I find the truths in them and not just accept the literal meanings. By 'friend - making' I mean to open my heart toward the Lord, toward the Saviour, toward the saints and sages so that the sincerity (*cheng*, 誠) of my heart could meet that of Heaven. And my spiritual training in daily life is upgraded. Both these methods are used for the same purpose of acquiring life for myself and for those who read my articles and know my words and deeds."<sup>⑭</sup> Here, Zhao's method is obviously a method of historical criticism, which is a common method used in modern biblical interpretation emphasizing the historical context of the texts, i. e., the social identity and background of the authors, the objectives and reasons they wrote, and their treatment of characters, styles, writing strategies, etc. This method has the advantage of enabling the readers to "understand the historical context of the text and the underlying meaning of the writers." It has its own limitations, however, in not being able to "let us look into the literary strategies and the functions of the reader, the text, and the act of reading itself in the process of interpretation."<sup>⑮</sup> In other words, it overlooks the impact of the reader's social context on his interpretation of the Bible. Out of his understanding of the inadequacies of this method, Zhao added a second method of what he called "friend - making."<sup>⑯</sup> He held that it was a method through which humans experience communion with God, with Jesus Christ, with the Holy Spirit, and with the saints and sages, so that he could understand the teachings and hidden meanings of the text. Zhao believed that this communion could only be established through sincerity of heart (誠心), i. e., "religious devotion." He admitted that a historical and scientific method alone could not help one to a full understanding of the text. Reading the Bible is, in a larger sense, a communication between a human and the Lord. On the one hand, a person listens to the Lord face to face with Him, while on the other hand the Lord speaks and reveals himself to humans. Although Zhao had a rational and scientific way of interpreting the Bible in his early theological thought, he had already sensed the indispensable "sincerity" or "devotion" in reading the Bible. This sense became firmly established in him later on in the 1930s when he said: "I find it easy to read other books but most difficult to read the Bible. No matter how devoted I am when I am reading, I cannot help finding in myself some suspicion and criticism, for I cannot totally understand the real meaning of the text. It seems that historical criticism and scientific studies have cheated me of a pure faith and direct experience. When I read the Bible, I had to be guided with the reference books. This is of course not reliable. Many believers put aside what they don't really understand but absorb what they do understand. They are better fed than I am."<sup>⑰</sup> Zhao's adoption of the two methods, i. e., historical criticism and "friend - making", in reading the Bible indicated that, on the one hand, he desired to follow traditional biblical hermeneutics. But on the other hand, he wanted to discover the meaning of the text through personal life. His reading is therefore a synthesis of historical interpretation and personal religious experience.

Compared with Zhao's double reading strategies, Wu's method was relatively "up - to -

<sup>⑭</sup> Zhao Zichen, Wu Leichuan and Wu Yaorong, "Why I Want to Read the Bible and How I Read the Bible," 1.

<sup>⑮</sup> Archie C. C. Lee 李焯品, ed., *Yazhou chujing yu Shengjing qianxi* (Asian Context and Biblical Interpretation), the series of Asian Contextual Theology, Vol. 2 (Hong Kong: Chinese Christian Council, 1996), preface, 1.

<sup>⑯</sup> The second method Zhao Zichen called "friend - making" obviously borrows from Mencius' teaching of "making friends with the ancients," which is developed as his classical reading method by the later Confucian scholars. See "Wan Zhang" (Part B), in *The Mencius* (Meng - 12a), Book 10, Part 8.

<sup>⑰</sup> Zhao Zichen, "Tantan wode xingling xiyang" (Talking about My Spiritual Growth) in *Litangxiu jingyan tan* (Speeches for Spiritual Training in Daily Life), ed. Xu Baoqian 徐宝谦 (Shanghai: the Association Press of China of the YMCA, 1947), 21.

date.” He said: “I often hope that my knowledge will evolve with the world so that I may compare and prove the teachings of the Bible in the realistic world. I don’t like to follow outdated interpretations that no longer fit into present society. This is perhaps the method that I have always kept in my mind.”<sup>⑭</sup> Here we can see that Wu’s method was to interpret the Bible on the basis of a theory of evolution. He wanted to testify to the reality of biblical events, but he didn’t mind deviating from traditional interpretations if he thought they might no longer apply.

Being a modern Chinese Christian with a strong Confucian background, Wu did not follow the Western hermeneutical tradition but derived his interpretations from his personal religious experience. His faith in Christianity was therefore based on a pluralistic ideology with which he looked at Christianity’s historical and realistic implications. First, he did not stress the uniqueness and the exclusive superiority of the Christian faith but believed that Christianity, as compared with other religions and traditional Chinese cultures, had more specific effects and advantages in social reform and national salvation at that specific historical time. He therefore wanted to read the contemporary ideas out of the Bible rather than finding in it historical similarities. In other words, he attempted to prove that the meaning of the Scripture is in accordance with current thought. In order to vindicate his standpoint, Wu proposed an original (what is meant with ‘original’?) idea of evolution in religion. He explained it in detail in his book *Christianity and Chinese Culture*. Studying human instincts, he argued that religion originated in the desires of humankind which elevated human life. Religion was therefore a driving force for the evolution of the human society and must in turn evolve together with the world. In short, religion must also be “up-to-date.” From this viewpoint, Wu refused to accept the miracles or other supernatural events when he interpreted Christian Scripture and Chinese Confucian Classics. He believed that the world was evolving, religion was evolving, and that we should demythologize anything mystical in primitive religions. Therefore, when he read the Bible, his interpretation of the doctrines of Christianity and the text itself was selective according to his own idea of evolution in religion.

How should we view Wu’s conviction that “religion is the original driving force for the human society”? Zhao Zichen’s critique could represent the opinions of his contemporaries. He pointed out that “Wu had not explained how religion became the original driving force for society and neither could he ascribe this driving force to humans’ faith in God.”<sup>⑮</sup> He thought that Wu had started from the Confucian point of view that “Men are born with desires,”<sup>⑯</sup> regarding desires as the origin of religions. But does this Confucian text mean that religion is simply desire? “If so, what kind of desire is it? Does religion promote desires while at the same time inhibit them?”<sup>⑰</sup> He thought that Wu had never given a clear explanation of what desires are, nor had he explained how desires made religion become the driving force for social evolution. Moreover, if religion was to be

<sup>⑭</sup> Zhao Zichen, Wu Leichuan and Wu Yaocang, “Why I Want to Read the Bible and How I Read the Bible,” 1.

<sup>⑮</sup> Zhao Zichen, “Yesu wei Jidu; Ping Wu Leichuan xiansheng zhi *Jidujiao yu zhongguocenhua*,” (Jesus as Christ; Comment on Wu Leichuan’s *Christianity and Chinese Culture*) *Zhenli yu shengming* (The Truth and Life) 10:7 (1936), 413.

<sup>⑯</sup> The quotation is from “Discourse on Ritual Principles”, in *Xunzi*, Book 19, 1. It is the book mostly written by Xunzi (Master Xun), who was an eminent thinker, philosopher and educator of the pre-Qin times (before 221 B. C.), and the most famous Confucian scholar after Confucius and Mencius. The original text is: “How did ritual principles arise? I say that men are born with desires which, if not satisfied, cannot but lead men to seek to satisfy them.” (“礼起于何也? 曰:人生而有欲,欲而不得,则不能无求。”《荀子·礼记第十九》) See John Knoblock’s translation of the book of Xunzi, II, in *Library of Chinese Classics (Chinese-English)* (Human People’s Publishing House, 1999), 601.

<sup>⑰</sup> Zhao Zichen, “Yesu wei Jidu; Ping Wu Leichuan xiansheng zhi *Jidujiao yu zhongguocenhua*,” (Jesus as Christ; Comment on Wu Leichuan’s *Christianity and Chinese Culture*) 414.

regarded as a driving force related to human desires, what then was God? Was He a mere secret of the universal law, or the natural principle itself? Was it necessary for man to communicate with God? It would seem that Zhao was questioning whether Wu's conversion to Christianity was really a conversion to faith in Jesus Christ or rather to an idea of an evolving religion. He commented that many biblical readings made by Wu were unexpected, such as his interpretation that Jesus' mission was to build a new country for the Jewish people in his time. This lacked any historical support and was not in accord with the facts recorded in the Bible.<sup>②</sup> Here we can see that starting from his method of historical criticism, Zhao was not satisfied with Wu's methodology that had "dehistoricized" the Bible.

Wu Leichuan gave no direct response to Zhao Zichen's criticism, but if we study his later work *Mo-tse and Jesus Christ*, we can find his implicit defense of himself. In "A Biography of Jesus Christ," the fourth chapter of this book, he proposed an important view that the Gospels are not history in the strict sense of that word. He found that these books were "not written when Jesus was still alive." Thus he argued that "although the times of the writings have been disputable, they were obviously written a few decades after Jesus' death and they are not, therefore, a 'biography' of Jesus Christ. Not being able to witness for themselves the personal experience of Jesus, the authors wrote only by using historical records of other writers or oral stories heard from their contemporaries." The Gospels are, therefore, "different in nature from history."<sup>③</sup> Here, Wu was questioning the "historical Jesus." He believed that the portrait of Jesus varies in the four books of the Gospels. The variation comes from the authors' purpose of writing, the materials they had chosen to collect, and their methods of editing. Since the writers lived in a time after Jesus, they could not avoid the tendency of injecting their contemporary understanding and feelings into their writings. The Jesus of the Gospels, the "Jesus of faith," is therefore not the real Jesus of history. As the text of Scripture was unavoidably pregnant with the subjective opinions of the authors, Wu believed that an individual reading of the Bible could reasonably be "selective according to the reader's judgment."<sup>④</sup> Thus, he thought, starting from his own religious viewpoint, it would be rewarding in the biblical reading when he was selective, reconstructive, such as "reading out the implication that Jesus as Christ points to a fundamental idea of social reform." Due to the strong criticism from Zhao, in his later book *Mo-tse and Jesus Christ*, he dropped his belief that Jesus "wanted to be King of the Jews," but he still followed his original principles and method for biblical interpretation.

From the above, we see that the contrast and conflict between Wu's and Zhao's reading of the Bible reflect the tension between traditional historical criticism and modern contextual theology. It brings up the question of the extent to which an individual reader of the Bible can follow the historical background and implications in the text to construct a relevant contemporary interpretation that does not deviate from the foundations of the Christian faith. This is a situation that Christians of all generations have to consider and face.

Second, we should ask about Wu's specific understanding of religion itself. As some scholars point out, Wu was, among other modern Chinese Christian intellectuals, "the most eclectic

② Ibid., 424.

③ Wu Zhenchun 吴震春, *Modi ya Yesu (Mo-tse and Jesus Christ)* (Shanghai: the Association Press of China of the YMCA, 1940), 80.

④ Ibid., 79-80.

thinker.”<sup>⑤</sup> It is true that his understanding of Christianity was a combination of diverse ideas and theories and that, to a large extent, he depended on his ideas of religion itself. In general, Wu had no fixed definition of the nature of religion and its relation with other branches of knowledge. In his view, religion was aligned with philosophy of life. He said: “Ever since the beginning of history, religion has been closely related to human life so that in the history of cultures the word religion has always been juxtaposed with such matters as philosophy, literature, science, arts, economics, politics, etc. Although its contents may be naive and obscure, or obsolete and bad, the right thing to do with it is to improve it by cutting out its irrational elements but not to exterminate it.”<sup>⑥</sup> Here, Wu expressed two viewpoints on religion. Firstly, he thought that religion, philosophy and science are all products of human society, with no difference in nature. Secondly, religion is not a hindrance to social evolution but an evolving force itself, with a reasonable existence (not sure what you mean with the last words?). He explained the first point by voicing the idea that “the evolving religion is philosophy of life,” which, he admitted, was an idea derived from the influence of the modern Chinese philosopher Feng Youlan, who placed religion in juxtaposition with philosophy. According to Feng “The only difference is that religion admits myths and arbitrary rituals while philosophy has none.”<sup>⑦</sup> Wu agreed with Feng’s view and believed that religion would shed its mythical and arbitrary elements through its own evolution but still keep its rituals to elevate our emotions. Wu himself was a strong advocate of Christian rituals. His idea of religion was sharply questioned, however, by Zhao Zichen. He questioned two aspects: Firstly, “Can we still call it faith when a religion is understood on the level of a philosophy of life?” He strongly opposed the idea of juxtaposing religion with philosophy by saying that “a philosophy of life is an explanation of religious experience and not religion itself.” Secondly, religion as faith does not go after happiness as its sole end. In his view Wu was overly concerned with the service that religion can offer to humanity but overlooked its relation to a supernatural Being. Zhao, therefore, believed that Wu’s understanding of the category of religion was humanistic in that he took man’s “being religious” as religion itself.<sup>⑧</sup>

Wu’s second view of religion was closely related to the social and cultural context of his times. Looking back on the history of modern China, after the May Fourth Movement in 1919, Darwin’s theory of evolution and Western science had pervaded the Chinese intellectual thinking so intensely that both the vernacular traditions in Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism, and the newly imported Christian faith were marginalized. The situation for Christianity became difficult in the 1920s when students launched the Anti-Christian Movement in Beijing in 1922, supported by leaders in Chinese intellectual circles. When studying the motives of this movement, some intellectuals came to the superficial conclusion that, due to its elements of strong nationalism, the movement started from the naive reasoning that Christianity was thought to be “out of balance with Chinese traditions” and that “anything foreign that came with the act of invasion was to be rejected.” Other Western

<sup>⑤</sup> Shao Yuming, “Er’ shi shiji chu Zhongguo zhishifensi dui Jidujiao de taidu,” (Chinese Intellectuals’ Attitudes toward Christianity in the early twentieth century) 284.

<sup>⑥</sup> Wu Leichuan, “Jidujiao gengxin yu Zhongguo minzu fuxing,” (Rebirth of Christianity and Chinese National Revival) in *Renze zhi tan: Er’ shi shiji zhongguo jidujiao xuehua zueshu lunji* (Exploring Indigenous Theology: Selections of the Twentieth Century Chinese Cultural Research on Christianity), ed. Zhang Xiping 张西平 and Zhao Xiping 卓新平 (Beijing, China: Chinese Television Publishing House, 1999), 67. This essay was selected from *Christianity and Chinese Culture*, Chapter 10.

<sup>⑦</sup> See Feng Youlan 冯友兰, *Rensheng zhexue* (Philosophy of Life). Also see *Christianity and Chinese Culture*, 5.

<sup>⑧</sup> Zhao Zichen, “Yesu wei Jidu: Ping Wu Leichuan xiansheng zhi Jidujiao yu zhongguowenhua,” (Jesus as Christ: Comment on Wu Leichuan’s *Christianity and Chinese Culture*) 414–415.

scholars, however, criticized this understanding. Rev. Winfried Glüer, a German scholar well known for his study of Zhao Zichen, acknowledges: “As was the earlier periods aimed at re-evaluating Confucianism, the desire of people to rid themselves of Christianity rose from the belief that it was irrelevant and out of date with science.”<sup>②</sup> He admits this is an explanation derived from the view of Western world.<sup>③</sup> His comment fits in with the reality of modern China.

As a matter of fact, the biggest challenge the Anti-Christian movement placed on the Chinese Christians was not whether Christianity could finally come into this country but whether it could meet the needs of Chinese society. Under such circumstances, the efforts to search for the integration of Chinese and Western cultures would have to give way to the efforts of establishing actual functioning effects of Christianity on Chinese social reform. When viewed in this perspective, Wu’s understanding of religion in terms of the theory of evolution was exactly an attempt to dissolve the conflict between the theory of evolution and Christian theology. Therefore, while believing in the idea of “religion as a motivation for the evolution of the human society,” he also emphasized the view that religion itself was in a process of evolution from the primitive “worship, prayer and even magic” to its modern form of “noble ideals, extensive sympathy, and passionate perseverance.”<sup>④</sup> To further synthesize the antithesis of religion and science, he went on to propose an idea of “an evolving religion in synthesis with science,” in which he believed that the adverse effects of religion on science had passed and that “they both originated from the human instincts and therefore follow the same course of evolution.” He explained this idea with an analogy of ancient magic as being the predecessor of modern science. Both religion and science, he said, were necessary for humans and “they were both a proof of the human control over the world.”<sup>⑤</sup> In short, as the driving force of continual human evolution, religion has the permanent existing value as philosophy and science.

How should we view Wu’s view on the relation between religion and science? This was an issue unavoidable for modern Chinese Christian scholars. The choice between religion and science, experience and reason, or both, was a challenge that haunted Chinese Christian intellectuals. Even Zhao Zichen, a strong critic of Wu Leichuan, uncertain about how to deal with the predicament which he expressed as follows: “Facing ‘a marginalized context,’ I am a man that stands in the middle way of two conflicting opinions and times that are opposed to each other. Neither of the sides do I wholly belong to. Therefore, I often painfully feel the tension. I have determined, however, to face the challenge of this complexity, relativity, pessimism, naturalism and ignorance. I want both religion and science, not in that I could reach the Lord but that I will be possessed by Him.”<sup>⑥</sup> In his early times, Zhao did advocate the juxtaposition of religion, philosophy and science, but he had to acknowledge that they fell in different categories. For example, “How can we tell that an entity excluded by science has no existence?”<sup>⑦</sup> He thus believed that religion surpassed science and philosophy and no complete integration could be achieved among them.

<sup>②</sup> Winfried Glüer 古爱华, *Zhao Zichen de shenxue sixiang* (Theological Thoughts of Zhao Zichen), trans. Deng Zhuoming 邓黎明 (Hong Kong: Chinese Christian Literature Council Ltd., 1998), 20.

<sup>③</sup> See the detail in Joseph R. Levenson, *Confucian China and Its Modern Fate: A Trilogy* (Berkeley & Los Angeles, 1968), 1, p. 117ff.

<sup>④</sup> Wu Leichuan, *Christianity and Chinese Culture*, Chapter 1, 3-4.

<sup>⑤</sup> *Ibid.*, 5-6.

<sup>⑥</sup> This is from a letter written by Zhao Zichen on January 12, 1950, now kept as the archives by the International Missionary Council in Geneva. See Winfried Glüer, *Zhao Zichen de shenxue sixiang* (Theological Thoughts of Zhao Zichen), 49.

<sup>⑦</sup> Zhao Zichen, “Shengjing zai jinshi wenhua zhong de diwei,” (The Position of the Bible in Modern Culture) *Shengming yuekan* (Life Journal) 1:6 (1921), 11.

Compared with Zhao's complex views of religion and science, Wu was more concerned with the realistic situation of Christianity in China. He believed that searching for the solution of this problem related not only to the contemporary expulsion (not sure what you mean. 'critique', 'attack on'?) of Christianity but more to the "reality in which the Christian faith could meet its (society's) needs." He therefore argued that the central issue of the discussion should be focused on "what contributions Christianity can make to the revival of the Chinese nation."<sup>⑤</sup> Within such a premise, he looked at Christianity in terms of an evolutionary theology that argued that the true meaning of Christianity lies in satisfying the demands of the times. In this way, there is no conflict between religion, science and philosophy, but Christianity can bring together different doctrines and theories in the category of religion to provide the most effective path for social changes in China.

#### D. Conclusion

How should we view Zhao Zichen's and Wu Leichuan's reading strategies of the Bible? As important Chinese theologians conscious about biblical interpretation, their readings represented two approaches taken by modern Chinese Christian intellectuals to read the Bible. One is based on historical and exegetical interpretation, emphasizing the significance of the biblical texts for personal religious and spiritual life. It searches for the renewal of personality, then later on the national salvation. Starting from the social needs and the reader's contexts, the other approach aims at reconstructing Christian theology and explores the contribution that the biblical texts could make to the specific times. In order to achieve this purpose, the interpreter may read the Bible with a predetermined understanding and ideology.<sup>⑥</sup>

Through the analysis of Zhao Zichen's and Wu Leichuan's principles and methods in reading the Bible, we found a tension between the invariable divine truth of Christianity and the contextualization of the biblical reading in different times and places. The conflict, however, contributes to the enrichment and vitality of the Scripture itself. In other words, the biblical texts are challenged, enlightened and reformulated in the process of reinterpretations. From this perspective, modern Chinese Christian intellectuals' exploration of the methods of biblical reading has offered a particular model in biblical hermeneutics, whether their ways provide a constructive reading of the Scripture, or a "misinterpretation" beyond the Christian tradition.

<sup>⑤</sup> See Wu Leichuan, "Jidujiao gengxin yu Zhongguo minzu fuxing," (Rebirth of Christianity and Chinese National Revival) in *Bense zhi tan: Er' shi shiji zhongguo jidujiao wenhua xueshu lunji* (Exploring Indigenous Theology: Selections of the Twentieth Century Chinese Cultural Research on Christianity), 71-74.

<sup>⑥</sup> See the detail in Grace Hui Liang, "Interpreting the Lord's Prayer from a Confucian-Christian Perspective: Wu Leichuan's Practice and Contribution to Chinese Biblical Hermeneutics," in *Reading Christian Scriptures in China*, ed. Chloe Starr (London: T&T Clark, 2008), 118-133.

中文题目:

## 中国现代基督徒知识分子是如何读圣经的?

——以吴雷川与赵紫宸处理《圣经》的原则与方法为例

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**提要:**“如何寻找合乎亚洲处境的诠释圣经的原则与方法”,这是近年来亚洲神学界普遍关注的命题,这一问题不单涉及到一般意义上的诠释学,更主要的是关乎在亚洲的处境下如何表达和传递耶稣基督的福音。上述问题对于中国的基督徒而言,更是不容回避的。中国文化的古老历史和宗教的多元化决定了他们面对的是一个“多元宗教经典”(multi-religious classics)构成的世界,同时,不同时代的社会处境也对他们的信仰提出了各种的挑战,在这样的情境中,他们会创造怎样一种阅读圣经的方法,用来诠释基督教经典,并确立自己的身份意识。本文选取吴雷川与赵紫宸为个案的研究对象,以他们读《圣经》的原则与方法为例,来考察中国现代基督徒知识分子是如何看待和阐释经文,试图以此为汉语基督教圣经诠释学提供研究的一个范本。

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