

An Academic Review on the Possibility of Sino-Christian Theology: from “Cultural Christian” to “Christian scholar”

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Abstract: This article aims to make an academic review on the possibility of Sino-Christian theology from the perspective of Cultural Christian to Christian scholar. It includes four parts: The Dual Vision of Sino-Christianity, the Dispute on the Subject of “Sino-Christian theology”, Highlighting the Church Issue, and the Future of Christianity in Contemporary China. The conclusion is: From the metamorphosis of “ultural Christians” to “Christian scholars”, Christianity is gradually reaching deeper into contemporary Chinese value system, and “Sino-Christian theology” will bear real fruit this foundation, and will not lapse into being a kind of slogan.

Key words: possibility; Sino-Christian theology; Cultural Christian; Christian scholar; Chinese value system

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The term “Sino-Christian Theology” means all Christian theological thought expressed in the Chinese language, this type of theology has existed since the Ming Dynasty.^[1] But if we consider the circumscribed meaning, it refers to the discussion of Christian culture and deliberation of Christian theology which appeared among the Chinese academia after 1980’s. The central character of this theology is referred to as a “ultural Christian”. This development was marked by the *Logos & Pneuma: Chinese Journal of Theology* which was published in June 1994 by Daofeng Shan. Using that definition, the development of “Sino-Christian Theology” has 20 years of history.^[2] In the first place, it should be said that Sino-Christian theology has achieved considerable success. There are two major contributions in the development of Sino-Christian theology: Firstly, it has paved a broad scope of Christian vision for the Chinese academia. Ever since the May Fourth Movement advocated “science” and “democracy”, which have become filters through which we understand the West, anything that fits this set of principles was accepted, and those that did not conform were mostly neglected. But civilization is an entirety, it is very difficult to extract something singularly to learn about it, that’s why the “Sino-Christian theology” movement, although ridden with controversies, had

[1] See “Sino-Christian Theology of the Ming and Qing Dynasties” ed. by Li Tiangang, *Logos & Pneuma: Chinese Journal Of Theology*, No. 27 Autumn 2007.

[2] “Sino-Christian Theology” takes on a circumscribed meaning. The initiator’s suggestion was based on humanistic and sociological discussions, its main aim was focussed on academic studies in China, and its content bears no relations to pastoral care and evangelism in churches.

expanded the horizon for the Chinese scholars in this area, and contributed greatly to the reflection on Chinese culture. The main expressions of this contribution were in translating, introducing and analyzing a large body of western theological thought and extensive publications on Christian studies. Series of books relating to western cultures and Christianity were published, which gave rise to extraordinary achievement for the studies of western culture, and resulted in substantial and long-term influence on the understanding of the West. “Cultural Christians”, as the subject of “Sino-Christian theology”, had caused much debate. Self-definition of these “cultural Christians” is also full of misgivings, ranging from scholars who harbour sympathy and understanding towards Christianity to scholars who claim the Christian faith but never participate in church activities, and there are other definitions. Undoubtedly the second contribution of the movement of “Sino-Christian theology” is that it nurtures a body of “Christian scholars”, who are different from “ultural Christians”. “Christian scholars” work in education institutions and are dedicated to the Church. They work on translation, publication, teaching and research, and at the same time they are ardent subscribers to the Christian faith, this has formed a new generation of Christian studies in China, and may also indicate the direction of future “Sino-Christian theology”. This has not attracted due appreciation in the past, but according to the author, this is the future hope for “Sino-Christian theology”, and may even be the defining factor for the content of the next wave of development for “Sino-Christian theology”.

The Dual Vision of Sino-Christianity

The term “Sino-Christian theology” was suggested by Dr. Liu Xiaofeng and Dr. He Guanghu.^[3] Only from Dr. Liu Xiaofeng’s narrative we can perceive that “Sino-Christian theology” was dual vision right from the start. Borrowing Mr. Li Zehou’s variation on “national salvation and enlightenment” to describe the historical function of the May Fourth Movement, in the end “national salvation” overcomes and then replaces “enlightenment”. “Sino-Christian theology” also faces the dual theme of “modernity” and “personal faith”, respectively represented by Dr. Liu Xiaofeng’s *Towards the Truth on the Cross and Sino-Christian Theology and Historical Philosophy*.^[4] On the one hand “Sino-Christian theology” emphasizes individuality, encountering the “Christ Event” and the Cross; on the other hand, “Sino-Christianity” is focussed on the issue of modernity. In the midst of the dual theme of “Sino-Christian theology”, the attention modernity often overcomes the attention paid to “personal faith”. So in the development of “Sino-Christian theology”, it was not surprising that there were studies on non-Christian topics due to the appearance of names such as Gnosticism, Carl Schmidt, Leo Strauss, A. Kojeve, Karl Lowith, etc. The consideration of “Sino-Christian theology” thought has since been placed in the macro context of modernity, and further determined that th type of Christian studies has taken on a definite framework of humanities and social science. From the earlier paper of Dr. Liu “Sino-Christian Theology in Modern Context”^[5] to his later work *Sino-Christian theology and historical philosophy*, his attention towards modernity has naturally steered his theological contemplation towards “historical philosophy”. In fact, Dr. Liu himself quite openly admits that

[3] Lin Zichun, *A Polyphonic View On Sino-Christian Theology*, Beijing: Religious Culture Publishing House, 2008, 13, Note 1.

[4] Liu Xiaofeng: *Towards the Truth on the Cross* published by Shanghai Sanlian Publishing House, Ltd. 1995, and *Sino-Christian Theology and Historical Philosophy*, published by Institute of Sino-Christian Studies, Hong Kong, 2000.

[5] This Paper is firstly presented at the Seminar on Religion and Culture held at Peking University in 1994.

“the relationship between Sino-Christian theology and traditional Chinese culture is basically a modern issue on historical philosophy.” [6] Although this type of historical philosophy has a very distinct Christian background, the focus is not initially placed on faith. Here lies the paradox of “Sino-Christian theology”, this inclination shows the openness of “Sino-Christian theology” which has attracted many non-Christian scholars to participate in Christian studies. The reason why “Sino-Christian theology” has achieved such large-scale success and influence in the 15 years of development is closely related to this tendency. It is however precisely the same success that makes it suspicious to Christians, thinking that such studies deviate from faith. History is often paradoxical; this kind of “theology” which is not accepted by Christians has in fact achieved the influence which traditional theology could not. In bearing a strong interest in modernity, “Sino-Christian theology” has delivered the message of faith, and has become a practical approach for a new generation of scholars to draw closer to Christianity. We can say that it has nurtured a generation of young “Christian scholars”. From this perspective, although “Sino-Christian theology” was much reproached, in its development there was a difference between its internal and external narratives. Its external narrative is based on the modern context, and its internal narrative is based on personal faith. The issue is during the development of “Sino-Christian theology”, this “dual” vision did not engage in a parallel course of development, but was from the start more inclined towards “vision of modernity”, and among the new generation of scholars, “personal encounter with the Christ Event” seems more attractive. In the past decade, modern context was leaning towards the views of historical philosophy specialists with a Judeo-Christian background and gradually took up an externalized narrative format. As long as modernity is still a basic issue in “Sino-Christian theology”, the issue of “modernity” will inevitably overcome the issue of “personal faith”.

On the other hand, under the influence of Dr. Liu Xiaofeng’s *Salvation and Leisure, Towards the truth on the Cross, The unbearable body and Fear and love of this generation* [7], young scholars have found their way to draw closer to Christianity. This is a very personal confession of belief, but “ultural Christians” have always accentuated their non-church faith. Although the new generation of “Christian scholars” have accepted Christianity as personalized faith, they are different from “ultural Christians” from before, in their spiritual journey they will always return to the Church to quench their spiritual thirst. This is a new direction taken by the newer generation of “Christian scholars”, in the “Sino-Christian theology” movement they are placing higher importance on the issue of faith, and are less robust in their introspection on modernity. Faith has then started to detach itself from “issue of modernity” and returned to itself as “issue of faith”, and the Church is acting as intercessor. So the development of this generation of “Christian scholars” deserves particular attention. Their work will truly convey the internal influence Christianity has on modern Chinese people. To them modernity and faith are no longer two issues. In this situation, not only is contextualization not a key issue, the issue of modernity will also be discarded, the issue of faith will progress to claim key position.

The Dispute on the Subject of “Sino-Christian theology”

There is great paradox in the development of “Sino-Christian theology”. The work of “ultural

[6] Liu Xiaofeng 2000: *Sino-Christian theology and historical philosophy*, 63.

[7] Liu Xiaofeng: *The unbearable body*, Huaxia Press, 1999; and *Fear and love of this generation*, Sanlian Press, 1996.

Christians” has flaunted not putting denominations and Church as the major premise. This is the advantage of “Sino-Christian theology”, it also caused considerable confusion. The advantage of this stance has attracted a large number of scholars of humanities, since the issue of modernity has always been able to captivate their sympathy, and from sympathetic understanding, they become allies to “Sino-Christian theology”, and have assisted in making it a formidable force amongst the academia; but it also plunges it into a difficult situation. Theology is after all a divine discourse through “man’s words”, the confusion on the key issue of “faith” has landed “Sino-Christian theology” into an embarrassing situation. Even though many scholars have done a vast amount of academic work, only truly believing in God can bring about the possibility of the existence of “Sino-Christian theology”, and that’s what the disputes were about, who is the subject of “Sino-Christian theology”.

Disagreement started as soon as “Sino-Christian theology” was introduced, because its initiators had emphasized the humanity and academic characteristic of the studies and discussions, and the focus of the work also concentrated on academics and thought, and not from the angle of faith or doctrine. According to this direction, the “Sino-Christian theology” movement and non-Christian studies of Christianity has overlapped to a great extension. As mentioned before, this is one of the reasons why “Sino-Christian theology” achieved such success in Mainland China. But “Sino-Christian theology” itself indicates that it should be a form of theology, a theological movement with its intrinsic thinking and objectives. In the initial stage of “Sino-Christian theology” development, emphasis was placed on translating and introducing academic studies on Christianity, discussion on faith itself was rare, so it was not much of an issue if “Sino-Christian theology” was likened as academic studies on Christianity, in that stage it can be understandable. But if “Sino-Christian theology” is to become a theology movement and establish its position in the history of Christian thought, then the issue of the subject of “Sino-Christian theology” must be resolved. Due to the specific characteristics of the Church in China and the special background in which Chinese scholars was brought up, scholars who were inclined towards Christianity seldom joined the organized Church (whether Three-self churches or home churches), this is why some people are termed “cultural Christians” or “Apollo”. Many Christian scholars in the Chinese-speaking world were very confused about this, and in the 1990’s there was a dispute which lasted over 9 months. In fact because of the shift of Dr. Liu Xiaofeng’s stance, it was not clear if “Sino-Christian theology” which he advocated would become the focus of a trend of theological thought and progress into full development. The worries of some of the contemporary scholars are coming true. If the issue of modernity is used to direct the thinking on “Sino-Christian theology”, it would be understandable if the same approach is followed to detach from Christianity. But Christian theology, that has become a notable problem.

“Sino-Christian theology” is then left in a situation with the subject absent. There are many theologians, those in the Mainland, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and even among overseas Chinese. It is acceptable if “Sino-Christian theology” can be loosely acknowledged as something to do with the Chinese language, but the vast difference between life experiences of Chinese in the Mainland and elsewhere means that the faith they profess is also greatly dissimilar, and it will be difficult to form a common framework of theological thought and discourse for them. “Sino-Christian theology”, at its inception, was more about the theological thinking of a group of contemporary scholars in their “Christian studies”. In this context, “Sino” (“汉语” in Chinese literally means “Chinese language”) means more than just the language, and it also goes beyond traditional resources and touches upon unique life experiences. Hence, the term “Sino” cannot dissimulate

the internal differences of the various faith communities. “Sino-Christian theology” must have a clearly defined subject.

We can say that the subject is slowly developing. Nurtured by “cultural Christians”, educated in the 90’s, a new generation of young scholars have been brought up to be Christians, and they are picking up the work of “Christian studies”. Among these young people, new Christians would appear call themselves “Christian scholars”. Compar with the older generation, they are more direct, insistent and self-aware of their own faith. They clearly understand the basic difference between the humanistic and theological direction in Christian studies. They also understand the fundamental antithesis between the word of philosophy and the word of theology. They are a different generation from the “cultural Christians”, who were their teachers. “Cultural Christians” and “Christian scholars” represent the two generation of “Sino-Christian theology”. Their common characteristic is that they both approach theology from outside the Church and any system of theology. They both approach the studies as scholars, and there is a process which transformed external engagement to internal faith, from scholar to Christian. This bears no resemblance to the concepts of any overseas Christian scholar. Even though they may be quite similar the “cultural Christians”, their differences are quite obvious and carry much significance. The issue of faith which plagued the “cultural Christians” from the start is resolved by them, between the issue of humanistic or theological approach, they chose to take the theological approach (not to discount that their studies academic in nature),^[8] they began to form their own theories on faith and understanding of the Church.

Of course in view of the overall environment, space for theoretical theological discussion in Mainland China is still limited and the narrative of “Sino-Christian theology” is still not clearly defined, but there are many such “Christian scholars” congregating around *Logos & Pneuma*; *Chinese Journal of Theology* and *Regent Review* on Christian thought, the new generation “Christian scholars” worthy of note, and they are maturing.

Highlighting the Church Issue

The introduction of “Sino-Christian theology” has shown the self-awareness of Christian studies among Chinese intellectuals. If we grasp the meaning of Christian theological thought, we can feel the intention which they want to surmount the normal pattern of approaching theology from a nationalized or localized perspective, so from a theoretical point of view, this may be taking similar direction contemporary liberation theology, black theology and feminist theology. But when we look at the development of “Sino-Christian theology” in the past decade or so, due to all kinds of internal and external factors, the expansion of its content is apparently inadequate, and has too much of an inclination towards the viewpoint of modernity, which brought about a key problem with “Sino-Christian theology”. There is no defined separation the word of man and the word of God, no one has yet made a self-aware differentiation between the humanistic approach and theological approach, more crucially, and there has been a lack of distinct definition of pastoral theology which is the core of theology. This is a fatal point in the discussion of Christianity of the last generation of “cultural Christians”.

“Sino-Christian theology” emphasized “individual faith” which appeals to a large number of young

[8] Sun Yi “the humanistic approach and theological approach” in *Regent Review of Christian Thoughts*, No. 2, 2006.

scholars. But if “Sino-Christian theology” was hoping to develop faith in the Mainland, then the situation at hand, as Dr. Zeng Qingbao said, a type of “Sino-Christian theology” which is compatible with the Cross is still to be unfolded. “Sino-Christian theology” relies on the meeting of “Holy Word” and the original existential experience of the individual. We know that in western intellectual history, the idea of individual originate from Christian thought.^[9] But in China, the maturity of Christianity may rely on the development of self-awareness of the individual self. In fact, the “individual” is not a naturally formed concept, it is a concept shaped by history. The formation of this “individual” is still in progress in the Mainland, its spiritual development is still awaiting full development. In view of this, the development of “Sino-Christian theology” is not simply relying on the development of thoughts, it also relies on the maturity of the environment in which it grows. The reform and openness of China has meant that life of the Chinese has become more individualistic, the new generation of “Christian scholars” are more sensitive to existence, which makes it possible for them to grow on this key issue that is to say, these “individuals” are beginning to mature. The environment in which they grew had made it possible for them to experience such an individual faith, and from this they can develop more defined Christian faith.

It is the steadfastness and definition of this faith which gives them the ability to think further on theological issues. Faith is no longer a simplistic encounter with the Christ Event. Theology emphasizes thinking “in Christ”, and this kind of thinking leads to the issue of the community, which is also the issue of the Church.^[10] Theologians do not express the faith of individuals, they are speakers of faith communities, shouldering certain specific responsibilities. ^[11] “Cultural Christians” time and again stress that they are “beyond denominations” and the individual nature of faith; “Christian scholars” directly point out that it is not a matter of being “beyond denominations”, it is in fact defying Church institution. When “cultural Christians” deny the function of the Church, they are showing some kind of cultural pride. In western theological tradition, theology and ministry interchangeable, there were many examples of interchanging roles between theologians and pastors. Since the start “Sino-Christian theology” has very strong tendency towards the academic institution and the academic elite, there was an estrangement with the Christian faith, embodied in resistance towards the Church. This problematic standpoint has been resolved by the maturing faith of the “Christian scholars”.

the “cultural Christians”, “Christian scholars” accept the principle of “faith in the Church” on both theoretical and organizational levels. They possess a more self-aware confession in “faith in the Church”. To an academician, the sense of self-awareness in faith is not an extraordinary thing, part of the academic establishment and they are also dedicated to the Church. This is not only a requirement of faith, it is also a requirement of theology. They clearly define their “Christian scholar” identity with the two elements of academic establishment and Church. This is not the intangible Church in heaven, but the actual Church on earth. “Christian scholars” openly identify with this tangible Church, admit that they are members of the Church, and confess that they believe that the Holy Spirit works within this Church. They insist, as Barth did, that theology is born from the Church, there is no theology outside of the Church. ^[12] They also insist

[9] Daniel Shanahan: *Towards Genealogy of Individualism*, The University of Massachusetts Press, 1992

[10] Chen Yaqian: “Academia and Church: the Christian Scholars and Their Puzzlement”, *Regent review of Christian Thoughts*, No. 2, 2006, 216.

[11] *Ibid.*

[12] Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, SCM Press, Ltd. 1949, 142

establish their theological studies on this point. This is the key difference from “cultural Christians”. “Cultural Christians” are still defending their particularity and elite position, but “Christian scholars” already understand, just like God acclaims his followers as the new Israel, that this is first and foremost a community. Individual faith only highlights self-aware confession of belief in order to define that it is not blind faith within a community, but no individual can ever experience the kind of depth and breadth of the life and world that one can only experience through a community; therefore faith must be placed in the Church.

Of course “Christian scholars” in the Church have their share of confusion, firstly there is the tension between faith in the Church and reason from the academic establishment, this kind of tension is a perpetual issue in Christian theology. In church life “Christian scholars” face whole hosts of problems, such as the encapsulation of the Church, the conservativeness of doctrine and the sense of guilt overpowering the sense of grace, etc. but this is another topic and we shall not develop that here.

The Future of Christianity in Contemporary China

Christianity has been spreading in China many levels. The author thinks that “Christian scholars” will be an important element in the development of Christianity in China. The metamorphosis from “cultural Christians” to “Christian scholars” can give better understanding of the future of Christianity in China. As for Chinese culture, the mainstream value of Chinese society is a kind of universal value. The world is the responsibility of all persons, someone even says that country can decline, but we cannot allow the world to decline. But in modern history, the world is mostly a nation-state system, so with external pressure from western world, this universal value in China would shrink to a kind of national culture or nationalism. This has happened to the Jewish people. ^[13] In fact, due to the fact that Chinese tradition possesses this universal characteristic, she is not by nature a kind of nationalism, but is seeking main general principle and responsibility for all. After the May Fourth Movement, the Chinese people thought that they had found “the general principle for all”, meaning “science and democracy”. The reason why Communism was so successful in China was because the Chinese people had really thought that they have found general principle from world history. This concept gradually eroded in the later part of the 1980’s, so a huge vacuum appeared in the value system.

The rise of the “Christian scholars” burgeoned on this backdrop, although it is a meeting between the individual and the Cross, the general background is still the issue of modernity. Behind individual faith, it is still a continuation of the modern fate of the Chinese in modern time, still seeking a form of universal value under modern conditions. Under this premise, it is not surprising that some “cultural Christians” would change their minds and go to another direction. The situation of the new generation of “Christian scholars” is different. Although the gene is still functioning to seek out a kind of universal value, with the reform and open policy, market economy has finally brought about an individualism which has never been seen in Chinese history before. This is a huge challenge to modern China, and a response is necessary through a kind of value system or faith. Lack of a mainstream value system, all kinds of value systems and faith systems will create an environment of competition. Today we can see 3 types of value systems in this competition: Confucianism, Christianity and Buddhism.

[13] Ahad Ha-Am, Selected Essays of Ahad Ha-Am, ed. by Leon Simon, Atheneum, 1939.

“Christian scholars” made their choice of Christianity with their keen sensitivity of the modern society. Christianity has been growing at a furious speed. Firstly it suits the Chinese people’s open-mindedness towards learning from the West; secondly the value system of Christianity is more adapt to the form of modern society, especially the Protestant Church; thirdly Christianity has an organized institution that is most advantageous for the promotion of faith. Of course there are disadvantages to the development of Christianity in China, in the minds of the Chinese people, it is still an imported religion, secondly some part of basic doctrine contradicts with Chinese tradition, for example the concept of death. The earliest Chinese Christian such as Xu Guangqi expressed confusion regarding the Christian doctrine after his baptism. This problem still exists amongst the intellectuals in China.

To most people in society, Confucianism seems to enjoy more popularity, and that is the real reason the recent surge of enthusiasm towards the studies of Chinese classics. The popularity of Confucianism has its own advantages: firstly Chinese tradition is very deeply rooted in the Chinese people, secondly its intrinsic character of universal care is better suited to the psyche of the Chinese. Problems also exist here, modern society is based on the individual as a unit, and Confucianism is based on the family as a unit in modern society, the idea of the family as a unit has lost its social coherence, so there was a big gap between ideal and reality. Secondly, if an ideology does not have the support of an organization, it can easily dissipate. Communism’s success in China is due to its combat efficiency which is well-supported by its organization. In traditional China, Confucianism was protected by the systems of private schools, ancestral halls and Imperial Examinations, but present enthusiasm towards Confucianism only relies on celebrities television. Thirdly, ever since the Religious Reformation and Enlightenment, the West has settled the relationship between state and Church, and the relationship between Confucianism and the State lacks this modern transition, so it dwindles with traditional politics, its fate in China is difficult to predict.

Buddhism in China was never really the mainstream, after all it has two levels, one is the very ingenious studies which is highly philosophized, highly elitist, and has a good market among some intellectuals; on the other level it has adopted the folk religion format, channelling many folk religious elements, and therefore very well-suited to the grass-root population; no matter from which level, it is not a mainstream social value system, but has a marginal function in the society.

This is the basic attitude towards the choice of value systems in China nowadays. From the metamorphosis of “cultural Christians” to “Christian scholars”, we can see that Christianity is gradually reaching deeper into contemporary Chinese value system, if given more relaxed cultural and spiritual space, the author believes that “Sino-Christian theology” will bear real fruit on this foundation, and will not lapse into being a kind of slogan.

中文题目：

汉语神学的可能性：从“文化基督徒”到“基督徒学者”

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提要：本文旨在探讨从“文化基督徒”到“基督徒学者”的汉语神学的可能性，共分四个部分：汉语神学的二分异象、关于汉语神学的论争、强调教会事件、当代中国基督教的未来。结论是：从“文化基督徒”到“基督徒学者”，基督教逐渐更加深入地进入了中国的价值体系之中，而且汉语神学将会在这个根基上结出真正的果实来，而不会只是一个口号而已。

关键词：可能性、汉语神学、文化基督徒、基督徒学者、中国价值体系